

Liberal Education, Friendship, and the “Political Art in the True Sense”¹

That’s how it is, my comrade (*hetairos*),” I said; “if you find a way of life better than ruling for those who are going to rule, there’s a possibility for a well-governed city to come into being for you, because only in it will the rulers be those who are rich in their very being.”²

The Turning Around to the Good is the Turn to the Other

Dignity is a newer concept than is liberal education, but the two are related. Liberal education refers to the program of education suited not simply for the free person, but it is one that aims at liberating the person from ignorance and bringing her to wisdom. In the words of John Henry Newman, the “*beau ideal*” of liberal education is the “perfection of the Intellect.”³ Newman’s claim echoes Aristotle’s claim that contemplation cultivates the highest, most divine element in ourselves.⁴ Modern defenders of dignity, including Kant, have something like this divine element in mind when they speak of persons as having inherent dignity. For both ancient defenders of our divine element, and modern defenders of its equivalent, dignity, the university

¹ This essay is dedicated to my students.

² Plato, *Republic*, translated by Joe Sachs, (Newburyport, MA: Focus Publishing, 2007), 520e. Hereinafter cited as *Republic*.

³ John Henry Newman, *The Idea of a University*, edited by Martin J. Svaglic, (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982), 105.

⁴ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, translated by Joe Sachs, (Newburyport, MA: Focus Publishing, 2002), 1177b27-33.

or college is the setting in which the young are initiated into the cultivation of the best part of themselves. Liberal education consists of a “liberation.” The young are not only liberated from prejudice, error, and so forth, but in learning to become thinkers capable of dialogue with themselves, they also learn to dialogue with others and thereby discover themselves as free members of what Anthony Kronman has recently described as a “common space of reason.”⁵ In discovering themselves in this “common space of reason,” and they also discover one another in friendship.

The most famous, and still the best, account of liberal education is Socrates’ comparison of it to being liberated from being a prisoner in a cave. The image conveys not only the story of one’s “turning around” (*periagôgê*) from darkness to light, but also one’s discovery of oneself, others, and the transformation of one’s self who becomes capable of beholding wisdom. Just as the *Republic* as a whole describes the “origin and being of justice” (*Republic* 359a), so too does the image of the cave convey the origin and being of liberal education, the education that liberates the soul.

Education is not what “certain people who claim to be professors” boast it as being: “[S]urely they claim they put knowledge into a soul it wasn’t present in, as though they were putting sight into blind eyes” (*Republic* 518b). Rather, education is a more mysterious process, an “art of the *periagôgê*” in which the teacher must reach into the depth of a student’s soul, and to draw her upwards, while at the same time modestly maintaining self-effacing distance so the student can freely become a soul capable of rational dialogue, with herself and with

⁵ Anthony Kronman, *The Assault on American Excellence*, (New York: Free Press, 2019), 99.

others. Plato in his own name describes teaching as matter of a light being suddenly transmitted from one to another, in joint pursuit of truth: “There is no writing of mine about these matters, nor will there ever be one. For this knowledge is not something that can be put into words like other sciences; but after long-continued intercourse between teacher and pupil, in joint pursuit of the subject (*sunousías*), suddenly, like light flashing forth when a fire is kindled, it is born in the soul and straightaway nourishes itself.”⁶ No one has control over the light that gets transmitted, its spark and transmission is sudden (*èksaíphnes*).⁷ This means we must be prepared to accept that our students will not always learn what we teachers intend, and may also learn more from us than what intend. Awakening comes as a surprise.

However, in order for flame to leap from one to another, the one receiving the flame must be able to recognize it as such and as good, and to recognize the one from which the flame leaps as a source of good. The cave allegory provides an image of the transformation one undergoes in order to receive that flame. There Socrates calls education the art of the turning-around. Education is inherently paradoxical. It consists of contriving to prompt another to turn around freely and to look and see the good. All the teacher can do is contrive and hope the

⁶ Plato, “Epistle VII,” in Plato, *Epistles*, translated by Glenn R. Morrow, (New York: Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1962), 341c-d.

⁷ As Socrates reports Diotima telling him: “Whoever has been tutored up to this point in love-matters and beholds beautiful things in order and correctly, will, as he now advances toward the end of love-matters, suddenly (*èksaíphnes*) come within sight of something wondrous, beautiful in its nature that very thing, Socrates, for the sake of which all those previous labors were indeed undertaken” (*Symposium*, translated by Eva Brann, Peter Kalkavage, Eric Salem, (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2017), 210e-211a).

student can see. The teacher must learn to leaven those contrivances with a modest self-effacement that respects the free act of a student learning. In this essay I suggest the best mode of such contriving and modest self-effacement can be understood as initiating the student into the art of friendship.

Socrates describes a turning around of the soul that entails the transformation of the soul who not only beholds wisdom but can behold it in others. The philosophical awakening described in the image of the cave is a turn toward the Good but in turning to the Good it also consists of the turn to the other, to the person. Socrates describes education as an initiation. The one who liberates the prisoners, the teacher, may have to do so by force; the teacher must find something within the souls of the prisoners with which to draw them out and drag them to seek wisdom with one another. Yet the teacher must also stand aside. By understanding the *periagôgê* as a turning-around not only to the Good but toward the Good and to the other, one then can understand why Socrates treats the liberation as well as a prelude to the return to the cave. Not only does the student glimpse the Good outside the cave, by doing so he or she also develops practical wisdom necessary to order the lives of those in the cave according to the Good, in friendship. This is no “ordinary” practical wisdom. Rather, it is the kind Socrates at the conclusion of *Gorgias* indicates is the necessary prelude to entering politics, which is the knowledge that justice is superior to injustice, and that it is better to suffer injustice than to

commit it.⁸ That is the “political art in the true sense,” in which Socrates claims only he, not those ruinous imposters like “Themistocles and Cimon and Pericles,” is actively engaged.⁹

The image of the cave, and the *Republic* as a whole, shows the dual movement of liberal education as one conducted with friends in the search for wisdom, and whose aim is friendship as well. Plato understands liberal education as a political project. Socrates refers to Glaucon, Adeimantus, and himself as “founders” (*oikistés*) (*Republic* 519c). However, it is not political in the ordinary sense because his program of education aims to create not merely partisans or even good citizens, but good human beings. It aims at founding not just any regime, but the good regime as a paradigm in the souls of the student (*Republic* 592a-b). Political education means educating the young to love justice more than injustice, and to prefer suffering injustice to committing injustice. Plato in his own name states the aim of education: “For I saw it was impossible to do anything without friends and loyal followers; and to find such men ready to hand would be a piece of sheer good luck, once our city was no longer guided by the customs and practices of our fathers, while to train up new ones was anything but easy.”¹⁰ The friendship of the wise and the just form the nucleus of the good regime. The *Republic* tells the story of Socrates and the young, founding the good regime in speech in their souls at a time when their city, Athens, “was no longer guided by the customs and practices of our fathers.”

⁸ Plato, “Gorgias,” in Plato, *Gorgias and Aristotle, Rhetoric*, translated by Joe Sachs, (Newburyport, MA: Focus Publishing, 2009), 527b-d.

⁹ Plato, “Gorgias,” 521d. See 519a.

¹⁰ Plato, “Epistle VII,” 325d.

The dialogue shows them founding anew, the city of speech in their own souls, under the cover of night.

This essay sketches out liberal education as the art of the *periagôgê*, wherein students discover the best part of themselves, or their dignity, together with friends in their common quest for a wisdom that dedicates them to justice, and cultivates in them the capacity to serve as a nucleus of a renewed political society. The essay shows how that process operates by meditating on Socrates' image of the cave in the *Republic*, and it will conclude with some historical examples that reflect the Socratic paradigm.

