

“Sunaesthetic” Friendship and the Foundations of Political Anthropology¹

John von Heyking

Abstract

Aristotle’s friendship teaching has been called the “peak” of his moral teaching. His understanding of *sunaisthesis* (joint perception/awareness) as the activity of virtue friendship has been called the “peak of the peak”. Furthering this line of inquiry, this paper considers how friendship is embedded in the nature of the intellect in *sunaisthesis*. By considering the manner that Aristotle thought the very activity of thought is to know and to love one’s friend, we see how friendship constitutes the foundation of politics, while also pointing beyond politics to the contemplation of the good. Friendship is built into the very way human beings think and act toward one another as moral agents, which shows its foundational role for political life. Because *sunaisthesis* cannot be judged by a standard or rule outside of itself, the paper considers the emphasis Aristotle places on the practice of friendship.

Keywords: Friendship, Thinking, Politics, Ethics, *Sunaisthesis*, Aristotle

Aristotle described political science (*politike epistēmē*) as the most architectonic (*magista architektonikos*) of the human sciences because he thought human beings find the full activation of their moral faculties by living in the polis (Aristotle, 2002: 1094a30).² Yet, politics, as scholars of different schools of political anthropology notice, depends on prepolitical human relationships not only to sustain it, but also to restrain the claims politics places on individuals, and ultimately perhaps to define, indirectly, the very purpose of politics. Curiously, Aristotle seems simultaneously to claim that politics forms the moral horizon for politics and to point to moral practices, including friendship, that transcend politics. In the concluding books of the *Ethics*, he claims friendship to be superior to political justice and contemplation (*theoria*) to be the highest and “most divine (*theiōtatōn*)” human activity. In contrast to the *Ethics*, Aristotle’s treatment of friendship in the *Politics* is muted. Moreover, the *Politics* concludes with a discussion of education and leisure in the context of civic festivals, and not, as one might expect from reading the culmination of the argument in the *Ethics* X, with philosophical contemplation. Although friendship, especially friendship constituted by shared intellectual activity, transcends politics but at the same time makes politics possible. Friendship is above politics but also beneath it in some way. Virtue friendship, as the highest form of friendship and the focus of this essay, is not the same as political friendship. Yet the key question for Aristotle, as well as for contemporary scholars drawing upon Aristotle and other political philosophers of the past to re-thematize friendship, is how such friendship sustains political life (Heyking and Avramenko, 2008; King and Devere, 2000; King, 2008; Bloom, 1993; Velasquez, 2003; Pangle, 2003; Nichols, 2009).

While Aristotle’s discussion of friendship is well-regarded by scholars and students, friendship has lost its central place in the study of political science because the modern subject is considered solitary instead of social and political by nature, as ancient and medieval. This turn away from friendship is due in part to the modern rejection of the metaphysical “foundations” Aristotle brought to his analysis of friendship. For Aristotle,

friendship is the quintessential human activity, where the soul and its constituent parts are fully activated in their intellectual and moral capacities. In the practice of complete friendship, one sees that thought “seems to be the most divine (*theiōtatōn*) of phenomena” (Aristotle, 1984c: 1074b16-17). Considering Aristotle’s understanding of the practice of virtue friendship (as an intellectual and moral activity) in light of his understanding of thought helps to clarify the foundational role of friendship for political science.

Even so, it is important not to confuse discussions of “foundations” with assertions about a bifurcated metaphysical structure of reality, filled with abstract dualisms of a subject-object dichotomy that produce further false dualisms of realism versus nominalism, noumenal versus phenomenal, or spirit versus matter.³ Rather, “foundations” is better understood as a short-hand way of referring to the constituent elements of reality humans experience in the fullness of their being and its constituent parts. Reality is perceived by insight, and as Eric Voegelin observes, insight is “itself rooted in the real movements of the human spiritual soul toward divine being experienced as transcendent. In the experiences of love for the world-transcendent origin of being, in *philia* toward the *sophōn* (the wise), in *eros* toward the *agathon* (the good) and the *kalon* (the beautiful), man became philosopher” (Voegelin, 2000a: 259). *Philia* is an existential virtue that both precedes philosophical inquiry, and, as we shall see, expresses the *telos* of human agency. Friendship paradoxically both enables and is the end of human action.⁴

