

THE POLITICAL ANIMAL: ARISTOTELIAN METAPHYSICS FOR AUSTRIAN SCHOOLMEN

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ABSTRACT: This essay aims to introduce the Austrian community to the metaphysical principles of political life first discovered by Aristotle and subsequently clarified by Thomas Aquinas. I begin by contrasting the Aristotelian perspective on social cooperation to that of mainstream post-Cartesian political philosophy with its emphasis on willful consent. I then describe the Aristotelian notion of the common good as the metaphysical principle of political life. From the existence of a diversity of political communities, I demonstrate that each community needs to have a political authority. I then briefly examine the political ideas of Mises and Rothbard in light of the foregoing, noting where they are compatible with and where they diverge from Aristotelian-Thomistic politics. Finally, I offer some take-home considerations showing how Aristotelian political principles can bring a fresh perspective on issues of concern to the Austrian community, namely, an opposition to the “welfare-warfare state.”

This essay aims to introduce the Austrian community to the metaphysical principles of political life first discovered by Aristotle and subsequently clarified by Thomas Aquinas. This introduction will hopefully provide the reader with an alternative framework of political philosophy which is radically different from the political liberalism of the last three hundred years yet compatible with the principles and methods on which the edifice of Austrian school economics is built.

As a preamble, however, I wish to briefly highlight the points of commonality between Aristotle’s general scientific approach and that taken by the Austrians in their economic theory. As Smith

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(1990) and Gordon (1994) have noted, there is a strong Aristotelian influence on the development of Austrian economics that goes back to Carl Menger and that has implicitly informed the thought of Ludwig von Mises and his followers, even if Mises himself was unaware of that influence.

We can identify distinctly Aristotelian principles in the economic thought of the Austrian school. First is causal realism. The Austrians—if not explicitly, at least implicitly—seem to agree with Aristotle that there is a mind-independent reality, an extramental world accessible via the senses and intelligible to the human mind. For the Austrians, as for Aristotle, cause and effect relationships are real and discoverable through the proper use of reason. Like Aristotle, the Austrians trust in the general reliability of sense knowledge and in the conformity of reason to reality. Because of this, they have been able to elaborate an economic science in systematic fashion, starting from first principles. Such was the approach taken by Menger and later followed by Mises and Murray N. Rothbard in the establishment of Austrian economics.

Second, having no qualms about interpreting human action as teleological, the Austrian school has separated itself from the mainstream of modern philosophy and science and has been criticized for being a throwback to Scholasticism. It is easy to see why: Mises's idea that humans act in order "to satisfy a felt uneasiness" brings to mind the Scholastic dictum that *every agent acts for an end* and, more generally, Aristotle's notion that humans are self-perfecting beings actualizing their active potencies. Teleological realism is a critically important Aristotelian principle and also a foundational concept in Austrian economics.¹

Despite these points of commonality, there is an important difference between the general philosophical approach taken by Aristotle and the method of Austrian economics—at least as formalized by Mises. Mises insisted in sharply separating the study of human action and the physical sciences by the so-called methodological dualism (Mises 1998, 17). This separation makes perfect sense insofar as the physical sciences, as practiced in modern times, rest on mechanistic presuppositions which are seemingly

¹ This statement must be qualified given that there is, at least in Mises's writings, an ambivalence about teleological realism. That ambivalence will be taken up later in this essay.

incompatible with teleology. For Aristotle, however, such a methodological separation would seem unnecessary and counterproductive, as it uproots man from his greater cosmological context: a natural world which is also pervaded with teleology and governed by fundamental principles that also apply to human action. As we shall now see, it is in the domain of political philosophy that this divergence is most consequential.

HUMAN REASON AND SOCIAL COOPERATION

A major difference between the Aristotelian or Scholastic world view, on the one hand, and the modern liberal world view, on the other, concerns the emphasis that modern philosophers typically place on man's power of reason. In the aftermath of the mind-body dualism introduced by René Descartes, post-Cartesian political philosophers have, by and large, considered an action to be a human action if it involves the exercise of man's rational capacities. Following Thomas Hobbes, they have tended to discount nonrational action as being merely animal and mechanistic. It is the will of man which is the prime consideration.

Modern political theories have generally focused on the *willful consent* of the individual as a principle of cooperation in human society: a society is human, because its individual members have consented to living together in certain ways and for certain reasons. The diversity of modern political theories, then, stems from divergences of views about what it is that the individual is (or should be) consenting to and what the reasons are that inform his consent.

For Aristotle, however, man is a unitary being. When Aristotle remarks that man is a rational animal, he does not emphasize man's rationality at the expense of his animality even though, of course, the power of reason is man's highest faculty and is unique to him. Human nature, for Aristotle, is at once animal and rational. So, while most modern political philosophers acknowledge that man is entirely dependent on social cooperation, man's dependence on others is, for Aristotle, part of his *nature*. This means that man's social character is as much a part of his animality as it is of his rationality.

Like other social animals, man depends on the specialized work of other members of his species to satisfy his essential needs for food, shelter, safety, the care of the young, and the maintenance of the species. Therefore, man is dependent on the division of labor in

much the same way that the bee is dependent on it. Human social cooperation *per se* need not, in Aristotle's view, invoke principles other than those at work in the animal kingdom.

