



Did U.S. Governments Violate Individual Human Rights? A Thomistic Response to COVID-19 Government Mandates

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Abstract

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, some Americans have claimed that U.S. governments have superseded their jurisdiction and violated individuals' human rights in the use of government mandates. Many citizens and politicians have also claimed that governments are utilizing the pandemic as a smoke screen to take individual rights away from citizens to gain further power. In light of such claims, I provide a Thomistic response to argue that state and local political authorities' use of public health mandates were other-regarding in seeking to protect the common good in an unprecedented health crisis. Further, I argue that the characterization of individual rights atomized from community has led to an improper understanding of political authorities, individual rights, and our duties to our communities. Rejecting the reductive, skeptical, individualistic, and atomistic views that many Americans have engendered, I provide a Thomistic political orientation that more adequately helps us think about political authorities' and citizens' responsibilities within our political communities.

Keywords

COVID-19, Human Rights, Government Mandates, Thomas Aquinas, Political Authority

Introduction

While it is common for Democrats and Republicans to significantly disagree over policy issues, the last four years of the controversial presidency of Donald Trump have seen American citizens become increasingly divided. In the final year of Trump's presidency, no one could have predicted the COVID-19 pandemic that befell the world. Instead of this non-partisan issue unifying American citizens to fight together against a 'common enemy', it led to further divisions and distrust of

government agencies. With the aim of protecting American citizens, federal, state, and local governments enacted various health related policies to combat the COVID-19 disease. The federal level addressed economic needs through ‘Covid-19 relief measures’ while also supporting the emergency development of a vaccine.¹ While the federal government provided a constant flow of information through the *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)*, specific health initiatives fell to individual state and local government mandates.² While varying among the states, many of these government mandates included the temporary closing of businesses, stay at home orders, curfews, limits on large gatherings, and mask mandates. In response to these mandates, many Americans have offered a two-tier charge against U.S. Governments. First, politicians have unjustly superseded their jurisdiction in ordering mandates to curb the public health crisis. Second, the government mandates violate individuals’ human rights. I argue that this two-tier type of argumentation is tied to reductionistic, skeptical, individualistic, atomistic perspectives of political community. In other words, governments are depicted as superseding their jurisdiction because their primary role is reduced to the protection of individual liberties and the provision of basic necessities. This reductionistic account also implies a skeptical belief that forms of government that go beyond this will lead to tyranny. Related to this, an individualistic and atomistic attitude are engendered by elevating the concept of individual rights above citizens’ duties to those in their political community. In other words, governments are not allowed to infringe upon citizens’ liberties to enforce COVID-19 related health standards for a community.³

To counter these reductionistic, skeptical, individualistic, and atomistic political orientations, I argue that Americans (and by extension other citizens of other nations) are better off viewing political life through a Thomistic perspective that connects our rights with our duties to those in our communities.⁴ A Thomistic perspective also advocates for the intrinsic worth of political community grounded on an

¹ For some examples, see ‘Federal, State, and Local Government Responses to COVID-19’, Ed. Anna Price and Louis Myers, *Library of Congress*, November 2020, <https://www.loc.gov/law/help/covid-19-responses/us.php>. The emergency development of a COVID-19 vaccine was called ‘Operation Warp Speed’. See U.S. Department of Defense, ‘Coronavirus: Operation Warp Speed’, <https://www.defense.gov/Explore/Spotlight/Coronavirus/Operation-Warp-Speed/>. See also U.S. Food and Drug Administration, ‘COVID-19 Vaccines’, <https://www.fda.gov/emergency-preparedness-and-response/coronavirus-disease-2019-covid-19/covid-19-vaccines>

² For examples of statewide efforts, see Rachel Roubein and Shia Kapos, ‘How 9 governors are handling the next coronavirus wave’, (*Politico*, November 11, 2020), <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/11/25/governors-coronavirus-next-wave-438821>

³ This article is primarily focused on the initial response to the use of U.S. government regulated health mandates prior to COVID vaccines and the resurgence of the Delta variant.

⁴ Mary Keys states, ‘the common good has increasingly been seen as an apt counter-balance to what many consider an excessive or overly exclusive emphasis on individual rights’,

other-regarding orientation of political leaders and citizens working together for the common good. In connection with this Thomistic perspective, I also affirm the perspective of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)* as tempering individuals' rights with our duties to others.⁵ In light of these Thomistic values, I argue that in general and especially in the early wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, federal, state, and local U.S. governments did not supersede their authority in instituting public health mandates to curb the public health crisis. Therefore, Americans' individual human rights were not grossly violated by U.S. government mandates. In order to defend this thesis, the first part of my essay describes what a Thomistic political theory entails for political life including a focused look on the proper and improper use of political authority. The second part of my essay discusses examples of the reductionistic, skeptical, individualistic, and atomistic perspectives engendered by American citizens and politicians in response to government mandates. I contrast these perspectives with a Thomistic understanding of political life that equipoises individuals' human rights, our duties to those within our communities, and the entrusting of political authorities to serve the common good. It is my hope that this argument will help counteract individualistically and skeptically oriented responses to government mandates by thinking clearer about political authorities' and citizens' responsibilities within our political communities.

Individualistic and Thomistic Political Orientations

Before critiquing some American responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, I will summarize the strong reductive and individualistic political orientation that is often evident in American political discourse while juxtaposing it to my understanding of a Thomistic political orientation. One of the central issues of political theory that is often ignored or ill-defined is the primary purpose of political government.⁶ One's conscious or unconscious fundamental political theory carries considerable influence in one's rationale and response to practical political issues. Many Americans tend towards individualistically oriented notions, which highlight the primacy of individual human rights and the

Mary M. Keys, *Aquinas, Aristotle, and the Promise of the Common Good* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 5.

