

## The Rise of The Political Community

It is clear, at least for Aristotle, that to be fully human, human beings need the political community to fulfill their natures (*Politics* 1.2.1252a25-53a40).<sup>1</sup> The claim made by Aristotle that “human beings are political animals” (*Politics* 1.2.1253a2-6 and 3.6.1278b18-19) has, in the past several years, become a controversial topic in Aristotle scholarship. In many ways, scholars have made the political animal argument to stress the natural sociability of humans, against the view held by Hobbes and other modern political theorists, who argue that human sociability is not *per se* natural. The rejection of human natural sociability culminates in the rejection of Aristotle’s claim that the *polis* (city) or the political community is natural (see Hobbes 1991; and Rousseau 1964; also see Strauss 1988, 47-55).<sup>2</sup>

A good portion of the scholarship concerning the political animal question in Aristotle’s political thought falls short, however. There are at least four ways this scholarship, in addressing why the political community must be authoritative over all other human associations, fails adequately to address the question: 1. There is a tendency among certain scholars—in their attempt to defend the natural sociability of human beings against the denial of Hobbes *et al*—either to undermine or to ignore the distinction between the political community and the household (see Arnhart 1990; Arnhart 1994; and Arnhart 1995; Masters 1989a; and Wilson 1993). In so doing, these scholars—who claim to be defending Aristotle’s understanding of political animals—seem to forget that Aristotle explicitly states that those who fail to note that the difference between the household and the *polis* is a difference in kind and not merely different in number or size “do not argue rightly” (*Politics* 1.1.1252a7-15). 2. Another

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<sup>1</sup> John Ferguson argues that the Aristotelian dictum that man is a political animal is “not far from the center” of Aeschylus’ *Oresteia* in that “man finds his fulfillment only in ordered society” (Ferguson 1972, 106).

<sup>2</sup> Kullmann’s (1980) article once again brought critical attention to this argument in Aristotle. R. G. Mulgan (1974) replies to Kullmann (1980) and begins the current controversy over Aristotle’s claim that “man is a political animal.”

tendency, of another group of scholars, is to over-emphasize the cultural and productive (or technological) aspect of human nature, which they believe really defines human beings as a political animal (see Yack 1993). This group tends to stress the human need to create and construct—both physical and linguistic social constructs—as what Aristotle meant in saying that human beings are political. Yet this view ultimately denies any sort of naturalness to the political bond and therefore tends to turn Aristotle into Kant or another modern social thinker. 3. Then there are those scholars who claim that Aristotle’s political animal teaching is a blunder,—which forces an inconsistency in Aristotle’s political thought—when otherwise he would really agree with Hobbes, that the political community is a human construct and is not really natural (Keyt 1987). 4. Finally, there is another group who, in a way, agrees with the view that Aristotle is more like Kant and other moderns but argues that Aristotle does not make a blunder to arrive here but, instead offers the naturalness of the city as an esoteric cover—one which points to the tension of the city and the best way of life—i.e., philosophy (Ambler 1985).

All four of the above groups of scholars seem to address how human beings are or are not political animals, usually in strictly biological or anthropological terms. They tend not to address the question in political terms—i.e., that politics is the ruling or most central concern for human beings. Thus, against the aforementioned ways of looking at the political animal question, I will examine a question ignored by the above scholars: why the city or the political community must be authoritative. Addressing this question is of utmost importance if one desires to understand why human beings are political animals. It is the logic of man’s political nature which requires that the *polis* or the political community be authoritative—i.e., to have the authority or the power to sanction, legitimize or empower—in matters of human affairs. To do this, we must address the origins of the *polis* and Aristotle’s claim that the *polis* is prior both to the individual and to the household (*Politics* 1.2.1253a19). Although Aristotle gives us the conceptual framework to address this question, Aeschylus gives us a poetic example, which not only dramatizes but also clarifies and presents explicit reasons why the political community must be authoritative—reasons that are merely implicit in Aristotle’s account.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The following are the abbreviations used in the notes: NE, *Nicomachean Ethics*; Agm, *Agamemnon*; LB, *The Libation Bearers*; and Eum, *The Eumenides*. In this essay, I used David Green and Wendy O’Flaherty 1983. Although Richard Lattimore 1953

