Suffering and Spiritedness: The Doctrine of Comfort and the Drama of *Thumos* in More's *Dialogue of Comfort Against Tribulation*

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This study examines the relationship between comfort, understood as an interior strengthening or emboldening, and the spirited element of the soul—that element which Plato and Aristotle called *thumos*. In the *Dialogue of Comfort Against Tribulation*, More follows his Greek precursors in regarding the spirited element as that part of the person which alone can unite the reason and the passions, making for human wholeness. More also follows Plato in using the dialogue form as a mode of *psychagogia*, or statesmanly soul-leading, whereby he elicits in the soul of the attentive and involved reader the same comfort which Antony calls forth in Vincent. The dialogue demonstrates how comfort requires arousing the spirited element in the soul, especially in its honor- and victory-loving aspect (Vincent's name is in fact redolent of this aspect of *thumos*.) But the kind of comfort which concerns More is supernatural in its origin and final end. This study will show how in his knowledge of the causes and conditions of supernatural comfort, More amply demonstrates that he is a theologian no less than a statesman or literary artist.
Keywords: *Dialogue*, comfort, *thumos*, spiritedness, suffering, theology, Plato, soul

Cette étude examine la relation entre le réconfort, compris comme renforcement et audace intérieur, et l'élément courageux de l'âme – élément que Platon et Aristote appellent thumos. *Dans le* Dialogue du réconfort contre les tribulations, *More suit ses précurseurs grecs en considérant l'élément courageux comme cette partie de la personne qui seule peut unir la raison et les passions, faisant de l'homme un tout. More suit également Platon par l'usage de la forme du dialogue comme mode de* psychagogia*, ou direction de l'âme, par laquelle il suscite dans l'âme du lecteur attentif et*

impliqué le même réconfort qu'Antony appelle chez Vincent. Le dialogue démontre comment le réconfort demande l'éveil de l'élément courageux de l'âme, surtout dans son désir d'honneur et de victoire (le nom de Vincent suggère en fait cet aspect de thumos.*) Mais la sorte de réconfort qui concerne More est surnaturel, tant dans son origine que dans sa fin. Cette étude suggère que, dans sa connaissance des causes et des conditions du réconfort surnaturel, More se montre un théologien à part entière, tout comme il est un homme d'état ou un grand auteur.*
Mots-clés: **Dialogue*, réconfort,* thumos*, courage, souffrance, théologie, Platon, âme***

Este estudio examina la relación que existe entre el consuelo (entendido como fortalecimiento y audacia interiores), y el componente más enérgico del alma, aquel al que Platón y Aristóteles llamaron *thumos*. En el *Diálogo del Consuelo contra la Tribulación*, More sigue a sus precursores griegos al entender esa parte más enérgica del alma como el componente de la persona que puede aunar la razón y las pasiones, completando así la totalidad del ser humano. More sigue también a Platón cuando usa el diálogo como una forma de *psicagogía*, o el arte de educar y conducir el alma, para así fomentar en el alma del lector atento y comprometido el mismo consuelo que Antonio ofrece a Vicente. El diálogo muestra cómo el consuelo requiere del concurso del elemento enérgico del alma, especialmente en su faceta de búsqueda del honor y la victoria (el nombre Vicente nos recuerda este aspecto del *thumos*). Pero el tipo de consuelo del que habla More es sobrenatural, tanto en su origen como último fin. Este estudio muestra cómo, en su conocimiento de las causas y características del consuelo sobrenatural, More demuestra sobradamente que es tan teólogo como hombre de estado o literato.
Palabras clave: *Dialogo*, consuelo, *thumos*, ánimo, sufrimiento, teología, Platón, alma