Where man's rationality comes into play, of course, is in regard to the particular character that the human society takes: it is because of man's power of speech, his ability to reason about means and ends, and his capacity to make moral judgments, that human societies acquire their unique structures which are fitting for the perfection of a rational animal. Still, it is not man's rationality that is the cause of his being a social being.

For Aristotle, the utter dependence of man on social cooperation and on the division of labor means that in a *formal* sense, a society of men must be prior to the individual even if, in a *material* sense, the individual must be prior to society. There can be no individual man without a society, and there can be no society without individual men. The coincident and mutual causality between the two is in keeping with other Aristotelian metaphysical principles, such as the mutual and coincident causality of act and potency that explains being and becoming.

Aristotle will not get distracted by mechanistic or evolutionary questions about how the world came to be that way. For some animal species, sociality is an unambiguous part of their nature. We do not ask ourselves: "How do individual ants come to form a colony?" The ant species is simply "colony forming." Likewise, we shouldn't bother asking ourselves how individual men and women come to form human societies. Man is a social animal. If the individual man is radically dependent on social cooperation and on the division of labor, then nature must somehow "supply" society along with man. The causal principle by which Aristotle explains such a cooperation will be clarified next.

THE ARISTOTELIAN COMMON GOOD

If man's reason is not the cause of social cooperation, what accounts for the existence of societies? As a causal realist, Aristotle will not settle for brute facts. The existence of societies must be explained, and their principles deduced through careful reasoning. Although even a modest review of Aristotelian metaphysics is clearly beyond the scope of this paper, I will attempt to introduce here some of the concepts that are relevant to political theory.

THE NATURE OF THINGS

In the ancient Aristotelian-Scholastic cosmology—rejected by Descartes and the Enlightenment philosophers—each existing thing has a *nature*, an intrinsic principle of motion, incumbent upon a thing's essence. A cat behaves as a cat because of the cat's nature, and likewise a rosebush and a human being. Each is a living organism, and each behaves in a certain way in accordance with its essence. Even a stone is, by nature, inclined to move "to the center" of the universe, that is, the center of the earth.² This view is to be contrasted with the atomistic world view—ancient or modern—whereby material beings are mechanical. Under that framework, movement comes not from within but is imparted by external forces of nature, which move parts in a mechanical way.

Descartes famously believed that all animals are mere automatons whose purposeful movement is an illusion. He made an exception for man, whom he endowed with a separate soul that controls the purely mechanical body. This "ghost in the machine" view still pervades the popular imagination but also much of modern social and political philosophy, at least to the extent mentioned earlier: if human nature is to be considered, it is considered only in so far as it consists of willful actions. The modern political philosopher has generally remained agnostic or ambivalent about how man's embodied rationality relates to the realm of causes and effects, which rule the rest of the natural world. And, after Charles Darwin, he may even deny that there is such a thing as a human nature, viewing man's actions as simply the mechanical products of a mindless historical process of evolution.

THE GOOD OF THINGS

If we accept the ancient realist's position that natural things are endowed with their own intrinsic nature and that such a nature is a principle of motion, causing the individual to act in certain ways, Aristotle points out that the actions of living things are intelligible precisely because they are directed toward recognizable ends.

² It is tempting to completely discard Aristotelian cosmology as outmoded, but the reader should be mindful that Einstein's theory of general relativity, while not endorsing the ancient cosmology, can rehabilitate the concept of natural motion in inanimate matter.

As we noted earlier, the dictum is: *every agent acts for an end*. The rosebush digs roots for the end of fetching water and nutrients. It develops leaves for the end of catching sunlight. The cat snuggles in the blanket for the end of getting warm. In the Aristotelian world view, teleology pervades the natural world and is not confined to the conscious willfulness of man.

Focusing our attention on that which the agent pursues, we come to our concept of interest: *the good*. A good is what elicits an inclination or a desire in a subject. If a subject acts upon the inclination elicited by a good, then that good specifies the *end*, or *final cause*, of the action, i.e., “that for the sake of which” the action is done.

For a rosebush, water and minerals in the soil are goods, and the sunlight in the surrounding space is a good: the rosebush digs roots for the sake of obtaining water and minerals, and it develops green leaves for the sake of catching the surrounding sunlight. For a cat, a serving of cat food, a blanket in winter, and catnip sprinkled on a scratching pad are all goods. The cat will move toward the bowl for the sake of the food, snuggle in the blanket for the sake of its warmth, and claw at the catnip-sprinkled scratching pad for the sake of the enjoyment it provides. For man, a glass of wine with dinner, an afternoon at the sports arena, a university education, are goods. All of these goods elicit an inclination in their subject, which may be followed by an action toward the good, the end of the action.

In the Aristotelian perspective, the goodness of a good resides in the good itself, i.e., in reality. In other words, a good is not good by virtue of a subject determining it to be good but is *good in itself*. Again, Aristotle comes to that conclusion by observing the similarities of action between natural beings. Clearly, the water is not good for the rosebush because the rosebush deems it to be so. The rosebush is obviously mindless. Likewise, an education is not good for Lisa by virtue of Lisa determining it to be so, but it is desired by Lisa because she apprehends it and judges it to be good in itself. Of course, Lisa could be mistaken and judge as good things that are not. Still, the goodness of an object is in the object itself and is not determined by the mind of the subject.³

³ Later in this essay a distinction will be drawn between the mind-independent reality of the good and its subjective valuation by an actor.

