

Interpretation

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In *The Second Birth: On the Political Beginnings of Existence*, Tilo Schabert formulates the first political question: “Toward what and for what should [a human being] act, and in what way?” (33). It is the great question, he says, and the question that existence asks of every human being. The effort to steer and shape the movement of one’s life in response to this question is a political beginning. For it contains the three essential elements of the political itself: constitution, power, and government. Schabert traces the origin of politics to the first breath of life, drawing from a miscellany of religious, political, and philosophical thinkers including Pascal and Lao Tse, Aristotle and Ibn Khaldûn, Arendt and Anonymous Iamblich, Strauss and Cicero, Voegelin and Heraclitus. He locates the political in an orderly soul, in a crowded train station, and in a society whose structure of power is “nobler” and “more divine” (35). Human beings are political by nature, Schabert contends. Their highest purpose is to govern. In governing, they are bearers and makers of worlds.

The capacity to govern is fundamental to Schabert’s concept of the political. Such a capacity allows human beings to form what is just and beautiful *within* themselves and *without*, in the external world. In Schabert’s theory, there are four *Gestalten*, or given principles, that take hold of human beings with their entrance into the world. These principles define the potential and the limits of human power. They decide the forms that human existence can and *should* have. The four *Gestalten* are divinity, thought, freedom, and law.

The first, divinity, determines one's power to create or destroy, as God in his realm does. Human beings, according to Schabert, have a creative power given them at birth. This power, he says, is evident "in every moment that they think up a project and in every beginning they make toward something" (116). They take what is merely thought and make it actual. Whatever the good or evil they intend, they invent "an intended configuration," "a wished-for consummation," or "a desired connection" (1). They "break and replace the power of bodies" to give society its proper form, or they drain society and damage its inhabitants (3). What human beings do create cannot have the "constancy, duration, stillness [and] unity" of Creation itself, but it can be firm and settled (58). It can persist. To make something persist, says Schabert, is a divine matter. The work of creation itself is the "mimesis of God."

Schabert's second *Gestalt* is thought, which instills the power of a confluence of knowledge and purpose in the mind. He proposes that "power for the recognition of meaning" is a human quality essential to the conduct of life because it comprehends the totality of human existence in the political moment (x). To study "the historical consciousness of human thought," he says, is to realize that the *divine hand* has shaped the rise and fall of civilizations through the ages. The "*Gestalt*-producing" power of God has defined what is and what is possible (12). If the divine potential of human beings is to be realized in the facts of their existence, they must know and understand "what the right life is" (40). Out of the work of cognition, as meaning is woven in thought, a work of power arises in the external world. Following a Platonic line of reasoning, an ordering of society follows the pattern of the ordering of one's soul. Thus, the decision "to be in this or that existential condition" is tied up with civilization itself (4). It has a political import. The individual who organizes himself (herself) in keeping with what is prudent, just, and wise is like a polis. In thought, as human beings find their bearings in a field of "passions, desires, resolutions, fantasies, volitions, yearnings, [and] reasonings," they learn to govern (3). As they become *capable of humanity* and conscious of themselves, their existence opens itself to a capacity for beginnings. The work of the soul points them to the work of laying a foundation for society. For the sake of life and survival, thought becomes a civilizing power. When thought is the subject of prejudice or delusion, it remains "a beginning, nothing more" (7). It must acquire "the character of a reality that founds a reality" to change the world (43).

The third *Gestalt* that Schabert posits is freedom, the principle that unsettles the other *Gestalten* by introducing an element of indeterminacy

into them. Freedom “opens up every form of politics,” and so human beings can choose the form of the political that suits them (117). They are free to turn away from the power they have been given. They are free to deform and destroy. They are free to overstep boundaries. Nevertheless, according to Schabert, they are not free to choose their own nature, whatever their moral inclinations. Human beings are distinct “in time, in space, [and] in the multitude of all other living beings and things,” but they are also inescapably human (7). In modernity, Schabert observes, human beings have sought to transcend their own mortality with intellect and reason. They have taken their divinely given power and transformed it into a pathology. They have tried to “create *their* world for themselves, hence a world totally subordinated to them and created in their image” (47). They have followed their own way, toward a false state of omnipotence that defies “the bonds of the cosmos” (48). Having refused a better way, because they resented a power above themselves, they have lost the highest freedom possible, “a freedom to be themselves” in their humanity (3). They have chosen “a crushing servitude, in which they become willingly dead in spirit” (52). They have become blind and cold.