Aeschylus' trilogy suggests that the city became authoritative when the forces of the household were made to submit to the laws of the city. Or as Ferguson says, "the play cycle is about the blood feud coming under the rule of law, and the people caught up in the process" (Ferguson 1972, 108). This chapter will tempt to show how Aeschylus' trilogy helps us come to a fuller understanding of Aristotle's teaching about the authoritativeness of the *polis*. Although the authoritativeness of the *polis* over the household is stated by Aristotle in the *Politics*, nowhere in that text is it shown how or why the *polis* became authoritative. On the other hand, Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, especially the *Eumenides*, dramatizes both how and why the *polis* is authoritative. It shows how the old gods, represented by the Furies, which symbolize the power of the household, are put under the control and rule of the *polis*. Thus the tension, between the new—Olympian—deities and the older deities, is an intentional reflection of the tension between the household and the political community. As Meier contends, the discovery of the political occurs when political life through community derived decisions override family/kinship derived decision processes. This is the teaching of the *Oresteia*.

At the end of the *Oresteia*, the realm of the household, *oikos*, is now to be under the authority of the *polis* or more correctly the political community.<sup>4</sup> In one sense the *Oresteia* represents not the rise of the *polis per se*, since the *polis* may be said to have existed before the end of the trilogy, but the rise of the authoritativeness of the *polis* or, as Christian Meier says, the discovery of the political in Greek political thought (Meier 1990, 80-139). Meier says that the *Oresteia* "gave expression to the political at the very moment when it first burst upon Athens, and did so, moreover, in a manner that was wholly adequate to the theme and is still relevant today" (Meier 1990, 82). Although the *Oresteia* concerns itself with showing how the political became authoritative, let us not forget the particular regime that triumphs at the end of the trilogy—Athenian democracy—and Aeschylus' role in giving it a defense. Also, W. B. Stanford argues that Aeschylus' portrayal of Athena's founding of the Areopagus presents him as a "conservative democrat, he conserves his origins by competing with them, evincing their potential for the future" (Fagles 1975, 97).

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and Robert Fagles 1975 are still available, Green and O'Flaherty's is slightly better in that they had these two fine editions from which to work.

<sup>4</sup> Aristotle, and Greek political thinkers in general, treat the *polis*—translated as the city—in two ways: 1) it is the urban center—literally the city; 2) it is also the generic expression of the political community. In this essay I refer to the *polis* or the city as the latter, not the former.

## The *Oresteia* and the Background of the *Polis*

The plot of the *Oresteia* should be familiar to most readers. The *Oresteia* is in fact a trilogy—*Agamemnon*, *The Libation Bearers*, and *The Eumenides*. It begins with Agamemnon, the leader of the Greeks in their war against the Trojans, returning home from the war. He returns home the victor of a great, yet costly war. He brings back many great prizes. One of them is the Trojan princess Cassandra. Expecting great acclaim and acknowledgment upon his triumphal return, instead he finds his wife Clytemnestra has taken up with Aegisthus, a political enemy. The reason for her action is that she desires revenge on Agamemnon for the sacrifice of their daughter Iphigeneia, whom he sacrificed for the sake of winning the war against Troy.

