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Friendship: The Horizon of Our Common Life

“SUNAISTHESIS” AND CIVIC CHORUSES

Aristotle makes this startling claim in his famous discussion of friendship:

[F]riendship seems to hold cities together, and lawmakers seem to take it more seriously than justice, for like-mindedness (*homonoia*) seems to be something similar to friendship, and they aim at this most of all and banish faction most of all for being hostile to it. And when people are friends there is no need of justice, but when they are just there is still need of friendship, and among things that are just, what inclines toward friendship seems to be most just of all. And friendship is not only necessary but also beautiful, for we praise those who love their friends, and an abundance of friends seems to be one of the beautiful things. (2002, 1155a22-31)

This, in a nutshell, is how Aristotle understands the importance of friendship for politics. One might say that for Aristotle as well as for Plato, friendship is the form of politics because it is that animating principle that elevates and sustains politics as an authentic expression of our humanity (Heyking 2016). In his reflection upon individual responsibility and hyper-partisanship, Arthur Brooks cites the Dalai Lama who makes essentially the same point as Plato and Aristotle when he states: “I defeat my enemies when I make them my friends” (Brooks 2016, n.p.). Plato, in his dialogue the *Laws*, has the Athenian Stranger proclaim the essential task of politics: “reconciling [*diallagon*] [people] by laying down laws for them for the rest of time and thus securing their friendship for one another” (Plato 1988, 627e). Friendship, then, is the purpose or goal of politics and our common lives together as citizens.

However, it is unclear what Plato and Aristotle mean by saying friendship is the goal of politics. Aristotle merely claims that like-mindedness (or political friendship) “seems to be something similar to friendship.” He speaks of it as an analogy to some undefined analogate. Friendship is at the apex of Aristotle’s moral and political thought. But at this apex sits a perplexity.

Aristotle never really shows us what political friendship actually looks like. He provides extensive discussion of democracies, oligarchies, and other inferior regimes, but he never provides us a picture of friendship in the best regime. The same can be said about personal friendships. He says a lot of about friendships of utility and pleasure, but what we know about virtue friendship is done largely through indirection, by showing the deficiencies of the inferior kinds.

The closest we get to a direct glimpse of the highest friendship is his description near the end of Book IX of the *Nicomachean Ethics* of how such friendship is a joint-perception of the good, what he calls *sunaisthesis*: “one also ought to share in a friend’s awareness that he *is* (or share his friend’s consciousness of his existence [*sunaisthanesthai hoti estin*]), and this would come through living together and sharing conversation and thinking; for this would seem to be what living together means in the case of human beings” (Aristotle 2002, II70b10–12). Aristotle contrasts shared intellectual perception—*sunaisthesis*—as the distinctly human mode of living together, from eating in the same place, which characterizes cattle. Sharing goods of the soul, not of the body, is what makes us fully human.

Sunaisthesis is a joint-perception of the good whereby my beholding and quest of the good is inseparable from your also beholding and questing with me. This triangulated beholding—of friends with one another and before the shared good they pursue—is characterized by what I refer to in my book, *The Form of Politics*, as “an effortful holding of oneself and ourselves in readiness.” Think of the analogous case of a group of musicians “in the groove”: they share a vision of their music, and that vision is inseparable from them sharing it with one another.

Of course friendship does not end with epiphany, but Aristotle adds that “conversation and thinking” constitutes “what living together means in the case of human beings.” Friends share what Aristotle calls a “prohairesis” life (from the Greek word for choice, *prohairesis*) together of moral practical decision making and, like sculptors who knock rough edges off marble, we sculpt one another and ourselves using speech and conversation instead of hammers and chisels, under the light of the good that draws us. Conversation, the dance of one mind with another, is the form friendship takes.

Being habituated in conversation is indispensable for citizenship, deliberation, and self-government. For this reason, Aldous Huxley portrays the subject-citizens of *Brave New World* as incapable of conversation, for what

can life offer that is worth simply talking about? What is worth contemplating? In her time with North Korean students, Suki Kim found their souls so deformed they could only utter state slogans in their essays (Kim 2014, n.p.). Her observations confirm Hannah Arendt's observation that totalitarianism thrives among lonely citizens—those incapable of friendship and of conversation (Arendt 1973, 475). The culture of “microaggressions” and victimhood plaguing many North American universities and colleges is similar because, as social psychologist Jonathan Haidt notes, it “fosters ‘moral dependence’ [on a central administrative and political authorities] and an atrophying of the ability to handle small interpersonal matters on one's own” (2016, n.p.). Conversely, parliamentary democracy is government by talking, as Winston Churchill described our regime. It depends on a citizenry capable of “conversation and thinking.” The capacity for friendship and conversation is also one of the main goals of liberal education. Becoming one “with whom it was agreeable to dine,” which was Churchill's criterion for his dinner and conversation companions, is a salutary goal for civic as well as liberal education (Colville 1981, 24).

