

# The Primacy of Politics: Tilo Schabert's Critique of Aristotle

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## Abstract

This essay examines Tilo Schabert's claim that politics is human beings' 'most important activity' through a comparison and contrast with Aristotle, who argues that contemplation is our highest and most divine activity. It argues that Aristotle's argument for the superiority of the contemplative to the active life, coupled with his distinction between theoretical and practical wisdom, can be read to suggest that politics is merely an instrumental good, and possibly one that the philosopher could in principle transcend. Schabert, by contrast, maintains the intrinsic goodness of politics and the thoroughly political character of human existence (as well as God and the whole of reality) by insisting that the theoretical is always also practical. Siding with Schabert, the essay concludes by asking whether he would be more consistent to maintain that all thought, and not just human thought, as some of his formulations suggest, is always practical.

**Keywords:** Schabert, Aristotle, contemplation/theory, politics, wisdom, practical wisdom, human flourishing

And it is clear that, even if prudence were useless in action, we would need it because it is the virtue of this part of the soul.

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*<sup>1</sup>

The law is already valid for human beings by virtue of their existence, even if each of them lived in isolation from the others, without an understanding or connection with one another.

Tilo Schabert, *The Second Birth*<sup>2</sup>

Tilo Schabert's *The Second Birth* offers a powerful and needed defense of the dignity and goodness of politics in an age of cynicism and technocracy. He opens the book with the remarkable claim that human beings should 'understand politics as their most important activity'<sup>3</sup> – a claim which, if true, should trouble both those citizens who shrink from political responsibility and the experts who seek to render politics obsolete. But why does Schabert think politics is so important? How could it – with all its corruption, cronyism, and exploitation – be our "most important activity"? How could a process so inefficient and ineffective possibly bear that honor? Schabert's answer is that politics is the process by which we participate in the creation of our world and our very humanity; more than that, it is a mode of participation in the divine. He thus invests it with both a human and a metaphysical significance that far outweighs the process of "who gets what, when, and how."<sup>4</sup>

Schabert's noble estimation of the divine nature of politics in fact challenges more than our contemporary misgivings; it also takes a stand against elements of the Western tradition of political theory, both modern and ancient. His critiques of the moderns will be familiar to

readers of twentieth-century critics of modernity such as Voegelin, Strauss, and Arendt, to name a few: we suffer from atomistic individualism; we have unleashed the libido dominandi and revolted against the order of things; and we have sought mastery over nature. Perhaps more surprisingly to students of such thinkers, Schabert also challenges our ancient political wisdom, arguing that even Aristotle did not fully appreciate the metaphysical breadth and significance of politics. Specifically, he argues that Aristotle's identification of politics with the founding of the *polis* "has had too normative an effect. It has prevented a visualization of the political cosmology and the political anthropogony that must be grasped *prior* to the *zōon politikon*."<sup>5</sup> In other words, by focusing our attention on the politics of the *polis*, Aristotle has diverted us from seeing the full scope of the metaphysical primacy of politics, i.e., how extensively it characterizes not only the human being, but also the whole cosmos, and even God. For Schabert, politics is even more deeply ingrained in the nature of things than it is for Aristotle, on at least one reading of his texts.

The contrast between Schabert and Aristotle can be brought into relief by a comparison of their accounts of human flourishing. Schabert argues that politics is the creative process by which we become what we are; in his words, it is 'an act of political caring for human beings by human beings'<sup>6</sup> through which 'human beings create for themselves a freedom to be themselves'<sup>7</sup> and seek to 'finish themselves up'.<sup>8</sup> He thus counts politics as integral to the *telos* of human life, which he characterizes as participation in 'the feast of creation, the perfect sociability of all beings and things together'.<sup>9</sup> As such, political creativity is the process by which human beings arise to take their place in the community of being governed by God. Politics is our "most important activity" because it is the form in which we flourish and participate in the divine.