Receiving the Person in the Cave

Socrates introduces the cave image as signifying our nature:

“Next,” I said, “make an image of our nature (*phúsis*) as it involves education and the lack of it, by likening it to a condition such as the following” (514a).

Socrates describes human beings as prisoners in a cave. From childhood, we have had our legs and necks in restraints, which force us to look only straight ahead at shadowy images projected by puppeteers from firelight. What we know of ourselves and of the world seems restricted to what we have been told and shown. The cave not only signifies the world and society in which we live. It also signifies our own souls in their darkened condition, as in a state of sleeping,

dreaming, or death. In the cave, the world is not fully present to us, nor are we fully present to ourselves.¹¹

One of the reasons we are prisoners is that it does not occur to us to resist or to question the things we have received. We lack the capacity to think of or even name alternatives. Ours is a condition of inarticulateness and of mimicry of images, slogans, and gestures. Ours may also be a condition of forlornness and anger if somehow we sense something is amiss in our condition, though we lack the means of expressing it. Our natural condition is like a baby who wishes to know and communicate but gets angry and frustrated for being unable to do so.¹²

There is very little in our upbringing to encourage us to turn inward and to contemplate ourselves, to cultivate the self-knowledge that Socrates wishes us to cultivate. Indeed, Socrates continually has to remind us to turn inward. We are constantly forgetting that his images, including that of the just city and the cave, are for the sake of understanding the internal condition of the human soul.¹³ His images reflect the inherent paradox of Socratic education.

¹¹ Compare with John 11:38. On the cave and Hades, Eva Brann, *The Music of the Republic*, (Philadelphia: Paul Dry Books, 2004), 118-22. On the image of the cave itself, see 207-216. See also Barry Cooper, "A Lump Bred Up in Darknesse': Two Tellurian Themes in the Republic," in *Politics, Philosophy, Writing: Plato's Art of Caring for Souls*, edited by Zdravko Planinc, (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2001), 104-121.

¹² See Augustine, *Confessions*, I.vii-viii.

¹³ See Plato, *Republic*, 519e and Sachs's comment (n.121). Even the sun image can mislead. It is easy to forget that the Good, which is "beyond being," is within (*Republic* 508e-509a). That is, what is "beyond being" cannot be contained within what is. Is the good beyond being then a person (see Plato, *Lysis*, 218c-d)? Socrates does not

The prisoner is liberated from her shackles but she must be guided lest she relapse into that she is habituated. The teacher must contrive images to point the way out. Yet those very contrivances can hinder her liberation. Despite his language of compulsion, liberation cannot be compelled. What else can the teacher do?

The prisoners, like Socrates' interlocutors and us, therefore have not been taught to find themselves, or other persons. They are alienated from and forgetful themselves and others. The image suggests the darkness of our ignorance envelops even ourselves. Anyone who has ever been in a dark cave or mine knows just how deep and even penetrating that darkness can be, leading one even to lack awareness of oneself. The experience is strange, alienating, and anxious, which the young commonly experience in their lives. For example, millennial students frequently express high levels of anxiety as well as loneliness while acting in every manner, like being addicted to social media, that perpetuate that loneliness and anxiety. They inhabit their souls as caves and need to be liberated because they lack their own means of liberation.

Curiously, Socrates omits to mention the prisoners' hands. Only their necks and legs are restrained, which prevents them from turning around their bodies. Their hands are seemingly free to reach out in front and to the side of them. Perhaps they are able to place their darkened hands in front of their eyes to compare themselves with the images placed before them. Perhaps too they can touch and even hold hands with the prisoner beside them. Even so, the freedom of their hands may serve the same purpose as their restrained heads that can only

provide us with a personalist vocabulary but it is hard avoiding this conclusion (see David Walsh, *The Politics of the Person as the Politics of Being*, (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2016), 125, 179).

look ahead. The prisoner's understanding of the world is severely restricted to his immediate surroundings. He is like the citizen of liberal democracy, whose pathologically suffers "individualism," which Tocqueville describes as a compression of spatial and temporal consciousness: "he loves to enclose himself within a narrow egoism exactly limited by four ditches topped by hedges."¹⁴ Individualism, which covers a wide array of pathologies, is the modern democratic version of the inarticulate mimetic rivalry (to borrow a term from René Girard) that Socrates thinks characterizes our nature as prisoners in the cave. We shall discuss hands in further detail below.

In addition to the knowledge they have derived from immediate sense perceptions, what they know is what has been told to them, mostly likely from the rulers, image-makers, opinion-makers, and "the customs and practices of our fathers." It does not even occur to them to question what they have received or to think otherwise.

But the ignorance of the prisoners, which seems quite self-satisfied, may get unsettled by a dim awareness that something is missing, perhaps his isolation and alienation from others.¹⁵ In other words, Socrates seems to indicate that the awakening of prisoners comes not from some discovery of speculative wisdom, but that they seem to sense something is missing

¹⁴ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, edited by Eduardo Nolla, translated by James Schleiffer, (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund Press, 2010), 397. See Joshua Mitchell, *Plato's Fable: On the Mortal Condition in Shadowy Times*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 175-89.

¹⁵ This is the perplexity of Bernard Marx that drives the drama of technological mediation in Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World*.

from the experience they have from themselves and from one another. Let us consider how this might be.

Socrates describes the prisoners' alienation in response to Glaucon's comment that he has described a bizarre (*àtopos*) image and bizarre prisoners:

"Like us," I said. "First of all, do you imagine such people would have seen anything of themselves or one another other than the shadows cast by the fire onto the part of the cave right across from them?"

...

"So if they were able to converse with one another, don't you think they'd speak of these very things as they see as the beings?"

"Necessarily."

"And what if their prison also had an echo from the side across from them? Any time any of the people carrying things past uttered a sound, do you imagine they'd believe anything other than the passing shadow had made the sound?"

"By Zeus, I don't," he said.

"So in every way," I said, "such people wouldn't consider anything to be truth other than the shadows of artificial things" (*Republic* 515a-b)

The prisoners of the cave are presented with images and opinions that teach them that their own self-awareness is akin to the knowledge they have about the world. However, the

prisoners may be dimly aware that these are actually two different types of knowledge, which may lead to perplexity, an opening for learning to take place.

The world they inhabit, including its constitutive parts as well as the possibilities for their own lives that the world presents, are nothing “more than the shadows of artificial things.” The prisoners apprehend the world in monochrome sameness, as having no distinction between natural and artificial because the artificial—the shadows—are extensions of the nature—the rock of the cave that they can also touch immediately underneath them. Little in their upbringing would prepare them to think in even a basic way, of distinguishing same and other. They have no opportunity to wonder, the beginning of philosophy.

The most obvious example of such mediation of their world through artifact would be the aforementioned “customs and practices of our fathers.” The prisoners would learn from the puppet-masters that the *nomoi* of their regime are the way of the world. Their own *nomoi* are identical to nature (*physis*). But their world seems inherently mediated through artifact in a more general sense as well. They are presented a world that is all artifact but that is passed off as natural. They think the artificial and the natural are identical. Necessarily they also believe their own is identical with the Good. The seeming is the same as the being, but philosophy begins with the wonder that comes from the awareness that the seeming differs from the being. How can the prisoners begin to wonder?

Our students experience their world in somewhat similar terms. Some of them are like the prisoners in identifying their own with the Good—their own nation, their own religion, their own identity. On the other hand, our students are also conditioned to regard everything as contingent, as socially constructed and even arbitrary. While this might seem fertile ground for

philosophizing, which presupposes a difference between seeming and being, and one's own and the Good, their sense of radical contingency does quite the opposite because there is nothing to philosophize about if everything is contingent all the way down the divided line. Our students inhabit a technologically mediated world dominated by fabricated objects, including not only their digital devices but the devices through which they encounter the world. The medium is the message, as Marshall McLuhan said. Moreover, they have been taught that the rest of the world not presently dominated by fabrication is "standing reserve," to use Martin Heidegger's term, that will eventually be rearranged and refabricated. This includes not only the external world but also themselves, with transhumanism lurking around the corner.

