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While human beings do not have social instincts, as do bees, termites, and other gregarious animal species, humans are instinctually driven or impelled by their natural needs to associate in certain ways. Societies or associations that are formed in order to satisfy natural needs are natural in a sense of that word which is different from the sense it has when calling a society natural means that it is instinctively determined.

—Mortimer J. Adler



STATE AND SOCIETY (in four parts)

by Mortimer Adler

PART III

IS THE STATE NATURAL, CONVENTIONAL, OR BOTH?

This question can be asked about other forms of human association as well as about the state. To call any of them conventional implies that they arise from voluntary, not instinctive, behavior. It would appear to follow, therefore, that an association or society cannot be both natural and conventional. They must either be voluntarily formed or the product of instinctive determinations.

I have already declared that all animal societies are natural, not conventional. All are the products, more or less, of instinctive determination—more in the case of the social insects, less in the case of the gregarious higher mammals.

We are acquainted with innumerable human associations that are purely conventional. Think of how our labor unions, our trade associations, our clubs and fraternal organizations, our business corporations and our professional associations, are formed. Individuals come together and voluntarily unite to act in concert for a common purpose.

Omitted from the preceding roster of human associations are families, tribes, and states. That they are natural is evident from the fact they are found everywhere on earth where human beings live; this is not so in the case of other human groupings.

It has already been asserted that the immense variety

in the way these natural associations or societies are structured indicates the operation of reason and choice in their origination. Being conventional, they can also be natural only if the word “natural” can be used to mean something other than being instinctively determined, as bee hives and termite colonies are.

The clue to a solution of this problem lies in a point already noted.

While human beings do not have social instincts, as do bees, termites, and other gregarious animal species, humans are instinctually driven or impelled by their natural needs to associate in certain ways. Societies or associations that are formed in order to satisfy natural needs are natural in a sense of that word which is different from the sense it has when calling a society natural means that it is instinctively determined.

With regard to human families, the natural need is exactly the same as the natural need satisfied by instinctive associations on the part of the lower animals. The other gregarious species would not survive unless their members associated and acted in concert. The same is true of the human species. The existence of human families is coeval with the existence of the human species on earth.

The family came into existence to satisfy the animal needs inherent in human nature and to prevent human offspring from perishing. At different times and places, familial associations took on different forms. The human family is thus both natural (because it serves a natural need) and also conventional (because the various forms it takes are voluntarily chosen, not instinctively determined).

When, in the course of human history, families came together and united to form small villages or tribal communities, natural needs and voluntariness were again

operative. The fact that a tribe or village involved more individuals than the number making up each of its component families allowed it to satisfy more than daily needs. The number of persons who toiled for the means of subsistence, and the division of labor among them, permitted them to accumulate more than they consumed from day to day and to store for some future time the excess that did not perish. The tribe or village was also better able to defend itself against outsiders and also to protect its members from the ravages of an inclement environment.

Both families and tribes or villages share the same basic biological needs—survival and subsistence. The family was less self-sufficing and less secure than the tribe because it was a smaller, less populous, community. The crude implements used by the primeval family to eke out the means of subsistence from the natural resources available were improved and supplemented by other tools when families united to form tribes or villages. Some elements of culture—ritualistic practices, decorations, song, dance, and painting—also came into existence at this later stage of human social development.

At a still later stage, tribes or villages united to form the earliest cities. Once again the increase in population and a slightly more elaborate division of labor served better the same biological needs of survival and security. The larger society, now including families and tribes of associated families, was more self-sufficing and more secure against the inclemency of nature and the hostility of other social groups.

In addition, the elements of human culture proliferated, became more refined, and eventually gave rise to the arts and sciences, and to the institutions of religion and political life (i.e., city life).

The earliest cities were states—city-states. Being

more self-sufficing and secure than isolated families and than families united in isolated tribal communities, the city-state was able to serve a natural need above the biological level—to serve the specifically human, rather than animal, need to do more than just stay alive, the aspiration to live well and to lead a civilized human life.

Let me paraphrase Aristotle's account of the origin of cities: "When tribes or villages united to form a community that was nearly or quite self-sufficing, the state came into existence, originating in the bare needs of life and continuing in existence for the sake of a good life. Therefore, if earlier forms of society were natural because they satisfied natural human needs, so too was the state natural."

In this account of the origin and naturalness of the state, no reference is made to two myths developed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to explain how states came into being.

One was the myth that prior to the existence of states, human beings lived in total isolation from one another, in a condition that the modern mythmakers called "a state of nature." The other was the myth that they departed from a state of nature and entered civil or political society through a device that the mythmakers called "a social contract," to which the individuals who united to form a state gave their voluntary consent.

Rousseau, one of the mythmakers along with Hobbes and Locke, admitted that a state of nature is purely hypothetical, not historical. He should have said the same thing about the social contract.

The very phrase "state of nature" flies outrageously in the face of fact. Man being by nature a gregarious animal, a state of nature, understood to mean human beings living in isolation from one another, is not only mythical but also unnatural. If human beings never lived

and could never have survived in this unnatural condition, they did not originate states by the voluntary act of isolated individuals contracting with one another to unite in a form of social organization that is a state.