Aristotle asserted that political society should strive to be a form of friendship. Moreover, political society acts most politically when it performs activities conducive to and reflective of friendship (although Aristotle wishes to avoid equating the *polis* with friendship). While commentators on Aristotle frequently regard common deliberation about the good life (with different factions asserting their own opinions about what the good life consists of) as the preeminent form of politics, Aristotle sees the city most unified, and acting most as a city, when engaged in festivity. Thus, he remarks in the *Politics*: “And elsewhere Odysseus says that this is the best pastime, when human beings are enjoying good cheer and ‘the banqueters seated in order throughout the hall listen to a singer’ ” (Aristotle, 1984: 1338a28-30, quoting *Odyssey*, 9.5-6).⁵ Books VII and VIII of the *Politics* have confused scholars for its discussion of education, festivity, leisure, and the importance of judging dramatic performances. If Aristotle’s method is dialectic, and if his treatises ascend from common sense understandings to greater clarity and philosophical understanding (as in the case of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, which culminates with its discussion of friendship (Books VIII and IX) and contemplation (Book X)), then it would seem inappropriate to discuss these phenomena in the conclusion of the *Politics*.

However, if festivity is taken as the central expression of political friendship, then these discussions make sense. For example, Athenian tragedy, which Aristotle discusses in his *Poetics*, arose out of the Dionysian festivals. The Athenian citizens practiced their art of judging political cases by judging performances of tragedy.⁶ Festivity, whereby citizens sing, dance, give thanks to the gods, feast, and drink, is a form of play whereby the entirety of the human person – including the intellect, appetites, and bodily organs – participates in the community song. Festivities are a form of serious play, and derive their freedom from their participants’ delighting in the plenitude and exuberance of being. Of course, festivities historically have tended to include an excess of feast and drink, which is why they require the guidance of reason not only to moderate their effects, but, more substantially, to provide the festival with meaning and purpose.⁷

Because the human being is by nature a political animal, and because festivity, the central expression of political friendship, needs the guidance of reason, our intellects must have a way of joining with other intellects. Aristotle says as much when he explains human beings are political by nature on account of our capacity to make speeches concerning the just and the advantageous (Aristotle, 1984e: 1253a2). If harmony is the goal of political friendship, then the intellect of individuals must have the capacity to harmonize with the intellects of other individuals. If we misunderstand the capacity of our minds to harmonize with those of others, we fail to understand the nature of politics. For this and for reasons elaborated in this essay, I shall speak of "sunaesthetic" nature of the human soul, which culminates in "sunaesthetic" friendship.⁸

As will be shown, *sunaisthesis* is joint perception of one's friend, the good, and oneself and one's friend beholding the good. A good illustration of *sunaisthesis* is found in Bertrand Russell's description of his sense of connection with Joseph Conrad: "At our first meeting, we talked with continually increasing intimacy. We seemed to sink through layer after layer of what was superficial, till gradually both reached the central fire. It was an experience unlike any other that I have known. We looked into each other's eyes half appalled and half intoxicated to find ourselves together in such a region" (Quoted in Epstein, 2006: 162-63).

Epstein comments that this "central fire" does not signify agreement between the two men, for they had vastly different political views. Rather, the "central fire" is more of an opening, a glimpse into the *ēthos* of the other: "It is a place where one can receive kindness, understanding, solace, patient attention, and respect for one's point of view, and all this because of an underlying but never spoken sense that everyone around that central fire, or in the community, knows that he and she are all in the same struggle together" (Epstein, 2006: 163). In *sunaisthesis*, one perceives the "central fire" of the other, their *ēthos*, but also the activity of both souls in a common narrative of a life shared pursuing the good. Russell's observation, and Aristotle as well, repudiates Lord Byron's comment that "Friendship is Love without his wings!" (Byron, 1991: 152; see also Heyking, 2007a). The purpose of this essay is to elucidate the meaning of this complex act.

Aristotle alludes to the sunaesthetic nature of the intellect near the end of his discussion of friendship in the *Nicomachean Ethics* IX. He explains that because human existence also means being conscious of our existence and finding it pleasant, it follows as a necessary conclusion that we would practice 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 (NE 1170b10-12).