Habituated into viewing their world as radically contingent and mediated by artifacts, they also come to view themselves as artifacts: "such people would have seen [nothing] of themselves or one another" other "than as shadows cast by the fire onto the part of the cave right across from them." They would have been taught to view themselves and each other also as this blend of natural and artificial, as being the same substance of the shadows that they perceive as extensions of the cave wall. One thinks of how people today fabricate a sense of self-hood online, curating an avatar that projects an idealized and highly controlled image of themselves, only to wonder why they cannot enjoy genuine friendships with others.¹⁶ They would have been taught there is no substantial difference between the shadows they see on the wall, and the voices projected from that wall, and the persons they encounter in proximity

¹⁶ See Roger Scruton, "Hiding Behind the Screen," *New Atlantis*, Summer 2010,

<https://www.thenewatlantis.com/publications/hiding-behind-the-screen>

with one another. “If they were able to converse with one another,” not only would they regard the shadows as true beings, but they would regard one another as substantially the same as the shadows, these compounds of artificial and natural.

The prisoners also experience their existence as fundamentally agonistic and competitive, leading to a servility before the puppeteers:

And if there had been any honors and commendations and prizes for them then from one another for the person who had the sharpest sight of the things passing by and remembered best all the things that usually passed by before and after them and at the same time, and based on those things had greatest ability to predict what was going to come, do you think he’d be longing for those rewards and feel jealousy towards the ones honored by those people and in power among them (*Republic* 516d).

Life in the cave consists in competing with others to see who can best please the ruler-puppeteers, like our own students whose passivity seems based on their expecting their teachers to tell them what to say and do. The life of prisoners seems to be one of mimetic rivalry. Mimesis after all is “far removed from the truth...and... joined with the part in us that’s far removed from thoughtfulness, and is a companion and friend that can lead to nothing healthy or true.”¹⁷ The standard for excellence for the prisoners is the capacity to mimic the

¹⁷ *Republic* 603b. Of course, this is not Socrates’ last word on mimesis, for he has rendered an account of it before using it himself. See Mitchell, *Plato’s Fable* and John White, “Imitation,” in Plato, *Republic*, translated by Joe Sachs, 323-46.

images projected by the puppeteers. There can be no doubt they are encouraged to commit injustice against fellow prisoners in their competition to see who can best mimic the puppeteer-rulers. One thinks of the obsequious forms of worship and mimicry in tyrannical cults of personality, including those of Stalin, Mao, and Hitler.¹⁸ Or the manner in which North Korean students are conditioned to think only in terms of ideological slogans.¹⁹ Referring to Hitler's Germany, Eric Voegelin speaks of the dehumanization that occurs under ideological tyranny as a spiritual "stupidity" (*Dummheit*).²⁰ The obsequious submission to democratic public opinion and slogans by our students is a milder, and arguably uncoerced, form of this condition.²¹ Socrates points out someone who had looked upon "justice itself" would not be interested in joining such competition. The prisoners experience the cave as slaves worshiping a tyrant, as a realm of injustice and servility. Having no sense of themselves or others, they know no alternative.

¹⁸ "People knew when to applaud at public gatherings, and when to invoke his name on public occasions.

Repetition was key, not innovation, meaning that excessive flattery could be dangerous too. Stalin, noted Nadezhda Mandelstam, wife of the murdered poet, had no need of zealots of any kind: he wanted people to be obedient instruments of his will, with no convictions of their own" (Dikötter, *How to be a Dictator*, 81). See also Dikötter's discussion of "Little Stalins" (78-9).

¹⁹ Suki Kim, "Teaching Essay Writing in Pyongyang," *Slate*, December 2, 2014, http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/foreigners/2014/12/what_it_was_like_to_teach_essay_writing_to_north_korean_graduate_students.html

²⁰ Voegelin, *Hitler and the Germans, The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, vol. 30, edited by Detlev Clemens and Brendan Purcell, (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1999), 96-102.

²¹ For details, see Kronman, *The Assault on American Excellence*.

Lending a Hand to the Person

Yet perhaps there is something wrong with the picture that is presented of the prisoners. Recall the prisoners' hands are not bound. Prisoners cannot see one another but it is quite possible that in that cramped cave, they can touch each other with their hands. Through their sense of touch they can detect something essentially different from what they see, suggesting to them a sense of otherness from themselves. Elsewhere Socrates points out to young Theaetetus that the perception we conduct through touching actually takes place in the soul. The soul's perception of sameness and difference is prior to touch, which means touch leads back to soul, at least for those inclined to seek.²² Also, the blind use their hands to know their surroundings.²³

Hands also guide others. At the start of *Parmenides*, Socrates narrates that upon leaving their home at Clazomenae with Glaucon and Adeimantus, who happen also to be his two interlocutors in *Republic* as well, Adeimantus takes his hand to direct him to speak to Cephalus, in whose home the *Republic* dialogue also takes place.²⁴ Unlike the opening of the *Republic*, where Polemarchus' slave grabs Socrates by the "behind my cloak," taking another's hand is a friendly gesture conducted without coercion. Socrates may have hand-holding in mind as well when he explains a teacher must coerce and drag a prisoner from darkness to light. While a

²² Plato, *Theaetetus*, 185c-186e. See also Aristotle, *On the Soul*, II.11.

²³ See Homer, *Odyssey*, VIII.195-99.

²⁴ Plato, *Parmenides* 126c.

rougher act, it still serves a similar purpose. Holding one's hand, especially in darkness, is an act of a teacher, a *psychagogue* who brings a student from dangerous darkness to light.²⁵

I suspect Socrates' silence is not only purposeful but like his other uses of silence, and the uses of silence in other literary and artistic genres, it is meant to convey something essential that words cannot grasp.²⁶ Simon Leys describes the comparable case of Confucius' use of silence: "Like the empty space in a painting—which concentrates and radiates all the inner energy of the painting—Confucius's silence is not a withdrawal or an escape; it leads to a deeper and closer engagement with life and reality."²⁷ Just as Plato in the *Seventh Letter* claims that the most important things cannot be written down or spoken of, Socrates' silence concerning hands points to something most important and ineffable: the encounter with the person. As an allegory of human nature, the cave image, including what is explicit and implicit, points to those things within ourselves that either facilitate or resist learning.²⁸ If the image is an imperfect contrivance to prompt us to turn inward, then perhaps a silence or gap within the image may serve that purpose more effectively, at least for those who choose to look.

²⁵ For instance, Virgil frequently touches Dante to guide him through the darkness in *Inferno* (Dante, *Inferno*, translated by Anthony Esolen, (New York: Modern Library, 2005), IX.51, 58, 73, XVII.93-96, XXXIV.70, 82. See also XV.29).

²⁶ On the silences of Socrates, see James M. Rhodes, *Eros, Wisdom, and Silence: Plato's Erotic Dialogues*, (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2003), 1-112.

²⁷ Simon Leys, *The Hall of Uselessness: Collected Essays*, (New York: New York Review of Books, 2013), 117.

²⁸ See comment by Joe Sachs in Plato, *Republic*, 213n.118.

The hand of the stranger they touch would seem very different from the shadowy hand that society says represents (and is identical to) what they are touching. Socrates' seems to suggest a disjunction between the vision of the world they are presented with on the cave wall, and the silent encounter of the person beside them. The prisoners may be unable to reconcile those two encounters, which places them into a state of perplexity and even alienation. But it is a state they have no way yet of describing or naming: how can they name that of which they are ignorant?