⁵ United Nations, *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. 1948. <http://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/>

⁶ Mary Keys argues, 'Aquinas's thought [is] a very useful and perhaps even essential resource for political theorists today, precisely because it delves deeply into the philosophic-anthropologic and ethical foundations of social and civic life, and so better enables us to envision the purposes of politics', *Aquinas, Aristotle, and the Promise of the Common Good*, p. 4.

non-intrusion of these rights as the primary purpose of government. This leads to a reductive, atomistic, and instrumentalized view of political life that ignores the intrinsic goodness of political community and the non-material aspects that political life provides. It is a reductive political vision because it makes the individual the foundation of human life and concern. It is also reductive in that political life is reduced to the goods and services that a government can and should provide (i.e., minimally decent conditions). Any government aims outside of these twin values are treated with deep suspicion. In other words, political communities are only materially valuable to citizens. There is no intrinsic worth beyond its provision for individuals' pursuit of liberty. Therefore, political life is reduced to a context of non-interference for liberties and material provisions for its citizens without any larger conception of community or the intrinsic goods that political life offers. While I agree that governments should provide material resources for its citizens and a wide allowance for civilian liberties, I argue that these are not the sole values of political community. Further, these aims are not the primary purpose of governments. Contrasting the excessive elevation of these values, a Thomistic theory offers a vision of human flourishing that affirms the necessity of basic goods but also describes flourishing in non-material terms. Political life is described as cultivating intrapersonal and interpersonal goods via emotional, educational, and psychological avenues for the establishment of order, justice, and peace within community life. In what follows, I describe this Thomistic political orientation in more detail to counteract reductive and individualistic accounts consciously and unconsciously held by many Americans.

A Thomistic understanding of the purpose of political life is defined as the communal pursuit of the common good built on a virtuous conception of reciprocal rights and duties, which leads to interdependent human flourishing.⁷ For further clarity, I define the key

⁷ For a fuller articulation, see Nathaniel A. Moats, 'A Thomistic Just Rebellion Analysis of the U.S. Capitol Insurrection', *New Blackfriars*, Vol. 102. Issue 1102. (November: 2021). pp. 873-892 and 'Recovering Aquinas' Common Good Oriented Right of Rebellion', *Nova et Vetera*, forthcoming. Gregory Reichberg articulates Aquinas' view of political community in the following way: 'An assembled multitude is more than an atomistic collection of individuals who happen to live in proximity to each other; rather it has the form of a community with ipso facto a shared ("common") good. This good is dynamic. It arises when the manifold activities of the community's individual members over time are conducive to the well-being of the whole, a unitary goodness that in turn redounds upon each of the community's many individual members. "Peace" is another name for this dynamic unity', *Thomas Aquinas on War and Peace*, p. 131. For more on Aquinas' political theory, see John Finnis, 'Aquinas' Moral, Political, and Legal Philosophy', *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Edward N. Zalta, ed., <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2018/entries/aquinas-moral-political/>; John Finnis, *Aquinas: Moral, Political, and Legal Theory*. Founders of Modern Political and Social Thought. (Oxford University Press, 1998); Edgar Scully, 'The Place of the State in Society according to Aquinas', *Thomist* 45 (1981): pp. 407-429.

concepts of the common good, interdependency, and human flourishing. The common good of the political community is the balancing of order, justice, and peace, which creates a context for interdependent flourishing for individuals and communities as they holistically live in connection with each other.⁸ Interdependency is the coordinated and cooperative effort of individuals leveraging their lives and skills with the aim to benefit other individuals and communities.⁹ In this conception, individuals are recognized as distinct and unique persons who are deeply interconnected and reliant on other individuals who compose their communities. Given this interdependent construction, individuals cultivate and leverage their skills to support other individuals while simultaneously contributing towards a greater whole (i.e., the common good). Human flourishing is the quality of holistic well-being attached to individual, communal, relational, physical, emotional, and

⁸ I utilize the terms of 'order, justice, and peace' from James Turner Johnson, *Ethics and the Use of Force: Just War in Historical Perspective* (England: Ashgate Publishing, Ltd., 2013), p. 9. It is important to note that Aquinas believed that God is the ultimate common good to which political community aims. Aquinas states, 'the common good of the whole is God himself, in whom consists the happiness of all', Thomas Aquinas, *De Perfectione Vitae Spiritualis*, Ch.13. <https://www.pathsoflove.com/aquinas/perfection-of-the-spiritual-life.html>. This theological perspective, however, is not required for his political theory to work. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* is an important source for defining Roman Catholic beliefs and provides a helpful summary of their understanding of Thomistic concepts. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* defines the common good as 'the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily', *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 2000), p. 1906. The common good 'presupposes respect for the person as such', 'requires the social well-being and development of the group itself', and 'requires peace, that is, the stability and security of a just order', *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, pp. 1907-1909. See also Richard A. Crofts, 'The Common Good in the Political Theory of Thomas Aquinas', *The Thomist: A Speculative Quarterly Review*, Volume 37, Number 1, (January 1973), pp. 155-173; John Finnis, 'Public Good: The Specifically Political Common Good in Aquinas', In *Natural Law and Moral Inquiry: Ethics, Metaphysics, and Politics in the Thought of Germain Grisez*. Robert George, ed. (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press) 1998: pp. 174-209. David Hollenbach, *The Common Good and Christian Ethics*. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002); David Hollenbach, 'The Common Good and Issues in U.S. Politics: A Critical Catholic Approach', *Journal of Religion & Society*, vol. 4 (2008) pp. 33-46.; David Hollenbach, 'The Common Good in a Divided Society' (1999). Santa Clara Lectures.; David Hollenbach, 'The Common Good Revisited'. *Theological Studies* 50 (1989): pp. 70-94. See also, Mary Keys, 'Contemporary Responses to the Problem of the Common Good: *Three Anglo-American Theories*' in *Aquinas, Aristotle, and the Promise of the Common Good* : pp.29-56.

⁹ The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states, 'Human interdependence is increasing and gradually spreading throughout the world. The unity of the human family, embracing people who enjoy equal natural dignity, implies a *universal common good*. This good calls for an organization of the community of nations able to provide for the different needs of men; this will involve the sphere of social life to which belong questions of food, hygiene, education, . . . and certain situations arising here and there, as for example . . . alleviating the miseries of refugees dispersed throughout the world, and assisting migrants and their families', pp.1911.

psychological well-being.¹⁰ It benefits individuals' intrapersonal and interpersonal well-being.

