Charles De Koninck at the Crossroads of Catholic Moral Thought: The “Common Good” Controversy and its Echoes in the Americas

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Though Charles De Koninck was the first French-language philosopher based in Canada to be known internationally, his is no more a household name in French than in English Canada – except in Quebec City. There, on 25 February 2006, three full pages of the Saturday issue of the local daily newspaper Le Soleil were devoted to a presentation of the “De Koninck Dynasty” of scholars, intellectuals and professionals, who have made their mark at Université Laval, in the Quebec City area, throughout the province, and beyond. The genealogical chart that covers the front page of the section shows the exponential spread of this prolific Catholic family over three generations of illustrious citizens, from the initial germ cell of a young Flemish couple who came to Quebec in 1934, when Charles De Koninck, having completed a dissertation on the philosophy of Sir Arthur Eddington at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, was invited by Université Laval to help set up its new Faculty of Philosophy. De Koninck’s wife, Zoe Decruydt, is now in her nineties; De Koninck, who would have been one hundred in 2006, died in 1965 at the height of his glory. At the time, the philosopher was in Rome, a lone lay expert called by Pope Paul VI to actively participate in the deliberations of the Second Vatican Council on two burning social issues facing the Roman Catholic Church: freedom of conscience and birth control. This father of twelve was strongly in favour of the latter, and is said to have been on his way to deliver to the pope some impregnable Scholastic arguments for allowing
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birth control, when God somehow thought it better to call De Koninck back to Himself, perhaps thereby changing the course of contemporary religious history.¹

This is not the only family legend that precedes his eldest son Thomas De Koninck wherever he goes in Quebec. There is a rumour that, as a little boy, the future philosopher was the model for the inquisitive Little Prince of the children’s classic of that title. The rumour is based on the time Antoine de Saint-Exupéry stayed with the De Konincks when he came from New York City at the invitation of Charles to give lectures in Quebec City.² In May 1942, in addition to presenting his new book Pilote de guerre (Flight to Arras) published in the United States in February, Saint-Exupéry also spoke on the question of the common good³ – the very topic on which the founding dean of Laval University’s Philosophy Faculty was writing the articles from which he would draw the book he is best known for in both Canadian intellectual history and the history of Catholic thought: De la Primauté du Bien Commun contre les personnalistes. Le principe de l’ordre nouveau (1943).⁴ Thomas De Koninck, who has followed in his father’s footsteps as sometime dean of Université Laval’s Faculty of Philosophy, asked me to help prepare an edition of Charles De Koninck’s main works for the Presses de l’Université Laval. I am currently preparing a critical introduction for De la Primauté du Bien Commun contre les personnalistes and am thus seizing this opportunity for advanced publicity for this project within the academic community.

The impact the book originally owed a lot to the peculiar conditions of the Second World War. Saint-Exupéry was far from being the only French intellectual based in the United States for the duration of the conflict. The cream of Catholic thinkers were also there, and during the Axis occupation of Europe, it was in America that they carried on their debates freely, so that for a while the Old Continent was no longer the centre of Catholic intellectual life. At the vanguard of this group was the Neo-Thomist Jacques Maritain, who had gradually come around to embracing liberal democracy after authoritarian beginnings as a turn-of-the-century neophyte. In 1942, he felt able to rally all Catholic intellectuals in the fight for freedom against totalitarianism. He did this by drafting a manifesto to that end. Charles De Koninck’s refused to sign the document. His refusal was grounded in deep-seated philosophical differences with Maritain. Those differences go back to fine points involving the assumptions of the philosophy of science (such as the Thomist understanding of contingency that he would later invoke to
critique existentialism), the area where he first gained serious credentials as a universally-respected Catholic thinker. He was increasingly uneasy about the popularity of Maritain’s ideas and the concomitant spread of the personalist discourse with which he allowed himself to be associated. This prompted him to direct the serious Thomist argumentation of his book on the common good “against the personalists” in general. While he did not name anyone in particular (aside from lesser figures like Mortimer Adler on democracy and Fr. Herbert Doms on marriage), everyone thought of Jacques Maritain, and no personalists ever recognized themselves in De Koninck’s ascription to them of positions they also rejected as a matter of course. Still, Notre Dame University’s Dominican Father I.T. Eschmann thought it fit to contradict de Koninck by writing an article “In Defence of Maritain.” This reinforced De Koninck’s original stance, motivating him to charge back with “In Defence of Saint Thomas,” a substantial essay in the second issue of the journal he had just founded: Laval théologique et philosophique. Though other contributors were often more irenic, the debate continued well beyond its wartime context, especially in the Americas, which gained, for the first time, center-stage in a debate of vital importance to the Roman Catholic Church.