For Aristotle and Plato, virtue friendship is “most intense and best.” Today we have difficulty appreciating the excellence they saw in the contemplative union of souls. Schooled in romanticism and materialism, we are more likely to prize the union of bodies in sexual relations over *sunais-thesis*. Unfortunately, in prizing shared bodily goods over shared goods of the soul, we are closer to cattle than to human beings.

Plato in his dialogue the *Lysis* (and in other dialogues) reminds us why thinking about friendship is so difficult. It turns out sharing goods of the soul is more complicated than it first appears. In the *Lysis*, Plato portrays Socrates claiming he passionately seeks friends but he claims not to know what a friend is. He and his youthful interlocutors consider a variety of definitions for a friend but none prove adequate. Part of the reason why is that Plato, more than Aristotle, confronts the central mystery of how it is we can know and love another human being. Socratic ignorance has become cliché to us but our presumptive familiarity with the term must not blind us to the reality that it really is a marvel that across what may seem like the infinite distance between oneself and another, we can gain some kind of knowledge of their souls. In a kind of Platonic incarnational theology, Plato in the *Lysis* draws upon Greek myths of Hermes, the messenger of the gods. Hermes, whom Zeus calls the god most friendly to humans, safely

brought Priam, king of the Trojans, to Achilles to fetch the body of his son, Hector. Plato draws upon the symbolism of Hermes to symbolize how souls mingle with one another over infinite spaces under the light of eternally really being. He does this at the point where dialectics proves inadequate to define what a friend is.

Political friendship has something in common with this view of virtue friendship as *sunaisthesis*. Just as friends “sculpt” one another’s souls in a “prohairetic” quest for the good, so too citizens express themselves as political animals through common deliberations and speeches about the just and advantageous. Speech is what makes us political—it is what some scholars call “logos-sociality.” The friendly conversant, “with whom it is agreeable to dine,” finds her public persona in the citizen capable of deliberation. As citizens we debate competing visions of the good life that we wish to share with one another. Our different opinions get expressed through action in the form of competing interests and factions. However, the fact we debate with one another serves as a reminder that our differences conjoin in a common life together. We debate with *our* fellow-citizens, not the citizens of another regime. In the words of Socrates when he concludes his defence speech to the Athenians, “more so to the townsmen, inasmuch as you are closer to me in kin” (Plato 1984, 30a). Debate and factional strife can get heated and it is political friendship, where face-to-face encounters remind us that our political opponents are also persons, and which gives us the sense we are all in it together, that helps restrain conflict. Though I disagree with you over how we should conduct our common life together, it is with you that I pledge to live that common life.

That pledge, the condition of political friendship by which we acknowledge our common lives together, takes the form of festivity. One of the reasons Aristotle rarely shows us political friendship is because political friendship rarely speaks in its own name. Political friendship is not the object of political action or deliberation so much as their condition.

Political friendship only appears explicitly when a people comes together by itself, for itself, and under that for which it exists as a people. Times of war or of constitution making are two examples he cites. A people does this not in “normal” political time, which is the time of deliberations among factions, but in “special” political time, the time that also includes festivity, the time of storytelling and recollecting the deeds of ancestors. It is the time Odysseus, upon hearing the songs of Demodocus of the Phaiakians

in Book IX of the *Odyssey* (and the dramatic centre of the epic), proclaims “the best that life can offer” (Homer IX.I–I2).

Festivity is the form of political friendship. Festivity is the horizon within which our common deliberations operate because it is in festive song and dance where citizens come together for and with one another, in recognition of what unites them. The highest form of political friendship seems to be an image of *sunaitheisis*, as when Plato has, in the *Laws*, the Athenian Stranger describe the political friendship of the Magnesians as chorus and festivity—365 days per year. Festive singing is an image of *sunaitheisis* because music is a symphony of bodies and souls. It is the mode by which citizens partake in a common noetic life together.