Of course, Aristotle argues long before Schabert that human nature is political, but he also claims that theory or contemplation is our final end and most divine activity, whereas politics is a merely human activity. This leads to apparent difficulties in his various accounts of the human good. In his discussion of the best life, he advocates for the contemplative life over the active life because it is more divine, but then, in other passages, he recognizes that human flourishing should include politics because we have a political nature. In the final analysis, it is likely that, despite Aristotle's defense of the contemplative life, he holds that human fulfillment includes the moral and political virtues (this seems necessary, if he is to remain consistent with his own definition of the human being and his teleological account of nature, and there is much textual evidence to support such a reading, some of which will be presented below). But he nevertheless suggests the possibility of surpassing politics to lead a purely contemplative life, thus providing possible support for the perennial temptation to think of politics as a merely instrumental, rather than intrinsic, good (which is not to say a necessary evil, as it sometimes is viewed in the Augustinian tradition).<sup>10</sup>

The tensions in Aristotle's account of the good life can be traced back to his account of the distinction between theoretical and practical wisdom, and, specifically, his view that theoretical wisdom transcends the horizon of practical reason. If human beings participate in a reality that transcends politics (theory or contemplation), then does this not at least suggest the possibility of transcending politics? Schabert, by contrast, stresses that the human being is political from beginning to end, and argues that both the human *telos* and human thought are always practical. This means that intellectual activity can never escape the confines of politics. In this sense, one could say that Schabert adheres more faithfully to Aristotle's own claim that human beings are political by nature because he argues that everything we do is imbued with

politics, and that our fulfillment must include equally the rational and political dimensions of our nature.

But even Schabert's treatment of the political or practical nature of thought leaves a question, for he sometimes seems to specify that it is specifically "human" thought (rather than all thought) that is political. Is this what he intends? If so, does not this stance still leave open the possibility that there is another kind of thought that is not practical? And would it not allow for the view that politics is still a merely human reality that could, at least in principle, be transcended? Schabert seems to want deny this possibility by viewing the creativity of human politics as a participation in divine creativity. Why, then, does he add this limitation? It seems he could omit it and more consistently maintain that politics is a divine reality in which human beings participate. This would mean that all thought by its very nature is practical – that theory and practice are unified in principle, and that 'thinking and being are the same', as Parmenides is supposed to have held.

Howsoever Schabert might respond to this question, he has written a compelling book with great insight on every page, and he has made a worthy effort to redeem politics and remind us that it is not merely a necessary evil or even an instrumental good, but an intrinsic component of human flourishing that should be embraced and celebrated.

### **Politics and Human Flourishing**

Schabert concludes *The Second Birth* with an autobiographical reflection that calls to mind the ancient debate over whether it is better to lead an active or contemplative life. Given his own decision to become a scholar, it would seem on the surface that he agrees with Aristotle, who argues in the *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Politics* that the contemplative life is superior to the active life. As Schabert recounts his own forays into political life, however, it becomes clear that his position is somewhat different to Aristotle's. Although he chose to become a scholar, he observes that politics has nevertheless remained his primary occupation:

While two different professional careers might indeed impose correspondingly different modes of life, they by no means preclude that the same quest is pursued, in either this or that profession. In my case, at least, there was no real shift. Politics remained at the center.<sup>11</sup>

Certainly, this is because he works in the field of political theory, but that is not the extent of the argument he wants to make. He also claims that all scholarly activity is inextricably connected to the creative process of politics. As he writes, 'there is no scholarly discipline that does not bear upon the life and the existence of the *polis*'; 'all pursuit of scholarly knowledge... is a political undertaking'.<sup>12</sup> Schabert thus places the scholar's work within the horizon of the political process, arguing that it 'is...part of the continuing creative efforts through which a society operates and through which it conceives and guides itself'.<sup>13</sup> Thus, for Schabert, whether one chooses the active or contemplative life, politics unavoidably holds a position of primacy in one's life: 'Both the *polis* and the scholar...are actors within the same process of creativity.'<sup>14</sup> There is, then, no possibility of elevating oneself above politics.

