

THE 2000 KUYPER LECTURE

Response

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Discovery Institute

The Creation Myth of Modern Political Philosophy

In Response to
James W. Skillen's lecture

American Statecraft: A New Art for the 21st Century

September 29, 2000
Washington, DC

The Creation Myth of Modern Political Philosophy

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I agree with the taxonomy Dr. Skillen outlined in his Kuyper lecture last night, presenting two broad positions or traditions on politics that are widely held among Christians today. What I'd like to do is probe these two positions more deeply and show why they are inadequate—laying the groundwork for his argument that a better alternative is needed.

The first tradition Dr. Skillen described follows Augustine in saying the state was instituted because of the Fall: Thus the purpose of the state is primarily negative—to restrain evil and punish lawbreakers. The second tradition sees individuals as endowed with God-given rights, and the state as a mechanism for protecting those rights: Here the state is artificial, instrumental. Instead of having its own ends or goods, it is a means to other ends. In either case, as Dr. Skillen put it so well, there can be no positive art of statecraft, since “there is no state to craft.”

To understand better why these views are inadequate, I'd like to start by setting a historical backdrop. In the classical world it was assumed that everything in the cosmos possesses its own inherent goods or ends or purposes. Among the goods possessed by human beings are certain ones that can be expressed only in their common life, the polis. These are in fact the highest goods, such as justice. Thus, by participating in the polis, the individual is drawn beyond the limits of himself and participates in a higher good, the common good.

In the middle ages, this philosophy was “Christianized” by Thomas Aquinas. He denied that the state was instituted after the Fall as a remedial measure. Instead, he argued, the state is an expression of our created social nature. The state would have arisen even if there had been no Fall into sin, for its positive function is to direct the community toward the common good. Thus political life is a positive good: It is the context where human beings practice the civic and moral virtues required to fulfill the purpose, the telos, of human nature, which is ultimately to become a citizen of the Heavenly City.

Now, when we come to the early modern period, we encounter a dramatic break with this way of thinking. The classical and medieval view was rejected as elitist and theocratic. The reasoning behind these judgments is important: It was understood that if the state has some higher, transcendent ideal, then that ideal can be known either by reasoning or by revelation. Either way, it is altogether possible for some of us to be mistaken—for you or me to be wrong about our higher purpose. Thus, it was natural to conclude that those who rule should be those who understand the higher ideals more fully—those with greater wisdom and virtue. In the classical version of this philosophy, the wise ruler was the philosopher-king. In the Christian version, the same reasoning was used to support the primacy of the Church over the state.

Much of modern political philosophy can only be understood as an attempt to avoid this conclusion. It was an attempt to place politics on purely secular, naturalistic foundations—one that could be known by direct, immediate experience that is accessible to each individual.

Consider a few examples. The first modern political thinker was Machiavelli (1471-1528). The foundation for the state, he taught, is the individual's instinct for self-preservation: The effective ruler is one who succeeds in identifying this instinct with the

instinct for the preservation of the city-state. How does he do that? By violence and fear. He kills off his rivals and hangs them in the public square, and so on.

The implication is that the source of the political order is not any higher good but an outright evil—deception, cruelty, violence. What motivates citizens is not moral duty but fear and self-interest. French political philosopher Pierre Manent says, “the political order is now a closed circle having its own foundation within itself, or rather below itself.” Machiavelli has asserted “the self-sufficiency of the earthly, secular order.”

We see something similar in the philosophy of Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679). In his system, the source of the political order is the fear of death. Hobbes assumed that the way to identify the essence of human nature is to hypothesize what humans would be like if stripped of all laws, tradition, customs—of civilization itself. This pre-political, pre-social condition Hobbes called the “state of nature.”

And what do we find in this natural state? The war of all against all. The threat of death hangs over everything and life is “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.” In this state of war, each person has a “right” to whatever he needs to preserve his life. Now, he may decide it would be more pleasant to give up some rights, such as the “right” to steal from one another. This transferring of rights is called a contract, and it becomes the basis of moral obligations.

Thus moral duties are not revealed truths; they are created when individuals, from selfish reasons alone, decide it is in their interests to contract away some of their rights. The same process is also the source of the state: To escape the constant fear of violent death, individuals agree to renounce the right to defend themselves, and to transfer that right to an absolute sovereign.

What we see here is a form of pre-Darwinian naturalism, where the foundation of the state is not justice or some other higher good, but merely the individual’s desire for self-preservation. This foundation is incontestable and indisputable because it is based on something beyond discursive reasoning and above any objection—on the instinctive fear of death.

Hobbes is building here on the foundationalism of Rene Descartes. In the famous Cartesian cogito (“I think, therefore I am”), clear and distinct ideas in the mind of the individual would constitute an indubitable basis for true philosophy. In a parallel fashion, for Hobbes, the fear of death harbored in the breast of the individual would constitute an indubitable basis for politics—a basis immune to the criticisms or claims of any older authorities, whether the polis or the Church.

Turning to the philosopher who had the greatest impact on the American founding, John Locke (1632-1704), too, begins with a “state of nature.” For him, the threat of death comes not from other people, however, but from hunger. The most basic right is the right to eat. By exerting his labor to find or grow food, the individual creates property. And to protect that property more effectively, he enters into a social contract with others. The motivation for political life, then, is not duty or love of justice, but enlightened self-interest.