In the *Laws*, the Athenian Stranger complains that no one today takes choruses seriously because regimes are too often ripped apart by faction, so regimes can rarely express themselves in unity. Moreover, most regimes are dedicated to inferior moral goods, like the acquisition of wealth, which is not conducive to choruses. Only a regime that is fully dedicated to virtue can express itself in festivity. Indeed, the choruses express the fundamental unity of body and soul, of the benevolent rule of reason over bodies, and as political rule.

In our own day, we are accustomed to associate chorus and festivity with the Dionysian. Sporting events and rock concerts are the most notable examples. However, these are cultural, not political, gatherings, and in their Dionysian core, they lack, shall we say, noetic content. One way of looking at the deficiency of modern gatherings is that they are crowd-forming, not choruses nor expressions of friendship. They lack what Roger Scruton calls “withness,” which characterizes folk dancing and other forms of communal folk gatherings.

However, one of the most impressive recent examples of a Platonic chorus is the Estonian “Singing Revolution” where, from 1987 to 1991, Estonians regained their independence from Soviet imperialism by means of national singing demonstrations at the Tallinn Song Festival Grounds. In chorus they came together with one voice, and this voice was peaceful because the songs were measured. They were songful acts of recollection that sustained the people during their time of tribulations. During this time up to a quarter of the Estonian population would gather together and sing their national songs. This was the pivot that enabled them first to bear Soviet rule for nearly fifty years, and then to gain their independence

peacefully. In *The Singing Revolution*, a documentary about this period, one Estonian defined her citizenship by stating, “I am a singer” (Tusty 2009).

Friendship is the horizon both of politics and of our moral life. It is the ordering force of our lives, both personal and political. As such, it is not that we possess friendship but friendship possesses us, to reformulate something Kant says about the holiness of virtue (Kant 1996, 165). The rarity of choruses shows this because regimes rarely possess the kind of unity needed to overcome faction and to present the regime to itself. Few regimes dedicate themselves to moral goods high enough to achieve this. I find the Estonian example, in the modern context, especially instructive because their choruses enabled them to gain independence peacefully. The measured and prudent way they approached their independence—always mindful of risking Soviet violent backlash as well as backlash from the forty percent population who is Russian—shows us what authentic politics looks like.

IMITATIONS AND INTIMATIONS OF POLITICAL FRIENDSHIP IN OUR OWN TIME

The insights of the philosophers on political friendship are confirmed if we look at the practices and self-understandings of great statesmen. I shall discuss some significant examples later. But first permit me to address the counter argument, that friendship has, or should have, little or nothing to do with politics. In doing so, I’ll have to muck around in the cave of our present-day politics before ascending to greater things.

Schooled in Machiavelli, modern social science teaches that politics is a battle of wills. At best politics can be rooted in some form of social contract whereby all, through what Immanuel Kant calls our “unsocial sociality,” agree to be civil to one another. The social contract has the advantage of applying universal laws equally to all citizens, and so serves our faith that liberal democracy is the best regime. The social contract of liberalism encourages us to view talk of friendship in politics as an excuse for oligarchy, cronyism, or conspiracy. Universal rules are given greater legitimacy than preferential friendships, which seem necessarily to be partial and incomplete. Indeed, citizens of liberal democracies easily understand the irony of the term, “Washington friend.”

Mark Leibovitch, in his recent book *This Town*, describes a culture of social and political climbers in Washington, DC, who seem to practise the kind of friendship that Thomas Hobbes describes when he says “to have friends

is power; for they are strengths united” (Leibovitch 2013, 19–33; Hobbes 1996, 58). The book portrays stunted intellectual and moral characters that prevent them from understanding their own plight or even articulating it coherently.

Something similar can be found in the corridors of power in Canada. A friend of mine, who spent years at the pinnacle of Canadian power, told me that one of the reasons politicians stay so long in politics is because they lack friends. They are lonely, and they regard their lives in politics as placebo replacements for a more fulfilled life among friends. Power is an aphrodisiac of a sorts, but it is an empty one. As vice is a pale imitation of virtue, so too are “Washington friendships” (and “Ottawa friendships”) a pale imitation of virtue friendships. Yet, as deformed friendships, they still point to something more fully formed, but one must know what to look for.

A recent *New York Times* article by Alan Feuer on Donald Trump and his relations quoted a former high level employee of his who claims: “Deep down, he’s a very nice guy [...] but he can’t let go and just be nice because he fears that people will take advantage of him. Donald is actually the most insecure man I’ve ever met. He has this constant need to fill a void inside. He used to do it with deals and sex. Now he does it with publicity” (2016, n.p.).