In a Thomistic orientation, citizens and political leaders are defined by a relationship with reciprocal other-regarding obligations. Citizens are given a significant role in determining their political construction (i.e., politicians, polity, laws, etc.) while also establishing and entrusting their leaders to faithfully fulfill their duties.¹¹ Political leaders are entrusted to serve the community through an other-regarding orientation by providing, preserving, cultivating, and protecting the common good.¹² The community entrusts political leaders to pursue and establish justice to provide relational flourishing between individuals. Laws are established to help protect the community and inculcate virtues that lead to individual and communal flourishing. Therefore, political life has intrinsic worth in the provision of a stable context of order, justice, and peace for individuals to interdependently flourish within their communities.¹³ As a sidenote note, I do not argue that this Thomistic orientation is an exclusive or exhaustive political vision, but a political theory that more adequately represents the intertwined nature of individuals and their communities than individualistically oriented ones.

A Thomistic Understanding of Proper and Improper Political Authority

Having established a Thomistic political orientation, I return to the question of whether U.S. Governments superseded their jurisdiction or violated individual rights. To answer this question, I discuss Thomas Aquinas' perspective on the proper and improper use of political authority.¹⁴ As noted above, political leaders are entrusted to serve the

¹⁰ For Aquinas, flourishing is also deeply tied to living according to God's natural law and becoming more the type of person that God has designed humans to be. Flourishing leads to right orientation and relationship with God, self, others, and the world. For the purposes of this essay, I focus simply on the natural ends.

¹¹ See 'Responsibility and Participation' in *Catechism of the Catholic Church* on, pp. 1913-1917.

¹² See 'Authority' in *Catechism of the Catholic Church* on, pp. 1897-1904.

¹³ I would also note that local communities' interdependent flourishing leads outwardly to its interaction with other communities. In this sense, a local community's flourishing leads to interdependently working with other communities.

¹⁴ For a fuller articulation, see Nathaniel A. Moats, 'A Thomistic Just Rebellion Analysis of the U.S. Capitol Insurrection', *New Blackfriars*, Vol. 102. Issue 1102. (November: 2021). pp. 873-892 and 'Recovering Aquinas' Common Good Oriented Right of Rebellion', *Nova et Vetera*, forthcoming. While using the term 'human rights' is anachronistic to Aquinas' articulation, there is good grounding to suggest that individual rights works within a Thomistic system. First, Jacques Maritain was an influential 20th century Thomist who persuasively advocated for human rights based on Thomistic principles. See Jacques Maritain, *Man and the State*

community in an other-regarding orientation by providing, preserving, cultivating, and protecting the common good to lead citizens to a virtuous and flourishing interdependent life.¹⁵ Leaders accomplish this by seeking peace, restraining violence, preserving justice, and enacting laws to protect the community from internal and external threats.¹⁶ Political authorities are also described as ‘dispensers’ of the common good and ‘custodians of justice’ who establish patterns for communal survival, perpetuation, and development.¹⁷ Political authorities seek to ‘secure greater advantages for their subjects’, which leads to reciprocal love and respect in the community.¹⁸ Leaders also seek peace and unity for ‘the good and wellbeing of a community united in fellowship [leading to] the preservation of its unity’.¹⁹ The absence of peace brings division and make communal life ‘burdensome’ rather than life-giving.²⁰ Aquinas further describes political leaders as cultivating citizens’ freedom rather than eliminating it.²¹ Aquinas states, ‘If, therefore, a community of free men is ordered by a ruler in such a way as to secure the common good, such rule will be right and just inasmuch as it is suitable to free men. If, however, the government is directed not towards the common good but towards the private good of the ruler, rule of this kind will be unjust and perverted’.²²

Ideally, citizens should select leaders who are exemplary, virtuous, cautious, prudent, and protective of the community. Ideal leaders will have ‘outstanding virtue’ and be ‘diligent’ to protect themselves from the temptation of tyranny.²³ Political leaders must be held to a higher level of accountability due to their role and responsibility as

(Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1998); Jacques Maritain. ‘The Person and the Common Good’, (The Review of Politics, 1947); Jacques Maritain. *The Rights of Man and Natural Law* (London Geoffrey Bles: The Centenary Press, 1944). Second, there were notions of natural rights within the medieval period that was a major predecessor for modern human right theory. See Brian Tierney’s seminal work, *The Idea of Natural Rights: Studies On Natural Rights, Natural Law, and Church Law, 1150-1625*. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 1997). See also, John Finnis, *Natural Law and Natural Rights*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press; 2011). Therefore, I use the modern term ‘human rights’ with the belief that it accurately coheres to a Thomistic approach.

¹⁵ Key states, ‘[the common good] reminds persons of the claims of ties that bind as well as of the importance of moral and civic virtue for personal flourishing and societal welfare’, Aquinas, Aristotle, and the Promise of the Common Good, 9.

¹⁶ Aquinas states that a political authority ‘gladdens a whole province with peace, restrains the violent, preserves justice, and disposes the actions of men by means of his laws and precepts’, *De Regimine Principum*, I.X.

¹⁷ Aquinas, *ST I-II*, q. 97, a.4, resp. and Aquinas, *ST II-II*, q.66, a.8, resp.

¹⁸ Aquinas, *De Regimine Principum*, I. XI.f

¹⁹ Aquinas, *De Regimine Principum*, I. III.

²⁰ Aquinas, *De Regimine Principum*, I. III.

²¹ Aquinas states, ‘Authority which is directed to the advantage of those subject to it does not take away the liberty of its subjects’, *Scripta super libros sententiarum* II: 44:2:2.

²² Aquinas, *De Regimine Principum*, I.II.

²³ Aquinas, *De Regimine Principum*, I. X, XI.

representatives of the community.²⁴ Leaders who use their power for personal gain are described as ‘unwise’ and ‘unfaithful’ to their role.²⁵ Therefore, other-regarding leadership defines true political authority whereas self-oriented leadership leads to injustice and is the epitome of political perversion (discussed further below).