We face the fundamental dilemma of education: how do we know what to seek if we lack knowledge of what is to be sought? Someone must help us. We must somehow be open to the other to come to our aid. But who and how? Our forlornness makes us angry, frustrated, and cynical. We are also habituated to mimic the authoritative images our society offers because our own souls are divided against themselves (*Republic* 602c-603b). We are not friends of ourselves and so cannot be friends with another. Instead, we look outside ourselves for seeming truth, and depend on authority figures to provide the "right answers" because we regard education as a matter, as "certain people who claim to be professors" claim it is, of "putting sight into blind eyes" and "an art of implanting sight" into the soul (*Republic* 518b-c). We are habituated to act how others expect us, including family, teachers, rulers, and other figures of authority.

We lack the intellectual and spiritual resources to distinguish those kinds of professors from teachers who instead regard teaching as the art of the turning-around (*periagôgê*) of the whole soul, from darkness to light. To the young uninitiate, the philosopher appears identical to the sophist because both lead them down a maze of confusing arguments that ends with a

conclusion opposite to what he initially thought, but that to the student appears as no truer than that from which he began. The philosopher's talk of experiencing a "sudden" flash of insight seems like manipulative mystification or at least like wishful thinking. Thinking or philosophizing seems not only pointless, but a danger to one's social status, and indeed one's very being. Prisoners have been taught to see life as essentially competitive and agonistic, which makes them think suffering injustice the worst evil one can suffer. Better they get a business degree, as their parents expected of them. Opening oneself to another, as a student to a teacher, puts one at risk at suffering that worst evil, or at least a lower annual income than what their parents expect them to earn.

Adeimantus explains his anguish to Socrates:

[The young] believe that from inexperience in questioning and answering they're led a little off course by the argument at each question, and when the little deflections have been added up at the end of the discussion, a big blunder blazes up that's opposite to the things they said in the first place, and like unskillful checker players who end up getting backed into a corner by people who are skilled at it, and have no way to make a move, they too end up backed into a corner and not having any way to say anything in their turn by this sort of checkers played not with game pieces but with arguments (*Republic* 487b-c).

This cynicism makes the student-prisoner resistant, then, to demonstration through dialectic, which Socrates notes obliges the teacher to respond with something with which the student-prisoner feels comfortable, an image.

However, the teacher runs a serious risk here because the image with which he responds, as part of his contrivances for the art of the turning-around, must differ fundamentally from the images to which the student is used. The student is habituated to act as others expect him to. The image contrived by the genuine teacher must speak to the student's own experience, but must also come from outside the range of cave experiences the student has hitherto been made to expect. It must be a special image because it must communicate a truth of which the student-prisoner has no experience, but in terms the student can understand: "there's not a single other experience like it, but it's necessary to pull things together from many places in order to give an image of it and a defense on their things" (*Republic* 487e-488a). The teacher will have to reach the student where she is, but there must be something within the image that the teacher delivers that uplifts the student as well.

And so the teacher will have to offer a special type of image, a bizarre (*àtopos*) image as Glaucon calls Socrates' cave image. Perhaps the teacher should not even provide an image but indeed must offer a person, the person of Eros, who appears to the student as an uncanny apparition or godsend. The teacher will exhibit a hodgepodge combination of strange and contradictory characteristics: "he plots to ensnare what is beautiful and good, since he's courageous, hasty and high-strung, an expert hunter, always weaving some devices, desirous of good sense and resourceful, philosophizing throughout his whole life, an

expert wizard, potion-master and sophist. And in his nature he came forth neither as immortal nor as mortal; but in one and the same day, he flourishes and lives at one moment."²⁹ To this uncanny godsend, the student may respond in shock and wonder, perhaps responding as the legendary Anubis responded when seeing Heracles had suddenly appeared before him in Hades.³⁰ Into the darkened pit of the student's soul comes the Socratic figure who will grab him, and drag him out into the light, all the while knocking off, with dialectic, the dead weights from his soul that weigh it down. Learning will be difficult, and few will wish to exert themselves. But the Socratic figure who does this cannot do this without first inserting himself into the student's consciousness as a person. Students experience this frequently when, looking back on their education, they vividly remember their teachers and the intellectual and erotic excitement they imparted in their own awakening. Students less frequently remember the contents of that education. The prisoners experience their lack of resource primarily not as a lack of information about the speculative metaphysical wisdom and what resides outside the cave. Rather, they experience first and foremost their inability to be a person unto themselves, and a person in relation to the other. They at least know that they do not know who they are as a person who may come into relationship with another. The Socratic teacher enters this gap by offering his person.

The Constitution of the Turning-Around

²⁹ Plato, *Symposium*, 203d-e; see Plato, *Republic*, 484a-504b.

³⁰ Plato, *Symposium*, 213c.

Education entails turning around the imprisoned student and bringing her up, out of the cave, and into the light:

This power is present in the soul of each person, and the instrument by which each one learns, as if it were an eye that's not able to turn away from darkness toward the light in any other way than along with the whole body, needs to be turned around along with the whole soul, away from what's fleeting, until it becomes able to endure gazing at what is and at the brightest of what *is*, and this, we're claiming, is the good (*Republic* 518c-d).

Socrates recognizes a fundamentally equal potential in each of us. The power is "present in the soul of each person." Education entails leading the student so she is able to participate in the common Logos of humanity. The image of the sun within the cave allegory signifies "the look of the good, but once it's been seen, it has to be concluded that it's the very cause, for all things, of all things right and beautiful, that it generates light and its source in the visible realm, and is itself the source that bestows truth and insight in the intelligible realm. Anyone who's going to act intelligently in private or in public needs to have sight of it" (*Republic* 517b-c; see also 516c). The good is "the cause of all things" (516c), "what is" (515d, 521c), and "justice itself" (517e). It is not a piece of information but an infusion of being (or "beyond being") that reorients the soul. The soul is transformed by turning toward it because in turning from darkness to light, from ignorance to wisdom, we experience the plenitude of our being, our selfhood. It presents

a “way of life” (*Republic* 521b) superior to the competition for political offices and other pursuits in the cave.

What do we make of Socrates’ apparently contradictory claim that seeing the good is both a mystical vision that reorients one’s soul and over which one has no control, and the “way of life” over which, presumably, one does have control? Consider the revelation that comes from reading a great text.

Socrates wants us to read and discuss great texts together. Xenophon reports: “Just as others are pleased by a good horse or dog or bird, I myself am pleased to an even higher degree by good friends ... and the treasures of the wise humans of old which they left behind by writing them in books, I unfold and go through them together with my friends, and if we see something good, we pick it out and regard it as a great gain if we thus become useful to one another.”³¹ Students find themselves as learners of a common text that constitutes them as a community of learners because they experience themselves as being judged by its wisdom that comes from a source they recognize as greater than their own minds. They discover that their common text speaks to them across vast stretches of time and space, that its author is a master who raises questions concerning their existence that they previously have never considered, but the author is also mysteriously their contemporary and companion because he enables them to understand their own condition, and themselves. The author enables them to see afar, and to see what is most near, themselves.

³¹ Xenophon, *Memorabilia*, in *Memorabilia. Oeconomicus. Symposium. Apologia*, translated by A.C. Marchant and O.J. Todd, Loeb Classical Library, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1923), I, vi,14. See my *The Form of Politics*, 18-21.