Those educated in the lessons of ancient political thought will recognize something of the tyrannical soul in Trump who seeks gratifications in power, but is trapped by his power. Worst of all, he is incapable of practising friendship, which is crucial for the practice of statesmanship.

Claims that Trump is a new Hitler notwithstanding, Trump is not a tyrant. In his rebuttal to arguments claiming Trump a tyrant, Waller Newell argues that comparing Trump to fascists and Nazis merely cheapens those terms. Instead, he argues, “Trump does fit the description of what Plato, Sallust and Hamilton would regard as a demagogue, someone who mirrors the worst qualities of the mob” (2016, n.p.). Trump represents something decadent of liberal democracy. Rathnam and Orwin show that, for Plato, democrats regard restraint as servile, and prize “authentic” individuals and leaders who challenge conventions, hierarchy, and even rule of law itself. Michael D’Antonio, Trump’s biographer, notes he holds a “view of life resembl[ing] the Hobbesian nightmare of a ‘war of all against all’ with little regard for the social contract that makes for peaceful communities and countries” (D’Antonio 2016, n.p.).

Trump seems to mirror his supporters. For instance, polling data shows Trump's strongest support comes not from those who have supposedly suffered from globalization and lost jobs, but from those living in broken communities and families, where the pillars of civil society have crumbled furthest. Conversely, Philip Bump reports on Barna Group research showing that regular church-goers support him the least.

Trump appears as a saviour to the angry and lonely crowd. Of course, as a demagogue he offers quick fixes and scapegoats to reinforce their belief in their victimhood. Those whose lives are sustained by intact and healthy family and social relationships are more resistant to his siren song.

But the Trump phenomenon is not simply the result of a temporary demographic or economic situation. Trump seems to reflect modern democracy in its decadent stage. To understand my claim better, we need to turn to Alexis de Tocqueville's magnificent account of democracy. As early as the 1830s when he published *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville regarded loneliness the greatest weakness of democracy—not just that found in America, but also in other liberal democracies including Canada. For example, *Globe and Mail* columnist André Picard calls loneliness a “hidden epidemic.” Tocqueville calls individualism the greatest weakness of democracy, and he shows how it is the precondition for what he calls democratic despotism, a tutelary power that “cares” for democratic peoples who have found their liberties too burdensome.

Tocqueville defines individualism as “considered and peaceful sentiment that disposes each citizen to isolate himself from the mass of his fellows and to withdraw to the side with his family and his friends; so that, after thus creating a small society for his own use, he willingly abandons the large society to itself” (Tocqueville 2000, 882). Unlike egoism, which derives from blind instinct, “individualism proceeds from an erroneous judgment rather than from a depraved sentiment. It has its source in failings of the mind as much as in vices of the heart.”

If *sunaisithesis*, as Aristotle describes it, is a joint beholding of one another while together we pursue the good, individualism might be seen as its direct opposite: the simultaneous withdrawal of one another from one another and from the intellectual and moral goods that sustain our moral life together.

One can see individualism at work in many facets of the life of democracy, but two stand out, one intellectual and the other emotional. Individ-

ualism leads democrats to reject all forms of authority other than one's individual judgment. The democrat is a sceptic, especially regarding claims of supernatural religious truths, and instead prefers what he regards as his own autonomous "common sense." For this reason, Tocqueville claims democrats are Cartesians without ever having read a word of Descartes, whose own motto, "I think, therefore I am" encapsulates this democratic aspiration toward the authority of nothing other than oneself. The primacy of the autonomous individual, standing over reality to summon forth its reasons, appeals to liberal democrats. Francis Bacon gives us this same image when he characterizes the scientific method as one in which we put nature on the rack and force her (always a her!) to give up her secrets by means of torture.

With regard to emotions, individualism leads democrats to withdraw into themselves, spending their lives pursuing material enjoyments instead of cultivating deeper moral obligations and loves with other persons that make life worth living. Tocqueville writes:

I want to imagine under what new features despotism would present itself to the world; I see an innumerable crowd of similar and equal men who spin around endlessly, in order to gain small and vulgar pleasures with which they fill their souls. Each of them, withdrawn apart, is like a stranger to the destiny of all the others [...]; as for the remainder of his fellow citizens, he is next to them, but he does not see them; he touches them without feeling them; he exists only in himself and for himself alone, and if he still has a family, you can say that at least he no longer has a country. Above those men arises an immense and tutelary power that alone takes charge of assuring their enjoyment and of looking after their fate. (2000, 1249–1250)

Trump is like his fellow democratic citizens who, in need of filling "the void inside," are on a restless pursuit of power after power that leads them further and further away from one another, from themselves, and from moral and spiritual goods that provide genuine human fulfilment.

