EPSOCIETY.ORG

The Politics of Theological Anthropology: Political Naturalism, Creation, and the *Imago Dei*

Graham Floyd
Adjunct Professor
Tarrant County College Connect Campus
Fort Worth, TX
grahamswbts@aol.com

Abstract: 'Political naturalism' is the claim that human beings are naturally political and social creatures. This concept goes back to Plato and is particularly associated with Aristotle. The rise of social contract theory, however, dispensed with political naturalism and claimed that political community is an invention of human beings. I argue that political naturalism is a position that should be adopted in theological anthropology. After canvassing arguments of political naturalism and social contract theory, I critique the arguments for political naturalism. I ultimately argue that political naturalism can be derived from the doctrine of creation as well as the nature of God and its connection to the doctrine of the *imago Dei*.

Are human beings naturally political? Is it part of human nature to seek and establish political community with other beings namely themselves? Political naturalism answers in the affirmative. Political naturalism is the claim that political community arises out of nature and that human beings are political organism by nature.[1] This position, however, has fallen on hard times in modern philosophy due to the emergence of social contract theory. As a result, the theist is faced with a pertinent question regarding theological anthropology. Should the theist accept political naturalism? I argue that the theist should accept this position as an aspect of theological anthropology. After canvassing the arguments of political naturalists verses the arguments of social contract theorists, I offer some critiques of those arguments in favor of political naturalism. I ultimately argue that political naturalism can be theologically derived from the doctrine of creation as well as the nature of God and its connection to the doctrine of the *imago Dei*.[2]

---

[1] Fred Miller, "Aristotle's Political Naturalism," *Apeiron* 22(4) (1989): 196.

[2] My method for understanding anthropology is similar to that of Jean-Baptiste Guillon. Guillon argues that there is often tension between revealed anthropology, which is stated in Scripture, and natural anthropology, which is informed by scientific research and common-sense belief. While neither anthropology is comprehensive according to Guillon, he argues that one should want for them to be in agreement. As a result, interpretations of one kind of anthropology must be flexible and adaptable to discoveries made by the other. In my argument, revealed anthropology

Politics: Nature vs. Invention

The claim that human beings are naturally political can first be traced to Plato. In the *Republic*, Plato states that human beings are naturally social and political creatures because they are not self-sufficient and are in need of other human beings to aid them.[3] Once human beings begin to interact with each other, a political system becomes necessary as a way to mediate between them. Aristotle adopts and refines this same argument as well. Aristotle claims that every political state is a community, and every community is established to achieve some good. Human beings always act in order to obtain what they perceive to be good, so the state or community must aim at the highest good. This community or state begins with a man and woman who cannot subsist without each other coming together via natural desire (like other animals and plants) and not by a deliberate act which produces a natural ruler and subject.[4]

Like Plato, Aristotle considers survival as the primary natural drive towards the formation of the political state, but he also adds procreation to the mix. As a result, the family is the first political community to naturally arise with its master and slaves (which can be either people or animals). When several families unite to supply more than daily needs, the village is formed which is generally comprised of extended family and subject to monarchical rule. When several villages unite to become quite self-sufficient, the state is born. Aristotle concludes that the state must be natural since it originates out of the earlier stages and is for the sake of the good life that all people naturally seek. Aristotle also concludes that a person without a state whether deliberately or accidentally is either immoral or not a human being. Aristotle defends this claim first on the use of speech to convey morality and right living. Humanity when perfected is the best of animals but when separated from law and justice the worst. The administration of morality and justice is the principle of order in political community making morality necessary for human existence. Second, the state is prior to the individual or family because it is the whole to which a part belongs. Things are defined by their working and power which they lose when separated from their

---

provides insights about the nature of human political associations not necessarily implied by natural anthropology but compatible with it resulting in a synthesis of the two anthropologies. See Jean-Baptiste Guillon, "Natural Anthropology and Revealed Anthropology," Evangelical Philosophical Society, https://www.epsociety.org/userfiles/Guillon_Natural%20anthropology%20and%20revealed%20anthropology_Edited_DCS-3.pdf, accessed October 1, 2019.

[3] Plato, *The Republic*, trans G. M. A. Grube (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1992), 369b-c.