Locke’s philosophy is another example of Cartesian foundationalism. For Locke, all that exists ultimately are individuals and their needs or wants. We do not choose our wants; we simply have them. They are given. What’s more, we cannot be wrong or mistaken about the things we want, because they are not known by inferential reasoning but by introspection into the immediate data of consciousness. We know better than anyone else what we want, and no one else can tell us what will make us happy. That means we don’t need to look to people of special wisdom or virtue to be

rulers. The individual's desires form an indubitable and incontestable foundation for political philosophy.

The last of the early modern political philosophers is Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778). Rousseau likewise begins with a "state of nature," but for him, the individual is stripped down to the point where he *has* no nature. He is unformed, indeterminate, a beast—a gentle, peaceful beast (contra Hobbes), but a beast nonetheless. Thus Rousseau's definition of human nature is, paradoxically, not to have a nature but to be free—free to create oneself. Freedom itself becomes the Cartesian foundation of Rousseau's system. To quote again from Pierre Manent: "With Rousseau, freedom becomes . . . an inmost and immediate feeling" of autonomy.

This is the point when revolution in the modern sense becomes possible—not just revolt against a political regime but the attempt to destroy society and rebuild an ideal one from scratch, one that will transform human nature itself and create "the New Man." For if human nature can no longer be defined positively—if it is indeterminate—then this opens an unlimited space for the state to impose its own definition of human nature.

What do these examples show? Let's draw together some common themes. First, the motive behind much of early modern political thought was to locate an autonomous foundation for the state, independent of the Church. Second, the strategy employed to that reach end was to locate a foundation for the political order not in any higher ends or spiritual goods, but in the direct, unmediated experience of the individual. The Cartesian subject asserts itself as the sole principle of political legitimacy: The source of legitimacy is the consent of isolated, autonomous individuals.

We can easily see why this approach resulted in exactly the two themes Dr. Skillen traced: an individualism that relegates the state to a derivative, artificial construct, and a reduction of its role to negative functions—violence and force in protecting the individual's rights. Social contract theory departed dramatically from classical and medieval views of the positive art of statecraft.

I want to take the last few minutes to address Dr. Skillen's proposal for recovering a positive understanding of statecraft. His starting point is to assert that the state has its origin not in the Fall but in creation. I would like to expand on his argument, using the schema of Creation, Fall, and Redemption. One of the insights of the Reformed tradition—which I have developed more fully in *How Now Shall We Live?*—is that Creation, Fall, and Redemption not only describe the shape of the biblical narrative, but also provide conceptual tools for analyzing the elements of any worldview or philosophy.

After all, every philosophy offers a concept of Creation—a theory of ultimate origins, an answer to the question, Where did we come from? Likewise, every philosophy offers a concept of the Fall, a theory about the source of evil and suffering in the world. And every philosophy offers a form of Redemption, a vision of how to reverse the Fall and set the world right again.

This breakdown clarifies the crucial role played by the "state of nature" for social contract thinkers: It is their creation myth, their alternative to the Garden of Eden. As philosopher Nancey Murphy comments, it "is a new myth of origins at variance with the account in Genesis." These thinkers sensed that in order to propose a new view of human nature, they needed to produce a new account of human origins. Because they lived prior to Darwin, they are ambiguous about whether they are offering a historical account or merely a hypothetical construct. But in any case, they clearly recognized the importance of offering a new creation myth as the basis for their thought. In this new

myth, the ultimate reality is individuals, while relationships are derivative, created by individual choice—including the political community.

Those of us who take our lead from Genesis hold a very different understanding of human nature. We begin with the assertion that humans were created in the image of God—a God who is a Tri-unity, and whose very nature consists in reciprocal love and communication among the persons of the Trinity. Thus the image of God is reflected not in the creation of an autonomous individual but in the creation of a couple—male and female—who are related from the beginning in the social institution of marriage, and which in turn forms the basis of society. The point here is that relationships are just as ultimate, just as real, as individuals. They are part of the created order, and the moral requirements they make on us are not impositions on our freedom but expressions of our true nature.

What does this mean for the state? The political community, too, is part of the created order. It is not a creation of individual choice but an expression of the divine image in humanity; it is not merely an expedient way for individuals to protect their rights but the context for developing our full human nature, achieving our telos; it is not founded on the immediate subjectivity of the individual but on moral ideals such as justice and civic service. And finally, it is motivated not by our lowest instincts of fear and self-preservation but by our high sense of moral duty and service to God.

What is the relevance of these ideas to the issues we face today? Consider just two recent books. In *Democracy's Discontent*, Michael Sandel says the background belief of contemporary liberalism is the concept of the “unencumbered self”—where all obligations and relations are products of choice. Sound familiar? Along similar lines, in *Rights Talk* Mary Ann Glendon says modern American law typically depicts the “natural” human person as a solitary creature; our law, she notes, is “based on an image of the rights-bearer as a self-determining, unencumbered individual, a being connected to others only by choice.”

These two examples make it clear that the basic philosophical assumptions of early modern political philosophy are still very much with us. Thus the questions we have discussed today lie at the heart of America's current cultural crisis.