Having defined proper political leadership, Aquinas also gives significant attention to improper political authority, which he terms ‘tyranny’. Aquinas defines tyranny as the political abuse of authority to gain and maintain self-regarding ends (i.e., power, wealth, status, etc.) at the expense of the community’s common good. Tyranny is a violation of the leader’s role because it neglects and injures the common good through prioritizing the leader’s private good.²⁶ Tied to the Greek word τυραννις, tyranny is the unjust rule of ‘oppress[ing] with power’ and considered to be the worst polity for a political community.²⁷ Aquinas states, ‘what renders government unjust is the fact that the private good of the ruler is sought at the expense of the good of the community. The further political authority departs from the common good, the more unjust the government will be’.²⁸ Intolerable conditions for the community are created when tyranny occurs in a sustained and significantly pervasive way. In such cases, the fundamental common good of order, justice, and peace is being thwarted. Aquinas provides several analogies to describe the horrible nature of tyranny. Tyrannical rule is analogous to being robbed or ‘mauled by a ferocious animal’.²⁹ In reference to tyranny as a type of theft, Aquinas states, ‘But to use public authority to take other people’s property violently and against justice, is to act unlawfully and to commit robbery; and anyone who does this is bound to make restitution’.³⁰ In this way, Aquinas argues political leaders do not have unconditional or unaccountable authority. Political leaders’ actions are to be held accountable to their communities.

Aquinas notes that tyrants seek to protect their self-oriented authority by three means.³¹ First, tyrants seek to thwart solidarity and friendship among citizens to prevent unified efforts to challenge tyrants’ power.³² Second, tyrants hoard power and wealth from citizens to keep them

²⁴ Aquinas, *De Regimine Principum*, I.XII.

²⁵ Aquinas, *ST I-II*, q. 97, a.4 resp.

²⁶ Aquinas, *ST II-II*, q. 42, a. 2, ad.3. Aquinas notes that a tyrant ‘oppresses his subjects in a variety of ways, according to the different passions to which he is subject as he tries to secure whatever goods he desires’, *De Regimine Principum*, I.IV.

²⁷ Aquinas, *De Regimine Principum*, I.II. Aquinas notes, ‘tyrannical government more often arises from the rule of many than from that of one’, *De Regimine Principum*, I.VI.

²⁸ Aquinas, *De Regimine Principum*, I.IV..

²⁹ Aquinas, *De Regimine Principum*, I.IV.

³⁰ Aquinas, *ST II-II*, q. 66, a. 8, ad.3.

³¹ Aquinas, *De Regimine Principum*, I.IV.

³² Aquinas, *ST, II-II*, q.42, a. 2, ad.3.

from having adequate resources to oppose them.³³ Lastly, tyrants stunt the growth of citizens' virtues.³⁴ The mention of virtue is of special note because Aquinas argues that virtuous people would eventually challenge a tyrant. By suggesting that virtuous citizens would challenge tyranny, he was implicitly endorsing the resistance of tyranny as a virtuous act. Thus, Aquinas views the government's investment in the cultivation of virtue as a check and balance for political polity. Without this, people were more susceptible to political tyranny. Therefore, tyranny stunts communities by limiting material resources, stifles the cultivation of virtues, and thwarts solidarity through the sowing of chaos, distrust, and vulnerability in an effort to impair the community's sense of unity, peace, and stability. With all this in mind, Aquinas defines tyrants as illegitimate political leaders who inhumanely oppresses the community through a self-regarding orientation, which leads to the illegitimate use of authority (i.e., force, theft, unjust policies, etc.).

Morality aside, Aquinas offers a three-pronged pragmatic argument to suggest that other-regarding means are likelier to lead to the ends of status, wealth, and power than self-oriented means.³⁵ First, other-regarding leaders create an environment of friendship in which 'virtuous' people 'gather together as one, [which] preserves and promotes virtue.'³⁶ This leads to citizens supporting their leaders in a spirit of solidarity. Second, these leaders are likelier to 'acquire greater riches through justice than tyrants do by robbery'.³⁷ Since tyrants oppress citizens, they need to use some of their ill-gained resources to provide more personal protection than would otherwise be required.³⁸ Third, leaders will gain more renown in present and future memory. Tyrants are forgotten or remembered in infamy.³⁹ Therefore, other-regarding authorities gain the 'stability of power, riches, honour and fame'.⁴⁰ The great irony is that tyrants typically employ oppressive means in their attempt to acquire these self-serving ends.⁴¹ Even if tyrants are able to acquire these material ends,⁴² it is not likely to last. Therefore,⁴³ even

³³ Aquinas, *De Regimine Principum*, I.IV.

³⁴ Aquinas, *De Regimine Principum*, I.IV.

³⁵ Aquinas, *De Regimine Principum*, I. XI.

³⁶ Aquinas, *De Regimine Principum*, I. XI.

³⁷ Aquinas, *De Regimine Principum*, I. XI.

³⁸ Aquinas, *De Regimine Principum*, I. XI.

³⁹ Aquinas, *De Regimine Principum*, I. XI.

⁴⁰ Aquinas, *De Regimine Principum*, I. XII.

⁴¹ Aquinas, *De Regimine Principum*, I. XII.

⁴² The emphasis of these mandates remind me of the Catholic ethic of 'the preferential option for the poor' in which those who are most vulnerable and marginalized are elevated rather than ignored.

⁴³ For the personal sacrifices that healthcare workers were forced to make, see Catherine Bennett, 'US doctors "self-isolate" to protect their families during COVID-19 pandemic',

if self-oriented leaders' main ends are these goods, they are better off serving the common good in order to acquire them.