In terms of the erotic lives of democratic souls, it seems to have ended up in a "hook-up" culture whereby consent—the liberal democratic model of justice—provides illusory protection from Jian Ghomeshi-type tyrannical desires while simultaneously begetting those same tyrannical desires. Democrats prize their autonomy, which, as Cindy Lieve discusses in her review of Peggy Orenstein's *Girls and Sex: Navigating the Complicated New Landscape*, seems to result in their preferring "hook-ups" to friendships because the

former offers the illusion of autonomy while the latter appears to demand emotional self-giving that autonomous selves wish to avoid. Democrats display naïveté toward how the illusory freedoms they seek in fact turn out to generate something much darker and dominating. Readers of Plato's *Republic* will recognize in my observation concerning hook-up culture, how tyrannical eros arises out of the delusional self-confidence of the democratic soul that thinks it can simultaneously liberate eros while keeping in check its darker forms.

Individualism also corrodes our capacity for conversation, the essential act of friendship. For example, Sherry Turkle documents how social media is undermining our conversational capacities—the very basis of moral and political deliberation. It's hard to have “emphatic conversations” when we're always checking our phones with the hope that whoever is posting something on Facebook or Tinder is more interesting than the face of the person before us. Social media also leaves us insecure with ourselves. She reports on one experiment that tested subjects' taste for solitude: “In one experiment, many student subjects opted to give themselves mild electric shocks rather than sit alone with their thoughts” (Turkle 2015, n.p.). The disregard or incapacity to converse, which is rooted in democratic souls who forget Aristotle's counsel that our humanity is fundamentally expressed “through living together and sharing conversation and thinking,” is fatal for liberal democracy which depends upon conversable citizens.

Indeed, this democratic desperation to “fill the void inside” might lead democratic souls to conclude that liberty is pointless and not worth the risk. They might decide everyone is a victim in need of a tutelary authority to root out “microaggressions.” Or they might conclude that liberty guarantees only the despair found in “small and vulgar pleasures,” and so is not worth the trouble. Or, as Robert Reilly diagnoses, they might conclude the boring nihilism offered by decadent democracy needs replacing with a more spectacularly violent form of nihilism.

The individualism that contracts the democratic soul into an isolated nullity also produces an opposite movement of intellectual and moral universalism. Equality suggests to democrats that all are equal and the same. Lacking reasons to regard one another as significantly different, the idea of a moral universal standing above us—and each in isolation of one another—is easily suggested. Democrats are easily drawn to moral universalisms including cosmopolitanism, universal humanity, and other general

and abstract ideas that appear to possess greater moral weight than more intermediate (between universal and individual) moral obligations, including those to nation, community, or family and friend. Consider how frequently democratic nations rally national forces in service of (or against) abstract nouns, including various wars on “poverty,” “terrorism” and other -isms.

Tocqueville notes how democrats have difficulty practising political friendship because their conception of the common good is abstract, the sovereign representative of the popular will is abstract, and the objects of collective action by the state tend to be abstractions. He writes: “In politics, moreover, as in philosophy and in religion, the minds of democratic peoples receive simple and general ideas with delight. They are repulsed by complicated systems, and they are pleased to imagine a great nation all of whose citizens resemble a single model and are directed by a single power” (2000, II95). Individualism and equality lead democrats to come to regard our preferential allegiances for smaller scale units, even our friendships, as morally suspect. Tocqueville notes how “the notion of intermediary powers is growing dim and fading” (2000, II97). Like the Laputians of Jonathan Swift’s great satire, *Gulliver’s Travels*, democrats have one eye turned within and one eye turned far above, which blinds them to the intermediate—the human scale.