Clytemnestra plots Agamemnon's death with her lover to revenge Iphigeneia's sacrifice by Agamemnon. Although Aegisthus does not actually take part in the killing—Clytemnestra alone murders Agamemnon—he goes along with the plot so he may take over the city. *Agamemnon* ends with Clytemnestra and her lover Aegisthus in charge of the city and the citizens waiting for Orestes to remove the newly imposed tyranny.<sup>5</sup> Although the citizens of Argos challenge what both Aegisthus and Clytemnestra did, they are powerless to right it. Although the citizens can easily rise up and kill both murderers, they lack the authority or sanction to take action against either Aegisthus or Clytemnestra.<sup>6</sup> The citizens

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<sup>5</sup> Peter Euben rightly argues that Clytemnestra's actions take her beyond the proper scope of human action, thus endangering the possibility of human association (Euben 1990, 72-75). However Euben's feminist sensitivity understates the differences between the injustices of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra. In one sense, although Agamemnon's actions are harmful to his own family, they could be justified in the context of faithfulness to one's own oath. Remember, he is obligated by an oath to punish the Trojans for their injustice to his brother. On the other hand, Clytemnestra's acts, in that marriage is the most fundamental basis of human association, are far worse than her husband's in that her acts destroy the basis of an important form of human association which does not wholly rely upon force.

<sup>6</sup> Nicholas Rudall says that the powerlessness or inaction of the free male citizens in the Agamemnon should be contrasted to the slave women, who are prepared to take action, in the beginning of LB (Green and O'Flaherty 1989, 21). Although the slave women are equally without authority to act, their thirst for vengeance—echoing the same thirst in the Furies against Orestes—has a plausible justification as being against tyranny. Clearly the rule of Aegisthus and Clytemnestra is tyrannical and since tyranny is an abrogation of the standards of all established authority and social norms, the slave women's lack of authority can be ignored given the general

must wait for Orestes who, because he is Agamemnon's son, has sanction to take vengeance. The city of Argos is thus reduced to the household of Agamemnon, where only the head of the household has authority to pursue policy.

Orestes, who is in exile, returns home to mourn over his father's grave. There he meets his sister, Electra. Although he desires to revenge his father, he has some doubts. Electra demands that her father's murderers be punished. This is the story of *The Libation Bearers*.

To aid him in his decision, Orestes informs her that he sought counsel from Apollo's oracle. He says the oracle told him to "kill them to match their killings" or the Furies of his father's blood would drive him mad. Now resolved to do as Apollo's oracle commands, he disguises himself as a stranger to enter his mother's house. He then kills both his mother and Aegisthus. Apollo then requires Orestes to cleanse himself. Although he does what Apollo requires, his mother's Furies nevertheless pursue him, attempting to drive him mad. This is how they seek vengeance for the murder of his mother.

*The Eumenides* begins with Orestes fleeing from the Furies. He again appeals for Apollo's protection. The god arrives but he cannot stop the Furies' wrath. In an attempt to stop the Furies and aid Orestes, Apollo arranges with the Furies for a trial of Orestes with Athena presiding. In Athens, however, Athena says she cannot decide the case of murder alone because the law requires a jury trial. Athena in doing this establishes the Areopagus as the political institution in Athens which is concerned with justice and the rule of law (compare Meier 1990, 106-115, 120-121, 124, and 134 and Hogan 1984, 168, 173 and 174). They agree to a jury trial. Apollo presents his defense of Orestes and his actions. As Meier says, in this play "right is pitted against right: a worse dilemma cannot be imagined" (Meier 1990, 89).

After Apollo's defense, the Furies then present their case against Orestes. Meier makes the case that the Furies, "alone have assumed the task of avenging Clytemnestra, since no mortal avenger is left" (Meier 1990, 90). Thus they see their role as defender of blood ties forced in that no one will take action against Orestes. Athena, before the jury hands in its ver-

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lawlessness of the newly established political regime. Yet the slave women do not act. Rather, Orestes, who in the old system—as heir and head of the household—alone has authority to act, carries out what they themselves desire to do, revenge Agamemnon's murder.

dict, says her vote will be for Orestes, because she is wholly for the father, and if there is a tie Orestes is to go free. With Athena's vote, the vote of the whole jury results in a tie—thus the verdict favors Orestes. Ferguson suggests that there is a relationship between the number of speeches made by both parties and the vote of the jury. He says, "the Furies have spoken six times, Apollo five; there are six votes for condemnation, five for acquittal" (Ferguson 1972, 107). The Furies are not satisfied with the outcome of the verdict. Although they will end their pursuit of Orestes, they now desire to seek vengeance on Athens. Athena is aware of this and being Athens' protector she begins to persuade the Furies not to engage in that course of action. Instead, she attempts to persuade them to be the special guardians of the city. She is successful in her argument and the Furies are reconciled to the city. The play ends with Orestes restored as ruler of Argos, promising that Argos will never be an enemy of Athens, and the Furies, now to be known as the Eumenides, becoming the defender of the city.