With Aquinas' definition of proper and improper political authority in mind, does the government mandates during the COVID-19 pandemic reflect proper (other-regarding) or improper (self-regarding) use of authority? While it is impossible to address each governments' mandates in detail, I argue that the general disposition of U.S. political leaders and the implementation of mandates during the COVID-19 pandemic were other-regarding in nature rather than self-oriented. These mandates aim to preserve and protect the general public. In other words, political leaders did not supersede their jurisdiction in the use of various mandates in their efforts to curb the public health crisis. Further, I argue that the other-regarding orientation of the mandates are displayed by the fact that these mandates primarily protect the elderly and those with underlying conditions. It seems that most American citizens are not in jeopardy of death if they contract the disease. This approach also aimed to support healthcare workers who selflessly and daily exposed themselves to provide aid to COVID-19 patients. In other words, American citizens were being asked to temporarily temper their liberties in a coordinated and cooperative effort to protect our most vulnerable citizens. These mandates exemplified a vision of an interdependent community working together towards the common good. While this may come at the cost of temporarily limiting certain individual, economic, and civil rights, the aim is an other-regarding common good with the long-term goal of flourishing for all. Therefore, political leaders who enacted such mandates to meet the public health crisis were fulfilling their fundamental duty to preserve and protect the common good. Politicians were not seeking self-oriented aims (i.e., wealth, power, fame, etc.), but the good of all its citizens. The fact that many citizens did not see it in this way speaks to the need of further reflecting on the purpose of political life and the reciprocal obligations of political leaders and citizens. As I have argued, a Thomistic perspective meets this need.

American Responses to COVID-19

In what follows, I offer a small selection of Americans who have not seen the actions of its governments in the other-regarding orientation that I have. These selections are meant to exemplify the reductionistic, skeptical, individualistic, and atomistic orientations found among many citizens and politicians. These Americans have claimed that their individual rights were and are being violated by U.S. governments with

The Observers, March, 18, 2020, <https://observers.france24.com/en/20200318-us-doctors-self-isolate-protect-families-during-covid-19-pandemic>

the long-term aim to limit human rights and civilian liberties in the future. In other words, U.S. governments are using the pandemic as a smoke screen to strip individuals of their autonomy in order to gain further political power. This type of response was particularly acute in the early days of the pandemic when mandates were more substantial in nature (i.e., stay at home orders, curfews, closing of non-essential businesses, etc.) before more of COVID-19's impact was known. I argue that these inordinately individualistic political theories influenced a spirit of government skepticism and resistance to social distancing and hygienic efforts in the name of 'individual rights' resulting in the further spreading of COVID-19 and deaths related to the disease. Further, I argue that these individualistically oriented assessments are misguided by a wrong understanding of human rights separated from political community.

In contrast to these skeptical and individualistic orientations, I argue for a Thomistic perspective in which the common good and our duties to others moderate our individual rights claims. In other words, individual rights should not be isolated from one's communal context and the duties that maintain within it. This is also evident in the often quoted, but misunderstood *UDHR*. Lastly, I provide an example of a community oriented human rights perspective exemplified in a statement given by New York Governor Andrew Cuomo. I conclude by arguing that state and locally regulated social distancing and hygienic efforts of the United States are not a violation of individual rights, but the proper fulfillment of the political responsibility of protecting the common good for the flourishing of all.

The COVID-19 outbreak in America occurred right at the cusp of many universities' spring break. Many college students refused to heed statewide and local social distancing efforts for fear that their parties or activities would be too limited.⁴⁴ One spring breaker stated, 'If I get corona, I get corona...At the end of the day, I'm not going to let it stop me from partying'.⁴⁵ Another spring breaker stated, 'It's really messing up with my spring break...What is there to do here other than go to the bars or the beach? And they're closing all of it...I think they're blowing it way out of proportion. I think it's doing way too much'.⁴⁶ Yet another spring breaker claimed, 'What they're doing is bad, we need a

⁴⁴ Timothy Bella, "If I get corona, I get corona": Miami spring breakers say covid-19 hasn't stopped them from partying', *The Washington Post*, March, 19, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2020/03/19/coronavirus-spring-break-party/>. This student later apologized, Colin Wolf, 'Florida spring breaker who doesn't care 'if I get corona' apologizes for being dumb', *Orlando Weekly*, March 24, 2020, <https://www.orlandoweekly.com/Blogs/archives/2020/03/24/florida-spring-breaker-who-doesnt-care-if-i-get-corona-apologizes-for-being-dumb>

⁴⁵ Bella, 'If I get corona...'

⁴⁶ Bella, 'If I get corona...'

refund...This virus ain't that serious'.⁴⁷ These college students' perspectives were far too insular. They were not concerned with the disease affecting their personal health and therefore were not concerned about its impact on others (i.e., the community around them). The blatant disregard for social distancing and hygienic efforts (i.e., masks, washing of hands, etc.) created two problems: First, some infected people required hospitalization even if they were not in a high-risk category. This led to a crisis of overpopulated hospitals. Hospitals were forced to balance the provision of adequate resources for those who with elevated risk while also meeting the needs of those who were not high risk, but still required hospitalization.⁴⁸ Second, ignoring government efforts to curb the health crisis created additional opportunities for those who were high-risk to get infected. Ignoring such mandates seemed to result in more deaths.⁴⁹ In order to 'flatten the curve' of the disease, it required communal cooperation and a willingness to forgo one's rights/liberties for the sake of the common good. Some Americans, however, were far more concerned over what personal sacrifices may be required.

It was not just college students, however, who were hostile or skeptical to government mandates. One celebrity received significant attention for her refusal to listen to such social distancing measures. In a viral tweet, she wrote about sending her kids off to a gymnastic camp to continue '#businessasusual'.⁵⁰ When people questioned her actions, she claimed that current conditions were 'too close to Mar[trial] Law

⁴⁷ Bella, 'If I get corona...'

⁴⁸ See Will Stone, 'Lessons From The COVID-19 Crisis: Overcrowding Hospitals Cost Lives', NPR, March 18, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2021/03/18/974861952/lessons-from-the-covid-19-crisis-overcrowding-hospitals-cost-lives>

⁴⁹ See Timothy Bella, 'Places without social distancing have 35 times more potential coronavirus spread, study finds', *The Washington Post*, May 15, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2020/05/15/social-distancing-study-coronavirus-spread/>; Jessica Snouwaert, '2 medical experts estimate 90% of coronavirus deaths in the US could have been avoided if everyone started social distancing on March 2', *Insider*, April 15, 2020, <https://www.businessinsider.com/coronavirus-deaths-us-could-avoided-by-social-distancing-sooner-experts-2020-4>; Apoorva Mandavilli, 'The Price for Not Wearing Masks: Perhaps 130,000 Lives', *The New York Times*, October 23, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/23/health/covid-deaths.html>; Xutong Wang, Pasco Remy F. Pasco, Zhanewi Du, Michael Petty, Spencer J. Fox, Alison P. Galvani, Michael Pigone, S. Claiborne Johnson, and Lauren Ancel Meyers, 'Impact of Social Distancing Measures on Coronavirus Disease Healthcare Demand, Central Texas, USA', *Emerging Infectious Diseases*, 2020;26(10):2361-2369. <https://doi.org/10.3201/eid2610.201702>