Though individualism leads democrats to regard their own judgments as authoritative, democrats realize that the complexities of the world make it impossible for them to be sceptical of everything. But instead of having faith in religious or intellectual authorities and traditions to guide their decisions, they are more likely to have faith in the godlike wisdom of public opinion. Public opinion has authority because its source is an abstract entity called “the public.” Consider how social media informs us how memes are “trending.” It is also all-consuming; the individual is lost within it and therefore cannot stand apart from it to scrutinize it. For this reason, Tocqueville argues that medieval monarchs were never as powerful as modern public opinion because the former could only control the bodies of their subjects, while the latter controls minds.

The state in democracy is the instantiation of its moral universalism; all are beneath it equally: “each citizen, having become similar to all others, is lost in the crowd, and you no longer notice anything except the vast and magnificent image of the people itself” (Tocqueville 2000, II96). The

state—the abstract noun that signifies abstract universalism of democratic peoples—fills in the gaps between individualistic and individual democrats who have withdrawn from the public square. Tocqueville feared the democratic administrative state would be despotic and end up being a “tutelary power” that “cares” for democrats who have become too servile to care for themselves. He notes how “it would be extensive and milder, and it would degrade men without tormenting them” (2000, 1248). Or as he states elsewhere: “It would resemble paternal power if, like it, it had as a goal to prepare men for manhood; but on the contrary it seeks only to fix them irrevocably in childhood; it likes the citizens to enjoy themselves, provided that they think only about enjoying themselves” (2000, 1250).

Of course, democratic despotism has its limits. There are only so many administrative jobs for people who aspire to regulate or “nudge” their fellow citizens in “small affairs” (Tocqueville 2000, 1259). Trump is symptomatic of the reaction to the crisis of the democratic administrative state. It is costly, it over-promises and under-delivers, people tire of sanctimonious know-nothings regulating the minutiae of their lives, and their anger additionally stems from the hopelessness that comes from living broken lives in broken communities. Unable to imagine greater possibilities than the degradation that democratic materialism presents to them, they follow the degraded leader who promises to gratify their degraded souls the most.

Lest we think Canadian liberal democracy is immune to Trumpism, I would point out that the recently deceased Rob Ford appealed to a similar demographic as Trump does in the United States. Marcus Gee of the *Globe and Mail* opined that the “Rob Ford show” “said that mainstream politicians are woefully out of touch with the people they represent. It said that a great many people agree with Ford that political life is dominated by a coddled establishment whose sole aim is to feather its nest. It said that a great number of people agree that an ever-expanding government is picking their pockets and wasting much of what it takes [...] The Rob Ford show [...] was a warning to Canada’s political class: stop listening and voters will elect someone with a club to smash all the furniture” (2016, n.p.).

I would add the political parties in Canada suffer all the symptoms of individualism of excessive democracy that Tocqueville describes. For the left, Canada is identified with the administrative state. They seem oblivious to the goods of self-government, for civil associations, and for subsidiarity. For the right, Canada is its economy. To speak of civil society is to speak

of habits of self-government which is tantamount to speaking of social conservatism, which is a vote-loser. For the right, it is much easier to focus on the economy. Neither left nor right seems to make room for a genuine space for politics, for political friendship.

The difference between Trump and Ford, as far as I can tell, is that Ford still had a personal touch with his constituents. He personally returned phone calls that numbered in the hundreds each week, and Ford Nation loved him because he was the sort of politician who would “call me back.” Ford still understood the importance of that great intermediary relationship in politics, friendship.

Liberal democracy begins by taking questions of the human good and happiness off the table because people cannot seem to agree upon the answers. Liberal democracy then replaces such questions by guaranteeing that all people have the right to pursue their own goods, however they see fit. Liberal democracy places the priority of the right over the good. For liberals, there is no *summum bonum*, the highest good, as Aristotle claimed. There’s only the *summum malum*, the greatest evil which is a violent and ignominious death. Tocqueville shows us that the price of ignoring the question of the *summum bonum* is loneliness and despair. The price of ignoring the question of the *summum bonum* is you are guaranteed to receive the *summum malum*, good and hard.

“COMPREHENSIVE JUDGMENT” AND “ABSOLUTE SELFLESSNESS”:

WINSTON CHURCHILL ON POLITICS AS FRIENDSHIP

In discussing individualism and its pathologies, we have reached the endpoint of democracy, the extreme point at which liberal democracy cannibalizes itself. Yet even here, deep down in the cave, light still shines in. But we must ascend further up the cave for greater illumination. We must look at higher types of friendship in political life, even in our own democratic regime. We must consider statesmen, as opposed to mere politicians, by virtue of the greater magnitude of their actions and their capacity to live up to that magnitude.