[4] Aristotle, *The Politics*, trans. Benjamin Jowett (New York: Random House Modern Library, 1943), I.1-2.

wholes. The individual when separated from the state is not self-sufficient and happy; therefore, he needs to be connected to a larger whole to be fully human. Only beasts and gods can be self-sufficient when isolated.[5]

Thomas Aquinas also championed the political naturalism of Aristotle. Like Aristotle, Aquinas argues that human beings are directed towards ends, but they need direction to the best way to achieve that end. People have a diversity of pursuits and activities with different ways of pursuing them; therefore, they need someone to direct them. Human beings are not like animals that have food, defense, and shelter naturally. Human beings must use reason and industry to obtain these things. There is also the natural drive to procreate as well as the need for moral direction. Since a person is incapable of all these things on his own, it is natural for human beings to be social. Human beings also only have a general knowledge of what is useful or harmful unlike animals. Since no person has the capacity to know all these things, people seek out the aid of others in society. Ultimately, all groups need something or someone to direct the group towards a common good. Since human flourishing is not possible without these goods, political community is necessary and natural for direction to humanity's end. Any person not connected to a human political community is immoral, unfortunate, or blessed by God.[6]

There are other reasons to support political naturalism according to Aquinas. He argues that the natural world is naturally subject to human dominion for three reasons. First, change follows the order of imperfect to perfect, and the less perfect fall under the use of the more perfect. The earth is used by plants, plants by animals, and animals and plants by human beings giving humanity dominion. Second, divine providence has order that the higher (humanity) governs the lower. Third, animals have an "instinct" lesser than that of human beings. Human beings have that "instinct" essentially and universally whereas animals partly. Sharing in anything must be subordinate to having it essentially and universally; therefore, dominion is created between the sharers and the non-sharers.[7] Fourth, there is natural disparity (inequality) amongst human beings regardless of their sinful state. Nature endows people with different qualities, such as greater intellect or muscular build, gender difference, and

---

[5] Ibid., I.2. Notice that both Aristotle and Plato's arguments are based in natural anthropology rather than any revealed anthropology. See footnote 2.

[6] Thomas Aquinas, *On Kingship or The Governance of Rulers*, in *St. Thomas Aquinas On Politics and Ethics*, ed. and trans. Paul Sigmund (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1988), 14-15.; Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle's Politics*, trans. Richard Regan (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2007), Chapter I, Comments 1-23. Aquinas considers people like John the Baptist and St. Anthony the Hermit blessed.

[7] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, vol. 13, trans. Blackfriars (New York: McGraw-Hill Publishing Company, 1964), Ia.96.1.

age differences.[8] This disparity implies that some people are fit to rule whereas others need to be ruled.

But why think that political naturalism amongst human beings is true from a theological point of view? Was not the original pre-Fall state of nature one of equality, perfection, and freedom without need of political community? Aquinas disagrees. Lordship is understood two ways he argues: a master over a slave or a person who directs others in general. Even though human beings in the pre-Fall state of nature were equal and free, there could be and was lordship in the latter sense. A free person can direct other free people towards finding their own good or the common good, which implies dominion. Since human beings are social creatures, there must have been political rulers in the original state of nature to guide this society. Further, if someone surpasses another in knowledge and justice, then it would be wrong if he were not allowed to fulfill those functions for the benefit of others.[9]

Modern philosophy, with the development of social contract theory, abandoned political naturalism claiming that political community is the invention of human beings. Thomas Hobbes contends that people are equal in a state of nature with the ability to get what they want either through power, conniving, or confederacy. People only seek society if it is to their benefit. This equality leads people to become enemies as they usually desire the same thing but cannot both have it. Ultimately, a state of war prevails because everyone has a right to use one's liberty for the preservation of his own life granting him a right to everything even other people's bodies. As long as this natural right endures, there will be a state of war leading to short, nasty, and brutish lives. The law of nature (i.e. reason) is to lay down and limit one's liberty freely in the form of an artificial contract, but only if other people are willing to do the same.[10]

John Locke agrees with Hobbes but has a different conception of a person's rights in a state of nature. People have a natural right to life, liberty, and property, and the defense of these rights leads to a state of war that is ended via voluntary contract.[11] Even Rousseau states that social and political order is by convention rather than nature. The state of nature is one of liberty for all individuals giving no one the right of authority over anyone. All authority is derived via convention which is best

---

[8] Ibid., Ia.96.3.