Goods need not be material substances. As mentioned, an education is a good, health is a good, friendship is a good, etc. But, to repeat, a good considered in terms of the inclination it elicits in a subject has the character of an end, or final cause, and is a metaphysical principle of an action, i.e., one not reducible to the material aspects of reality.

SINGULAR GOODS AND COMMON GOODS⁴

From the examples we have listed above, we can see that certain goods are proper to each nature. Catnip is a good proper to cats but not to snakes. Likewise, a university education is a proper good for humans and not for cats. Each nature, each natural kind, responds, desires, has inclinations for goods that are proper to its species.

Among proper goods, we must now distinguish singular goods from common goods. A singular good is a good that extends its goodness to only one individual member of a species. A common good, on the other hand, extends its goodness to many members of the species at once, and it is shared at once among many *without exhausting itself*. The inexhaustible extension to many is what philosophically defines the term “common.”

Of the examples given above, the following are singular goods: the water in the soil is a singular good for the rosebush nearby. The catnip on the scratching pad and the blanket on the bed are singular goods for the household cat. The health that I desire for myself is my singular good. If I desire health for you, then I vicariously desire a singular good for you. These singular goods extend their goodness to only one individual at a time.

Now, it is true that many of these goods may be shared by more than one individual, and perhaps even by many individuals: the water in the soil can be shared by many rosebushes; the blanket could be shared by the cat and the owner, a chocolate cake can be shared among two, three, or twelve people. Still, none of these are common goods, properly speaking, because when they extend their goodness to many, their goodness is diminished. They exhaust themselves. They are not true common goods but are instead aggregates of singular goods.

⁴ The most authoritative contemporary treatment of the Aristotelian-Thomistic conception of the common good was provided by De Koninck (1943), and De Koninck's work on the subject has recently been examined by Guilebeau (2016). This section draws from those two sources.

A common good—by definition—is a good that extends itself to a community without exhausting itself. It is what causes a community to be a community. It is that which inclines individuals to act as a part of a community and not simply as a multiplicity of individuals. As Aristotle says in the opening line of the *Politics*, “Every state is a community, and every community is established with a view to some [common] good.”

The concept of a common good is easy to grasp when it pertains to *voluntary* communities: the game of soccer is the common good of the Liverpool Football Club; the production and sale of bricks is the common good of the ACME Brick Company, and the teaching and dissemination of Austrian economics is the common good of the Mises Institute. It is for the sake of the game of soccer that the Liverpool FC team members are united as a team, for the sake of making and selling bricks that the owners and employees of ACME are united as a company, and for the sake of disseminating a specific economic theory that the students, faculty, and administrators of the Mises Institute are united as an institute.

THE POLITICAL COMMON GOOD

In the examples of voluntary association just given, the concrete common goods that bring together the employees of the brick company, the members of the soccer team, and the students and faculty of the educational institution are self-evident and of no great philosophical interest. Precisely because the association is voluntary, the common good is apprehended by the mind of men and can be easily defined or articulated in more or less concrete terms: “making bricks,” “playing soccer,” “disseminating Austrian economics.”

In contrast, the common good of their political community⁵ (which, as we have seen, is not established on a voluntary basis, but is formed by human nature) is not a concrete good that can be specifically described. Rather, the political common good is inferred from the existence of the political community. It is the metaphysical principle that *explains* the existence of the political

⁵ I use the general term “political community” to refer to society at large, no matter its degree of development, and will avoid using the more specific terms of “tribe,” “polis,” or “nation,” each indicative of a particular kind of political community. The term also includes so-called stateless societies, so long as it is recognized that those are not necessarily devoid of an ultimate political authority (see below).

community—if one wishes to remain faithful to the principles of causal realism.

The political common good is inferred as follows: we observe that human beings live in political communities—tribes, cities, nations—by nature (as shown in the first section above). Since only individuals act, and since each agent acts for an end, if we observe individuals acting in political communities, we infer that a good must be present to incline them to act thus. Otherwise, the community or the acts of living communally would be unintelligible and the principles of causal realism violated. That good is the principle and cause of a community being a community. It is the political common good, as understood by Aristotle, by Aquinas, and by medieval and contemporary philosophers who follow the principles of causal realism outlined by Aristotle and Aquinas.⁶

THE PRIMACY OF THE COMMON GOOD OVER THE SINGULAR GOOD

We should note that the political common good is necessarily “greater” than the singular good: it is not only a good for each individual, but it is a good that inexhaustibly communicates itself to all individuals of the political community. It is a greater good because it exerts a greater effect.

De Koninck (1943) explains the greater effect of the common good as follows:

The common good is greater not because it includes the singular good of all the singulars; in that case it would not have the unity of the common good which comes from a certain kind of universality in the latter, but would merely be a collection, and only materially better than the singular good. The common good is better for each of the particulars which participate in it, insofar as it is communicable to the other particulars; communicability is the very reason for its perfection.... That does not mean that the others are the reason for the love which the common good itself merits; on the contrary, in this formal relationship it is the others which are lovable insofar as they are able to participate in this common good.