⁵⁰ See Douglas Charles, 'Evangeline Lilly Refuses To Self-Quarantine, Says Her "Freedom" Is More Important In Mind-Blowing Instagram Post', *BroBible*, March 19, 2020, <https://brobible.com/culture/article/evangeline-lilly-wont-self-quarantine-freedom-more-important/> and Victor Morton, 'Evangeline Lilly rejects social distancing: "Some people value freedom over their lives"', *The Washington Times*, March 19, 2020, <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2020/mar/19/evangeline-lilly-rejects-social-distancing-amid-co/>

for [her] comfort already, all in the name of a respiratory flu'. Her view also received extra attention because she was living with her father who was classified as a high-risk individual with stage 4 leukemia. She justified her refusal to comply by engendering government skepticism. She stated, '...keeping a close eye on our leaders, making sure they don't abuse this moment to steal away more freedoms and grab more power, but gracious with each other as we try to navigate the unknown dangers of a modern, global world and power structure'. In response to some negative feedback, she also stated, 'Some people value their lives over freedom, some people value freedom over their lives. We all make our choices'. In other words, this celebrity implied that the government was already in the process of 'stealing' liberties and feared that governments would use the pandemic as an opportunity to create a precedent to further restrict freedoms and rights. Further, she implied that her freedom was more important than the physical health of those around her.

This celebrity simultaneously engendered a general distrust of political structures and the elevation of her freedoms above the right to life of others. This type of response was a common sentiment among many other Americans across diverse political, religious, and economic lines. I argue, however, that these individualistic and atomistic oriented sentiments ignore how the principle of liberty is intricately connected to the concept of community and our duties therein. In other words, our liberties and actions are always connected to the way in which the use of them affects others. Our individual, civil, economic, social, cultural, and political rights are extremely important rights, but we must remember that not all rights are equal. The right to life is the foundational and primary right from which all other rights are grounded. In other words, other rights make little sense if one's right to life is infringed upon or violated. When the right to life conflicts with other rights, the right to life is the moral priority.⁵¹ Our volitional freedoms are never unconditional, but are always in relation to our communities and the rights of others. For example, no one is allowed to violate another's right to life through their personal rights claims. Even if one is willing to jeopardize one's personal health, we have a responsibility to care for others in our communities. While no one enjoys wearing a mask, it is a very small inconvenience to protect those around us who may be at a higher risk. Autonomy may be limited in the required use of a mask, but the restriction of such liberty is ultimately about caring for the lives of others in one's shared community. Further, even if the right to life was not

⁵¹ This is not to suggest that the right to life is the only principle of moral concern, but that it is the foundational right which will in most cases override the priority of other rights or at the very least make other rights a secondary matter. A Thomistic perspective does not argue solely from a right to life in the biological sense, but sees this right as necessary for quality of life arguments to make coherent sense.

at stake, individuals still maintain obligations to seek the common good of their community. By being a part of a community one explicitly and implicitly accepts that some individual freedoms will be limited to live peacefully together. Citizens also maintain an obligation to support political and healthcare officials who are working for the common good. This does not entail unconditional obedience, but it does require citizens to sympathetically, charitably, and generously support those who lead their communities against a common threat. Therefore, the aforementioned celebrity is morally confused about how human rights are grounded and should operate. The common good of the public health of the community is more important in this particular scenario than an individual's right to keep 'business as usual'.

Lest this atomized human rights approach and skeptical view of government be dismissed as an outlier or simply found among uninformed citizens, I provide two other similar accounts from significant political figures. In the first account, Ron Paul, who is a retired politician, former presidential candidate, and physician, argued that the COVID-19 pandemic was 'a big hoax', which was 'massively exaggerated by those who seek to profit—financially or politically—from the ensuing panic'.⁵² Many weeks after the ensuing pandemic, he argued that the American people should 'fire' Dr. Anthony Fauci, the top infectious disease advisor, who has helped to promote the 'social distancing' measures and recommendations to help 'flatten the curve' of the disease. Paul interpreted Fauci as being a tool of the government to strip civil liberties. Paul stated, 'The plan that they have is when things are getting back to normal, people can return to their work, and they do things, and go to the golf course if they get a stamp of approval... Your liberties are there if you get a proper stamp from the government... It's an excuse to have total control over the people'.⁵³ Despite having a political and medical background, Paul engendered a deep skepticism of governments mandates. He argued that the disease was a 'tool' for stripping civil liberties with the long goal of governments' controlling their citizens. Further, it is implied that American governments are lying about the extent of COVID-19 for further wealth. While it is true that some may gain more wealth, power, or prestige from the pandemic, it seems highly unlikely that health mandates benefit political leaders in the ways suggested by such skepticism. Health mandates and restrictions more negatively impact the economy and require more work

⁵² Andrew Mark Miller, 'Ron Paul calls on Trump or "the people" to fire Anthony Fauci', *Washington Examiner*, April, 10, 2020, <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/news/ron-paul-calls-on-trump-or-the-people-to-fire-fauci>

⁵³ Quoted in William Davis, 'Former Rep. Ron Paul Calls On Trump To Fire Dr. Fauci, Says Some Are Trying "To Have Total Control Over The People"'. *Daily Caller*, April 9, 2020, <https://dailycaller.com/2020/04/09/texas-ron-paul-donald-trump-doctor-anthony-fauci-fire-dismiss-coronavirus-covid-19/>

on the part of politicians. Yet, if the goal is further wealth, then what benefits are gained by health mandates? We are left to assume that governments are using it as a gaslighting method to gain control over citizens. According to this skeptical narrative, even if one were to grant the circumstances of a genuine pandemic, the government is stealthily using it to find ways to infringe upon the individual liberties of its citizens. This skeptical attitude unjustifiably engenders distrust for political authorities and creates even further divisions between citizens and political authorities. As I have suggested, however, another interpretation is available in which, on the whole, American political and public health officials genuinely care about American citizens.