The text serves as a kind of constitution—a way of life— for the joint act of contemplation by a gathering of students because they find themselves embraced by its horizon whose edge none of them, including their teacher, can breach. By discovering themselves as fellow learners of a common text, they also learn to recognize their individual shortcomings but also, in intellectual humility, to trust one another as fellow helpers in the common task of discovery. Their discovery of this can come in the form of a revelation or metanoia, a “turning around” of the soul.³² One might say that Socrates’ cave image (and the *Republic* as a whole) is not only one such constitution, but it is the constitution of constitutions. Indeed, “constitution” or “regime” is the very title of *Republic* (*politiea*).³³

Theirs becomes no longer the cave but the paradigmatic “safe space” where, in mutually recognized perplexity and loving adventure, they acknowledge everything they utter is at best a half-formed thought and none is much better formed than another’s. Their “common space of reason” is a community of equals, and the joy and delight they each take in one another on

³² I provide an account of such constitution upon teaching *The Eric Voegelin Reader* (edited by Charles R. Embry and Glenn Hughes, (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2017)): “Establishing True Community in Philia Among Students: Teaching the Eric Voegelin Reader,” *Voegelinview*, July 30, 2018, <https://voegelinview.com/establishing-true-community-in-phiaia-among-students-teaching-the-eric-voegelin-reader/>

³³ Travis D. Smith reports of a great Socratic teacher on the *Republic*: “That book is so comprehensive that it should be called simply, *The Book*, declared Mansfield, except that there is another one out there that has already appropriated the name” (“Harvey Mansfield: Teaching Not Differently, But Further Than the Parties,” in *Teaching in an Age of Ideology*, edited by John von Heyking and Lee Trepanier, (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2013), 236n.24).

their common quest is the foundation for a friendship that surpasses any political opinion they now recognize as less important than the precious insights they gained together about things far more important than politics. As Kronman notes, their constitution provides them with a citadel from which to judge the puppeteers, sophists, and other cave skulkers who, perhaps even in the name of a shadowy kind of free speech, would undermine the conditions of conversation. The liberated students can proclaim to them: “You want to draw us back into our private worlds of feeling and experience. You want us to join you in putting feelings before thought. That we will not do. It would be beneath us to refuse to allow you to speak... Our shared devotion to the idea of a community of conversation is deeper than any of the other beliefs that set us apart.”³⁴

Socrates warns the soul who gazes upon the sun and is forced to return will have difficulty playing the games of the prisoners. Even so, he points out acting intelligently in private or in public depends on having had sight of the good precisely because this reorientation inoculates the soul against the mimetic desire of the prisoners. The student now sees that game as a fool’s game because the pursuit of injustice undermines the divine element within himself that he has discovered. Instead he is now confident to stand up to injustice, as when Socrates, serving as prytane, faced down death threats for refusing to judge the ten generals.³⁵ He has the freedom to walk away from political life if and when it demands he commits injustice, as when Socrates listened to his daimon, or when a recent liberal arts

³⁴ Kronman, *The Assault on American Excellence*, 118.

³⁵ Plato, *Apology* 32b; Xenophon, *Hellenica*, 1.7.15.

graduate quits his new governmental job because his superiors want him to spy on his colleagues instead of doing the policy work he was originally hired to do.

The prisoner gets released or liberated, by a teacher presumably. The process of having one's soul turned around is painful, and Socrates claims the teacher must use a combination of force and care to help her become accustomed to the greater light, and to become "rich in their very being" (*Republic* 521a). He claims one needs to "drag him away from there by force... along the rough, steep road up, and didn't let go until he'd dragged him out into the light of the sun" (*Republic* 515e). The prisoner would be angry at being dragged and would have to be prevented from relapsing into old, bad habits. The gamesmanship of the cave's mimetic desire is attractive but its attractions are like encrustations on the soul that need to be "knocked off" (*Republic* 519b). For example, the teacher may have to shame his students for their addiction to social media, which hinders the development of habits of careful reading and thinking. The teacher may have to make his students feel "uncomfortable." While Socrates emphasizes the use of force on the prisoner, care and gentleness is also necessary, and perhaps prior to force, to encourage the prisoner along and to become confident that the liberation is indeed leading somewhere. Instilling confidence into students is a challenge for teachers. In uplifting the student, the teacher also teaches the student to love what is best within and to give the student confidence that the effort to cultivate what is best within is worthwhile.

Friends to Themselves, Friends With One Another

We usually say today that liberal education is about teaching students how to think. This is true but it leaves much out. As Hannah Arendt has shown, with special reference to Socrates, thinking is the act of speaking with oneself. Thinking requires one is in agreement or consistent with oneself. One must be a friend to oneself. Quoting Aristotle, she writes a dialogue takes place “‘within the soul, and though we can always raise objections to the outward word, to the inward discourse we cannot object,’ because here the partner is oneself, and I cannot possibly want to become my own adversary.”³⁶ As we saw above, the soul submerged in mimetic rivalry and who has never tasted the good will be its own adversary. Thinking is the act of the self that is at one with itself and therefore capable of thinking difference. This is what liberation from the cave achieves because in the cave the self experiences itself in dissipation, which is to say it cannot experience itself because there is no self to experience. It is never present to itself and therefore incapable of genuine thought. Nor is it capable of friendship toward the other because there is no self present to bestow friendship, nor to receive friendship.

The liberated prisoner learns to become a dialogic self who seeks friendship with other dialogic selves, or at least to initiate those who show the potential to become dialogic selves capable of friendship:

To Socrates, the duality of the two-in-one meant no more than that if you want to think, you must see to it that the two who carry on the dialogue be in good shape, that the partners be *friends*. The partner who comes to life when you are alert and alone is the

³⁶ Hannah Arendt, *The Life of Mind*, one-volume edition, (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1978), 186.

only one from whom you can never get away—except by ceasing to think. It is better to suffer wrong than to do wrong, because you can remain the friend of the sufferer; who would want to be the friend of and have to live together with a murderer?³⁷

Here Arendt connects the dialogic self with the Socratic pre- or meta-political teaching, that before one enters politics one needs to learn that justice is better than injustice, and that suffering injustice is preferable to committing injustice. Her comment about the murderer not wishing to live with himself brings to mind the excessive need for love and recognition that tyrants like Stalin and Mao were said to exhibit.³⁸ It is as if their excessive need was meant to compensate outwardly their inability to live inwardly with themselves in their dissipated condition, which is the way Socrates describes the tyrant in *Republic IX*.

So the liberated student learns not to receive images and information passively—though there are “professors” and sophists who think that is the paradigm of learning (*Republic* 518b-c)—but to become a “two-in-one,” that is, a dialogic self. She is friend to herself because she loves herself properly and cultivates what is best in herself, and she is capable of conducting

³⁷ Arendt, *The Life of Mind*, 187-88. Emphasis in original. Plato explains in his own name: “This is the advice that Dion and I gave to Dionysius since his father’s neglect had resulted in his being without culture and unused to associations appropriate to his position. We said that once embarked upon the course just mentioned he should induce others among his relatives and companions to become friends and partners in the pursuit of virtue; but above all to become a friend to himself, for in this respect he was incredibly deficient” (Plato, “Epistle VII,” 332c-d).

³⁸ Frank Dikötter, *How to be a Dictator: The Cult of Personality in the Twentieth Century*, (New York: Bloomsbury, 2019), 84, 109.

dialogue with herself in such a way that enable her to discern herself clearly, and to discern other beings and persons clearly. As Socrates argues in *Republic X*, the soul enslaved to mimesis, which characterizes the prisoners in the cave, is contrary to itself until it can obtain insight into what is (*Republic* 602d-603b). Because it is contrary to itself, it slavishly imitates what it receives, instead of being a soul capable of self-direction and self-reflection. Nor are prisoners capable of inviting another into themselves to become “another self” because there is no self by which to encounter another self; there is no space into which the other can enter.