The fourth *Gestalt* is law, or the principle of “reciprocal agreements freely made by human beings with each other” (52). This *Gestalt* is the only one of the four that human beings give to themselves. Using their pre-given power, those who live and act together put laws in place to bind them to their “togetherness” and protect them from the disquiet of passion and desire (82). Laws, if they are good, says Schabert, serve as “load-bearing elements” (105). They make possible “the order most conducive to the right conduct of life” (102). Within this order, the freedom of the whole finds its proper scope and consequence. Living in accord with the law, which molds their coexistence “to the requirements of coexisting,” human beings are freed for their humanity with others (112). They are freed to do “their own free work” (122). Once created, however, a space for freedom may disintegrate. The structures of government may cease to function for the sake of freedom. For this reason, human beings must care for their freedom. They must look after the power that they place in a governing freedom “exactly as instructed”: giving power and taking it away, choosing good leaders and placing obstructions in their path, beginning good processes and interrupting them, putting good mechanisms in place and confusing their operation. By placing limits on what they have created, human beings keep from losing themselves.

Is a society structured according to these *Gestalten* perfect? No. A perfect society would have no need of them, according to Schabert. What is their

purpose then? To bring to politics a moral end. For Schabert, the care of human beings for themselves and for others is essential to the culmination of a divinely guided life. What distinguishes a good human being from a bad one is his (her) capacity to live a good life in a community. Schabert draws a contrast between love formed in tyranny (Plato's *Gorgias*) and love formed in wisdom, what he calls *eros philosophos* (94). The human being with the first kind of love is "friends neither with other human beings nor with a god, because he cannot live in a community" (95). The one who has the second kind is "the communitarian human being, the creative friend," the just soul who is just to the world (94). In a shared world of bodies, the difference between the two is a political one. Schabert proposes that only other-oriented human beings can "[make] everything and everyone good," as the order of their souls is externalized. These human beings "[operate] among things for the sake of these things, for their permanence, their co-existence and their sociability." They think and act "beyond the circle of their individuality" (35). This is the *second birth* of the individual, a moral awakening into civilization. It is this awakening that gives human beings power over time and death. It gives them hope. A politics "brought to the point of beauty" resists decline and despair (65). And it makes humanity complete. In the "fulfillment of life itself," as Plato, Nietzsche, Rousseau, John Adams, and the scholars of the *Huainanzi* understood, human beings are truly happy (62).

Schabert seeks to counter the failings of modernity with his formulation of the dignity and importance of the political. What is the value of such a formulation? He borrows the concept of a "second birth" from Hannah Arendt, replacing impulse with necessity, and transforming a turn toward others into a moral imperative. Schabert draws on "a wide field of things political" to construct a cosmology tracing the origin of politics to the Divine (127). ("God is a politician," he says [5].) However, he ignores tensions and contradictions in the texts from which he takes his ideas. Schabert posits his theory as a kind of "political science," proven in such texts, as if the mere existence of these ideas were sufficient to prove his claims (127). He uses quotations out of context and interprets them narrowly to fit his arguments. They do not fit neatly into his schema, which plots a post-Enlightenment course between faith and reason. Schabert maintains that his project is "as broadly based and as comprehensive as possible," yet the rules of his *Gestalten* are exact, or "exactly as instructed" (129, 122). The theological side of his thought makes him less a scientist than a prophet. His assumptions raise questions about the legitimacy of his universal logic. What is divine? How is truth known? What is the "proper form" of society (127)? How ought society to attend to the complexities of culture, race,

gender, economy, and education? Schabert does not provide answers to these questions. His theory is given as “a stimulus and a mode of political inspiration” (64). It is precisely in this mode of political inspiration, however, that the value of his formulation lies. His notion of “human creativity directed at the human *polis*” is compelling in this age of terror and doubt (127). It breathes new life into Aristotle’s *poiesis*. It makes a logical space, echoing Wittgenstein, for the power of the individual in a world of bodies. It revives a concern for Strauss’s theological-political predicament. It affords an alternative to the political theology of Carl Schmitt: a theological politics. It challenges the modern polis to find a “better, ‘more beautiful’ way” (45).