For moderns accustomed to regarding the self as solitary and equipped with an instrumentalist, discursive, constructive, or reflective understanding of reason, Aristotle's conclusion that friendship arises necessarily from the active exercise of the intellect is difficult to understand.⁹ Aristotle's statement concludes a series of observations concerning human being-at-work (*energeia*). A few lines earlier, he remarks that "living in its governing

sense appears to be perceiving and thinking” (NE 1170a20, 1170b1).¹⁰ Living among things that are good and pleasant in themselves fosters the full activation of the human soul. Being alive is pleasant in itself, and it follows that we are aware of our being alive. Moreover, we are also aware of our being aware of being alive. It follows from our being aware of our awareness that we necessarily wish to share in awareness (or “joint perception”, which is a more literal translation of *sunaisthesis*) with our friend. Our being aware of our own existence implies a desire to share that consciousness with another because it is the very nature of the intellect to seek identity with its object.¹¹ April Flakne describes *sunaisthesis*, the peak of Aristotle’s teaching on friendship (which itself serves as a peak for his teaching on ethics), as “an experiential event of codetermination of life experienced as a whole”. In *sunaisthesis*, the *ēthos* of each friend is beheld as a separate but inseparable part of the *ēthos* of the other. A note of caution is needed, however. In the highest kind of friendship, which is based on virtue, our intellects are fully activated and determined, which rules out any possibility that one becomes absorbed into the self or soul of one’s friend.¹² In perfecting our *ēthos*, our *ēthos* becomes determinate and thus individuated.

Central to the way Aristotle links friendship to the exercise of the intellect is that in seeking to know, we also seek to be known. Human beings are incomplete, and knowing reality also means knowing ourselves within reality. Our incompleteness prevents us from fully understanding ourselves because we only see ourselves from the inside, as it were, and friends enable us to see ourselves from the outside. Aristotle describes the link between friendship and thought more directly in the *Eudemian Ethics*, where he states that life, crowned by friendship, is “perception (*sunaisthesis*) and knowledge in common (*sungnosis*)” (Aristotle, 1984b: 1244b25). The full quotation of his elaboration is worth reading:

[S]ince the known and the perceived are [in the class of the desirable], generally speaking, by virtue of participation in a determinate nature, one’s desire that one perceive is thus the desire that one should be of a determinate nature. But since we are not each of these things by virtue of ourselves alone, but only by participating in such natures in the acts of perceiving and knowing – for one who perceives becomes what is perceived in respect of and to the degree that he perceives and according to the way and the object he perceives, and so the knower the known – it is therefore because of this that one desires always to live, because one desires always to know, and this is because one desires to be oneself that which is known (Aristotle, *Eudemian Ethics*, 1245a1-11, as translated by Kosman, 2000: 310).

Aristotle, who is usually more lucid, here grapples with the paradoxical nature of *sunaisthesis*. It is simply impossible to describe in a straightforward manner an intellectual act of such complexity, where the thinking subject simultaneously beholds the good, the friend, and beholds oneself and one’s friend beholding the good. Such an intellectual act defies description in terms of a straightforward description of objects in the mode of intentionality. This passage strains the treatise and lecture form of communication and is perhaps why Plato, for example, chose to write dialogues instead. *Sunaisthesis* bursts the categories of subject-object for which the philosophical treatise is more suited. Even so, Aristotle’s point

is that the activity of the intellect is to know the object as well as to be known. The intellect necessarily proceeds from itself to know itself. Unlike God who is self-sufficient, the human intellect necessarily proceeds to another, the second self, who, in knowing the first self, completes the act of the first self’s intellect.