The dialogic self who is friends with herself is also capable of friendship with others. Being a two-in-one self who is in “good shape” does not mean one is absolutely self-sufficient. One still needs friends. Indeed, being two-in-one who properly loves oneself necessarily leads to sharing one’s life and indeed consciousness with another friend. Aristotle concludes a lengthy discussion of selfhood and self-consciousness by claiming that the activity of reasoning itself necessarily issues forth in the practice of friendship:

But one’s being is choiceworthy on account of the awareness of oneself as being good, and such an awareness is pleasant in itself. Therefore 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.³⁹

³⁹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1170b10–12. For details, see my *The Form of Politics*, Chapter Two.

For Aristotle as much as Socrates, the good life, one that is oriented toward the good, consists of “living together and sharing conversation and thinking.” Liberal education aims at this. Being a teacher in the tradition of liberal education consists of initiating students into this way of life, of friendship and conversation and thinking. Friends engaged in conversation present, reveal, and share the best parts of themselves with one another. This sharing constitutes the common space of reasoning together that the teacher seeks to establish in the classroom, and that serves as a benchmark for lesser spaces of reason, including the public agora when students return to the cave. In this common space of reasoning together, they discover themselves, one another, and the good together they seek. They thus break free from the mimetic rivalry that characterizes the cave.

The possibility of liberation from the mimetic rivalry of the cave can be distinguished in the way Leo Strauss contrasts the bonds of friendship between a philosopher and his interlocutors (and students), and the desire for recognition that characterizes the competition for political rule. Strauss objects to Alexandre Kojève’s claim that the relationship of the philosopher to his interlocutors is the same as the relationship of the ruler to subjects. Kojève argues that both cases are about recognition, that is, about recognizing another’s authority, i.e., of having “his eminently human value” recognized. For Kojève, one obeys another’s advice or orders not, strictly speaking, out of fear of another’s strength, “but because he spontaneously considers them worthy of being followed or carried out, and he does so not because he himself recognizes their intrinsic value, but only because *this particular person* gives this advice or these

orders.”⁴⁰ We recognize the authority figure as the one we “*willingly...* give way in the streets.”⁴¹ While this may be true of political rulers, one is also reminded of the exaggerated sense of entitlement and craven demand for recognition that characterizes many academics, and their petulant response to not having their “expertise” recognized.

However, Strauss argues that the philosopher relates to his interlocutors not in terms of recognition but as friends: “The attachment to human beings as human beings is not peculiar to the philosopher. As philosopher, he is attached to a particular type of human being, namely to actual or potential philosophers or to his friends. His attachment to his friends is deeper than his attachment to other human beings, even to his nearest and dearest.”⁴² The philosopher considers his friends those primarily whose souls are well-formed and full of potential for becoming attuned to the eternal order:

[P]recisely because he has had a glimpse of the eternal order, he cannot help being intensely pleased by the aspect of a healthy or well-ordered soul, and he cannot help being intensely pained by the aspect of a diseased or chaotic soul, without regard to his

⁴⁰ Alexandre Kojève, “Tyranny and Wisdom,” in Leo Strauss, *On Tyranny*, Revised and Expanded edition, edited by Victor Gourevitch and Michael S. Roth, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 143-44. Emphasis in original.

⁴¹ Kojève, “Tyranny and Wisdom,” 143, quoting Xenophon, *Hiero*, 7.2 (in *On Tyranny*, 14). Emphasis is Kojève’s. The full statement by Simonides expresses the mimetic desire inherent in tyranny and in what the prisoners of the cave allegory experience: “[A]ll who are present—may serve you in all your commands without excuses, admire you, rise from their seats, give way in the streets, and always honor you both in speeches and deeds.”

⁴² Leo Strauss, “Restatement,” in *On Tyranny*, 200.

own needs or benefits. Hence he cannot help being attached to men of well-ordered souls: he desires “to be together” with such men all the time. He admires such men not on account of any services which they may render to him but simply because they are what they are.... The philosopher therefore has the urge to educate potential philosophers simply because he cannot help loving well-ordered souls.⁴³

The philosopher does not need to be recognized or admired by others. His quest for truth is enough, and he does this in conversations with others. He is quite capable of admiring himself, and exhibits proper self-love and love of others.⁴⁴ Strauss thereby validates Aristotle’s contention, for instance, that love is superior to honor because it is supremely freer and more active; moreover, honor is only worthwhile when it confirms one’s own opinion of oneself.⁴⁵ Note too Strauss’s claim the philosopher “cannot help being attached” to well-ordered souls, as if it were involuntary. He is “intensely” drawn to them as he is drawn to the good. That is his route to the good. He must keep the company of well-ordered souls, he must seek them in the cave, because that is where the good is to be found, in the souls of his friends.

Because liberated prisoners learn to cherish what is best in themselves, they also cherish what is best in one another and seek to preserve it. When Socrates claims that before entering politics, one must first learn that justice is better than injustice and that suffering injustice is preferable to committing it, he seems to have in mind the horror a well-ordered soul

⁴³ Strauss, “Restatement,” 201.

⁴⁴ Strauss, “Restatement” 204.

⁴⁵ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, VIII.8.

feels at the prospect of betraying one's friend, one whom he "cannot help being attached." One not only betrays one's friend, but also betrays oneself. The friend as "other self" who is also "inside" us, stands before us as a reminder of our self-destruction when we commit injustice. The person we face reminds us that we also face ourselves, our other self. Having tasted friendship in the good, it is monstrous to deny it then to oneself in betraying a friend. Why would one wish to revert back into a state of dissipation, whose very meaning means one's self dissolves? Why choose to return to the cave, not as a conscious and thinking soul who has seen the light, but to revert to the state of a dissipated prisoner's non-thinking and non-being? Why choose one's own self-destruction? Socrates might very well have understood why Judas hanged himself after betraying Jesus.⁴⁶ Injustice is its own punishment.

Friends Most Suited Must Govern

Saying her eyes need adjusting to the light signifies the transformation of the soul from one used to not-thinking and mimetic desire, to one capable of discerning beings and true being, and being able to think discursively about them. The ascent out of the cave is an ascent out of the pointless and indeed animalic cycle of vengeance and mimetic desire that characterizes most cities. The ascent signifies how the student learns dialectic, the practice of thinking together, with one's self and another. By learning dialectic, the student learns not only how to

⁴⁶ For Augustine, the evil of original sin is the fact that it was not chosen for some inferior good but that it was chosen for no good, for non-being. This is why Augustine says it was "nilled," not "willed," to signify the nullity, and why death was the just punishment for original sin.

think on her own but also together with others. This is why Socrates states the liberated prisoner who sees “justice itself” becomes capable of acting “intelligently in private or in public.”

The liberated prisoner is compelled to return to the cave in part because she “cannot help being attached” to those with potential to be her friends. Not only does she understand why justice is better than injustice, and suffering injustice is preferable to committing it, her soul is habituated into the practice of justice and of friendship:

So it’s necessary for each of you in turn to go down (*katabateon*) into the communal dwelling and to get used to gazing at dark objects with the others, because when you’re used to it you’ll see thousands of times better than the people there, and recognize each sort of image for what it is and what it’s an image of, from having seen the truth about beautiful and just and good things. And so the city will be governed by you and by us wide awake, and not in a dream the way most are governed now by people who fight with each other over shadows and form factions over ruling, as though that were some great good. But the truth is surely this: that city in which those who are going to rule are least eager to rule is necessarily governed best and with the least divisiveness, while the one that gets the opposite sort of rulers is governed in the opposite way (*Republic* 520c-d).