This becomes apparent in recent scholarship that has brought to light the significance of the gradual replacement of a post-Tridentine morality of individual redemption through pious submission to an immutable social order with a new personalist ethos of human dignity in engaged incarnation for social transformation. This has been done by situating the background to Quebec’s Quiet Revolution within the context of cultural transfers from fast-evolving Christian circles in Europe around the middle of the last century. De la Primauté du Bien Commun contre les personnalistes no doubt marks the first time thinking from French Canada grabbed world attention for being at the center of a controversy that mobilized Thomists into two camps either for or against Maritain, the most prominent Catholic thinker of his day. For it was deemed the one book that dared to aim at the anonymous designation of “personalists” in the text. From what I have seen of Charles De Koninck’s correspondence, this suspicion was correct, despite the claims by some (such as their mutual friend Yves Simon) that this could only be a misunderstanding. The false assumption that the book was an immediate reaction to recent Quebec publications has been perpetuated since then.. Among these publications was the December 1942 issue of La Nouvelle Relève entirely devoted to Maritain on the occasion of his sixtieth birthday. Some of his intellectual
admirers in the province, led by the review’s young editors Claude Hurtubise and Robert Charbonneau, joined together to publish original works from exiled French writers (including in this case Yves R. Simon). But it is François Hertel’s book, *Pour un ordre personnaliste* (1942), that is most often cited as the trigger for this attack on Maritain. In fact, the articles that would be reworked into De Koninck’s book had already appeared in instalments over several issues of the *Semaine religieuse de Québec* in 1942, and neither this weekly nor other Quebec publications at the time never linked the two works. They even reviewed Hertel rather favourably on the whole.

Hertel was a relatively unconventional (for the Quebec context of the time) Catholic intellectual; an important article by the University of Ottawa’s Marie Martin-Hubbard discussing Hertel’s work has recently underlined that Thomism in Quebec was not as monolithic as is often assumed. This is no less true on a global scale, as shown by the echo this debate found for over a decade as far away as Latin America. If a Spanish edition of De Koninck’s book appeared in 1952, 1948 had already seen the publication of a hefty tome entitled *Crítica de la concepción de Maritain sobre la persona humana* by Father Julio Meinvielle, a friend of Charles De Koninck who drew on his work and repeatedly invited him to speak and teach in Argentina. De Koninck did not necessarily share Meinvielle’s reactionary politics, even though this has often been taken for granted in light of his early stance in *The Primacy of the Common Good*. It was after all explicitly aimed “against the personalists,” who were soon to reshape the Catholic worldview in a sense consonant with some modern assumptions, and may therefore be deemed progressive in retrospect. This is why De Koninck is popular today with traditionalist Catholics who reject Vatican II, and can draw for this on Julio Meinvielle’s denunciations of the Council’s liberal and modernist antecedents. Yet the fact remains that he was the highest placed lay North American actor of the Council – indeed the only lay *peritus* as adviser to Cardinal Maurice Roy. Likewise, he took controversially “liberal” stances on the need to accommodate freedom of conscience in the Quiet Revolution’s debates about secular education. Based on recent reassessments of the triumphalist view of the Quiet Revolution (as the vindication of modern self-determination and emancipated subjectivity over against the heteronomous claims of religion and traditional authority in general) that is still central to public discourse and social consensus in Quebec today, I think it might be time to take a fresh look at De Koninck’s book. His critique was more than just a
rearguard action. In some ways it was a prophetic warning of a notable drift towards hedonistic secular individualism, which progressive Christian personalism unwittingly helped usher in Catholic societies such as Quebec. \(^\text{16}\)