In *The Eumenides*, there is a clear tension between the old gods, the Furies, and the new gods, Apollo and Athena, fathered by Zeus. This tension echoes the tension that is found in the play between the household (and the pre-political) and the city (and the political). The old gods are aligned with the household and the new gods are aligned with the city. This is important: At the time of the trial, the Furies are still unreconciled toward the city. The household bonds, expressed as kin loyalty, force one to a cycle of revenge, in order to right wrongs done to the family. There is no end to vengeance and no peace. The desire for peace, which is needed for the fulfillment of human happiness (*eudaimonia*), entails that one rise above one's own—kin ties—to some other claim that is more authoritative. This other claim is that of the *polis*.

## The Household and the Polis

In attempting to understand the tension between the household and the *polis*, we can turn to Aristotle on the political and the *polis*.<sup>7</sup> He says

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<sup>7</sup> The tension between the *oikos* (household) and the *polis* (the political community) is not to be understood as a tension between the public and the private. Such a reading, as done by Judith Swanson (1992), anachronistically forces the modern split of the public and the private upon Aristotle and his political thought. Only in modern political thought, following Hobbes and Spinoza, is there a radical sepa-

that human beings are political animals (*Politics* 1.2.1252b30-53a5 and 3.6.1278b18-19). Yet Aristotle also says that the family, expressed in terms of the household, is natural (*Politics* 1.2.1252b10-14 and 1.2.1253a15-18). In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle is more explicit concerning the naturalness of the family. He says that,

The friendship of man and woman also seems to be natural. **For human beings naturally tend to form couples more than to form cities**, to the extent that the household is prior to the city, and child bearing is shared more widely among the animals. (*N.E.* 8.12.1262a17-19 [my emphasis])

The two ties are essential to our nature as human beings, yet in order to be fully human we need justice. In the last analysis, for Aristotle, justice (what reason informs us that nature or human nature suggests is the right and fitting course of action)—or at least one's perception of justice—is what truly defines a city. He explicitly says that without justice there is no city (*Politics* 3.12.1283a19-22). This only reinforces his argument concerning the political nature of human beings. But would not the passage from Aristotle, which seems to say man is a bonding animal, imply that the household is prior to the *polis* and being prior to the *polis*, is also more authoritative than it? This appears to be, in that being prior seems to imply being historically prior and thus having a more ancient origin than the *polis*. Being older tends to give more authority and if the family is prior, and thus older, it would appear to have more authority than the *polis*. But note that Aristotle says that the bonding between man and woman is more natural than the formation of cities in that couples are more easily formed than are cities. Thus the forming of couples over cities is accidental and due to the relative simplicity of forming a couple, compared to the greater difficulty of creating a city. Yet the passage infers something more significant than the statement that couples arise more easily than cities. The passage seems to suggest that the association between the paired man and woman is akin to or similar to the political community. This would further suggest that the household is more dependent on the *polis* than one would originally think. But Aristotle does not develop either claim to any final extent. Rather, he merely argues that the *polis* is not only prior to the household (and the individual) in terms of existence (*Politics* 1.2.1253a19), but it is also authoritative, which means the household is subordinated to it.

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ration of the private and public realms, whereas such a separation is non-existent in classical political philosophy.