Schabert's position challenges those who would argue that the contemplative life can and should be chosen at the expense of the active life, a possibility that is suggested (although

perhaps not ultimately defended) by Aristotle. The tension is evident in his treatment of the question in the *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Politics*. Introducing the question of the best life in “Book I” of the *Ethics*, Aristotle acknowledges three contenders for the happiest life: the lives of pleasure, politics, and study.<sup>15</sup> He quickly dismisses the identification of happiness with pleasure, but appears to find the contest between the remaining two, the active and contemplative lives, more difficult to decide and postpones the discussion until “Book X”. When he returns to the question, Aristotle sides with the life of study – the contemplative or philosophical life. He offers several reasons, all of which suggest that it elevates us above human limitations and concerns. First, it is our “most continuous” activity in the sense that we can engage in it for longer than, say, physical labor.<sup>16</sup> Second, it is also the ‘most pleasant of the activities in accord with virtue’.<sup>17</sup> Third, it is the most self-sufficient because it is the least dependent on external goods.<sup>18</sup> Fourth, it is the most leisured of our activities, since even the virtues of the politician presuppose troubles and have extrinsic ends such as power and honor.<sup>19</sup> Finally, Aristotle claims that contemplation is our highest activity and, in his view, the activity by which we come closest to the divine: ‘the gods’ activity that is superior in blessedness will be an activity of study. And so the human activity that is most akin to the gods’ activity will, more than any others, have the character of happiness.’<sup>20</sup> In another place he claims similarly that ‘[t]he person whose activity accords with understanding and who takes care of understanding would seem to be in the best condition, and most loved by the gods’. Aristotle thus concludes that ‘happiness extends just as far as study extends, and the more someone studies, the happier he is, not coincidentally but insofar as he studies, since study is valuable in itself. And so [on this argument] happiness will be some kind of study.’<sup>21</sup> In short, ‘the wise person, more than anyone else, will be happy’.<sup>22</sup>

In contrast to his claim that contemplation is a divine activity, certain passages in Aristotle’s texts suggest that politics is a strictly human activity and must therefore take second place to the activity of study.<sup>23</sup> For instance, he claims that the gods are uninterested in or above the various “sorts of actions”, including political action: ‘anything that concerns actions appears trivial and unworthy of the gods.’<sup>24</sup> He adds – directly contrary to Schabert’s claim that politics is our “most important activity” – that political science cannot be regarded as the highest science because it is concerned with something that is merely human:

It would be absurd for someone to think that political science or prudence is the most excellent science, for the best thing in the universe is not a human being [and the most excellent science must be of the best things].<sup>25</sup>

Aristotle concludes that political life must be secondary to the contemplative life because it is concerned with the merely human (whereas contemplation rises to the level of the divine): ‘The life in accord with the other kind of virtue [i.e., the kind concerned with action] is [happiest] in a secondary way, because the activities in accord with this virtue are human.’<sup>26</sup> Aristotle even goes so far as to argue that the contemplative life is itself a kind of active life that replaces politics:

It is not necessary, as some suppose, for a life of action to involve relations with other people, nor are those thoughts alone active which we engage in for the sake of action’s consequences; the study and thought that are their own ends and are engaged in for their own sake are much more so.<sup>27</sup>

In so arguing, Aristotle seems to suggest the possibility of a solitary, contemplative life of the sort that Schabert believes to be impossible.

Yet Aristotle himself holds that such a life is impossible for human beings, as he recognizes that a purely contemplative life is superhuman. Thus, on one hand, he argues that ‘each person seems to be his understanding’<sup>28</sup> and that, ‘for a human being the life in accord with understanding will be supremely best and most pleasant, if understanding, more than anything else, is the human being’.<sup>29</sup> But, on the other hand, he remarks that the purely contemplative life ‘would be superior to the human level. For someone will live it not insofar as he is a human being, but insofar as he has some divine element in him.’ And, while Aristotle tells us that we should strive to “immortalize” ourselves,<sup>30</sup> he also observes that we should strive to fulfill our human nature rather than to transform into another kind of being. For instance, he argues that

it would be absurd, then, if [one] were to choose not [one’s] own life, but someone else’s. And what we have said previously will also apply now. For what is proper to each thing’s nature is supremely best and most pleasant for it.<sup>31</sup>

He makes a similar point in his discussion of friendship when he asks:

Do friends really wish their friend to have the greatest good, to be a god, for instance? For [if he becomes a god], *he* will no longer have friends, and hence no longer have goods, since friends are goods. If, then, we have been right to say that one friend wishes good things to the other for the sake of the other *himself*, the other must remain whatever sort of being he is.<sup>32</sup>

There seems to be an ambiguity in Aristotle’s thought here. He wants to identify the human being with the intellect because it is that which is intrinsically most excellent but, in so doing, he suggests the possibility, or at least the desirability, of transforming our nature by escaping its political component.