The positions of Maritain and De Koninck are often seen as complementary by their admirers who are often the same people. \(^\text{17}\) I was even asked to contribute an entry on Charles De Koninck to an Italian encyclopaedia of twentieth-century personalists. \(^\text{18}\) To be sure, De Koninck questions the conceptual meaningfulness and Thomist credentials of the distinction between individual and person that is central to personalist discourse, particularly where it is used to oppose the spiritual generosity of the one to the narrow egotism of the other. Following this distinction, the individual is simply writ-large in social collectives, which the person therefore cannot be subordinated to, by virtue of his or her own direct relation to God, in the accounts that directly prompted De Koninck’s critique. Yet De Koninck is not denying the paramount dignity of the human person, nor that this dignity is tied to the person’s nature as an organic whole with a capacity for deliberation, as Maritain insists. He simply adds that it has even more to do with the end that orients this freedom: to live in common with other beings within a larger whole ordained to the good of those of which it is made up, in a harmonious diversity that expresses God’s perfection. This supreme created good is a common good that rests on the proper good of each insofar as it is not merely private, but diffusive of itself in the larger wholes of which it is part and that ensure it, whether they be of the order of nature or of the order of culture.

The person therefore does not transcend political society (or the universe for that matter), as some personalists have seemed to suggest, for a true polity is in essence a community of persons and of intermediate communities. This is not unlike Joe Clark’s definition of Canada as a “community of communities.” Political society in this sense is not to be confused with the state as such, which, if it usurped to itself all the legitimate prerogatives of the communities that pre-exist in civil society, would no longer serve the common good. It would be merely a super-individual lording it over society instead of serving its interlocking communities as an overarching “meta-community” (if I may hazard this neologism). For every person also belongs to communities other than the political one, such as those defined by family or religion. Moreover, God transcends yet upholds all communities as the uncreated good of everyone,
common to all. According to Charles De Koninck, to ignore the primacy of the common good in the name of private goods (whether material or spiritual in nature) that cannot be shared would thus amount to undermining the dignity of the person. This is not unlike the sentiments espoused by his son Thomas in his award-winning book *De la dignité humaine*.

Once removed from the polemical backdrop of the minutiae of a Scholastic disputation about the Common Good, this constant in the elder De Koninck’s thought ironically brings it so close to some basic stances of personalist discourse as to make it undistinguishable from the latter. This proximity can be illustrated by a few sentences from the last collection of articles he published, entitled *Tout homme est mon prochain*, where he states that “this dignity does not emerge when man is content with holding on to what nature has given him.” Personalists would say this stingy self-centeredness is what they mean by the given individual in each of us, which the genuine person is called to transcend by deliberately giving him/herself to her/his special vocation. If for the early Swiss Protestant personalist Denis de Rougemont (who happened to be close to Saint-Exupéry in wartime New York) the person was defined early in the 1930s as the “free and responsible human being,” in 1964, De Koninck likewise asserted that “man expresses his dignity by acting by himself, by performing actions for which he is held responsible.”

In his key contributions to the theology of co-redemption through Mary and the definition of the Catholic dogma of her assumption, De Koninck had long based his case on the Virgin’s free assent and total submission (over against the prideful self-assertion he thought he found in personalism) to her part in the Incarnation of the divine Word, since “the human person enjoys here a bonitas propter se wholly beyond compare.” De Koninck framed his argument in terms of an Aristotelian-Thomist definition of “dignity,” which “is said of the person in general, and of the citizen in particular, inasmuch as he is causa sui and enjoys a certain power of contradiction.” With the proviso that this power is best held latent in unison with divine will, such self-determination plays a similar role in defining the image of God in human beings for Greek Church Fathers like Saint Maximus the Confessor, who refers to it as autexousia. De Koninck will again cite this definition, illustrating “the part of the human person in the work of redemption” in *Le scandale de la médiation* (1962), to specify in *Tout homme est mon prochain* (1964) the “rights and duties of parents in educational matters”; for the freedom of conscience that allows the citizen to act by himself is essential to the common good
of political society, which therefore grants rights to the person, down to the freedom to err even on the most basic issues of life. Yet if “the good life allowed by political society takes its source in the recognition of the dignity and freedom of the human person,” “a community that would only see in its organization a means to protect men against each other, as indispensable as this may be, is not worthy of the name of political society,” since it is not ordained to the common good for its own sake. Visions of the good life may vary and need to be respected in recognition of the personal dignity that citizenship presupposes, but their strict confinement to the private realm would prevent the pursuit of the common good through the practice of particular virtues that belong to the essence of political society.

