

The Second Birth: On the Political Beginnings of Human Existence

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The Second Birth: On the Political Beginnings of Human Existence. Tilo Schabert. Translated by Javier Ibáñez-Noé. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015.

Tilo Schabert's *The Second Birth* is a philosopher's book.

Lest anyone misunderstand, this is an essay written by a genuine lover of wisdom for those others who take similar care to cultivate an attitude of love toward truth, goodness, justice and beauty wherever they may be encountered. It is a book that will resonate within anyone who, to paraphrase Wittgenstein, is prepared to put the question marks down deeply enough when thinking about the political dimension of human reality; and why human reality is inevitably political. Schabert's book takes the reader on a "transcultural and transhistorical" (xv) career across what Voegelin once referred to as History I (in its multiplicity) in search of the grounding and encompassing History II. It is a masterful engagement with humanity. (In an interesting stylistic way, Schabert refers to human beings in the third person, which I will comment on below). *The Second Birth* is an evocative invocation of the dignity of humanity that the philosopher will relish as she/he moves through the book. It works as a meditation upon some of the primary existential sources through which our humanity is realized. These include beginnings, number, body, action, consciousness, grace, the divine, thought, creation, Eros, time, law and freedom—all of which are the topics for their own chapter. In what follows below, I point only to some highlights among many others.

The first chapter, "At the Start" lays out the key differentiation: the distinction *and* connection between a beginning and a start. The individual human being "is a beginning, nothing more. But he is also the beginning in which the *Gestalt* of the human being is started through this beginning: a human being among human beings ..." (7). Our first birth is our being a finished human being in terms of bodily constitution. But it is that very bodiliness that itself constitutes the need for a second birth, the political birth. We are always in need of sociality, shelter, food, etc. It means that, for Schabert, the political arises as a *metaxy* or in-between reality. It is located "between the 'start' of human existence . . . and the 'beginning' that is then made by human being themselves through the founding of political communities" (3). It is bodiliness that is the condition for a second birth, a beginning that is political in substance. Bodiliness is the condition for encountering boundaries, the condition for opening the world as a world of different books, songs, paintings, equipment, states, economies, religions etc. Beginnings are that through which "human beings become creative for the creation 'human being.'" (7).

The chapter on number follows. “Number is the mode of all creation” (9) and Schabert explores the significance of this for human beings who, after all, exist from the beginning, a beginning in number, a numerical beginning. The significance of the one and the many means that, on the one hand, there is a need for politics because we are many; but on the other hand, we can only be many due to our already being one. Discussing St. Augustine, he writes that “No matter how many human beings there may be in existence, they will always abide in the unity of their beginning, of that one beginning called ‘human being’” (14).

The next chapter, “In Body,” is a beautiful discussion on the embodied human person in a world of embodiedness. In engaging with Huainanzi and Ibn Khaldûn, Schabert writes that “Everyone is lonely in his or her body” (20). The body is the realm of aggression and power because it is spatial. But it is that very aggressiveness that proves to be the crucial weakness in that it communicates a demand or a predicament of neediness that only the other person can adequately address. So, in their need, “bodies become ‘eloquent’ toward one another” (21). Schabert’s great metaphor is the apparent chaos of a busy train station if viewed from a balcony, but that nonetheless is actually a political civilization among bodies who are eloquently negotiating their way amongst each other across platforms and spaces. It is perhaps obvious that the next chapter should be about action, but this is action in the more-than-pragmatic sense of being “power for themselves and [exerting] an influence on their own life that this life itself demands” (33). Self-governance reminds this reviewer of the role of *concordantia* in Nicholas of Cusa’s *The Catholic Concordance* where the Cusanus writes that it is not manumission that sets man free, but wisdom.