Of course, such a suggestion does not fit with his own commitment to the political nature of the human being. Most importantly, given that Aristotle famously argues that ‘the human being is by nature a political animal’, how could human flourishing exclude the fulfillment of that political nature? Aristotle certainly holds that the good life should include relationships with others. There are many passages in which he recognizes the need for social existence, including in his discussion of the contemplative life itself, in which he states that even the contemplative person studies ‘better with colleagues’.<sup>33</sup> In another context, he also argues that friendship ‘is most necessary for our life. For no one would choose to live without friends even if he had all the other goods.’<sup>34</sup> Toward the end of his treatment of friendship, he adds that

Presumably it is also absurd to make the blessed person solitary. For no one would choose to have all [other] goods and yet be alone, since a human being is a political [animal], tending by nature to live together with others.<sup>35</sup>

His resistance to the rule of the man of pre-eminent virtue – because his rule prevents others from participating in political rule and thereby more fully flourishing – is another indication. These passages all suggest that the good life includes political life.

Indeed, Aristotle perceives that the political good is superior to the individual good:

For even if the good is the same for a city as for an individual, still the good of the city is apparently a greater and more complete good to acquire and preserve. For while it is satisfactory to acquire and preserve the good even for an individual, it is finer and more divine to acquire and preserve it for a people and for cities.<sup>36</sup>

This passage echoes one from Plato's *Republic* in which Socrates observes that even the philosopher should prefer a political life to a solitary one:

Thus, like someone who takes refuge under a little wall from a storm of dust or hail driven by the wind, the philosopher – seeing others filled with lawlessness – is satisfied if he can somehow lead his present life free from injustice and impious acts and depart from it with good hope, blameless and content.

Well, that's no small thing for him to have accomplished before departing.

But it isn't the greatest either, since he didn't chance upon a constitution that suits him. Under a suitable one, his own growth will be fuller, and he'll save the community as well as himself.<sup>37</sup>

These passages show that both Plato and Aristotle think the best life includes political community, and that the common good is intrinsically superior to the individual good. Plato in particular insists that philosophy and politics must, in the final analysis, coincide – and not just because the city needs the philosopher but because the philosopher needs the city as well. The philosophical way of life is made possible by the city, but it is also completed in the city: the philosophical city, and not simply the solitary life of a single philosopher, is the *telos* of human life; the Good is not a solitary end, but one that can and should be shared with others. Even St Augustine, who, as noted above, is often thought to treat politics as a necessary evil, recognized this in naming his book *The City of God*.

Returning to Aristotle, his texts exhibit a dialectical tension between theory and practice, one that is right at the center of his definition of the human being as both rational and political. The problem becomes evident in the attempt to force a choice between politics and contemplation in the first place. On one hand, every person has a limited amount of time and many goods to pursue, so a decision must be made regarding how to live one's life. On the other hand, if the human being is both political and rational by nature, how can one choose between politics and study at all? But this issue actually runs much deeper in Aristotle's thought – all the way down to his distinction between theoretical and practical wisdom. If, as he argues in "Book VI" of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, theoretical and practical wisdom are separable, and theoretical wisdom transcends practical wisdom, then this leaves open the possibility of liberating oneself from politics through study – of engaging in "pure" thinking, something which Schabert wishes to reject.