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The notion that Thomas More may or must be understood as a theologian, is liable to strike the serious student of history as well as the theological specialist as overbold, if not unbelievable. It is one thing, indeed an easy thing, to grant that a Renaissance statesman, a pious Catholic, would be conversant in matters of Christian doctrine and even be possessed of a serious interest in theological questions. But it seems an altogether different matter to count More among a number which includes the likes of Augustine or even Gerson. Of course, if the theological enterprise is the exclusive province either of the academic "professional" or of the religious adept, then More may safely be regarded as a first-rate controversialist and edifying devotional writer, but as a theologian only in some derivative sense. Happily, however, the Church speaks of theology as a science, that is, as a knowledge of realities through a knowledge of their causes. A theologian is a Christian who habitually thinks about the essential doctrines of the Church and about their interrelationship one to another and the ways in which they illuminate reality. Thomas More is just this sort of Christian. Theology is not simply a *technê* or proficiency practiced by those trained according to this or that convention. It is a habit of mind perfective of men as men, not a skill that bears only an incidental relation to a man's humanness. In this way, then, we may see Thomas More in all of the ways he presents himself to us, rather than by the half-light of dubious assumptions about what theologians must be about. In his knowledge of the causes and conditions of supernatural comfort, More amply demonstrates that he is no less a theologian than a statesman, literary artist, husband, or father.

Practically speaking, this frees us to read the *Dialogue of Comfort Against Tribulation* on its own terms, as the work of a man and not a specialist. In particular it allows us to see the dialogue

form as essential to its teaching, avoiding the temptation to wring a theological treatise from its artful presentation: "*Eek Plato seith, who-so can him rede, the wordes mote be cosin to the dede.*"[1] This can be a challenge when reading Part I, which has been called "doctrinaire,"[2] and not altogether unjustly. Antony takes a didactic, if edifying, tone in which the comic element so prominent in Parts II and III is conspicuously absent. But if we are correct in taking Antony seriously as a teacher, then the form of his instruction in Part I should be understood as a preliminary stage in Vincent's education in comfort.

It is essential to keep in mind that "comfort" here does *not* mean "consolation." Vincent is not seeking to be soothed. "Comfort" refers to an interior strengthening or quickening of the spirited element of the soul—that element which Plato, one of More's principal teachers, called *thumos*. What is this "spirited" element? In Book II of Plato's *Republic*, Socrates analyzes the human soul by way of a tripartite distinction of the intellect, the passions, and a middle part, called *thumos*, which is capable of uniting the reason and the passions in a fully human life. Classical scholar Joe Sachs beautifully describes the relationship of these parts:

> …an older sort of wisdom is articulated in Plato's *Republic* (esp. 439D-442B), according to which the human soul is not a duality of reason and passion, but has three parts, with the middle part giving it the possibility of wholeness. As described in the *Republic*, this middle part is what is irrationally spirited in us, just as in a spirited horse, but capable of obeying reason, so as to be able to follow its leader like a dog. There is nothing spiritual in this sort of spirit, but there is something that can have dignity, since it appears not

[1] Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, The Prologue.
[2] J. Stephen Russell, "More's *Dialogue* and the Dynamics of Comfort," *Moreana*, 65-66 (1980), 41-56.

> only in pep rallies that arouse school spirit, but also as what we call the indomitable human spirit which can rise above any adversity. The republic, that is, the regime or constitution, that Plato's *Republic* is about is the internal human commonwealth in which reason rules and directs the passions by joining with, and giving honor to, our spirited side. *Only that third part of us is capable of loving the good and being loyal to it, and the constitution to which it submits is not the despotic one of mastery, but the political rule of persuasion.*[3]

While desire is moved by pleasure and pain, spiritedness is governed by honor and shame. For Plato (one of More's principal teachers) and Aristotle, spiritedness is the seat of all that is most humanly interesting in us: ambition, reverence, shame, disgust, fear, loyalty, and so on. Jesus himself frequently appeals to this side of us as when, for instance, he praises the man who sells all he has to obtain a field with buried treasure, presumably leaving the landowner in the dark about what he's parting with. Plato and Aristotle alike hold that human greatness, or even wholeness,[4] is impossible without a cultivated *thumos*. Vincent comes to his uncle pious, but pusillanimous; looking for comfort, but without the spiritedness that makes comfort possible. Antony leads Vincent to see consequences of a defective *thumos* and liberates him from the contraction of soul that fear always produces. Antony's *psychagogia*, moreover, is a statesmanly soul-leading of one who sees the theological-political consequences of the Protestant account of man's end and his place within the whole. Vincent will be brought to recognize a deeper threat to the soul of Western man than the despotism of the Turk.

Antony's task in the first eleven chapters is to awaken the spirited element in Vincent in the midst of a careful theological

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[3] Joe Sachs, "Wholes and Parts in Human Character," *The St. John's Review*, vol. 46, #3 (2002), 6-7. Emphasis mine.