On this point, the setting of the *Oresteia* is extremely informative, in that the two natural human ties—of family and of city—are not yet unified. Rather, it could be said that there is truly no *polis*—or at least it has not yet become authoritative over the claims of the *oikos*, the household. To repeat: the setting of the *Oresteia* is one in which the *polis* or the political community is not yet authoritative. Rather the household, *oikos*, is still the source where legitimate moral and social authority emanates. But as shown by the action of both Clytemnestra and Orestes, who only act out the blood heritage of their family, the household only has recourse to revenge and vengeance, which is shown to be unending.

The example of the Furies, the defender of the *oikos*, compels us to examine how non or a-political forces are limited in their attempt to rectify wrongs done. It is clear in the trilogy that, for the household, revenge is the only avenue available to rectify injustices. Yet, vengeance is unending, in that those who are acted against will desire to right what they now perceive to be an unjust injury. In one sense vengeance only ensures further vengeance. Also, vengeance allows no purgation of crimes committed or of the evil deeds done to enact it. It allows no peace nor happiness. It is the cycle of unending retribution.

The cycle of violence is also reflected in the nature of the gods. Ferguson notes that, “Ouranos ruled the gods by violence and was overthrown by violence. Cronos ruled by violence and was overthrown by violence. Zeus now rules” (Ferguson 1972, 78). This seems to indicate that up until the end of the *Oresteia*, there seems to be no end to the cycle of violence. But Ferguson notes that Zeus’ rule is unlike the rule of the previous divine rulers, in that he does not merely rule by force but through wisdom as well (Ferguson 1972, 79). Zeus’ rule is a break in the cycle of violence and thus is an attempt to establish the permanence of his rule over the gods. Zeus’ actions—or directions—reflect the necessity to end the cycle of violence within the human community, in that Apollo claims he is acting on Zeus’ orders. To end it will allow the establishment of a form of human rule that will lead to human happiness (*eudaimonia*) or, as Martha Nussbaum would say, lead to the flourishing of human beings.

The ending and purging of this cycle of violence is something required if human beings are going to be able to live together in a fine and noble fashion. In one sense, the *Oresteia* is all about the need to establish some source of authority that will judge concerning matters of perceived injuries and evils. The authoritativeness of the political community allows the submission of grievances to a non-participant judge who binds all par-



ties to the decided outcome. This is what law attempts to do. Thus, law is the particular embodiment of justice in the given political framework of a given political system. The establishment of the authority of law in the city is an attempt to redress wrongs and prevent further injustices. The Furies also claim to redress wrongs, however, and their wrath caused both fear and terror in the minds of human beings which restrains humans in their acts against their own. This is not enough because human beings must associate with more than their own kin in order to live well. However, the Furies seem not to care about injustices done to strangers or to people with whom one is intimate; rather, they defend only the ties of blood kin. Moreover, the Furies are unending and single-minded in their pursuit of those who violate kin. Thus they bring about the cycle of violence from which the city desires and needs to escape.

### **The Divine and the Human Foundation for the *Polis***

Because the wrath of the Furies perpetuates the cycle of unending and relentless violence, they do not allow the possibility of human community. Although the Furies do allow for the perpetuation of the family via the preservation of the ties of blood, it ignores the ties of oaths or of words spoken. Recall that the Furies are deaf to the violation of Clytemnestra's marriage vows (*Eum* 209-225). In fact they reject their duty to revenge Agamemnon's murder because Clytemnestra was not blood kin to her husband. From the point of view of the Furies there is only one really important association, that of blood ties.

Aristotle argues that there are two natural human associations: 1) family and 2) political community.<sup>8</sup> The first is expressed in the household, *oikos*, and the second is expressed in the city, *polis*. The Furies only protect the ties of blood and this is essentially the realm of the *oikos*, the household. In regard to the city, the Furies are originally its enemies. This is made explicit, when the Furies awaiting the jury's verdict, say to Apollo,

I wait to hear the settlement.

I have two minds still about my hate for the city. (*Eum* 731-32)

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<sup>8</sup> Some may say that the village is a third natural association, but Aristotle does not argue this. Instead of being another form of natural association, he claims, the village is "above all an extension of the household" (*Politics* 1.2.1252b16-17).