The greater effect of the common good explains why individuals can be seen to spontaneously give up their own singular

⁶ This essay focuses on the political common good, the good of the political community. Apart from the political common good, the other natural common good recognized by Aristotle and the Scholastics is the common good of the *family*, which, like the political community, is another natural order in the framework of human existence.

goods—and even their lives—for the promotion or defense of the common good, such as the soldier who willingly enrolls in the armed forces to fight an enemy who he believes threatens his beloved country. The sacrifice of the individual for the community can only be explained if the common good elicits a greater inclination toward it as compared to the singular good.⁷

At the same time, the greater love for the common good does not subjugate the individual. In the view of Aristotle and of the Scholastics, man's self-perfecting pursuit of goods necessarily points to an ultimate good: his *happiness*. All goods are, in a sense, instrumental and ordered to the pursuit of that ultimate good. As a social animal who depends on the division of labor, man's pursuit of happiness proceeds from the pursuit of singular goods but also from the desire for, and pursuit of, the greater common good. Both the singular goods and the common good order him to his ultimate happiness and the two are not in conflict with one another.

CONTRAST WITH THE MODERN UNDERSTANDING OF THE COMMON GOOD

The foregoing Aristotelian understanding of the common good as a teleological principle of social life stands in sharp contrast to the modern understanding of the term.

In modern political philosophy, the concept of the common good refers either to aggregates of singular goods or to concrete shared interests not unlike the voluntary common good of a business enterprise. This is readily seen in a recent entry in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* that defines the common good as “facilities ... that the members of a community provide to all members in order to *fulfill a relational obligation* they all have to care for certain interests that they have in common” (emphasis mine).⁸ The examples of facilities given include the road systems,

⁷ Mises's analysis of the self-sacrifice of the individual for the country is compatible with this view: “When society's existence is threatened, each individual must risk his best to avoid destruction. Even the prospect of perishing in the attempt can no longer deter him. For there is then no choice between either living on as one formerly lived or sacrificing oneself for one's country, for society, or for one's convictions.... War carried on *pro aris et focis* demands no sacrifice from the individual. One does not engage in it merely to reap benefits for others, but to preserve one's own existence” (1951, 402).

⁸ *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, s.v. “The Common Good,” by Waheed Hussain, Feb. 26, 2018, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2018/entries/common-good/>.

public parks, police protection, courts, public schools, cultural institutions, civil liberties, clean air, and national defense.

These are clearly concrete goods (e.g., the roads) or specific interests (e.g., the right to free expression), in keeping with the idea that human political societies are formed through willful, rational cooperation. In such a framework of understanding, there is no distinction in kind between the political association and the various examples of private associations we mentioned earlier, such as the soccer team, the firm, or the educational institution. The distinction is merely one of scope, wherein the political society is a voluntary association that concerns *all* members of the community.

Seeing the common good as essentially an aggregate of singular goods, the modern political philosopher since Hobbes sees an inherent conflict in the social life of man: the common good compels the individual to give up something he would otherwise pursue. It places limits on the individual's liberty and, therefore, is a paradoxical good that has the character of a necessary evil rather than a true good that orients the individual toward his flourishing. The political philosopher's goal, then is to come up with rules of political life that minimize that conflict.

NO COMMON GOOD ACCORDING TO MISES AND ROTHBARD?

Before closing this section, we should note that the concept of the common good is conspicuously absent in the work of Mises and Rothbard. It does not figure in the indices of Mises's treatises that address political questions, such as *Human Action*, *Liberalism*, or *Socialism*, nor does it receive any attention in the works of political theory of Murray Rothbard.

This lack of attention likely stems from the fact that economic theory may dispute the value of the common good in its modern conception. If the common good is a "set of facilities" that are shared among many and, therefore, nothing more than an aggregate of singular goods, there is no need to give it any special consideration. Its optimal distribution will be achieved by normal market processes and exchanges. Furthermore, if the common good is a set of concrete "shared interests," the subjective theory of value would prescribe that people be allowed to sort themselves into communities of shared beliefs and values. Government intervention in the name of the common good is superfluous or worse.

Still, the concerns of Rothbard and Mises in political theory are similar to those of Hobbes and of most modern political philosophers: the minimization of conflict. Rothbard believed conflict would be minimized by the absence of government while Mises believed it could only be achieved under the coercive action of the state.⁹

MANY POLITICAL COMMUNITIES, MANY COMMON GOODS

Having established that the political community exists by virtue of a political common good, and having distinguished the Aristotelian understanding of that common good from the modern liberal perspective on it, we now reflect on a fact of observation: the human race exists as a *diversity* of distinct political communities, not a single one. The human race is not ordered to a universal political common good. Rather, a diversity of coexisting political communities populates the world, each ordered to its own common good.

What accounts for the diversity of political common goods in human life? Here again, Aristotle would begin by looking to the animal world for the answer: there is one species of black ants but many black ant colonies. What accounts for this multiplicity? When an ant colony outgrows its anthill or when conditions are adverse, one or more new queens are produced, and a part of the colony may either swarm or “bud” away to find a more suitable habitat. If successful, a new colony is formed. Similar phenomena occur among bees and among other “eusocial” animals, such as wasps, certain species of mole rats, and certain crustaceans.