[4] Cf. Plato, *Republic*, esp. 439D-442B.

instruction. By chapter 12 Vincent understands that the Protestant alternative to the Church's teaching is both comfortless and enervating. Turning to a closer examination of these twelve chapters, we will be in a better position not only to understand the argument and the action of the dialogue, but to take an interested part in a conversation in which we recognize our own anxieties and hopes.

Antony sets out by describing for Vincent the excellences and the limitations of the teaching of "the old moral philosophers."[5] The philosophers may be compared to pharmacists who dispense both health-giving and harmful drugs, but who are unable by their own lights to discern the difference. They have a purely instrumental value, for their teaching is medicinal only when prescribed aright by "the Great Physician."[6] The teaching of the philosophers ultimately fails to give comfort for lack of necessary knowledge of man's supernatural end and for lack of an intrinsic efficacy which gives the truly comfortable doctrine its power to strengthen the sufferer. In other words, comfort in tribulation requires a supernatural or revealed doctrine as well as a supernatural disposition by which that knowledge may be effectually received. A great chasm has been fixed between the consolation that philosophy offers and the comfort which God alone can give.

If only God can give it, only faith can receive it. Comfort is especially derived from faith in the word of God expressed in Holy Scripture: "For except a man first believe that Holy Scripture is the word of God, and that the word of God is true, how can a man take

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[5] Thomas More, *A Dialogue of Comfort Against Tribulation,* I.i.9. All references to the *Dialogue* correspond to the book, chapter, and page number of the Yale Critical Edition, *The Complete Works of St. Thomas More*, volume 12, ed. Louis L. Martz and Frank Manley (New Haven: Yale UP, 1976). The text is from the standardized version of this edition prepared by the Center for Thomas More Studies.

[6] I.i.11.

any comfort of that [which] the Scripture telleth him therein?"[7] Antony reminds his timorous student that the comfort is greater or less in proportion to the robustness of the faith that does the receiving: "This faith as it is more faint or more strong, so shall the comfortable words of Holy Scripture stand the man in more stead or less."[8] But he reminds us that this faith is an unmerited gift which God gives freely, though we may—and should—pray boldly for its continual increase.

Thus natural reason, even in its perfected state, fails to comfort us in tribulation. But faith, which is a supernatural perfection of the intellect, does not alone suffice. The soul must move itself toward the God whom it knows by faith. The source of this motion is in appetitive part of the soul, which expresses itself in a longing to be comforted by God.[9] The awareness of this longing is a first movement in the direction of its satisfaction. Here we have an appeal to the spirited element in Vincent, an inducement to avoid in all events both that lethargy which prevents a man from seeking comfort, and the bitterness or ire by which he refuses even that which is offered, each of which is a defect or deformation of *thumos*. Just as grace perfects nature, so desire perfects *thumos*. Or, as Aristotle would have it, desire is always present in spiritedness.[10] Antony can awaken Vincent's spiritedness by appealing to what is already very much aroused in him: a deep longing for comfort. But the spirited search for comfort must itself be governed by a supernatural discernment which at its most elementary stage knows worldly comfort to be illusory and, at a higher level, seeks comfort in God himself, not principally in the removal of suffering. The man

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[7] I.ii.12.
[8] *Ibid*.
[9] I.iii.14.
[10] Cf., Aristotle, *On the Soul*, Book 3. We might add here that the Greek term for "desire," *epithumia*, itself suggests a crowning of *thumos*.

who takes the greatest comfort in the desire to be comforted "is he that referreth the manner of his comforting to God... holding himself content... whether it be by taking away, or diminishment, of the tribulation itself... or by the giving of him patience and spiritual consolation therein."[11]

In fact, tribulation is the principal means by which God drives a man from his defective spiritedness to find in God the sole source of indefectible comfort. Like medicine, the potency of tribulation must be proportionate to the affliction it treats. God sends it not merely to induce a man to seek comfort, but to seek it in God. For this reason Antony emphasizes at several points in the *Dialogue* the importance of leaving the manner of comfort to God himself. One seldom knows with any precision the reasons for their suffering, and so while a man will ordinarily and lawfully pray to have his tribulation removed, he must finally acknowledge the fact that he does not know whether he prays foolishly or in accordance with wisdom.