[9] Ibid., Ia.96.4. Notice that Aquinas is using revealed anthropology to support natural anthropology and create a synthesis of the two systems. See footnote 2.

[10] Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Edwin Curry (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1994), I.13.1-3 and 8-9, I.14.2-9, I15.2-3, II.17.12; Thomas Hobbes, *The Citizen*, in *Man and Citizen*, ed. Bernard Gert (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1991), I.1-15, II.1-3, V.5 and 9.

[11] John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, in *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. Peter Laslett (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), II.4-9, III.17-21, VIII.95, 99, and 102.

preserved in a social contract.[12] In each case, political community is something invented via the mutual agreement of individuals rather than a natural movement from the nature of human beings.[13]

Creation, Image, and Politics

The question now is whether or not political naturalists have argued correctly that human beings are naturally political especially from a theological standpoint. While several reasons are given for affirming political naturalism, the overarching point of these philosophers appears to be that human beings seek an end, namely the good and happy life. Most if not all of their other reasons (self-sufficiency, survival, knowledge, morality, procreation) for political naturalism are subsumed under this one claim of political community as the means to that end. Such a claim seems reasonable enough but can be challenged in various ways. The "good and happy life" can mean many things to many people and might not involve the above-mentioned aspects. Why cannot the hermit's life be considered self-sufficient, good, and happy if he can acquire the knowledge for survival and enjoyment of life on his own without direction? Such a life at least seems possible. Further, what need would the hermit have of moral training and direction if there is no one with whom to be morally concerned? As a result, it is not entirely obvious that political community is necessary for achieving a good and happy life.

The appeals to procreation and humanity's dominion over the natural world are closer to the mark both philosophically and theologically. The family is a natural political community with rulers and subjects. Further, the biblical doctrine of humanity's dominion over the natural world (Gen 1:26, 28) also implies a political community of rulers and subjects. Still, one might object that neither the family nor humanity's dominion over the natural world is the kind of political community with which the argument of this paper is ultimately concerned. Rather, it is the kind of political community found governing rational beings in a city or nation that is the argument's concern. This kind of political community has not been demonstrated by appeals to the family or to dominion over nature. Further, why think that differing families must naturally create grander political communities like cities and nations rather than via voluntary association? It seems possible that families could live

---

[12] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *On the Social Contract*, trans. Donald Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987), I.1-6.

[13] Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau's arguments are based in natural anthropology; however, their arguments are at odds with the arguments of Plato and Aristotle whose arguments are also based in natural anthropology. This disagreement supports Guillon's claim that natural anthropology is not comprehensive and should be flexible to insights from other areas. As a result, further insights can come from revealed anthropology to settle the conflict. See footnote 2.

without such political communities. In fact, not all people seek to procreate and form families bringing into question the naturalness of such a drive and its political consequences.

As a result, one is back to the question of whether or not political naturalism should be accepted as part of theological anthropology. It is here that I would like to make two suggestions towards answering this question affirmatively. First, the doctrine of creation implies that human beings are naturally political. As created beings, human beings are naturally under the dominion of God. He is the ruler of all reality, and human beings are subjects under his rule. This dominion is clearly seen in the first three chapters of Genesis where God issues a series of commands regarding how human beings may conduct themselves within creation, within the Garden of Eden, and within the fallen world (Gen 1:28-31, Gen 2:16-17, and Gen 3:11, 16-19). Simply by being created, humanity naturally falls into a political community with God and not one like that of the family or of humanity's dominion over the natural world.[14] God's political rule over humanity is also supported by the claim of morality being necessary for humanity. As Paul states in Rom 2:12-16 and 5:13-14, the moral law of God is written on the hearts of all people, ruled over humanity even before the Mosaic Law was implemented, and continues to rule to this day. The presence of such a moral law that is naturally known highly suggests a natural political community between God and human beings due to creation.