Whatever the mechanism of multiplication may be, the lesson to be drawn is that societies of animals—of which human societies are a type¹⁰—naturally emerge from preexisting societies depending on territorial considerations which regulate the size of

⁹ “[P]eaceful human cooperation ... cannot exist without a social apparatus of coercion and compulsion, i.e., without a government. The evils of violence, robbery, and murder can be prevented only by an institution that itself, whenever needed, resorts to the very methods of acting for the prevention of which it is established” (Mises 1992, 97).

¹⁰ E. O. Wilson, one of the most prominent contemporary evolutionary biologists has recently classed humans among the “eusocial species” of the planet, a noteworthy return to the Aristotelian view. Wilson’s position has caused controversy among biologists who, like Mises (*vide infra*), are ambivalent about relating man’s sociability to the sociability of animals. See, for example, Angier (2012).

the community to optimize its flourishing and self-sufficiency.¹¹ Social cooperation is cooperation in a certain place at a certain time. The material world is not immediately sustaining but its raw resources must be worked and developed through the division of labor. For ants as for men, the transformation of those resources into “capital goods” necessarily confines the division of labor to a given territory.

Given the natural propensity of living species to grow in size and number, the limitations imposed on a given community by a given territory is one important mechanism by which communities divide from one another, leading to a multiplication and diversity of populations segregated according to territorial considerations: at *this* point in time and under *these* current conditions, *this* ant colony thrives on *this* anthill, and *that* ant colony on *that* one; *this* human tribe lives in *these* pastures, and *that* human community dwells in *that* city on *that* riverbank.

Because human societies are societies of rational animals who possess creative imagination, the multiplication of human societies also produces a great diversification in the mode or manner of existence over time. What distinguishes one ant colony from another is simply its location, size, and whatever accidental features are dictated by the habitat. Human societies, on the other hand, are further diversified in their language, culture, political organization, moral norms, religions, etc.

THE POLITICAL COMMON GOOD IS PRIOR TO THE LANGUAGE, CULTURE, RELIGION, AND POLITICAL ORGANIZATION OF A POLITICAL COMMUNITY

Based on the metaphysical considerations given earlier in this essay, it should be apparent that the political common good must be *ontologically* prior to the language, culture, religion, and political organization of a community, even if language, culture, religion, or political ideology may *temporally* preexist the formation of the community. Linguistic, religious, cultural, or ideological affinity

¹¹ While modern political communities are rarely *de facto* self-sufficient and may rely largely on trade with other communities, potential self-sufficiency is a necessary and real aspect of any political community. It is precisely because a political community is at least potentially self-sufficient and therefore “one thing” that we can distinguish one political community from another.

can explain the distinctive characteristics of a political community, but they cannot explain its being a political community as such.

Of course, shared cultural values, shared religion, and a shared language can be the impetus for forming a new political community in a new (and hopefully unclaimed) territory, or may be criteria by which a community chooses to include certain members and exclude others. But culture, religion, and language cannot be the reason a community is an actual political community.

If the “Catalan people” choose to secede from Spain and succeed in living together as a Catalan nation, their political common good will be distinct from the Catalan language and culture. To show this, consider that, for example, the Catalan language could, over time, cease to be spoken among the Catalan people without the integrity of the community suffering a loss. Also, any Catalan-speaking person may choose to leave the Catalan nation or to not join it to begin with. The Catalan language itself cannot be the cause of being of the Catalan nation.

Likewise, a community’s political organization and its dominant ideology cannot be the cause of its being a political community. The political community of Russia was organized as a monarchy for centuries but abruptly became a Communist nation in 1917 and, equally abruptly, changed into a constitutional democracy in 1991. Despite the dramatic changes in political organization, the same nation remained through the change. That sameness implies a sameness in the political common good that orders the Russian nation. That the political common good can persist despite dramatic changes in language or in religious, cultural, or political organization shows that the political common good is “prior” to all these attributes of a political community.

To be clear, however, this priority is not a priority *in time*, but an ontological priority. Common goods do not exist in themselves, “out there in the world,” waiting to be pursued by a people. A common good is a metaphysical principle that emerges in a historical context, under specific conditions, when a community succeeds in becoming self-sufficient. Nevertheless, the common good is a real teleological principle, distinct from its material principles, from its people, and from the cultural and ideological attributes that it brings to a community. It is not Clovis, his Frankish followers, their beliefs, and the territory they occupied that caused France to be a nation. But it is Clovis, his Frankish followers, their

beliefs, and the territory they occupied that made the nation that emerged become “France” and not another nation.

THE NECESSITY OF A POLITICAL AUTHORITY

Because political communities are diverse, the question of how to distinguish a member of the community from an outsider arises. That distinction, of course, is essential to preserve the integrity of any given political community.

In animal societies, the distinction is made on a strictly material basis and, therefore, can be entirely decentralized. For example, an intruder ant which threatens the integrity of a colony may be detected based on a pheromone and be immediately attacked by any member of the colony, even one not specifically functioning as a guardian. The remarkably versatile life of ants is astonishingly decentralized with respect to authority, causing Aristotle to point out that each ant is “its own ruler.”