So much of politics and life in general is a history of loyalties and betrayals, and the subsequent telling of stories about them. Friendships and personal relationships are frequently the subtexts of many political controversies. When considering the grand sweep of historical movements of great politics, and when considering great ideas of political philosophy, it is easy to overlook the interplay of personal relationships as the crucible of polit-

ical and moral decision-making. Friendships are the highest of these kinds of personal relationships and they play an important part in shaping our political world (Heyking 2013; Heyking 2017).

Indeed, politics is conducted by persons with distinct personalities, moral aims, and motivations. One thinks of Winston Churchill's friendship with Franklin Roosevelt that sustained the alliance against Hitler; Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan's friendship that continued the "special relationship;" François Mitterand's friendship with Helmut Köhl during the reunification of Germany; the friendship of George Washington and James Madison; the monumental correspondence between John Adams and Thomas Jefferson whose reconciliation had a profound impact on the subsequent course of American history in wake of the revolution; Abraham Lincoln's "team of rivals" whose *modus operandi* was turning rivals for power into friends, especially William Seward.

Here in Canada we have the examples of the two founders of responsible government in Canada before Confederation, Louis-Hippolyte Lafontaine and Robert Baldwin, and the friendship between John A. MacDonald and Étienne Cartier, the "Siamese twins" who guided Canada's Confederation. Both examples remind Canadians that their nation was founded not so much by two foundings but by two founding friendships between individuals who understood their political goals depended upon the moral character and trust they placed upon one another.

The one statesman whose practice of political friendship reflects most the insights of the philosophers, Plato and Aristotle, was Winston Churchill. Friendship, in terms of "comprehensive judgment" and "absolute selflessness," was for Churchill a central category of his stacraft. In politics he sought the virtue-friendships that Aristotle describes of those who exercise the highest moral and intellectual character, especially magnanimity. Friendship of the two kinsmen of the Bible, Moses and Aaron, is paradigmatic for him, as was the friendship between his great ancestor the Duke of Marlborough and Eugene of Savoy. Churchill befriended men including Lloyd George, F.E. Smith (Lord Birkenhead), Brendan Bracken, Max Aitken (Lord Beaverbrook), Jan Smuts, Harry Hopkins, Franklin Delano Roosevelt (Meacham 2004; Heyking 2017).

With Birkenhead he founded the "Other Club," a dinner club of English luminaries whose most important rule, Rule #12, was, "Nothing in the rules or intercourse of the Club shall interfere with the rancour or asperity

of party politics.” If you were not clubbable, or were not among those men with whom it was agreeable to dine, then you were not invited to join, even if you were politically important.

With Beaverbrook in the War Cabinet, he rallied England and ensured its Air Force was well supplied. Moreover, Churchill simply liked having Beaverbrook around; he was his closest confidant during the war.

The qualities of his friends suggest for Churchill the types of character who could serve as allies with whom to fight political and military battles, but also as companions with whom to enjoy the greatest action and dramas that life has to offer. Indeed, Roosevelt sent a telegram to congratulate him for winning a vote of confidence in January 1942, telling him: “It is fun to be in the same decade with you” (Churchill 2013, 4:62).

My favorite episode in the Churchill–Roosevelt friendship comes in 1943 when, after doing business in Casablanca, Churchill informed Roosevelt that “I must be with you when you see the sunset on the snows of the Atlas Mountains.” With their entourage and security detail they drove an hour to the US consul’s residence in Marrakesh where assistants carried Roosevelt—and according to Moran, Churchill’s doctor, “his paralyzed legs dangling like the limbs of a ventriloquist’s dummy, limp and flaccid”—up fifty steps to the top of a tower in order to watch the gorgeous sunset. After seeing Roosevelt off the next day, Churchill told an assistant, “He is the truest friend; he has the farthest vision; he is the greatest man I’ve ever known.” But the two friends shared that vision, a common vision of the “whole scene” as Churchill liked to say, of the theatre of war, as well as the practical ends of political life. They shared what Aristotle calls *sunambasis*, a joint perception of the greatest goods human beings can pursue.

Character played an important role for Churchill when it came to choosing his friends. Statecraft is an adventure best practised and even enjoyed with companions who share one’s stature. His moral and political vision is one of great friends performing great deeds with one another, and also of reflecting upon those great deeds in the form of sharing stories over dinner and drink, conversations, writings, books, and even philosophical contemplation.