The ascent out of the cave is an image of the Socratic teaching that before one enters politics, one must learn that justice is superior to injustice and suffering injustice is preferable to

committing it.⁴⁷ That is the “political art in the true sense” in which Socrates claims that only he is practically engaged.⁴⁸

Such teaching brings the student into the *logos* of our common humanity, which enables one to sift through the confusion of images and opinions over which cave prisoners compete, and so truly to discern the genuine aims that human beings pursue but constantly fail to obtain because of their confusion. By bringing the student into the *logos* of our common humanity, one also beholds that which is most common to all and so makes possible the art of politics, understood as the art of reconciliation, of turning enemies into friends. Only experience in the common *logos* of our humanity can one behold the other as a partner in the project of reconciliation, of friendship, and thereby capable of ruling with the aim of friendship. Those who can govern “best and with the least divisiveness” are those least divisive in themselves.

The soul who has seen “justice itself” is the one whose most divine element has become present to himself, and to others in friendship. Such a soul knows better than others that committing injustice means self-destruction. In his philosophical friendships he has first-hand experience in beholding why justice is such a divine good for he has seen it in the other.

Plato states in his own name that political society is founded upon the nucleus of friends who have had these experiences. Indeed he emphasizes this is especially the case when one’s “city was no longer guided by the customs and practices of our fathers.”⁴⁹ When the ancient customs are inoperative, or when one’s society has descended into the depths of cave-like

⁴⁷ Plato, *Gorgias* 527b-e.

⁴⁸ Plato, *Gorgias* 521d.

⁴⁹ Plato, Ep. VII 325d.

tyranny, one has nowhere to turn except to the Socratic friend who offers his hand that drags or pulls one up out of the cave into the realm of reasoning together.

The Genesis of Politics as the Party of Friends

In this essay I have alluded frequently to Plato's *Seventh Letter* in which he explains that political reform cannot occur unless led by lovers of virtue who are friends with one another. Friendship among the virtuous is the nucleus of the good regime. This Socratic/Platonic teaching is frequently forgotten in our time. Liberal democrats typically look to the social contract as their founding myth.⁵⁰ That myth tells the story that people come together not as friends but as self-interested individuals seeking common advantage through universally agreed-upon rules.⁵¹ *Leviathan* by Thomas Hobbes is perhaps the most famous and compelling modern version of this myth. Even so it is important to note that Hobbes dedicates his great demolition of the Socratic politics of friendship to his good friend, Sidney Godolphin, who was a central figure in the party of friends to which they both belonged, the Great Tew Circle.⁵² The

⁵⁰ See Martha Nussbaum, "The Enduring Significance of John Rawls," *Evatt Journal*, Vol. 2, No. 8, December 2002.

<<https://evatt.org.au/papers/enduring-significance-john-rawls.html>>

⁵¹ As Plato as Glaucon criticize in *Republic* (358e-361d), and has Callicles criticize in *Gorgias* (482c-486d).

⁵² On the Great Tew, and their role in constructing the post-civil war era in England in the seventeenth-century, see Hugh Trevor-Roper, "The Great Tew Circle," in *Catholics, Anglicans, and Puritans: Seventeenth Century Essays* (Chicago Press, 1988), ch. 4 (pp. 166-230). According to Travis D. Smith, "Hobbes's political thought contains a sustained attack on friendship" ("Hobbes on Getting By with Little Help from Friends," in *Friendship and Politics:*

actions of the founder of the modern social contract myth may have followed more closely those set out by Plato than by his own work.

Let us conclude by briefly considering two twentieth-century examples of Socratic statesman who sought to create a party of friends, Jan Patočka and Eric Voegelin. Both cultivated the “political art in the true sense”⁵³ in face of totalitarian destruction of common humanity. Patočka was Czechoslovakia’s and perhaps central Europe’s most significant philosopher in the second half of the twentieth century. He was one of the founding signers and spokesmen of the Charter 77 movement, which demanded the Czech communist government recognize the Helsinki agreements on human rights.⁵⁴ For his effort he was fired from his position at Charles University, and later in 1977 died as a result of injuries suffered under interrogation by the secret police. In the three years before he was killed he delivered a series of lectures on Plato in the homes of friends. These were later published as *Plato and Europe*, in which the guiding argument was the care of the soul. One of the seminar participants

Essays in Political Thought, edited by John von Heyking and Richard Avramenko, (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008), 214).

⁵³ Plato, *Gorgias* 521d.

⁵⁴ For details, see Petr Lom, “Foreword,” in Jan Patočka, *Plato and Europe*, translated by Petr Lom, (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), xiii-xxi. For a more detailed account, see Martin Palouš, “Charter 77: Forty Years Later,” paper presented to the annual meeting of the Eric Voegelin Society, 2017. I thank Professor Palouš for sharing his paper with me.

and future president of the post-communist Czech Republic, Vaclav Havel, declared “[t]hese unofficial seminars pulled us into the world of philosophizing in its true original word.”⁵⁵

Another Charter 77 member, Martin Palouš, describes Patočka’s decision to lead Charter 77 as his “Socratic turn”; it was his decision to re-enter the cave. Even so, the Plato seminars were attended by numerous other members of Charter 77. Palouš describes these seminars as having constituted the “parallel polis” to that of the Czech tyranny, whose animating experience as that through the seminars they had been uplifted from their isolated loneliness into a common space of reason.⁵⁶ They had learned to think as the dialogic selves that we saw Socrates and Arendt discuss. By becoming dialogic selves, they learned to enter the common world of humanity, as partners and friends who would then form Charter 77. They were uplifted out of the cave into the light, and thereupon made their own Socratic turns to form Charter 77. Palouš explains:

Signing Charter 77 marked for me, a very specific, somewhat bizarre, but very real entry into plurality. It meant a really strong existential encounter with those who were also finding themselves on board of our small, rickety and thus permanently endangered boat that could sink any moment; people to whom I was bound, whether I liked them or not,

⁵⁵ Lom, “Foreword,” xv, quoting Havel’s obituary for Patočka, *Charter 77 and Human Rights in Czechoslovakia*, ed., H. G. Skilling, (London: George Allen, 1981), 242.

⁵⁶ Roger Scruton conveys the cave’s darkness in 1970s Prague in *Notes From Underground*, (New York: Beaufort Books, 2014).

whether they were my good friends or weird and sometime even crazy individuals, by an unbreakable bond of solidarity and mutual understanding.⁵⁷

Palouš' account appeals directly to Socrates and Arendt, both of whom also informed Patočka's philosophizing and Socratic turn. The "parallel polis" was the city of friends constituted by Patočka, the "Socrates of Prague," that formed the nucleus of post-communist Czech Republic and Slovakia.

Eric Voegelin's own scholarship was an act of Socratic statesmanship.⁵⁸ Like Patočka, he saw philosophizing as an act of resistance against dehumanizing totalitarian ideologies. It is an attempt to recapture one's humanity. It cultivates "existential virtues" including justice, learning how to die, love for the good and the beautiful, and friendship because being initiated into the life of reason, one is initiated into the "common logos of mankind." Friendship among mature human beings is the "experiential nucleus" of true political community.⁵⁹

Community in the *nous*, carried by that noetic self, is for Aristotle the basic political virtue, the *philia politike* [political friendship] because only if the community is based on

⁵⁷ Palouš, "Charter 77," 32

⁵⁸ A lengthier account of Voegelin's Socratic statesmanship can be found in my "Eric Voegelin and the Art of the Peripatetic," in *Teaching in an Age of Ideology*, 87-114. See also my "Establishing True Community in *Philia* Among Students: Teaching the Eric Voegelin Reader."