In human political communities, in contrast, information about the membership of a given human being cannot be communicated by material factors alone. Even though one ordinarily becomes a member of a political community by birth, no political community is established on a strict genetic or biological basis. Even the most primitive tribes are apt to include outsiders, for example, by marriage. Besides, when communities are large enough, there may not be any practical way for one person to know the genealogy of another.

To belong to a human political community obviously involves a degree of personal choice: I may choose to relinquish my membership in the American political community to become, say, Mexican. Making the choice effective, however, is clearly not up to me. I am effectively a Mexican only once I am deemed to be so by the Mexican community *as a whole*. Otherwise, disagreement among Mexicans on my status would threaten the integrity of the political community. But agreement among Mexicans cannot possibly come about through their individual free choices. Such unanimity would be highly unlikely or highly precarious. Rather, the need for establishing my status as a Mexican for Mexico as a whole necessitates an authority to ultimately decide and thereby communicate for all Mexicans whether or not I belong to their political community.

The fundamental need for all who engage in communal life to be informed—implicitly or explicitly—of the “membership status” of any given individual justifies the existence of a political authority to adjudicate this matter when the situation demands it. In primitive tribes, that authority may be confined to a single ruler or a council of individuals. In more developed societies, it is most often seen to take the form of an institution: the state.

But note that this justification for a political authority leads us to conceive of its primary function in a very specific way: the political authority is not primarily the person or institution holding “a territorial monopoly on the use of violence” for the purpose of achieving peace and security—the common understanding of the state in modern political theory. Rather, the political authority revealed to be necessary by Aristotelian metaphysical principles is primarily the person or institution to whose judgment the community must necessarily submit in matters regarding the ultimate identification of individuals as members of the community or as outsiders.

GRECO-AUSTRIAN CONFLICT?

Since I began this essay with remarks on the Aristotelian roots of Austrian economics, I will now briefly comment on the political philosophy of Ludwig von Mises and Murray Rothbard in light of the preceding considerations. To be clear, the following comments cannot amount to a nuanced analysis of either man’s political thought. I will simply contrast a few of their salient ideas to those of Aristotle.

Both men, it appears, espoused a view of the nation as a natural community whose explanation transcends atomistic and mechanistic principles and does not come into being by any social contract. According to Salerno (2019, 8), Mises believed that “the nation has a fundamental and relatively permanent being independent of the transient state (or states) which may govern it at any given time,” causing him to view the nation as “an organic entity.”

Likewise, Salerno (2019, 9) draws attention to the following comment in Rothbard (1994):

Contemporary libertarians often assume, mistakenly, that individuals are bound to each other only by the nexus of market exchange. They forget that everyone is necessarily born into a family, a language, and a culture. Every person is born into one or several overlapping communities, usually including an ethnic group, with specific values, cultures,

religious beliefs, and traditions. He is generally born into a “country.” He is always born into a specific historical context of time and place, meaning neighborhood and land area.

While those comments by Mises and Rothbard suggest compatibility with Aristotelian political principles, there are also striking dissimilarities.

Rothbard, for example, grounded much of his political ethics in John Locke’s theory of property. With its emphasis on the importance of “self-ownership,” that theory borrows heavily from post-Cartesian ideas in which the willful consent of man is central. For example, in his *Anatomy of the State*, Rothbard declared:

Man is born naked into the world, and *needing to use his mind* to learn how to take the resources given him by nature, and to transform them ... into shapes and forms and places where the resources can be used for the satisfaction of his wants and the advancement of his standard of living. The only way by which man can do this is *by the use of his mind* and energy to transform resources ... and to exchange these products for products created by others. (2009, 13, emphasis mine)

That passage, in contrast to the previous one, would place Rothbard in the modern liberal tradition of considering political communities as formed through the willful actions of individual human beings.

Mises’s views in regard to the genesis of human societies are also somewhat ambiguous. On the one hand, he emphatically rejects the Lockean idea of the isolated individual. As Salerno (1990) has remarked, the isolated human being is for Mises either fictional or metaphorical: “[M]an as man is necessarily a social animal. Some sort of social cooperation is an essential characteristic of his nature” (1985, 252).

At the same time, Mises rejects outright any metaphysical explanation for the political community and sees no explanation for it outside of the action of individuals:

Individual man is born into a socially organized environment. In this sense alone we may accept the saying that society is—logically or historically—antecedent to the individual. In every other sense this dictum is either empty or nonsensical. The individual lives and acts within society. But society is nothing but the combination of individuals for cooperative effort. It exists nowhere else than in the actions of individual men. *It is a delusion to search for it outside the actions of individuals.* To speak of a society’s autonomous and independent existence, of its

life, its soul, and its actions is a metaphor which can easily lead to crass error. (1998, 143, emphasis mine)

Instead, Mises proposes evolutionary explanations for the origins of political communities in which human reason takes pride of place, and he rejects any political theory that adopts the animal society as an explanatory model:

