

Johannes Althusius, Neighbor Love, and the Origins of Society

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Where did society come from? How did politics come about? Why do people live together? Perhaps these aren't questions that you've ever asked before. But political thinkers from Plato through to Rawls have tackled questions about the social nature of humans, and how it is that we get into political situations in the first place. It's the question, the problem, if you will, of the origins of society.

How one answers this question has substantial ramifications. It affects, for one thing, how we understand the origins of political legitimacy; who justly decides who has political power? It affects, too, how we account for the nature and form of the political sphere; is it—should it be—democratic, or monarchical? And what about humans? Are they naturally political, or not? Different accounts of the origins of society would lead to different answers to all these questions.

Johannes Althusius (1563–1638) was a Reformed Protestant political scientist and jurisprudential thinker, as well as a scholar and politician of some note. In his *Politica methodice digesta* (*Politics methodically set forth*, henceforth *Politica*), Althusius sets out a large-scale account of politics. At the beginning of this work he defines what politics is, what the elements of it are, and how political community came to be. How Althusius addresses this last point will occupy the rest of this article.

Althusius held, as did his Reformed forefather John Calvin, that humans were naturally social and political. For Althusius, politics was a good and necessary thing, rather than a corruption of the created order. People are naturally “neighbourly”. That is, they are called by God to live in such a way that they might serve their neighbour. Political community, according to Althusius, is meant to facilitate and encourage neighbourliness in order that humans might live out the demands of God's moral law: to love the Lord our God, and to love our neighbours as yourselves. Only when we are in political community can we love our neighbour, and so it follows for Althusius that we must naturally find ourselves in such a community.

Althusius begins his description of the origins of society by using Aristotle's explanatory model of four causes for the existence of a thing. The four causes are the material cause, the formal cause, the efficient cause, and the final cause. The *efficient cause* of political society, that is the source of the movement into human society, is, according to Althusius, ‘consent [*consensum*] and pact [*pactum*] amongst the communicating citizens.’ (*Politica* 1.29). That is, the mechanism by which people form society is the making of an agreement to form a political community.

So much for efficient cause—the how, so to speak, of the origins of political community. What does it look like? This is the question of the *formal cause*, which is the form, or shape, of human society, and this Althusius describes as the *vita activa*. That is, the active life of public good works, and political and social interaction, is the shape of human community. His readers would have understood this in contrast to both the contemplative life, and to the purely private life of domestic pursuits whereby one seeks the good of oneself and one's household (*Politica*, 1.29)

The *material cause*, that is, the ‘stuff’ or parts out of which society is made, is ‘the aggregate of precepts.’ These precepts are the various laws and conventions of society

which ensure that people will offer one another services and helps providing for the common advantage of social life. (*Politica* 1.31)

The final cause, the ‘why,’ of political society, which is the most pivotal both for Aristotle and for Althusius, is the ‘enjoyment’ of life, ‘the common welfare,’ and ‘the conservation of a human society where you can worship God quietly and without error.’ (*Politica* 1.30) The final cause is the end, or the purpose, of human society. The four causes all work together to make human society, one where Althusius envisages that people will live co-dependent, intertwined lives in which they offer one another helps which will preserve and foster human community.

This Aristotelian ‘four causes’ explanation is only one of the ways in which Althusius explains the origins of society in *Politica*. But it is one of his most helpful. We can see what Althusius held to be the purpose and importance of human society. The highest purpose of political life, according to Althusius, is the common good and a life of enjoyment, along with correct worship and quiet enjoyment of God. In our own day, we often think of politics in terms of individuals, and our assessment of public policy is heavily influenced by an this atomized view of society. Althusius, along with the early Reformed thinkers, offers a very different take on things.

To be sure, Althusius held that society formed because of a consensual pact between people. But this idea need not lead us in a liberal individualist direction. Althusius’ conception of the origins of society, through his ‘four causes’ explanation, shows that he believed people were naturally inclined toward society, that they are designed by God to perform acts of love toward one another, and that even the laws which people make are to be designed to enable these acts of love. Althusius’s conception of the origins of society shows that people are naturally social and political. It also shows that we are naturally neighbours to each other. We are, in that sense, intertwined with one another. Althusius even used the word *symbiosis* to describe our interconnectedness.

Althusius’s theory of the origins of society points us to the reality that we are social creatures who are meant to love our neighbours. If Althusius is right, any conception of society, and any conception of the origins of society, which overlooks our symbiotic human nature misses the crucial fact about human society. Althusius believed that we are made to love one another. That is, quite simply, what society and politics are for. And in this, he was in substantial agreement with the consensus of Christian thought.

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