The next two chapters on consciousness and grace are chapters about illumination and enlightenment respectively. The first is where Schabert contrasts the discernment and choice of good and evil, of meaning and emptiness, of life and death. The self-governance of the soul is treated through Plato’s *Republic* as the power of the soul to “see.” What Voegelin describes as the macroanthropic principle finds expression in the phrase “Whosoever is a human being is also a *polis*” (41). The focus on enlightenment is an exploration of the theme of unboundedness beyond the boundaries of bodies and numbers as handled by Plato and St. Augustine. The element of grace as enlightenment and the need for existential humility—perhaps also shades of angst in the Parmenidean glimpsing of infinite being—is articulated well in the sentence “In their freedom to overstep boundaries, human beings find their boundary” (50).

The following chapters on the divine and on thought work well together too. “The power of the divine and the power of thought are ‘always already’ with them [humans]. The creative start is opened for human beings in these two powers, and it gives them a path and a direction for their civilizing creation” (53). Through Plato’s tale of Kronos in the *Statesman*, Schabert locates the beginnings of political theory in the shift from the Age of Kronos where divine care looked after humans until the age of man when politics became mimetic of the divine. Politics must care for humans in ways left abandoned by the gods. Essentially, while pragmatic politics goes about its business, it is political theory

that plays the mimetically divine role of reminding the practitioners of why politics is inherently noble. "Political theory is orientation" (62). Thought, then, plays this civilizing and noble role. From the pluralities that pragmatic politics throws up, it is thought that can lead back to unity, "a symmetrically structured commonality" (70). Thought is a "start"; the heavenly *polis* provides the model of justice and humanity in unity. It is not a "beginning" because the heavenly city is not of the order of an ideal or a utopia. Under conditions of pragmatic existence, it is simply impossible; but in thought, the pragmatic city already has a model of justice to orient its soul.

Schabert goes from here to talk about creation as the whole of things that nonetheless is always falling apart; but in falling apart, finds itself as a whole. "There lies a 'history' in things. From their beginning, they come apart, and they come together through their beginning. Here is creation and chaos" (79). The tension that holds creation and chaos together is Eros. "Being ordered according to Eros, everything finds itself in motion toward a point at which it is something other than what it is, and at which, therefore, it introduces confusion into things for the sake of bringing about their unification" (81). The One becomes Many, but the Many know themselves in the One. There is a hunger in the Many for unity which Schabert articulates as "A feast lies in creation and the feast is absent—in the same creation" (83). With Plato's *Symposium*, he goes on to talk about Eros as the strength and weakness of humans. If Eros in the mode of the *eros tyrannos* knows only how to devour, Eros can also be the *eros philosophos* that "stands in relation to things that is good for those things" (95). It knows the beautiful because it is related to the divine, is open to the divine, acts as a messenger from the gods to men and back again.

"In Time" demonstrates another boundary of sorts: The temporality by which things come into and go out of existence. All things in human life are in motion, but they are in motion from a beginning. So too with political communities, their motion is derived from a common beginning, but the beginning is also the beginning of their end. In handling this topic in Plato's *Laws*, Schabert writes "A political civilization becomes extinguished because its meaning is forgotten" (103).

"In Law" is a magnificent chapter, reminiscent of a Socratic *anamnesis*. Schabert looks at the provenance of law or its embeddedness in the structure of being. Law arises from the human predicament of need in the context of this structure. Perhaps symbolized as the divine, as reason, or as the nature of things, the beginnings of law are not found simply in human convention, but in the attunement of the human condition to the condition of being. One is put in mind of Voegelin's comments in the *History of Political Ideas, Vol. II (Collected Works of Eric Voegelin, Vol. 20, 226)* where he writes that there are only two alternatives to what Schabert discusses here: the nihilism of any order that can compel submission; or the erecting of intramundane elements such as instincts, the will to power, etc. into absolutes that essentially truncate the human person and society by a willful blindness of transcendent sources of meaning (*Apperzeptionsverweigerung*).