However, friendship was not simply instrumental for some higher political goal. It is the primary goal of politics. Or, in the words he provides to serve as the moral of his biography of John Churchill, the Duke of Marlborough: “One rule of conduct alone survives as a guide to men in their

wanderings: fidelity to covenants, the honour of soldiers, and the hatred of causing human woe.” (Churchill 2002, 2: 996). This has less to do with helping friends and harming enemies, than the more Socratic view of helping friends and not harming enemies, where harm means primarily moral harm. Churchill wished to destroy Hitler’s capacity for evil; he did not wish his moral corruption to worsen (Plato 2007, 331d-332d).

Churchill conceived of Great Britain as enjoying a political friendship—*homonoia* or like-mindedness in Aristotle’s terminology (Aristotle II55a20-30; II67a25-30)—that he termed its “island story.” Political friendship, as friendship generally, is not only expressed through stories, but *are* stories, which helps explain why the histories Churchill wrote were primarily moral histories, which he saw “as a branch of moral philosophy,” and not academic or scientific histories (Churchill 2013, 1:x; Heyking 2016, Chapters 3, 5–7 and Conclusion).

The moral of the story was not simply the meaning of the actions described therein, it was also about its main character, the author. As Churchill said on one occasion of his *Second World War*, “this is not history, this is my case” (Jenkins 2001, 824). His histories, of which he is a self-narrator, was a matter of what the ancient Greeks called *logon didonai*, the giving of an account of one’s self, of holding oneself responsible to another for one thinks and does. He once remarked that “a man’s Life must be nailed to a cross either of Thought or Action.” However, he understood action is never complete unless it is sung or spoken about. His own books and speeches do that. Indeed he wrote his biography of Marlborough because Marlborough’s monument meant to tell his own story, Blenheim palace, stands silent. Magnificent as it is, it is nothing more than a “pile of rocks.” Churchill complains, “This mood [of building silent monuments] has characterized dynasts in all ages, and philosophers in none” (Churchill 2002, 2:754). Only with Churchill, who grew up in Blenheim, can Marlborough’s action be brought to completion. But in completing Marlborough’s action by telling his story, his *logon didonai*, Churchill nails his life to a cross of thought; he casts his lot with the philosophers, not the dynasts.

But perhaps it is too much of a stretch to include Churchill with the philosophers, though his histories are a form of “moral history” and, as such, constitute profound insights into the nature of politics. Indeed, upon having read and returning Birkenhead’s copy of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, he told his friend, “it is extraordinary how much of it I had already thought

out for myself” (Smith 1924, 115). Commenting on Churchill’s response to Birkenhead, Harry Jaffa remarks of this very point of Aristotle’s practical political science: “But it is the very genius of Aristotle—as it is of every great teacher—to make you think he is uncovering your own thought in his” (2011, n.p.). So perhaps it is better to think that as a great statesman and writer of moral history, a singer of his and his people’s songs written in the “psalm” format and following the cadences of the King James Bible, he was somewhere between a philosopher and a statesman. He was more like the tragedian whom Aristotle places between the philosopher and the historian.

It is in this in-between place wherein political friendship resides, in the great actions a people undertake and in the speeches and songs their singers sing. It is here, in the banquet hall of the festival of the Phaiakians, in Book IX of the *Odyssey* where Odysseus, upon hearing the songs of Demodocus and before singing his own tale, makes the most remarkable statement of the meaning of political friendship:

What a fine thing it is to listen to such a bard
 As we have here—the man sings like a god.
 The crown of life, I’d say. There’s nothing better
 Than when deep joy holds sway throughout the realm
 And banqueters up and down the palace sit in ranks,
 Enthralled to hear the bard, and before them all, the tables
 Heaped with bread and meats, and drawing wine from a mixing-bowl
 The steward makes his rounds and keeps the winecups flowing.
 This, to my mind, is the best that life can offer. (Homer 2015, IX.I–12)

This is the paradigm of political friendship that Plato and Aristotle incorporated into their philosophical reflections. It is the model for Plato’s invocation of festivals in the *Laws*, and it is the model for Aristotle when, in Books VII and VIII of the *Politics*, he considers the leisure and political friendship of the best regime. The great statesmen understand its truth.

As friends aspiring to virtue, we share perceptions and thoughts about the good which together we pursue. In political friendship, our sharing of the good takes the form of singing. As with Odysseus, the choruses of Magnesia, Churchill, and the Estonians, we are singers.

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