Aristotle uses the term *sunaisthesis* (as well as *sungnosis*) to describe the common perception and knowing that friends undertake. *Sunaisthesis* is an uncommon term. *Aisthesis* means both sensory and intellectual perception, where the latter form of perception is further subdivided into the perceiving of the “ultimate particular (*eschaton*)” in practical judgment and in the perception of noetic insight (NE 1142a22-30).¹³ Aristotle compares intellectual perception to our perception that a triangle is the last figure into which a polygon can be divided: we take in its essence by a glance, and not by further reflection (NE 1142a28-30). The two forms of intellectual perception are normally kept distinct, but Aristotle admits the same power takes in both ultimate particulars and first principles (NE 1143a28-1143b10). Moreover, *aisthesis* includes within its meaning consciousness of ourselves as perceiving, so we perceive ourselves perceiving the triangle.¹⁴

In addition to the example of the triangle, Aristotle also gives us a way of thinking about the same act of perceiving the “ultimate particular” and the beautiful (which is also good). He shows us how moral seeing (*aisthesis*) operates like “aesthetic” seeing of the beautiful.¹⁵ Acting righteously or nobly cannot be reduced either to following a rule nor subjectivism. Edward Goerner explains the parallel between, and perhaps the identity of, practical reason’s perception of the good and of the beautiful (its “aesthetic” dimension) with the example of an art critic’s description of the beauty of a fragment of a jasper head of the Egyptian Queen Tiye in the Metropolitan Museum. Michael Brenson writes:

The head is so complete, so thoroughly thought and worked through, that the fragment seems whole; there is a sense that even if the head were broke further [than just above the mouth] and only the chin remained or a cheek, or even a chunk of lip, the sense of completeness and resolution would not be diminished.¹⁶

Something “fragmentary” and “incomplete”, like this jasper head or the Michelangelo torso in the Vatican Museum, is yet complete in its beauty. The artists who made these works worked by the standards of their craft, to be sure, but the beauty of their “fair balance or harmony or symmetry or even dynamically balanced asymmetry... cannot be formulated adequately in any finite set of univocal rules but is nevertheless encompassed in a unity by structures of disciplined analogies”. Perceiving a “fair balance” is both an “aesthetic” act as well as an act of prudent judgment (Goerner, 1983: 573-574).

Adding the *sun-* prefix to form *sunaisthesis* was rare in antiquity. Plutarch uses it to describe the fellow-feeling Solon created in Athens with his legal reforms. However, its primary meaning in antiquity was self-consciousness without necessarily referring to another, and its meaning shifted to signify the interiorization of the self.¹⁷ Even so, the term, “consciousness” (Latin *consciens*) can also mean awareness of something with someone (*alicui consciens*), so even a modern individualistic thinker like Hobbes could describe consciousness, though not friendship, as “when two or more men know of one and the same fact, they are said to be conscious of it one to another, which is as much as to know it together” (Hobbes, 1996: 48).

Even so, *sunaisthesis*, as the activity of the intellects conjointly knowing and being known, does not simply mean sharing the same opinions about everything. Recall Aristotle's description of friendship in the *Nicomachean Ethics*: "living together and sharing conversation and thinking". Human *energeia* involves the activity of the intellect, which means *sunaisthesis* involves actively thinking with another. Sunaesthetic friendship is active, whereas holding the same opinion is inactive, just as friendship is active love, whereas goodwill is inactive love (NE 1157b30). This active sunaesthetic friendship provides the model for Aristotle's "action-based, associational theory" of the polis, which is "constituted not by a shared identity, but rather by a conversation and a sharing in actions and in the goods they instantiate and seek" (Keys, 2006: 77, 85).

The intellect is still in its active condition when it incorporates the form of the object known. Aristotle eloquently describes the active condition of friendship wherein friends put the impress of the other (or more literally, having "their rough edges knocked off" (*apomattontai*)) "by the things they like in one another" (NE 1172a17). Friends help to determine, that is, actualize each other's *ēthos*. *Sunaisthesis* forms the crown of Aristotle's friendship teaching because it expresses the friends' common activity in perception and thinking. In *sunaisthesis*, friends behold one another (including themselves) beholding the good. They are fully conscious of themselves as individuals, their "other selves" and the good that informs their activity. Flakne beautifully describes this experience of joint perception:

I catch myself in the act of perceiving; I witness the bloom of your actualization in the face of some object, and some, and simultaneously feel my own actualization, which rebounds in your enlivened perception of my perception. *This experience of seeing and feeling, the controvertability of the moment is itself sunaesthetic.* I am what I see; I do not have to think myself into this experience, discursively compare or analogize the physical moments of actualization. My eidetic experience is of actualization itself (yours), and I, qua actualized, am part of that *eidōs*. In perceiving your *energeia* I experience the pleasure of my own activated intentionality, *energeia*, toward you (Flakne, 2005: 53).