⁵⁹ Eric Voegelin, *Modernity Without Restraint, Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, volume 5, edited by Manfred Henningsen, (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2000), 140.

that love in the noetic self will it have order. A common interest in a profitable business at the expense of other people will not be a particularly sound basis for a government or for a political community. What must always rule is that ultimate reasonableness for which we sometimes use the term the *common good*: It is common insofar as it is the common reason that we have to control our passions. *Philia politike* is the noetic love; and if there is, as in inner society, a factor that controls passions and keeps them under control (because passions are always there), then one can speak, in regard to outer society, of a *homonoia*, a common *nous*.⁶⁰

This statement might be the most concise summary of Voegelin's political thought anywhere in his oeuvre. Political friendship is the substance of politics. It can only be achieved by mature people friendly with one another and, because "*That* is reason: openness toward the ground,"⁶¹ they are also open to one another.

Voegelin's activities as a philosophical founder are seen most clearly in his "Hitler and the Germans" lectures he delivered in 1964 in Munich.⁶² Purcell compares his student audience to cave prisoners: "For his audience, encountering Voegelin delivering the lectures was like meeting someone coming up from the underworld of Plato's cave, would be their Socratic

⁶⁰ Voegelin, "In Search of the Ground," in *Published Essays, 1953-1965, Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, volume 11, edited by Ellis Sandoz, (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2000), 231.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 232. Emphasis in original.

⁶² Voegelin, *Hitler and the Germans*. Clemens and Purcell provide a useful overview of Voegelin's statecraft in these lectures in "Editors' Introductions," 1-40; see Heyking, "Eric Voegelin and the Art of the Periagoge," 105-108.

guide. In that sense, Manfred Henningsen [who was a student in the audience] remarked that their greatest impact was in their actual performance, ‘in expectation of a German metanoia.’”⁶³ Voegelin’s primary concern was to establish a true community in existential *philia*, in the Socratic manner of uplifting students from the darkened cave into the light. Purcell notes: “That’s perhaps the fullest significance of those lectures—they expressed Voegelin’s own *philia politike*, his attitude of political friendship towards his audience. They were intended to ground the common *homonoia*—like-mindedness in the participation in the same divine nous—a new generation of German *spoudaioi* of inner dignity and external civic virtue....”⁶⁴ Manfred Henningsen documents a number of students in attendance who would go on to form a cross section of German *spoudaioi*, representing media, government, bureaucracy, and the academy.⁶⁵

Patočka and Voegelin are but two examples of Socratic statesmanship by which the teacher uplifts his students to discover their inner dignity as well as their philosophical friendship and political friendship with others. However, those examples are not isolated. One might consider numerous others, including even Thomas Hobbes, mentioned above as the modern arch-opponent of this Socratic paradigm. Indeed, the university is the descendent of Plato’s own Academy, which was his institutional effort to cultivate the Socratic paradigm of

⁶³ Purcell, “Can a Philosopher Be a Prophetic Witness to Truth?”, paper delivered to annual meeting of Eric Voegelin Society, 2007, 2, quoting Henningsen, “Eine Mischung aus Schalchthof und Klapsmühle, Einleitung zu Eric Voegelin,” *Hitler und die Deutschen*, (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 2006), 38.

⁶⁴ Purcell, “Can a Philosopher Be a Prophetic Witness to Truth?”, 6.

⁶⁵ Henningsen, “Einleitung zu Eric Voegelin,” 19.

statesmanship. It also informs Augustine’s ideal of monasticism, a kind of micro-republic of friends that partakes in the world and forms an alternative to the earthly city’s cycle of vengeance and mimetic rivalry.⁶⁶ In a non-Western context, there is the comparable example of Confucius and his wandering friends who were dedicated to teaching rulers that justice is better than injustice.⁶⁷ Other examples of informal gatherings of philosophical friends who end up as seedbeds for political reform suggest themselves: the pub and café culture of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe that nurtured the Enlightenment; the Vienna *Geistkreis* in the 1920-30s of Hans Kelsen and Ludwig von Mises, whose members also included Eric Voegelin, Friedrich Hayek, and Alfred Schütz; finally, though leisurely but not directed to the education of the young, was Winston Churchill’s “Other Club” that formed the crucible of his wartime government and Britain’s postwar government.⁶⁸

These examples have in common that they are gatherings of friends dedicated for the most part to liberal learning, but also that they are the seedbeds for what would become the nucleus of their respective society’s political or intellectual leadership. The idea of the

⁶⁶ See Peter Brown’s comments on this micro-republic, and its contrast with authoritarian and otherworldly monasticism ideals including those of Benedict (Brown, *Through the Eye of the Needle: Wealth, the Fall of Rome, and the Making of Christianity in the West, 350-550 AD*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), chapters 9-11.

⁶⁷ See my “The Figure of Socrates and its Significance for Liberal Education in Asia.” *Cambridge Journal of China Studies*. Vol. 13(1) 2018: 1-22.

⁶⁸ On the “Other Club,” see my *Comprehensive Judgment and Absolute Selflessness: Winston Churchill on Politics as Friendship*, (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine’s Press, 2018), Chapter One.

university is also about this. Many nations are governed by informal networks of friends who met one another in university. Oxford, Cambridge, Yale, Harvard, Princeton, Sorbonne, McGill, and Calgary are the seedbeds of the networks that govern their respective nations, for better and for worse of course.⁶⁹ The apocryphal saying, attributed to the Duke of Wellington, that the Battle of Waterloo was won on the playing fields of Eton, remains generally true in its spirit.⁷⁰

These examples also remind us that while Socrates' image of the cave signifies the aim of liberal education, the university, as Newman shows, is "middling." Its purpose is not to produce philosopher-kings or "geniuses" (who do not owe their genius to being taught) but to produce good members of society:

But a University training is the great ordinary means to a great but ordinary end; it aims at raising the intellectual tone of society, at cultivating the public mind, at purifying the

⁶⁹ For an overview of the "Calgary School" of political science, see Tom Flanagan, "Legends of the Calgary School: Their Guns, Their Dogs, and the Women Who Love Them," in *Hunting and Weaving, Empiricism and Political Philosophy*, edited by Thomas Heilke and John von Heyking, (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 2013), 21-40. I have attempted to give an account of the "origin and being," in the Platonic sense, of the Calgary school in my review of Barry Cooper and Ted Morton, *Suddenly There! Thirty Years of Killing Time in Southern Alberta, 1985-2018*, in *Voegelinview*, April 3, 2019: <https://voegelinview.com/suddenly-there-thirty-years-of-killing-time-around-southern-alberta-1985-2018/>

⁷⁰ "Wellington, Arthur, Wellesley, 1st Duke of 1769-1852." In *Chambers Dictionary of Great Quotations*, edited by Chambers. 3rd ed. Chambers Harrap, 2015. http://ezproxy.uleth.ca/login?url=https://search.credoreference.com/content/entry/chambq/wellington_arthur_wellesley_1st_duke_of_1769_1852/0?institutionId=2649

national taste, at supplying true principles to popular enthusiasm and fixed aims to popular aspiration, at giving enlargement and sobriety to the ideas of the age, at facilitating the exercise of political power, and refining the intercourse of private life.⁷¹

Liberal education aims not to produce philosophers but to cultivate in students a “philosophic habit” among ordinary students that, like philosophy itself, teaches the student, “to see things as they are, to go right to the point, to disentangle a skein of thought, to detect what is sophistical, and to discard what is irrelevant.”⁷² In so far as liberal education is also a cooperative exercise, it also enables students to cultivate the habits of friendship because the very act of learning is cooperative and opens up their souls to gratitude to those, including teachers and fellow students, who help them to learn. We teachers in that “middling” institution are well-served to recollect what the cave allegory signifies, because it is that which we cave dwellers finally aim.

⁷¹ Newman, *The Idea of a University*, 134.

⁷² Newman, *The Idea of a University*, 135.