This might situate Charles De Koninck’s lifelong reflection on the centrality of the common good as a harbinger of the kind of sophisticated Anglo-American communitarian thinking that has emerged in critical opposition to the prevailing liberal consensus in the last quarter of the twentieth century, and especially of the comeback of the Aristotelian-Thomist position with the publication of Scottish moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre’s *After Virtue*. But by the contrast it offers with the kind of rugged individualism canonized in the American Constitution – as a Machiavellian system of checks and balances designed to offer basic protection against each other to the citizens in their untrammelled pursuit of happiness as a private good, *The Primacy of the Common Good* can be read as a classic statement of the distinctive historic assumptions of Canadian thought. It has long been championed as such by the University of Ottawa’s Leslie Armour.

In this as in other respects, Charles De Koninck can thus be compared with George Grant (1918-1988). His *English-Speaking Justice* was in large part a prescient critique of the late modern form of liberalism represented by John Rawls, which knows only changing social conventions between individual claimants to discretionary rights, deliberately bracketing substantial visions of the good as private matters in order to privilege procedural norms over the common good they normally presuppose. Viewing himself as a political philosopher within the framework of a broadly conceived Christian Platonism, George Grant was English Canada’s most prominent public intellectual before Charles Taylor – another Christian communitarian philosopher. His *Lament for a Nation*, subtitled “The Defeat of Canadian Nationalism,” ironically became the latter’s enduring manifesto, even though it claimed “the impossibility of
conservatism in our era is the impossibility of Canada.”\textsuperscript{28} For Grant defined the Canadian project as the wager of maintaining particular historic identities within an orderly whole for the common good, which is also how De Koninck understood the polity. Grant was also close to De Koninck in the grounds he invoked for Canadian resistance to the American Empire as the vanguard of the modern project of mastery over the natural order, leading to the tyranny of the “universal homogeneous state” (to use a term from Leo Strauss’ Aristotelian critique of Hegelian Alexandre Kojève that Grant made his own). Asking at the same time as George Grant if love of one’s own country was out of date in an interdependent global society, De Koninck recognized the need for an international body of political communities ordained to the greater good of all of humanity, as long as this universal good did not cease to be that of countries and political societies, as in the “Grand État monolithe”\textsuperscript{29} that a federation like Canada was best designed to hold in check.\textsuperscript{30} For “such an organism must be founded on human rights, among which is the right to political life in a more limited community, more attuned to human beings in their natural and historic diversity.” Such differences could only be viewed as a hindrance by the world body, of which the United Nations are but an early stage, if its goal was to “homogenize humanity in a formless paste whose only rights would be those of abstract man, the common denominator that is devoid by definition of any right; of the nondescript human who can only claim the right to give up all his rights” as a particular being.\textsuperscript{31} Like Grant, De Koninck sought to preserve the concrete reality of human rights and freedoms from any abstract universalist discourse that would use them to undermine the claims of morality, the fabric of society, historical loyalties, or the authority of such political institutions as allow the good to be sought in common in a meaningful context. Given the way these two thinkers have best articulated in both languages of Canada some of the characteristic assumptions of this country’s beleaguered traditional self-understanding, I find it fitting that in 1949, when the milestone Massey Royal Commission on Canadian culture needed reports on the state of philosophy in English and French Canada, it turned to George Grant and Charles De Koninck respectively.\textsuperscript{32}

These forays into both the local and global contexts – Quebec and the Roman Catholic world, Canada and the English-speaking world – of Charles De Koninck’s \textit{De la Primauté du Bien Commun contre les personnalistes} were meant to give some sense of the current relevance, as well as the historical importance, of this classic of political theology, as a
foretaste of the planned new critical edition, before I move on to the Belgo-Canadian thinker’s other significant contributions to political theory, the philosophy of natural science, and Catholic theology, in further volumes of this projected collection of his main works.

Endnotes


2. Actually, the Little Prince was no doubt a composite of the various models from Saint-Exupéry’s life – including himself – of which it has alternatively been claimed he drew from after being prompted by his American publisher that summer to flesh out as a Christmas story the character he had been doodling and imagining for many years already. As a summary of recent reconstructions of the genesis of *The Little Prince*, see Alain Barluet, “Le roman du Petit Prince,” in *Le Figaro hors-série: Entre ciel et terre. Saint-Exupéry, Le Petit Prince a 60 ans*, July 2006, 50-59.