The principle of the division of labor is one of the great basic principles of cosmic becoming and evolutionary change. The biologists were right in borrowing the concept of the division of labor from social philosophy and in adapting it to their field of investigation. There is division of labor between the various parts of any living organism. There are, furthermore, organic entities composed of collaborating animal individuals; *it is customary to call metaphorically such aggregations of the ants and bees "animal societies."* But one must never forget that the characteristic feature of human society is purposeful cooperation; society is an outcome of human action, i.e., of a conscious aiming at the attainment of ends. No such element is present, as far as we can ascertain, in the processes which have resulted in the emergence of the structure-function systems of plant and animal bodies and in the operation of the societies of ants, bees, and hornets. Human society is an intellectual and spiritual phenomenon. It is the outcome of a purposeful utilization of a universal law determining cosmic becoming, viz., the higher productivity of the division of labor. (1998, 144–45, emphasis mine)

These comments place Mises in opposition to Aristotle who, as we mentioned earlier, saw teleology as pervading the entire natural world and considered the analogy between societies of men and societies of bees to be real and proportionate, rather than imperfect or metaphorical. Mises, in contrast, sees teleology only in the willful consciousness of man: "Reason and experience show us two separate realms: the external world of physical, chemical, and physiological phenomena and the internal world of thought, feeling, valuation, and purposeful action" (1998, 18).

What's more, Mises seems to have rejected metaphysics wholesale, stating in *Human Action* that: "In the present state of our knowledge, the fundamental statements of positivism, monism, and panphysicism are mere metaphysical postulates devoid of any scientific foundation" (1998, 17–18). But the lack of a specific reference to Aristotelian metaphysics in that statement, however, is noteworthy. To what extent was Mises familiar with Aristotelian first principles?

In the one passage of *Human Action* that mentions Aristotle, Mises criticizes the ancient philosopher for believing that value inhered in the good:

An inveterate fallacy asserted that things and services exchanged are of equal value. *Value was considered as objective*, as an intrinsic quality inherent in things and not merely as the expression of various people's eagerness to acquire them. People, it was assumed first established the magnitude of value proper to goods and services by an act of measurement and then proceeded to barter them against quantities of goods and services of the same amount of value. This fallacy frustrated Aristotle's approach to economic problems and, for almost two thousand years, the reasoning of all those for whom Aristotle's opinions were authoritative. (Mises 1998, 204, emphasis mine)

Mises may have correctly criticized Aristotle's primitive economics, but we should highlight the fact that the Aristotelian objective reality of metaphysical goodness does not entail that valuation itself should be objective.

Clarifying that point is not simply of arcane interest. Consider the positivist criticism of Austrian economics according to which a statement such as "an actor will always choose his most valued end" is a definitional statement, or a tautology. That criticism may be valid if the goodness of a thing is entirely subjective and determined by the actor. If the goodness of a thing does not pertain to the thing itself, to its extramental reality, but is only a psychological determination made by the choosing actor, then the positivists would be correct: "most valued" would simply mean what the acting person chooses. If such is the foundation of Austrian economics, it could not add new knowledge about the world.

By locating the goodness of a thing in the thing itself, Aristotelian metaphysics refutes the charge of tautology: the actor sees various goods in the world, subjectively ranks them at any moment in time, and chooses means to pursue the most valued ends at that particular time and place. The key element is to recognize that goodness is in the things themselves. The valuation, then, reveals the subjective, personal preference of the actor for one good over another. The revelatory character of the action allows the statement "an actor will always choose his most valued end" to be the premise for a deductive economic theory, and economics need not be reduced to identifying relationships between actors and goods solely by empirical, i.e., statistical, inference.

As Gordon (1994), Hoppe (2007), and others have noted, there is a strong Kantian influence on Mises, evident in his frequent use of Kantian terminology. His conceiving of the "external world of physical, chemical, and physiological phenomena" as a separate

realm from the “internal world of thought, feeling, valuation, and purposeful action” raises a question about his stance on realism. But too strong a subjectivist view of the goodness of things could jeopardize the causal-realist claims of Austrian economics.

According to Hoppe (2007, 19), however, that need not be so: by adding to Kantian philosophy the *a priori* category of human action, Mises built a “bridge to reality” and allowed Austrian economics to escape from the Kantian idealism into which it might otherwise find itself. If that is the case, then Mises may not have been as far from Aristotle as he might have thought, especially since it is difficult to conceive of human action independently of sense knowledge.¹²

SUMMARY AND TAKE-HOME CONSIDERATIONS

To summarize this introduction to Aristotelian principles of political life, we began by noting that human political communities exist not by the will of man, or by his power of reason, but by his nature as a social animal: man essentially depends on others and on the division of labor, and therefore social life is as natural to him as it is to bees and ants.

Aristotelian causal realism appeals to a plurality of causes to adequately explain the natural world: material, formal, efficient, and final (teleological). As part of the natural world, man is a teleological being whose actions are ordered toward ends. The teleological cause that orders the communal life of man is the political common good.

The understanding of the common good as a metaphysical principle with the character of a final cause is in stark contrast with the contemporary conception of the common good as an aggregate stock of “facilities” or as “shared interests.” The mechanistic assumptions that underlie the modern concept of the common good are unrealistic and fail to provide a causal explanation for the communal behavior of man.