### **The Primacy of Politics**

Whereas Aristotle's texts leave open the possibility of an apolitical, contemplative *telos* for human beings, Schabert stresses the thoroughly political character of existence, and even being. For our part, we are political from beginning to end; human beings are born into politics and find

fulfillment in politics. With regard to the beginning, we find ourselves in a series of relations of power, or, political relationships from the first moment of our existence. We are born dependent on others; we make claims on others, and, as we grow, we find that we owe something to others. As Schabert writes, the patterns or ‘*Gestalten*’ of power, which inhere in their existence by reason of their existence, take hold of human beings from the very beginning, with their entrance into the world.<sup>38</sup> Thus, human beings do not generate political societies *ex nihilo*, and, contrary to classical liberal political thought, there is no individual who is prior to the political community. Schabert thus disagrees with the idea that a social contract could represent the beginning of a political community. The “social contract” is ‘always appended after the fact, given that people must have already come to a political understanding before they could even begin to think of entering into such a contract’.<sup>39</sup>

Already existing in a political relationship to one another, human beings can come together to determine the terms on which they will live together. But they do so already having been thrust into the position of living together. As has already been mentioned, Schabert claims that his position is more radical than Aristotle’s in this respect because he does not wait for the founding of a political society to point out the political nature of human existence (or, for that matter, the whole cosmos); ‘before human beings lay the foundation for a political community, certain *Gestalten* are pre-given to them for the conduct of their life that make them entirely “political” from the very start of their life’.<sup>40</sup> In a sense, we would be political even if we somehow did not enter into politics.

Schabert goes so far as to argue that human existence and political existence are coextensive, even synonymous. As he writes, ‘the concepts “human being” and “government,” considered existentially, [are] identical’<sup>41</sup> and ‘all that is meant by the word “human being” is creative politics’.<sup>42</sup> In explaining his position, he appeals to the Platonic vision of the soul, according to which we must rule over and order our own souls through reason. Observing the internal competition for power within ourselves, he observes that ‘[t]he soul is political by itself – the soul is the politician that a human being always encounters in him- or herself.’<sup>43</sup> Our existence is intrinsically political, even on its own. This means that there really is no such thing as a private individual because ‘[t]he beginning of all governing is in the soul. Human society has its existence here.’<sup>44</sup> The order of our souls has a direct bearing on the order of our communities. Thus, ‘[m]y soul... is anything but a private thing. It is a public thing more than anything else in me.’<sup>45</sup> Contrary to the modern understanding of the self-contained person, Schabert sides with the ancients, who understood much more vividly the social permeability of the soul. There are no atomistic individuals, but only individuals in relation to other individuals as well as the wholes that they constitute together (family, country, church, etc.). Hence, we cannot escape our political nature, although we can fail to live up to it – to our own detriment:

They are political by their very nature, even when they either do not yet know it or no longer know it. As soon as they forget that their life is to govern, the political world in which and through which they live is extinguished. But this extinction is the extinction of this particular political world, for human beings can survive the catastrophe, and when they do, human existence is the same as before, i.e., political in and through itself. Human beings do not need to recollect this, because even without recollection, they ‘know’ that the beginning that enables them to live is the beginning of a *polis*.<sup>46</sup>

The depth of Schabert's account of the political nature of the human being leads to his disagreement with Aristotle about the role of politics in the *telos* of human existence. Whereas there is at least some question in Aristotle as to whether the best life includes politics or not, Schabert consistently maintains that it does. Human fulfillment is political and politics is not a condition from which we could be – or should even want to be – eventually released. Such an existence would be untrue to who we are. We saw above that Aristotle seems to recognize this as well – and in other passages he remarks more than once that the one who is without a *polis* is either a beast or a God – but he does not go so far as to argue that politics is the “most important” activity of human beings. Schabert, on the other hand, states boldly: “The culmination of human life is a political culmination”<sup>47</sup> and that ‘the quest for the truth of humanity couldn't be anything other than a quest for the creative power of politics’.<sup>48</sup> These statements leave no doubt that, for Schabert, we find the truth of our existence in the creativity of politics. This surely runs counter to Aristotle, who, even if he includes political virtue in our final end, finds the culmination of our existence in contemplation.