3. Louis-Guy Lemieux, “Le Petit Prince, c’est Saint-Ex avec les traits du jeune Thomas De Koninck,” *Le Soleil*, Saturday, 25 February 2006, D2; to underscore its point, this article features a side-by-side comparison of pictures of Thomas De Koninck as an eight-year old boy and the Little Prince as drawn by Saint-Exupéry. Writing to the latter to ask him to return in the Fall for seminars with Laval philosophy faculty and students on the basis of his *Pilote de guerre*, Charles De Koninck takes up the general tenor and specific passages of this book to illustrate some of his own theses on the common good. See Charles De Koninck’s letter to Antoine de Saint-Exupéry recorded 22 June 1942, Fonds Charles De Koninck, Archives de l’Université Laval, Quebec City.

4. Charles De Koninck, *De la Primauté du Bien commun contre les personnalistes. Le principe de l’ordre nouveau* [Foreword by Cardinal Rodrigue Villeneuve, Archbishop of Quebec] (Quebec City: Presses de l’Université Laval & Montreal: Éditions Fides, 1943). The second part of the title refers to a distinct secondary study of humanism, dwelling on Feuerbach to show that its inherent denial of both the givenness and the Giver of the created order must always lead to the nihilism of the self-creating “new order” of modernity perfected in Marxism and other totalitarian trends, and that in this respect personalism is no exception. De Koninck would go on to introduce the serious study of Marxist-Leninist philosophy at Laval University in the midst of the Cold War – with the idea of “knowing the enemy” of Christian civilization no doubt, but this was still a bold step of intellectual independence and rigor in a context where Church dominance left little scope for opposing views.
5. See Charles De Koninck’s letter to Fr. Julio Meinvielle recorded 19 July 1951, Fonds Charles De Koninck, Archives de l’Université Laval, Quebec City.


16. This Weberian paradox of the heterogeneity of the spiritual intentions and social effects of religious reform movements as applied to the Quiet Revolution is a keystone of its critique by new generations of intellectuals since the turn of the century, which I have tried to synthesize in my postscript.
entitled “De l’utopie à l’uchronie” to Stéphane Kelly, ed., Les idées mènent le Québec. Essais sur une sensibilité historique (Quebec City: Presses de l’Université Laval, 2002), 197-219, as well as in my contribution entitled “Echoes of George Grant in Recent Critiques of Post-Quiet Revolution Quebec,” Ian Angus, Ron Dart, and Randy Peg Peters, eds., Athens and Jerusalem: George Grant’s Theology, Philosophy and Politics (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006).

17. See the nuanced discussion of the Maritain-De Koninck controversy in Michael A. Smith, Human Dignity and the Common Good in the Aristotelian-Thomistic Tradition (Lewiston, New York & Queenston, ON: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1995). A critical but balanced Thomistic assessment of Maritain’s personalism that took in some of De Koninck’s arguments, but avoided the excesses of his polemics or those of Meinvielle was already to be found in Jacques Croteau, O.M.I., Les Fondements thomistes du personalisme de Maritain (Ottawa: Éditions de l’Université d’Ottawa, 1955). On the same topic, see also John Brendan Killoran, “Virtue and the Common Good: The Thomistic Roots of Maritain’s Personalism,” Études maritainiennes / Maritain Studies 5 (April 1989): 83-102.


21. “Ma certitude de l’incompatibilité absolue entre le personnalisme et l’esclavage de Marie a été le principe le plus profond de mon attaque contre les personnalistes,” wrote De Koninck in a private letter (CDK 15/15.01L Charles De Koninck to Rev. Henri Guidon 1943/0611, in the Charles De Koninck Papers at the Jacques Maritain Center of the University of Notre Dame, Ill.). I owe this revealing clue on the intimate link between De Koninck’s Marian theology and his political philosophy to Sylvain Luquet Plantier, translator of De Koninck’s “In Defence of Saint Thomas. A Reply to Father Eschmann’s Attack on the Primacy of the Common Good” and author of the special introduction to it to follow the main text of La Primauté du Bien commun in
our planned new edition.


23. De Koninck, Tout homme est mon prochain, 114.


30. See La Confédération, rempart contre le Grand État, one of Charles De Koninck’s contributions to the Province of Quebec’s Royal Commission of Inquiry on Constitutional Problems, published separately from the main report as Annex No. 1 in 1954.