In the second case that I consider, former Attorney General, William Barr, who was speaking during his tenure at the time, questioned the way state governors were using their executive authority six months into the COVID-19 pandemic.⁵⁴ He stated, ‘You know, putting a national lockdown, stay at home orders, is like house arrest. Other than slavery, which was a different kind of restraint, this is the greatest intrusion on civil liberties in American history’. Thus, even those within high-level government positions were engendering a hostility and skepticism for political acts that temporarily restrained certain liberties for the sake of a major public health risk. He further stated, ‘They [governors] treat free citizens as babies that can’t take responsibility for themselves and others’. This implied that individual citizens should be left to themselves to implement whatever hygienic restraints seemed best to them. While this might be a nice ideal, this is certainly an irresponsible approach to a significant public health crisis which involves such a contagious disease. Community cooperation is required to combat a disease which impacts a community. If individuals alone could contract without being a carrier then perhaps government mandates may not be necessary, but this was not the case during the COVID-19 pandemic. Ron DeSantis, the republican Governor of Florida, also boasted in the earlier period of the pandemic that Florida was able to stem the tide of COVID-19 without using ‘draconian methods’ like other states.⁵⁵ Instead of describing some of the more restrictive measures as ‘draconian’ or governors’ superseding their jurisdiction, I argue that COVID-19 was an extreme scenario in which political leaders genuinely attempted to use their authority for the sake of the common good, which

⁵⁴ See Katelyn Polantz and Christina Carrega, ‘Barr says calls for coronavirus lockdown are the “greatest intrusion on civil liberties” other than slavery in US history’, *CNN*, September 16, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/09/16/politics/barr-justice-department-speech/index.html>.

⁵⁵ See Rachel Sharp, ‘Gov Ron DeSantis says people are flocking to Florida because they’re sick of “draconian lockdowns” - as he boasts that home sales are up 22%, taxes are low and schools are open (but ignores fact state has fourth worst COVID death toll in America)’, *Daily Mail*, January 5, 2021, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-9116791/Ron-DeSantis-says-people-fleeing-Florida-theyre-sick-draconian-lockdowns.html>

in this case involved the use of health mandates to protect the health of American citizens.

In extreme situations that imminently threaten the common good, governments may need to temporarily limit certain liberties for the sake of the public health of the community. I argue that COVID-19 certainly met this threshold as it quickly became a national and international crisis that indiscriminately threatened all citizens' health. An additional factor for consideration was the lack of information regarding the impact of the disease. Information was and is constantly shifting as scientists and doctors continue to learn more about the disease. This factor favors the interpretation of government enacted health mandates as a goodwill attempt to protect the public and in conformity with their central duties of caring for the common good. Thus, American citizens should not interpret temporary restrictions of liberty as governments unjustly infringing upon their rights in an attempt to gain more political power, but rather the proper protection and preservation of the common good.

Scientists and doctors suggest that we may live with the threat of COVID-19 indefinitely.⁵⁶ Some may wonder if my view implies an indefinite support for government mandates. I do not argue that stronger forms should remain in place indefinitely until COVID-19 disappears. It does, however, allow for these forms when deemed necessary for public health (i.e., a decrease in transmissions and deaths). Thankfully, living in a post-vaccine era, many of these restrictions may be carefully reversed. Yet, specific time and place dictates the necessity of restricting liberties for the sake of public health. Particularly in the earliest days of the pandemic in which so little was known about its effects, stronger forms of public mandates were justified (i.e., stay at home, curfews, closing of businesses, etc.). Governments, however, that continue to insist upon these stronger mandates without a justifiable cause would be superseding their jurisdiction especially if lesser forms may be equally effective (i.e., the use of masks, limits on indoor seating, etc.). Therefore, rather than seeing government health mandates as creating a precedent for further government intrusion, I argue that it is better to see it as an act of government responsibly responding to an extraordinary event in which a substantial public health risk required temporary restrictions of liberty for the good of all.

One of the fundamental assumptions in the skeptical views thus displayed is the elevation of human rights without reference to notions of community. In contrast to this prioritization of individual rights without communal reference, I argue in favor of the depiction of human rights as outlined in Article 29 of the *UDHR*. The first two sub-articles state:

⁵⁶ See Michael Greshko, 'COVID-19 will likely be with us forever. Here's how we'll live with it', *National Geographic*, January 22, 2021, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/science/article/covid-19-will-likely-be-with-us-forever-heres-how-well-live-with-it>

‘(1) Everyone has duties to the community in which alone the free and full development of his personality is possible. (2) In the exercise of his rights and freedoms, everyone shall be subject only to such limitations as are determined by law solely for the purpose of securing due recognition and respect for the rights and freedoms of others and of meeting the just requirements of morality, public order and the general welfare in a democratic society’.

In reference to this article, Sumner Twiss also argues, ‘The deep normative basis for these developments and expansions is the recognition that duties and responsibilities of various agents are implicit in human rights and are key to the latter’s guarantee and advancement’.⁵⁷ In other words, the foundational document articulating human rights suggests that we must balance our individual rights with the duties to those in our communities. Therefore, while individual human rights are not limited to our geographical location or political affiliation, our community connection is an important aspect of why such rights exist and need articulation. In other words, human rights are not dependent upon structural recognition, but the recognition of human rights makes little sense outside of life in a community. Human rights do not protect us from political community itself, but rather from the abuse of such. Human rights are not simply about the preservation of individual liberty, but also how humans can flourish together. Thus, an individualistic rendition of human rights misses a central component of the purpose of human rights. Therefore, I have argued throughout, that American citizens are better off with a Thomistic perspective which emphasizes a strong communal orientation balancing rights and duties for the sake of the common good than reductionistic, skeptical, individualistic, and atomistic perspectives engendered by many American citizens and politicians.⁵⁸

Two Years Later

Before concluding this article, it will be beneficial to briefly qualify my position given that two years have passed since the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic. My argument is not an unqualified endorsement of all government mandates in the name of COVID-19 (or public

⁵⁷ Sumner Twiss, ‘Reflections on the Relationship Between Human Rights and Global Ethics’ in *Multi-Religious Perspectives On a Global Ethic: In Search of a Common Morality*. Eds. Myriam Renaud and William Schweiker. (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2020), p. 206.

