

Matthew D. Wright: *A Vindication of Politics: On the Common Good and Human Flourishing*. (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2019. Pp. x, 221.)

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When Aquinas (following Aristotle) says that man is by nature political, what standing does that confer on politics? Is political association a unique and intrinsically comprehensive end, one central to human flourishing? Or does the state (and perhaps even the body politic) provide only a setting: the pre-conditions under which other associations—family, religion, philosophic friendship—can foster that flourishing (3–4)? The latter position is gaining currency among contemporary natural law thinkers, led by John Finnis. Matthew D. Wright seeks to shore up the contrary position, by exploring the distinct qualitative—that is, noninstrumental—goods of politics.

Wright begins his vindication of politics by rehearsing Aristotle's and Aquinas's foundational assertion: the state is the architectonic human community. But what might they mean by "architectonic"? Natural law theory is clear that politics cannot monopolize human goods, nor claim the highest human good, nor even order other goods to political purposes (72). Doing so could override the contemplative or religious life, or even license the inhumane trampling of the individual for political ends. Happily, Wright points out that one need not claim that "the concerns of the polity are the supreme good" in order to aver that "the polity must be concerned with the supreme good" (81–82). In what ways might it show this concern?

In chapter 1, Wright explores Finnis's suggestion that politics concerns only coordination problems (19–20). For example, one might imagine lawmakers stipulating which side of the road to drive on. But Wright characterizes the common purposes in such cases of coordination as mere coincidences of interest that express only friendships of utility. (Indeed, he notes Finnis's embrace of a politics oddly similar to that of the archliberal Mill.) Wright might also have added that such problems require little deliberation. By contrast, Aristotle's friendships of the good (so clearly constitutive of his politics) require a noninstrumental attention to the good of the other. Such friendships are not fully embodied in matters of common interest, as when citizens create a dog park to individually walk their dogs; rather, they are embodied in a common good, as when friends establish a political book club to learn together (40, 73–75). Politics thus promotes the good of civic friendship.

But if Wright has earlier established that friendships of the good can take place in the contemplative or religious settings of private life, what then is unique about political friendship? Chapters 2 and 3 examine the intensive human goods of family and friendship, in order to illuminate—through contrast—what might be a unique feature of public association. His answer is extensiveness (76–77). Politics extends the quantitative range of friendship beyond what is possible in private life. This extensiveness, detailed in chapter 4, helps to justify politics as "architectonic," without having to

sweep away the private realm. Nonetheless, Wright observes that the breadth of civic friendship also renders it shallower, especially in the modern state (81–82, 89–90). If the superiority of civic friendship lies only in its quantity, might one dispute the quality of this qualitative political good?

Wright partially answers this implicit question by exploring in chapter 5 a qualitative benefit of political friendship: its orientation to fulfilling the natural obligations of justice. Here Wright draws on a figure outside the standard natural law tradition: Edmund Burke. For Burke, politics situates us in a community that both precedes and outlives us. This engenders a loyalty that produces an “extensive benevolence” (135–36, 160). One might imagine Finnis responding that the family and church do likewise. But where the family fosters the “softer” virtues of patience, kindness, and compassion, politics cultivates virtues that “evinces a sternness, self-discipline, and greatness of soul.” Politics thus makes possible “greater crimes that demand fiercer indignation, more majestic sublimities that invoke awe, and a vast array of human excellences that should elicit delight and emulation” (128–31).

Wright’s evocation of personal ties to “a community extended through time” (121) helps to emphasize politics as culture and not simply as creed; as shared practices rather than simply as government. Put the other way around, Wright sees government not as embodying politics, but as expressing the body politic. This latter organic metaphor steers us away from being merely “active citizens,” engaged in clashes of interests with inevitable winners and losers. Rather, it situates us as “culturally embedded citizens,” sharing a commitment to better ordering our common affairs—a helpful reminder in a polarized climate (154–55, 163–64).

Indeed, Wright’s study calls forth the question whether natural law thinkers, typically drawing on Aristotelian concepts of nature, nonetheless overlook Aristotle’s belief that a constitution is not simply a legal document but a way of life. (Presumably their day-to-day obligations in marriage are not reducible to their wedding vows, or to their subsequent agreements about who will take out the trash.) For even the law itself may have incomplete meaning before it is clarified in concrete situations. Aquinas, too, recognizes that “by repeated external actions, the ... concepts of reason are most effectually declared”; political custom thus “has the force of a law, abolishes law, and is the interpreter of law” (*Summa theologiae* I-II, q. 97 art. 3). Perhaps only politics, with its extensive field of action through time and space, can lend customary nuance and intellectual weight to legal formulations. In doing so, it might also provide a prudential counterpoint to Finnis’s exacting conviction that natural law demands unilateral nuclear disarmament.

In his conclusion, for which he saves some of his best insights, Wright further notes that politics uniquely involves the exercise of authority. Politics, unlike private associations, seldom operates on a basis of unanimity. For that reason, politics inescapably brings forth a climate of extensive (and thus competing) opinions, and it calls forth authoritative governing

decisions even in the face of opposition (164). Wright might have added that the tensions of distributive justice—the allocation (and reciprocal acceptance) of burdens for the common good—are at their heaviest in politics, most prominently in times of war. Likewise, the stakes of distributive justice are also higher in politics, as the enforcement of these burdens involves not the intangible sanctions of family or religion but the sword of the state. Governments do not simply delineate which side of the road to drive on; they also dictate which lands will be expropriated for a new highway. One could thus argue that only in politics can one develop and manifest the greatest exercise of practical wisdom. By further exploring the character of authoritative force, Wright might shore up the quality of the distinctly political goods on offer.

Indeed, the distributive justice of politics includes a further qualitative difference from private life: in politics one makes sacrifices not for a few proximate friends but for innumerable distant fellows. This observation might help to inform the question that lingers in the background of Wright's work: What is the value of natural political virtues in the face of higher philosophical or theological virtues? Wright points out that citizenship provides an "extension of the natural love of home" by which individuals can be drawn outside their own—a defense of particularity and the nation endorsed even by Mill (156–57). For example, Wright points out that political kinship provides an outlet for church action even to out-group nonmembers (166). Perhaps such natural charity for a now-larger in-group paves the way toward the supernatural love of out-group enemies. But such a line of speculation is beyond what can be expected in one book. In any case, Wright vindicates a politics that should at least render citizens—whatever their disputes over law—less disposed to view one other as enemies.

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Michael P. Federici: *The Catholic Writings of Orestes Brownson*. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2019. Pp. ix, 440.)

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The relation of Roman Catholicism to the American order has from the country's founding been fraught with mistrust, anxiety, and not a little