The constituent activities of the intellect are present in Flakne's summary of *sunaisthesis*. In perceiving the "other self" beholding the good as we also behold the good, *sunaisthesis* unites intellectual perception of ultimate particular (the act of practical judgment) and of first terms (the act of noetic insight). The intellectual and moral virtues are fully activated, meaning the *energeia* (being-at-work) of each partner is fully determined. Consciousness, as the power of receptivity, is determined by the friend and by each partner's participation in the good.

So far, our discussion has taken for granted the passive, suffering, or pathetic (all rooted in *pathos*) character of thought, and thereby has kept implicit the "foundational" character of friendship.¹⁸ For Aristotle, "thinking is a way of being acted upon (for it seems to be by virtue of something common that is present in both that one thing acts and another is acted upon)" (Aristotle, "On the Soul", 429b26). A few lines later in *On the Soul*, he observes: "Knowledge, in its being-at-work (*energeia*), is the same as the thing it knows, and while knowledge in potency comes first in time in any one knower, in the whole of things it does not take precedence even in time, for all things that come into being have their being

from something that is at-work-staying-itself (*entelecheia*)” (Aristotle, 2001: 431a1-3; see also 430a20). That which is known acts upon the intellect, which, prior to that, only “knows” in potency, as a tablet, “when nothing written is present in it actively” (Aristotle, 2001: 429b26). The intellect, like the tablet, is suited to receive the form of the intelligible (thereby indicating that Aristotle’s version of the blank slate emphasizes it is a slate, and not simply its blankness, which seems emphasized in modern accounts). The “*energeia*, the being-at-work, the fullness of being, of that which acts resides in that which is acted upon” (O’Grady, 1986: 41).

This is not to say that, for example, in knowing a tree our mind becomes a tree. Rather, the identity of knower-known is better expressed in the manner Robert Sokolowski describes the relationship: “One might say that a man who knows a lot about trees is ‘arboreal but not a tree’, and the way he is arboreal is by having taken in ‘the tree’ and many of its necessities, without having become a tree. He is like *the* tree, but he is not *a* tree” Sokolowski, (2008: 279).¹⁹ Similarly, in knowing and loving our friend, we become like her, which is to say, we are also unlike her. Both likeness and unlikeness serve to individuate and unite us in a sunaesthetic harmony. Moreover, what unites us is not understood to be particular qualities but the virtue(s) we share and serve as exemplars for each other. As we become “arboreal but not a tree” by perceiving a tree, so too we become “courageous but not courage” by perceiving the courage of our friend: “In my experience of my friend’s life as oriented toward ‘courage’ I will understand, in a flood of pleasurable resonance and as if for the first time, what courage has meant to me, as if ‘all along’ ” (Flakne, 2005: 58).

The final words of Flakne’s comment, “as if all along”, point to the centrality of recollection in *sunaisthesis*. If we perceive the *ēthos* (or form) of our friend as “courage” or “good”, we see her not as an occasion of “courage” or “good”, but as “courage” or “good” personified. She is a living icon of what is eternal. Because what is eternal cannot be learned as we would learn a particular fact, we become aware of it by recollection. The image nature of our friend reminds us of what is, and we are reminded of what courage or good has been “as if all along” because courage and the good has indeed been there “all along” because they are eternal. With Plato, all knowledge is recollection (or anamnesis), and so one may say that “Eros comes to us as anamnesis” (Rhodes, 2003: 497). Aristotle is more sober by generally avoiding discussing eros, and as a result he is less prosaic and perhaps less clear when discussing recollection. Even so, knowledge of first things arises upon encountering particular things that awaken the intellectual part of the soul.²⁰ This is why examples are so important in his pedagogy, and consistent with his view that knowledge is “pathetic”. Aristotle compares the awakening of knowledge to the passage of the body from “a state of intoxication or sleep or disease to the contrary state” (Aristotle, 1984d: 247b15). Just as the passage to the contrary state of sobriety, wakefulness, or health does not imply that previous knowledge was never there. Indeed, Aristotle states one is impaired from using that knowledge when intoxicated, asleep, or sick. Similarly, the movement from ignorance to knowledge is one of “the soul’s settling down out of the restlessness natural to it”, which is caused by an agent external to the soul, just as the movement to sobriety, wakefulness, and health is caused by an agent external to the body. Elsewhere, Aristotle speaks of the “whole universal that comes to rest in the soul” (Aristotle, 1984f, 100a6).