⁵⁸ Keys states, ‘the concept of the common good reflects and relates an ethos of communicability, relation, shared practices and benefits, and responsibility. Where rights references may prima facie prompt citizens in election years to wonder whether they are “better off today than [they] were four years ago”, concern for the common good elicits rhetoric along the lines of “ask not what your country can do for you, [but] what you can do for your country”’, *Aquinas, Aristotle, and the Promise of the Common Good*, p. 9.

health). This article was originally written as a response to American outcries of injustice to the use of government mandates enacted during the first phase of COVID-19.⁵⁹ As the pandemic and our understanding of COVID-19 has shifted so should our understanding of the use of government mandates. I argue that in the early days of the pandemic, government regulated COVID-19 mandates (i.e., social distancing, hygienic efforts, stay at home orders, etc.) were not a violation of Americans' individual rights, but the proper fulfillment of the U.S. governments' political responsibility of protecting the common good for the flourishing of all. While U.S. government mandates did not in principle violate Americans' human rights at the beginning of the pandemic, that is not to suggest that such violations could not or did not ever occur. In the use of government public health mandates, I argue for a progressive understanding and implementation of mandates. In other words, stricter government mandates were justified in the early days of the pandemic, but may not be currently justified given the availability of vaccines and the waning potency of COVID-19.⁶⁰ Therefore, a Thomistic approach does not justify indefinite government mandates or those unwarranted by scientific research.

Particularly in the first phase of the pandemic, Americans should have been willing to apply charity to their political leaders and medical professionals as they attempted to make sense of the pandemic before accusing them of authoritative abuse given that nothing of this magnitude had occurred in recent American history, the lack of scientific data available, and the constantly evolving understanding of

⁵⁹ I see four major phases within the COVID-19 pandemic. The first phase was the pre-vaccine days when the death toll was high. The second phase came after the advent of the vaccine helping to decrease hospitalizations and deaths. The third phase occurred with the Delta variant. The fourth phase occurred with the Omicron variant in which the infection rate reached its highest, but thankfully the death toll and hospitalizations had greatly decreased.

⁶⁰ Even in various states' diverse mandates, American mandates never came close to the invasive nature of the mandates found in China. Arguably, China's more aggressive approach seemed to pragmatically reduce the infection rate. See Kai Kupferschmidt, and Jon Cohen. 'China's Aggressive Measures Have Slowed the Coronavirus. They May Not Work in Other Countries.' *Science.org*. March 2, 2020. Accessed April 4, 2022. (<https://www.science.org/content/article/china-s-aggressive-measures-have-slowed-coronavirus-they-may-not-work-other-countries>). Part of the problem in American infection rates were the individualistic orientation as previously discussed in this article and the unwillingness of U.S. governments to be overly aggressive. This statement does not praise or justify China's aggressive approach. Rather, I argue that this shows that even when U.S. government mandates went beyond many Americans' comfortability, they still stayed within a democratic framework that kept its citizens at the forefront. I personally favor America's more reserved use of public health mandates than the approach taken in China. Prior to the vaccine and the waning of the disease, aggressive measures only produced short-term marginal victories. I would also argue that better alternatives could have been implemented without the need of such aggressive measures. While both America and China claimed to enact health mandates for the public good, America's approach never lost sight of human autonomy and human rights despite the rhetoric used by American mandate critics.

COVID-19. Yet as our knowledge of COVID-19 and our medical capabilities have increased (primarily with the advent of the vaccine), it does make the use of some government mandates unnecessary (i.e., stay at home orders, masks, etc.). This admission, however, is not to suggest that those who originally cried out against the use of mandates were vindicated, but rather that the use of mandates is a constantly shifting situation (much like the COVID-19 pandemic) in which we may need to apply mandates differently at various times. In other words, governments should willingly and quickly adjust (or absolve) mandates when our medical advancements and scientific knowledge increases our ability to keep the public adequately safe. Given the various circumstances (i.e., infection rate, hospital capacities, shortage of medical personnel, etc.) across America, not all states were able or willing to lift mandates as quickly as some citizens would like. Rather than decry these ‘authoritarian overlords’ as being unwilling to relinquish power, we should charitably recognize that each state was and is dealing with an ever evolving situation and that some post-traumatic stress may exist in which reversing mandates may be pragmatically unwise or psychologically difficult.⁶¹ In any case, my argument is primarily focused on defending the use of public health mandates in principle rather than defending its use in all circumstances.

Conclusion

In conclusion, based on a Thomistic perspective, I have argued that federal, state, and local U.S. governments have not superseded their jurisdiction in the use of public health mandates or violated individuals’ rights in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Rather, these governments have been properly acting within their role as preservers, providers, defenders, and cultivators of the common good. In this essay, I have also contested the skeptical attitude displayed by American citizens and politicians who have unjustifiably suggested that government mandates are smoke screens to strip individuals of their human rights in an effort to gain more political power. I argued that most government public health mandates should be interpreted as an other-regarding attempt to protect the well-being of individuals and communities. Further, I have argued that individual rights cannot be isolated from the concept of community. As displayed in Thomistic

⁶¹ For example, New York has been slow to reverse its public mandates. Yet, given the death toll it faced in the early days of the pandemic, there was some psychological comfort that mandates brought. Reversing these mandates too quickly may have been psychologically difficult. Psychological difficulty is not a sufficient warrant to maintain stringent mandates, but it may give us more charity in accessing the situation in places like New York.

thought and the *UDHR*, a proper understanding of individual rights is intricately tied with our duties to others. Therefore, I have argued that a Thomistic political perspective provides a more adequate understanding of the purpose of government and the reciprocal responsibilities of political authorities and citizens than the reductive, skeptical, individualistic, and atomistic perspectives engendered by some Americans' consciously and unconsciously held views.

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