As suggested above, the difference seems to stem from their different estimations of the relationship between the theoretical and the practical. Whereas Aristotle separates the two and places the former above the latter, Schabert insists that thought – or at least human thought, a caveat that will be discussed below – is always practical. Thus, we are political even in our thinking:

Every human being...is, in his or her individuality, already ‘society,’ because ‘thinking,’ as it is enacted in human beings, always brings forth sociality and is enacted as sociality. While thinking, human beings are never really ‘alone,’ but are always already in society, even when such thinking apparently takes place in solitude.<sup>49</sup>

Thought is the source and the goal of the political community; human beings ‘find the community that is to be founded in the sociability of thought; in the latter the former is already present. Thought is what is common to all of them; in it, they are always already political.’<sup>50</sup> In this sense, reason should rule (note the political metaphor): “The same wisdom holds dominion in the society of human beings and in their thought. Among human beings, wisdom is the constitutional power in all things”<sup>51</sup> These passages illuminate Schabert's claim, quoted above, that ‘[b]oth the polis and the scholar... are actors within the same process of creativity’.<sup>52</sup> Whether one contributes primarily as a thinker or an actor, one nevertheless contributes to the creation of the community and its quest to live in truth.

This means that thought itself is also inescapably political. In an admittedly conditional phrase, Schabert considers the possibility that all ‘thought is a practical discipline’.<sup>53</sup> For this reason, it is not possible to transcend politics through a life of contemplation:

Human thought, then, in the strict sense of the word, is never “free,” nor can it be free. Thought in a “pure state” does not exist for human beings. Their thought is always both forming and formed – a task – and hence “ethical” and political”.<sup>54</sup>

This would suggest that even in their fulfillment human beings cannot participate in the kind of contemplation Aristotle suggests. If ‘thought...is sociability’,<sup>55</sup> if thought is political in principle,

then, even from the perspective of the human *telos*, thought is practical. Our final end must be creative activity shared in common with others.

One question that remains is whether it is only human thought that cannot be “free” or “pure,” as Schabert’s formulation suggests. While he has gone further than Aristotle in articulating the pervasiveness of the political in reality, does he nevertheless countenance the possibility that non-human thought could be apolitical? Is there ultimately a point in reality from which an apolitical view can be gained? Does God transcend politics? If so, then this would seem to affirm in principle the division between the theoretical and the practical as found in “Book VI” of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Is politics in the end a merely human or intracosmic reality? Or are theory and practice, thought and politics, by their very natures always tied to one another?

### Politics as Metaphysics

Although some of the passages from *The Second Birth* quoted above suggest that it is only human thought that is limited or circumscribed by politics, Schabert actually appears to diverge from Aristotle on the question of the divine status of politics. Tellingly, Schabert quotes Cicero with approval: “There is no activity that comes as close to the power of the divine (*deorum virtus*) as the founding of political societies (*civitates novas condere*) or the preservation of those already in existence (*conservare iam conditas*).”<sup>56</sup> That sentiment certainly stands in sharp contrast to Aristotle’s claim that theory or contemplation is the most divine activity. Of course, Schabert thinks politics includes thought, but, even so, he seems to be at odds with Aristotle when he claims, in his own words, that ‘God is a politician’<sup>57</sup> and that politics is a ‘mimesis of God’.<sup>58</sup> Aristotle believes it is thinking that makes us like God; Schabert thinks it is politics, our capacity for creativity. For Schabert, the creativity of politics is our way of participating in God’s creativity by taking responsibility for ourselves and our world, and attempting to order ourselves and our communities according to his will.

One is reminded of the first creation story in the Book of Genesis, in which human beings are made in the image and likeness of God and given dominion over the earth:

Then God said: Let us make human beings in our image, after our likeness. Let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, the tame animals, all the wild animals, and all the creatures that crawl on the earth. God created mankind in his image; in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them and God said to them: Be fertile and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it. Have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and all the living things that crawl on the earth (1:26-28).

The passage suggests that human beings are like God because we hold dominion – because we exercise political rule – over the earth. Moreover, God gives us the power (and the command) to ‘be fertile and multiply’, thus indicating how we are to use that dominion, i.e., to be creative. Thus, if we follow God’s plan for us, then we will rule creatively over ourselves and the Earth in a way that participates in God’s power to rule creatively over all that he has created.