Thought is “pathetic” by receiving and taking in all and identifying with what it knows. And so, by being passive, thought is also the most active of all activities. Joe Sachs refers to this paradox of passivity and activity as “an effortful holding of oneself in

readiness”: “Like the good reader, the contemplative knower is most active in one way (*energetikos*) just by being least active in another (*poietikos*)”.²¹ William O’Grady summarizes the moment of noetic insight that crystallizes all thinking:

Aristotle’s analysis singles out a special moment, the highest moment, within our experience of coming to know, what we sometimes speak of as a moment of insight, when we genuinely do come to understand what it is we are facing. It is of *this* moment that he says that we, as would-be knowers, are essentially not working but are being worked upon ... The experience of suffering, of being acted upon by the knowable things, is not said to be characteristic of all moments of our experience as would-be knowers. But I think that Aristotle means that the moment in which to know is to suffer is not merely the highest moment, but also the moment which somehow empowers and guides all the others: as the *telos* (fulfillment) of the would-be knower, it is present from the beginning, not merely as norm or proposed objective, but as effectively moving (O’Grady 1986: 41).²²

O’Grady focuses on the moment, that is accompanied by wonder, and that constitutes other forms of thought, including discursive reasoning. Wonder, of course, is the beginning of philosophy. Most of the ancient and medieval thinkers similarly viewed thinking as pathetic. For example, Plato describes the turn to wisdom, from darkness to light, as a turning around of the soul that the individual suffers (Plato, *Republic*, 515e). St. Thomas Aquinas distinguishes discursive reason (*ratio*) from perceptive reason (*intellectus*) (Pieper, 1952: 9-12). This pathetic character of reason, which for Aristotle is the most active, is the opposite of the active constructivist view of reason taken by the moderns. Kant, for instance, characterizes reason as “work”.²³ From the Aristotelian perspective, friendship is impossible for the modern who views reason not as a beholding of the good friend, but as a mode of work to use the friend. There can be no *sunaithesis*, no virtue friendship, for the modern because its “reason is only what it controls or defines”.²⁴

The question then becomes, not whether we need to “move beyond” Aristotle to make friendship relevant for the modern period. We may indeed need to move “beyond” him, and I have indicated some areas where in fact this is necessary. However, before considering what “moving beyond” looks like (including the progressive assumptions embedded in this kind of language), we would first need to consider whether the instrumentalist, discursive, or technological view of modern reason is the whole story. The limited space of this essay prevents even the beginning of a consideration of this vast question. However, recent effort to view modern reason as meditative and “existential” (not “existentialist”) shows it more in line with Aristotle’s concerns about the practice of friendship and *sunaithesis* explained here.²⁵

Thought also wants to be known, and reality is incomplete unless understood. As incomplete beings, we seek to know reality which also means knowing the nature of our participation in reality. The possibility of knowing reality, and our place in it, depends on reality having put itself before us (and put us in it). This raises the question of “foundations”. For Aristotle, “thought is moved by the object of thought” (Aristotle, 1984c: 1072a20). The activity of our intellect is predicated on the activity of Nous, the active intelligence animating

reality, which Aristotle refers to as god (Aristotle, 1984c: 1072b31). Even so, this “foundation” is perceived in the structure of perception and thinking, whereby sense perception and discursive reasoning rests upon a foundation of contemplative thinking, and where the activity of the intellect is embedded in sensory experience (Sachs, “Introduction” 37). O’Grady provides a familiar example when we are affected by the sensible form (*aisthēton eidos*) of an oak tree:

[T]here is an intelligible form residing in the sensible form, and in some wholly mysterious way that sensible form can *give way* to the intelligible form, can allow the intelligible form *to shine through* it, so that we are made to understand not just what it is to be *this* oak tree, but rather what it is to be oak tree simply (O’Grady, 1986: 40).