But the purposes of tribulation are not wholly unknowable. Antony in fact distinguishes three kinds of tribulation: first, there is the tribulation sent to punish sin and inspire us to repentance; next, there is that which God sends to prevent us from falling into sin; and finally, there is the tribulation by which God wills to test our patience and increase our merit. The first two are "medicinal"[12] because God uses them to heal us from, or innoculate us against, sin and concupiscence. The third kind of tribulation is "better than medicinal" because it is neither curative nor preventative, but rather perfective of the man who already possesses a relatively clear conscience. All three are in their own ways meritorious.

[11] I.iii.16.
[12] I.vii.23.

We bring the first kind of tribulation upon ourselves. It is, so to speak, as avoidable as sin. But neither is it a matter of unqualified justice; there is no Christian equivalent of karma. God's justice is always merciful, but this needs to be rightly understood. The old axiom which says that God's justice is always "tempered" by his mercy is usually taken to mean that God punishes less severely than he has a right to. This view presupposes that there are divine attributes that are in principle opposed to one another and which must settle themselves into a delicate equilibrium. However that may be, Antony knows that there is a comfort in this kind of tribulation that runs deeper than an appreciation of God's restraint. James Monti gives a beautiful summary of Antony's teaching on this point: "Tribulations that arise from one's own sins and failings can be turned to good account, for though at first they come upon a man against his will, he may thereafter willingly suffer them as a penance for his transgressions. Through repentance and patient acceptance, such tribulations are transformed into a medicine for the soul, as were the sufferings of the good thief crucified with our Lord on Calvary. Moreover, not only do these tribulations endured in this life (and joined to Christ's Passion) make reparation for our sins; the patient and submissive endurance of them also merits us a greater reward in heaven."[13] The first kind of tribulation, which would be a mercy were it simply corrective or punitive, becomes, *mirabile dictu*, an occasion for merit and greater heavenly glory.

The second sort of tribulation is given as a means of preserving us from sin:

> If that thing be a good medicine that restoreth us our health when we lose it, as good a medicine must this needs be that preserveth our health while we have it, and suffereth us not to

[13] James Monti, *The King's Good Servant, But God's First* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1997), p.332.

> fall into that painful sickness that must after drive us to a painful plaster.[14]

We can resist the allurements and blandishments of the world only with constant vigilance, but the truly watchful Christian is the rarest of men. Yet God draws us out our natural state of distractedness through suffering. Even the apostle Paul was visited by tribulation of this sort to keep him from falling into pride for having received "the high revelations that God had given him." Though Paul had asked God three times to remove his tribulation, "yet would not God grant his request… but let him lie so long therein… till himself that saw more in Saint Paul than Saint Paul saw in himself, wist well the time was come in which he might well, without his harm, take it from him."[15] Inverting an old expression, we may say that in the second kind of tribulation God keeps us from making the good the enemy of the perfect.

The third kind of tribulation is "better than medicinal" because it neither punishes sin nor prevents one from falling into it. Rather, it is sent to exercise our patience and increase our heavenly merit. Now since no one is entirely free from sin or its occasions, it seems unlikely that anyone could safely suppose they suffer purely for the increase of merit. Even to consider the possibility is likely to be an occasion of spiritual pride. Antony acknowledges that the danger is very real for the general run of Christians, but "must they not envy nor disdain, since they may take in their tribulation consolation for their part sufficient, that some others, that more be worthy, take yet a great deal more.[16] The more worthy man will have the witness of his conscience to assure him that he suffers for the sake of patience and greater merit. But the circumstances of his tribulation also indicate what kind of tribulation he is undergoing. The Christian who suffers

[14] I.ix.28.
[15] I.ix.29.
[16] I.x.31.

for the sake of maintaining justice or "for the defense of God's cause" may, if his conscience is otherwise clear, be confident that his present trials are more than medicinal.