But does this not require, then, that politics is not a merely human reality? If the creativity of human politics is modelled on the creativity of God, then it is not simply human beings who are political, but God himself and, by extension, the whole of creation. Schabert’s

attention to political cosmology (and his critique of Aristotle for his lack of the same) also supports this interpretation. For instance, Schabert observes how the whole cosmos exists between the one and the many, which necessarily leads to the question of how the many can be held together in light of the one. Or, as he writes in a later chapter,

The world is a society of the unsociable. Every thing and every being within it exists in a division of the whole; the whole exists only through its parts; every part excludes the whole through itself. The world comes apart as a world. And, nonetheless, everything is this: a society. For every being and thing, insofar as it is a part, is a part of the whole.<sup>59</sup>

The question of order, the question of creating and holding together the whole – these are political questions that make sense in the context of, not only human society, but the society that is the cosmos. It has not been uncommon in the history of Christian thought to speak of the divine governance of the world – even if the implications of such claims for Aristotle’s account of theoretical wisdom the good life have remained obscure.

But then why does Schabert maintain the caveat that it is only “human” thought that is practical or unfree or impure? If all of creation is political, if even God is political, then would not thought by its very nature be those things? If politics is a mode of participation in the divine just as much as thought is, then would it not be fair to posit the unity of thought and practice in the divine, rather than continue to suggest their possible separation? Rather than say that human thought is different in nature, might we say it is different in degree – that it is participation in a divine capacity, the full extent of which remains inaccessible to us because our participation is incomplete? This would allow us to say that the relationship between philosophy and the city, between theory and practice, is tense because we fail to bring them together, not because they are fundamentally at odds with one another. It would also allow us to maintain that human beings approach the divine through both practice and theory at the same time. Otherwise, if it is only human thought that is practical, then would it not still be the case that politics is ultimately a mundane activity, one that could be overcome, at least in principle, through the activity of thinking? Such a conclusion seems contrary to the one Schabert wants to make.

## Conclusion

Aristotle famously remarks that the city-state ‘comes to be for the sake of living, but it remains in existence for the sake of living well’.<sup>60</sup> Human beings are “political” because we have the power of speech – ‘no animal has speech except a human being’ – and ‘speech is for making clear what is beneficial or harmful, and hence also what is just or unjust’.<sup>61</sup> We also use speech to discuss theoretical matters. Thus, theory depends on politics. The philosopher depends on the city to sustain him and his way of life, but philosophy itself can only emerge in the context of the polis, which is constituted by speech. The city gives birth to the possibility of philosophy. At the same time, politics depends on theory, for we cannot live well without wisdom and living well is the purpose of politics. The culmination of human life, then, must include the coincidence of political and theoretical wisdom.

Yet Aristotle contemplates the possibility of an apolitical existence. It is evident when he comments that ‘anyone who cannot form a community with others, or who does not need to because he is self-sufficient, is no part of a city-state — he is either a beast or a god’.<sup>62</sup> Is

Aristotle correct to posit that a god would be apolitical? Can we say that philosophy and politics must coincide in principle, but then conceive of an apolitical God? Would this not mean that politics is a merely human reality? The juxtaposition of the active and the contemplative lives presents a choice that is unavailable to human beings in practice (every human being must think and act). But is it even an option in principle?

Schabert makes a compelling case that it is not. He shows us a way of understanding politics that invites us to embrace it as the activity that most makes us human. In political life, we come together to live in truth with others and with God, and it is from that perspective that we should judge politics. That is its end, and, therefore, its true nature. Politics as we experience it is often difficult, disappointing, and even evil. But its end is a common good that every human being desires by nature. As both Aristotle and Schabert suggest, it is something we should want, even if we have no use for it.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., trans. Terence Irwin (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1999), 1145a3-4.

<sup>2</sup> Tilo Schabert, *The Second Birth: On the Political Beginnings of Human Existence*, trans. Javier Ibanez-Noe (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 111.