The Aristotelian account of families uniting to form tribal communities and tribal communities uniting to form cities is much more in accord with all the facts. The acts by which these unions occurred were voluntary, but they were not of a character that can be properly described as entering into a contract.

Scholarly commentaries on Aristotle's *Politics* and Rousseau's *Social Contract* regard these two great political philosophers as starkly opposed to one another, with Aristotle insisting, on the one hand, that the state is purely natural and with Rousseau insisting, on the other hand, that the state is purely conventional. A more careful reading of the texts reveals that this is not so.

In the context of all the passages in Aristotle's *Politics* where its author asserts that the state is purely natural or a creation of nature, we can also find the sentence in which he says that "he who first founded the state was the greatest of benefactors." *That reference to a founder of the state implies that the state is not purely natural in origin. It is not only a creation of nature, but also a product of human devising and innovation.* What Aristotle had in mind when he referred to the founding fathers of states were innovators who drafted constitutions, the kind of constitution that Solon drafted for Athens and Lycurgus for Sparta.

Rousseau begins *The Social Contract* by saying that, of all human societies, only the family is natural because it serves the basic biological needs. The italicized word "only" implies that the state must be purely conventional. However, a few pages later, Rousseau tells us that mankind could not have survived in the isolated condition that he calls a state of nature. It was his natural

need to associate for the sake of survival that led him to depart from a state of nature and enter, by voluntary contract, into civil society.

Two contradictions are plainly evident here. If the human family is a naturally necessary society, then human beings never lived in isolation in a state of nature. If the impulse to enter into civil society arises from the same natural need that caused human beings to live in families, then the state is as natural as the family, not purely conventional as Rousseau's earlier statement implies. In addition, if the family satisfied those biological needs adequately, there was no need for the state.

By saying that the state enables human beings not only to survive and subsist, but also to live well, Aristotle expands the natural needs that the state serves beyond the biological needs served by the family and the tribal community. From the passage in which Rousseau attributes the origin of the state to the merely biological needs of subsistence and survival, it would appear that some conflict is still present between Aristotle and Rousseau.

However, even that is not the case. A few pages later in *The Social Contract*, we find a passage in which Rousseau eloquently praises the state for enabling man to do more than merely survive and subsist—to live a civilized and good life, a condition accessible to no other species of animal, all of which associate instinctively only to serve their biological needs.

The only matter on which Rousseau and Aristotle remain opposed concerns the myth of the social contract, as opposed to the historical reality that Solon and Lycurgus brought states into existence by drafting constitutions for them.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Max,

I am a physicist by training. My interests are in the area of the philosophy of science and philosophical cosmology and theology. The metaphysical origins of the physical world have always fascinated me. Plato's concept of forms and Aristotle's concept of universals always appealed to me. I fell in love with them both in college. I have read many of the works of Plato, Aristotle and Aquinas. I have also read many of Dr. Adler's works and other commentaries on ancient and medieval philosophy.

I have very little training in philosophy beyond the middle ages. I have recently attempted study modern philosophy and I found it to be a culture shock. I have found very little in modern philosophy that is of any use. Modern philosophy seems to move in every direction at once. There is no consistency or progress. Systems are built and abandoned with startling frequency. It seems as if every philosopher wants to be another Plato or Aristotle. They are also incredibly intimidated by scientific thought and when they are not busy trying to out do each other, they seem to be intent on defining the limits of "philosophic knowledge" out of fear that some great scientific discovery will render their life's work as being useless. Consequently, they seem to spend a great deal of time trying to define what people can't know rather than what is knowable. I have since read similar comments by both Dr. Adler and Bertrand Russell, so I know it just isn't me who feels that way. I could use some direction in how to approach modern philosophy from a background in classical philosophy.

I also am interested in the philosophy of science. I have some concern that the scientific method as a whole has been used indiscriminately in areas it wasn't designed for such as in the study of human behavior. I

feel that over the past few centuries, people have developed an unrealistic expectation of what science can achieve. Consequently, there is beginning to be a disillusionment with science among the general public. This is further exacerbated by the inaccessibility of the scientific approach to the general public due to its mathematical complexity. My fear is we may soon see a backlash against science similar to the backlash that occurred against classical philosophy in the early modern period.

I have read with great interest Dr. Adler's work "Natural Theology, Chance and God" published in "The Great Ideas Online" in January of this year. I have some questions and comments on it that I will send in another email.

Thanks,

John Burack

Dear Dr. Adler,

I agree with you that man is different in kind from all other animals. Can we, however, reconcile that statement with the idea that man shares a common origin with other animals through a naturally evolutionary process or are we compelled to conclude that there must have been a supernatural inter-vention that accounts for those qualities that make man different in kind rather than just degree from other animals?

It is my sense that very few modern thinkers appreciate the extent to which some of the qualities human beings possess differ from anything seen in other animals. Even the few who do have some grasp of the significance of the differences are not willing to accept that man is truly different in the sense that you mean. Further I think this unwillingness is rooted in the notion that man evolved naturally from less complex species of

animals.

Tony Harris

The legitimate object of government is to do for a community of people whatever they need to have done, but cannot do at all, or do so well for themselves in their separate and individual capacities. --Abraham Lincoln

WELCOME NEW MEMBERS

Bishop Victor Herron

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We welcome your comments and questions.

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