Second, the doctrine of the *imago Dei* implies that human beings are naturally political. The doctrine of the *imago Dei* is the claim that all human beings have a special likeness to God that sets humanity apart in the natural world and makes them what they are.[15] The doctrine implies that humanity is a part of creation but is also placed above the plane of nature to some degree via a special connection with God.[16]

---

[14] It is tempting to conclude that all human beings have a familial relationship with God simply because they are God's creation. While the Bible does frequently refer to God as a parent, it does not appear to be in the context of God's relation to all humanity but rather to specific individuals or groups. For example, Deut 32:6 and Is 64:8 refer to God as the father of Israel. The New Testament refers to God as the Father to emphasize the Trinity and the Father's connection to the Son, Jesus Christ. Passages like Matt 6:26 where Jesus says "your Father" apply to the disciples. Other passages, such as John 1:12-13, Rom 8:12-17, 1 Cor 8:6, Gal 3:19-4:7 and 1 John 3:1-3, emphasize that a person is a child of God only if they have been regenerated and adopted by God. Only believers have a familial relationship with God and may refer to God as their parent. Otherwise, one is a slave, not an heir.

[15] Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1998), 518.

[16] Erickson, 519-20; David Cairns, *The Image of God in Man* (London: SCM Press, 1952), 19-21; Anthony Hoekema, *Created in God's Image* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986), 13-17, 19-20.

If human beings are made in God's image, then one can look at the nature of God to see what political implications for humanity might be revealed via the divine nature.

What can be seen in God's nature is that he is a Trinity: one essence eternally comprised of three persons coequally sharing that essence.[17] As a Trinity, the Godhead naturally contains a basic social and political community that the members of the Trinity did not voluntarily establish. Instead, they are necessarily united by and equal in nature. As a result, a social and political community of equals is established in the Godhead. These members then may voluntarily submit themselves to one or the other members establishing a more complex political arrangement. In fact, it could be further argued that this more complex political arrangement of the Godhead is not completely voluntary in the sense that any social-political community must have an established hierarchy of dominion. Referring back to the argument that sentient entities need to be guided towards their good end as well as Aquinas's argument concerning dominion in the pre-Fall world, one could claim that the Godhead must necessarily establish a more complex political arrangement in order determine how best to obtain the Godhead's good end in spite the divine persons being equal. The only voluntary part of this necessary hierarchy of dominion would be which divine person performs which role in the hierarchy in order to obtain the Godhead's good end. As a result, political naturalism would be implied not just in the existence of the Godhead itself but also in the political shape the Godhead establishes for itself.

If human beings are made in God's image and God is naturally political, then it is highly plausible that being naturally political is part of that image making human beings naturally political. This conclusion can be evidenced by God's claim in Gen 2:18 that it is not good for man to be alone leading to the creation of woman and the establishing of the family political community. The reason loneliness is not good is because humanity is a social and political creature just like God. Human beings, therefore, were created for social and political community because it is part of the *imago Dei*. Political community cannot be avoided even if one seeks not to be a part of a family or a human political community. Human beings will always be naturally drawn to their political connection with God particularly by the moral law he established in nature and which is known by all human beings. Further, Aristotle is correct that political community is the whole to which human beings are parts and that human beings derive their function and sufficiency from this whole. While this claim is true of the familial political community, it is true primarily of the political community between God and humanity. Human beings cannot find their true purpose and happiness outside of the political community between God and humanity making such community integral to human flourishing. That which is integral to an entity's flourishing will naturally be sought as an end by that entity.

---

[17] Erickson, 361-63.

Lastly, Aristotle and Aquinas are correct regarding non-political persons. A person who is not part of a human political community is either immoral, unfortunate, or blessed by God.

Based on the doctrine of creation and the doctrine of the *imago Dei*, political naturalism appears to be an aspect of theological anthropology. Human beings enter this world as political creatures under the rule both of God and of parents. A moral law established and enforced by God also rules over humanity as part of that political community. Further, human beings have an innate propensity due to their special as well as biological nature to seek out social associations with both God and human beings which naturally leads to political associations of various kinds necessary for human flourishing. Political community, therefore, is natural and not a mere invention from a theological viewpoint.

Graham Floyd is Adjunct Professor at Tarrant County College Connect Campus in Fort Worth, TX.