

Tilo Schabert: *Die zweite Geburt des Menschen: Von den politischen Anfängen menschlicher Existenz*. (Freiburg and Munich: Verlag Karl Alber, 2009. Pp. 192. €26.00, paper.)

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Saul Bellow's *Mr. Sammler's Planet* turns on the question of what is worth saving in our civilization, and I read Schabert's *Die zweite Geburt des Menschen: Von den politischen Anfängen menschlicher Existenz* (The second birth of humans: on the political origins of human existence) as a similar search. For Schabert, it's our political or civilizational "second" birth that really actualizes our humanity, and his book itemizes the most important sources of that second birth. His topics of "beginning," "number," "body," "action," "consciousness," "grace," "the divine," "thinking," "creation," "eros," "time," "law," and "freedom" read like many facets of a single diamond, each encouraging the reader to examine his or her own political foundations in terms of these wisely selected multiple perspectives. Behind the set of sources is an articulated vision of the political effect of the soul's achievement of self-government.

Schabert distinguishes between "beginning" as first and "beginning" as origin or creative principle, which opens the self to the world, whether artistic, economic, political, or religious (22).

The next chapter, "Number," reflects on the one and the many as applied to humanity, noting how Cicero had raised this issue in terms of reason as the one held in common by the many (29). Schabert paraphrases Augustine in the *City of God*, to the effect that humans are not human if all humans are not human, in that God created all humans as one (31).

He then explores the centrality to politics of the notion of body, quoting John Jay's dictum "If men were angels, no government would be necessary" (35), and agrees with Ibn Khaldun's insight into the necessity for a "new" political science since our bodily needs can only be adequately met by cooperation (38). Action is discussed primarily in the sense of the power of human beings to rule themselves, with human action seen as self-defining and self-constituting. And since such action has consequences beyond ourselves, it is through action that humans "discover the truth of their political existence" (55).

Since consciousness, or soul, for Schabert is the origin of self-rule, it is our common capacity for self-rule that grounds the possibility for political rule or order (62). Again following Augustine's *City of God*, Schabert sees humans as attaining their second birth through "grace" (71). In language that reminded this reviewer of Kolakowski's key diagnostic insight of "Promethean humanism" in his *Main Currents of Marxism*, Schabert characterizes grace in terms of Augustine's *amor Dei* permitting genuine freedom, while *amor sui* makes one "God's rival" (73).

The theme of grace is expanded in the following, correlative chapters on the divine and on thinking: "The divine and thinking are both forms for any kind of initiating of human civilization. With these, with the power-form of the divine and of thinking, the second birth of humans" originates (75). What Schabert outlines in these two chapters is reminiscent of the later Voegelin category of Question and Mystery, itself a theoretical advance on Voegelin's understanding that underlying all human civilizations, whether grounded in myth, philosophy, revelation, or even ideology, is the human quest for truth, particularly the foundational truth of transcendent reality.

And, in a book on political foundations, Schabert is very clear that human thinking is primarily a thinking with others, paradigmatically represented by the Platonic dialogues as constitutive of social existence (89, 95). So the chapter on thinking seamlessly leads on to the next topics, creation and eros. For Schabert, it is through the creative action of eros—in the sense of Plato's *Symposium*, particularly in the sense of what Lonergan once called "the eros of the mind"—that humans evolve into their fully human state: "Humans prepare themselves to be human. Creatively they shape the chaotic material of their experiences into the form of their existence" (114). He contrasts this self-forming soul with the "essentially thoughtless human," "aimlessly erotic," Plato's *erōs tyrannos*, understood by Schabert as what Nietzsche diagnosed as *Herrschaft* or the will to tyrannize others (121 n. 41). He concludes the chapter by referring to the high point of Plato's *Gorgias*, with its tragic contrast of a world or *kosmos* bound together

by communion and rooted in genuine love and the *akosmia*, or “un-world,” rooted in radical self-love and the desire to dominate (123).

Schabert proceeds to discuss the fragility of our civilizational creations in terms of time—the time of their coming into existence and of their possible going out of existence again (127). This chapter, perhaps more than most, is a reminder that Schabert’s categories aren’t primarily descriptive but aim at being what I would call ontologically explanatory. Societies not only come into existence, as did the United States of America. They also go out of existence—not only archaic societies, but political realities as complex as the Austro-Hungarian Empire, not to mention the Christian societies of Anatolia and North Africa in the first millennium.

In the penultimate chapter, on law, Plato is quoted: “where [law] is sovereign over the authorities and they its humble servants, I discern the presence of salvation and every blessing heaven sends on a society” (*Laws* 715d, quoted at 137). This chapter shows the author’s keen grasp of the classical Greek and Latin sources on the primacy of law. Still, he might have confronted the profoundly inadequate modern problematic of positivist or proceduralist debates on law, where his former teacher Voegelin insisted on law’s dependency on prior ethical and cultural experiences.

Schabert’s final chapter is on freedom, which, while considered to be another form of political existence, is also the form underlying all the others (144). While each person must take on the task of achieving their own inner order, or fail to do so, this power of freedom becomes dramatically the source of good or evil when concentrated in the hands of a single political leader—Schabert quotes Theodore H. White on the awesome power of a U.S. president, for example (148). This freedom that I am born with is operative “only when others participate in it with me, recognize their freedom in mine and I recognize mine in theirs.” For Schabert, this paradoxical “space of freedoms” is “the political structure of our existence” (151). Quoting Cicero’s assertion that “Nothing is finer than freedom, but when this is not the same for all, it doesn’t deserve the name freedom,” the author concludes that humans create their own second birth, within political civilization, insofar as they freely accept the freedom of others, including others as their rulers.

This masterly essay in political foundations unfolds in a dialogue with a huge range of Greco-Roman, Islamic, and classic Chinese authors too rich to summarize here, but it has also emerged from a lifetime of keen observation of contemporary politics—for example, his 1978 *Gewalt und Humanität: Über philosophische und politische Manifestationen von Modernität*, the 1989 study, *Boston Politics: The Creativity of Power*, and his 2009 political biography of Mitterand, *How World Politics Is Made: France and the Reunification of Germany*.

–Brendan Purcell