<sup>3</sup> Schabert, xvi.

<sup>4</sup> Harold D. Lasswell, *Politics: Who Gets What, When, and How* (New York: Whittlesey House, 1936).

<sup>5</sup> Schabert, 2.

<sup>6</sup> Schabert, 1.

<sup>7</sup> Schabert, 3.

<sup>8</sup> Schabert, 87.

<sup>9</sup> Schabert, 87.

<sup>10</sup> For a refutation of this view of politics in Augustine, see John von Heyking, *Augustine and Politics as Longing in the World* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2001).

<sup>11</sup> Schabert, 125.

<sup>12</sup> Schabert, 126.

<sup>13</sup> Schabert, 126.

<sup>14</sup> Schabert, 126.

<sup>15</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, I.5.

<sup>16</sup> Aristotle, NE, 1177a23-24.

<sup>17</sup> Aristotle, NE, 1177a24-26.

<sup>18</sup> Aristotle, NE, 1177a28 ff.

<sup>19</sup> Aristotle, NE, 1177b5-16.

<sup>20</sup> Aristotle, NE, 1178b20.

<sup>21</sup> Aristotle, NE, 1178b25-30.

<sup>22</sup> Aristotle, NE, 1179a20-30.

<sup>23</sup> There are also many passages in which he suggests that practical wisdom is also divine, so the following quotes cannot necessarily be taken as illustrating Aristotle's definitive position on the question.

<sup>24</sup> Aristotle, NE, 1178b15.

<sup>25</sup> Aristotle, NE, 1141a20.

<sup>26</sup> Aristotle, NE, 1178a5-10.

<sup>27</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. C.D.C. Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1998), 1325b15-20.

<sup>28</sup> Aristotle, NE, 1178a2.

<sup>29</sup> Aristotle, NE, 1178a5.

<sup>30</sup> Aristotle, NE, 1177b1 (translation modified).

<sup>31</sup> Aristotle, NE, 1178a4-7.

<sup>32</sup> Aristotle, NE, 1159a5-10. As he writes later, "no one chooses to become another person even if that other will have every good when he has come into being; for, as it is, the god has the good [but no one chooses to be replaced by a god]. Rather [each of us chooses good] on condition that he remains whatever he is; and each person would seem to be the understanding part, or that most of all." 1166a21-23.

<sup>33</sup> Aristotle, NE, 1177b.

- <sup>34</sup> Aristotle, NE, 1155a5-6.  
<sup>35</sup> Aristotle, NE, 1169b15-20.  
<sup>36</sup> Aristotle, NE, 1094b5-10. Schabert, 35.  
<sup>37</sup> Plato, *Republic*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., trans. G.M.A. Grube, Rev. C.D.C. Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1992), 496d-497a.  
<sup>38</sup> Schabert, 2.  
<sup>39</sup> Schabert, 23.  
<sup>40</sup> Schabert, 1.  
<sup>41</sup> Schabert, 3.  
<sup>42</sup> Schabert, 4.  
<sup>43</sup> Schabert, 115.  
<sup>44</sup> Schabert, 41.  
<sup>45</sup> Schabert, 90.  
<sup>46</sup> Schabert, 103-4.  
<sup>47</sup> Schabert, 42.  
<sup>48</sup> Schabert, 129.  
<sup>49</sup> Schabert, 40. "Thought is what is common to all of them; in it, they are always already political." Schabert, 68.  
<sup>50</sup> Schabert, 68.  
<sup>51</sup> Schabert, 69.  
<sup>52</sup> Schabert, 126.  
<sup>53</sup> Schabert, 54.  
<sup>54</sup> Schabert, 148, n. 6.  
<sup>55</sup> Schabert, 65.  
<sup>56</sup> Quoted in Schabert, 58-59.  
<sup>57</sup> Schabert, 5.  
<sup>58</sup> Schabert, 58.  
<sup>59</sup> Schabert, 79.  
<sup>60</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, 1252b28-29.  
<sup>61</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, 1253a10-15.  
<sup>62</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, 1253a28-29.

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