Human political communities, as well as animal societies, are diversified: there is not one universal ant colony, nor is there one

¹² A similar conclusion was reached by Warren Orbaugh in an unpublished paper presented at the Mises Institute’s Austrian Scholars Conference in 2011, “Whether Mises’s Use of “a Priori” Is Kantian or Aristotelian,” a recording of which is available at <https://mises.org/library/whether-mises%E2%80%99s-use-priori-kantian-or-aristotelian>.

universal human society. The diversity of political communities implies that the division of labor and economic exchanges between members of a community are privileged as compared to the division of labor and economic exchanges that could occur between communities. This privileging implies the need for a mechanism to distinguish members of one community from others. In human societies, this mechanism involves rational judgment and is an operation of individuals or institutions: the political authority.

In this essay we have seen that Aristotelian teleological realism, which forms the foundation of Austrian economics, can also form the foundation of a true political science. The basic political principles summarized in the preceding pages are not prescriptive in and of themselves but may be prescriptive insofar as we understand real principles to be “laws of nature” that must be respected or else disregarded at great peril. Political life—life in society—is not an end but a means by which individual human beings flourish and attain their happiness. The better we understand and respect the principles of political life, the better the chance of finding happiness.

By rejecting the Lockean homesteading principle and by providing a justification for a formal political authority, the political realism of Aristotle may disappoint some members of the Austrian community who wish to pursue the ideals of anarcho-capitalism and the project of a purely voluntary society. I hope the Aristotelian principles will not be dismissed simply because they lead to a conclusion that is not desired.

At the same time, the justification for the state offered by Aristotelian metaphysics need not lead one to be resigned to coexistence with an aggressor, as was Mises’s view,¹³ so long as we conceive of aggression (and violence) in its Aristotelian sense, as going against the nature and the good of things.

Understood properly, the State’s only purpose should be the promotion of the common good of its community, a good that is naturally desired by all its members. It is only when the state deviates from this function—as it is apt to do when the community

¹³ “[P]eaceful human cooperation ... cannot exist without a social apparatus of coercion and compulsion, i.e., without a government. The evils of violence, robbery, and murder can be prevented only by an institution that itself, whenever needed, resorts to the very methods of acting for the prevention of which it is established (Mises 1992, 97)

adopts a faulty understanding of the common good—that it is liable to act as an aggressor. Quoting Aquinas, De Koninck (1997, 36) highlights the importance of distinguishing the common good from the singular good to avoid tyranny:

[O]ne can love the common good in two ways. One can love it to possess it, and one can love it for its conservation and its diffusion. In effect, one can say: I prefer the common good because its possession is for me a greater good. But this is not a love of the common good as common good. It is a love which identifies the common good with the good of the singular person considered as such. “To love the good of a city in order to appropriate it and possess it for oneself is not what the good political man does; for thus it is that the tyrant, too, loves the good of the city, in order to dominate it, which is to love oneself more than the city; in effect it is for himself that the tyrant desires this good, and not for the city.”

The appropriation of the common good for one’s own possession brings to mind Rothbard’s depiction of the state as “a gang of thieves writ large.”

The political metaphysics sketched in this essay can also provide a principled opposition to the “warfare-welfare state.” First, political common goods are real principles, and political communities are natural orders that must be respected precisely because they are real. Therefore, imperialism and universalism are necessarily violations of those natural orders. Second, as we have seen, the political common good is not a treasury of singular goods to be taken from some and doled out to others under specious pretexts or based on a poorly conceived notion of social justice. With a realist’s understanding of the common good, the disastrous social policies adopted by all liberal democracies over the last two centuries would not have been enacted. As De Koninck puts it (again quoting Aquinas):

A society constituted by persons who love their private good above the common good, or who identify the common good with the private good, is a society not of free men, but of tyrants—“and thus the entire people becomes like one tyrant”—who lead each other by force, in which the ultimate head is no one other than the most clever and strong among the tyrants, the subjects being merely frustrated tyrants.

The political common good is a metaphysical principle that ultimately serves the happiness of individual man. Like all principles of nature, it must be pondered carefully. Clearly, this essay could only tangentially introduce the reader to Aristotelian metaphysics.

Those unfamiliar with it will undoubtedly question many of the points we have made in passing: In what way does Aristotelianism provide an alternative to both Cartesian mind-body dualism and materialistic monism? What are the exact principles of causal realism, and how does Aristotle justify them as self-evident? What are the reasoning steps that allow the philosopher to proceed from first principles to a coherent anthropology?

Those questions are of utmost importance, and I hope that this essay will spur interest in the thought of Aristotle and Aquinas. The philosophical foundations they have provided can serve the gamut of scientific inquiry about man, from the physical sciences to the social sciences, acknowledging a fact that should be obvious to all: man is at once a rational being and a physical being.

Menger, Böhm-Bawerk, Mises, Hayek, Rothbard, and present-day contributors to Austrian economics have built a wonderful edifice of knowledge about the rules that govern the exchange of singular goods in society: economic science in the Austrian tradition. Perhaps it could be bolstered by being placed on a deeper anthropological foundation, one that more completely considers man in all his dimensions—physical, animal, rational, and political.

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