This kind of tribulation, which pertains particularly to martyrs and confessors, is what Vincent fears most of all. Yet if Antony's account is reliable, tribulation of this sort is reserved for the healthy who have no need of medicine. It is the privilege of those who possess, or are capable of, a rare spiritual greatness. What may be in the offing for Vincent is an occasion for the highest kind of human achievement and deepest spiritual comfort. This characterization is Antony's most potent appeal yet Vincent's spiritedness. It does not go amiss. For the first time in the *Dialogue*, Vincent declares himself to be comforted by Antony's instruction. He had earlier confessed that the distinction between medicinal tribulations and a tribulation surpassing them was "obscure and dark."[17] Now, however, "it specially delighteth and comforteth me to hear it."[18] It should come as no surprise that Antony has so successfully plucked up Vincent's courage, for he has addressed himself to the honor-loving element in Vincent's soul, a defining characteristic of *thumos*. In describing the kind of tribulation visited upon men of greater spiritual worth, Antony depicts the very circumstances in which Vincent expects shortly to find himself. By a sort of noble flattery, he deftly brings Vincent to see himself as a member of a class of men that, as Antony is careful to point out, includes Job and St. Paul.

The conversation shifts in chapter twelve to a consideration of Protestant objections to the doctrine of Purgatory. It arises naturally as Vincent now sees that absent a doctrine of meritorious suffering, the Lutheran view of tribulation must leave men comfortless: "And then is (if they say true) the cause of that comfort gone... if the

[17] I.viii.24.
[18] I.x.33.

comfort that we shall take be but in vain and need not."[19] James Monti has characterized this chapter as a "brief excursus,"[20] but it appears to be the kind of which Socrates, for example, makes frequent use and which often turns out to be decisive in grasping the full implications of an argument. Antony's irenic and even playful tone here may come as surprise to those who are familiar with More's more polemical works. But the skillfully offhanded approach seems somehow apt for what will be among More's final words on the Protestant revolt. Since the *Dialogue* is not principally concerned with countering the heretical claims of Protestants, Antony need not take the tone or the tack of the controversialist. He plays instead the role of a diplomat, even expressing some hope that there might yet be some reconciliation among the baptized. This is in part because it appears that the actual belief of Protestants tends to be more coherent than their stricter theological formulations. For instance, according to Lutheran doctrine, a Christian's faith alone is rewardable, yet "this grant they themselves: that faith serveth of nothing… but if she be accompanied with her sister charity." Furthermore, "they say that he which suffereth tribulation or martyrdom for the faith shall have his high reward, not for his work but for his well-working faith." This, to Antony's mind, is a distinction without a difference: "yet since they grant that *have* it he *shall*, the cause of the high comfort in the third kind of tribulation standeth. And that is, ye wot well, the effect of all my purpose."[21]

Be that as it may, there is a deeper rationale for Antony's diplomacy which concerns the political consequences of theological doctrine. Europe is divided between competing views of the soul's highest possibilities. The alternative to the Catholic doctrine of meritorious suffering is the Lutheran notion of a purely passive

[19] I.xii.37.
[20] Monti, p.333.
[21] I.xii.39-40.

righteousness received solely through the virtue of faith. While Antony happily acknowledges that whatever is rewardable in a Christian's life originates in the saving work of Christ, he also insists that Christ's merits are efficacious only where there is an active cooperation with grace. The unmerited gift is the source of an authentically meritorious life which enables one to "fill up what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ."[22] In this way God has "set so high a price on so poor a thing" as our works. Antony has demonstrated in Vincent how a refined and graced *thumos* is necessary to transform what is suffered into what is actively offered in union with Christ's self-offering. This is the source of the believer's comfort or strength. The Christian in tribulation need not remain a mere sufferer. Rather, like Christ, he may by a spirited act of the will offer up what is undergone; he may, in other words, be both priest and victim, conforming himself to Christ in his priestly office and meriting by virtue of Christ's merits. Luther, as Antony knows, insists that a Christian's merit is alien to himself, belonging to him by a kind of legal imputation. By his reckoning, suffering must remain a pure undergoing—one that may be punitive or purifying, but never meritorious. One has nothing to offer God but one's sin. Whatever else Luther may have meant by the priesthood of the believer, he excludes anything distinctively priestly. Of course, one is rightly consoled in knowing that God chastens those whom he loves, but this consolation is the proper accompaniment of gratitude; it is not the comfort that directly involves the spirited quest for supernatural merit. And according to the Catholic tradition for which Antony speaks, the supernatural elevation of spiritedness strengthens it in the pursuit of its proper natural ends, in particular a right love of victory and honor. Ultimately the alternative facing Europe is between a strengthening doctrine, perfective of the spirited

[22] Colossians 1:24.

part of the soul, and one which destroys the very grounds of the soul's perfectibility. On it, More suggests, hangs the West's will to overcome the Turkish threat of that, or of any, age.

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