The final chapter of *The Second Birth* deals with freedom as the undergirding power that makes the other powers possible: "It is a pattern of human life, and yet it is, at the same time, *the Gestalt*, which, in contrast to all other patterns, open up everything in human life for him- or herself" (113). That all human beings are free simply by virtue of being human, and therefore deserve to have a politics of freedom, is caught by the quotations from Aristotle toward the end of the chapter. "The state is a community of free people. . . . Only a few partake in wealth, but everyone partakes in freedom" (122). Yet, freedom is paradoxical. Our bodies have already set us in a predicament of need. Neediness does not seem like freedom, but in fact, in order to be fully free, this predicament of need leads us to work out a freedom in a way that is cognizant of that very need and can address the dimensions of that need. In an almost lyrical way, Schabert presents the reader—a reader who may be troubled by a Hobbesian ghost floating among liberal things—with a most beautiful passage about freedom, paradox, power, and love:

"Here is a path on which a sort of marvelous transformation occurs. We take away our natural freedom by inserting it into an order of government, but we obtain in its stead a governing freedom. Such governing freedom renders everyone who is united under it my friend and, when it is a matter of defending this freedom, my ally. With natural freedom I am always alone with myself and my only ally is merely my own naked power, which will inexorably abandon me one day . . ."(120).

The paradox of power is the convergence of our bodily neediness and our intrinsic freedom. It is the human condition. "Human beings govern themselves as they must, namely, by exercising power" (121). However, while we know much about our human condition and our power and our neediness, "what comes out of these beginnings is their own free work" (122).

The Second Birth is a political work. But it is work about politics in its deeper meaning as a community or cosmion that can also express itself in spiritual and religious symbolism. Schabert quotes Voegelin from *Political Religions*: "The language of politics is also permeated with religious motivations and thus becomes a symbolic system in the distinct sense of the permeation of worldly experiences with transcendent-divine experiences" (61). Politics in this sense becomes the name of that field in which human reality becomes engaged with itself and with what lies beyond itself.

Without wanting to detract from Schabert's—or Voegelin's—work in any way, one wonders what he might say to someone like Levinas who ascribes a priority to Ethics over both metaphysics and politics and more; a priority that does not lose sight of the person and the inter-personal chain of obligations and freedoms that constitute each self. Instead of the eminence of the third-person "it" and "they"—the putative language of the political—is not human reality more primordially and transcendently a reality where "I" and "thou" (or "Thou") predominate? Does not the political have to cede its ground to the ethical, in the same manner as justice is surpassed by love, as Thomas Aquinas tells us? Indeed, Schabert writes "There is one word for the care of human beings for themselves: *politics*" (58). This reviewer wonders why there is *one* word and why another

word “ethics” is not mentioned. A rhetorical flourish, perhaps? Or has ethics become a species within the genus of politics? (Ethics is already essentially politics?) Why, *contra* Levinas, is “ethics” an inadequate word for the human care for humans? These are questions are not criticism, but ask about the massiveness of political things *for the sake of* the smallness of individual human things. These questions seek an adequate language to handle the personal reality of human life that can often be squashed when projected against the grand politico-historical stage.

However, Schabert does address the relation between need, freedom, power and politics throughout his book because it is a work of genuine philosophy that loves its human subject matter and remains cognizant of persons. But *The Second Birth* is not a work centered on individual persons. It is a work about all human persons. So, if the perennial danger of emphasizing the political is that the personal can be eclipsed, *The Second Birth* cares too much for the reality of human beings as persons to do such a thing. In fact, the political language of “it” and “they” becomes a strength as the book proceeds in that symbolism such as this conveys the fullest sweep of human reality in more satisfactory ways than the language of first and second persons. Schabert book succeeds because it is artful. It employs political language in such a way that it is illuminated by its own noble spirit. It continually puts us on Schabert’s own metaphorical balcony above the train station’s platform and asks us at once to observe the apparent chaos below, inviting us to realize that civilization happens within, down there, among that seething mass of persons. Furthermore, a noble politics such as Schabert’s can remind us that “I” am “they” and bring home to us the full truth of Terence’s famous saying, *Homo sum, humani nihil a me alienum puto*.

Also available is Ming Chong’s review [here](#).

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