O’Grady’s observation that the sensory form allows the intelligible form “to shine through it” recalls Aristotle’s observation that we behold the “bloom of well-being in people who are at the peak of their powers”, and that this is an aspect of *sunaisthesis* (NE, 1174b34; Flakne, 2005: 53). These statements recall that an act of intellectual perception, of which *sunaisthesis* is a kind, reveals all the different strata of reality that that issue from the divine ground (Nous).

Similarly, a statement at the beginning of the *Nicomachean Ethics* also encapsulates Aristotle’s understanding of human action as participating in all strata of reality, and how the ground of reality makes itself known in the course of action. Action can only be intelligible if it is for a purpose. Acting with no purpose, or for a sequence of purposes that goes on *ad infinitum* (which is really for no purpose), is unintelligible. As a result, only an act predicated on an ultimate good (*telos*) is intelligible (NE 1094a19).²⁶ Anything else is simply a “perpetual and restless desire of power after power that ceaseth only in death” (Hobbes, 1996:70). Acting is predicated upon a first cause just as thinking is predicated on Nous: “The object of our search is this – what is the commencement of movement in the soul? The answer is clear: as in the universe, so in the soul, it is god. For in a sense the divine element in us moves everything. The starting-point of reasoning is not reasoning, but something greater. What, then, could be greater than knowledge and intellect but god?” (NE 1248a25-29).

Friendship is the expression of the human intellect whose nature it is to identify with the known. For this reason, the impasse that worries numerous scholars, that the virtuous man is self-sufficient and therefore does not need friends, is only apparent.²⁷ However, we are confronted with another impasse in our effort to think through politics and foundations by linking friendship with thinking and perceiving. We can perceive the intellectual form of the oak tree in its sensible form, but perceiving the intellectual form, the *ēthos*, of the human being, in its sensible form is more problematic. Aristotle raises this impasse near the beginning of the *Nicomachean Ethics* when he cites Solon’s saying that a human being cannot be said to be happy until he is dead, that is, when free from misfortune (NE 1100a10-20). Behind this saying lies a deeper problem for the entirety of Aristotelian ethics, which is: when is a life said to be happy, that is, complete? At stake with this issue is the coherence of moral life itself. If the soul cannot be said to have its being-at-work (*energeia*), no inherent and indelible activity, then there can be no moral stature, but only customs.²⁸ The problem with identifying sunaesthetic friendship as the highest human activity is that, at any given

time, we have only partial understanding of the human form of ourselves and of our friends. Our intellectual perception of their *ēthos* would seem to resemble more a conjecture or guess than the immediate recognition that a triangle is the last kind of polygon that can be divided (NE 1142a28-30). Our practical judgment of a friend's *ēthos* would have to be more tentative and provisional since human beings seem not to have a way of knowing how a life can turn out.

Fortunately, Aristotle addresses this impasse. After mentioning *sunaisthesis* in *Nicomachean Ethics* IX, Aristotle discusses the number of friends one should have. That number consists of the number of people whose *ēthos* one can finally know. Given the impasse we just noted, Aristotle here seems to be saying that one can only know the *ēthos* of a few friends over the course of one's life. The *ēthos* of a friend might appear in "an experiential event of codetermination of life experienced as a whole" (Flakne, 2005: 50).²⁹ This would be friendship's equivalent of beholding balance in the fragmentary jasper head of Queen Tiye or torso of David. Or his *ēthos* could appear serially over the course of his life, and that his form is not something static but the development of a moral life in action. His *ēthos* would take the form of a narrative, story, or myth, whereby the plot (*mutbos*) unfolds over the course of time. Aristotle's observation that we should have only a few friends is rooted in the fact that our perception of our friend's *ēthos* must take place over the course of our lives. The two modes of *sunaisthesis* – a single event of codetermination and a lifetime story or *mutbos* – are not mutually exclusive but most of us are more likely to experience *sunaisthesis* in the latter mode. Characterizing *sunaisthesis* as a lifetime shared together, of knocking off each other's rough edges (NE 1172a17), indicates the essentially educative character of friendship (NE 1172a17).³⁰ The exercise of reading and reflecting upon the *Nicomachean Ethics* can assist with this purpose. The treatise not only provides information on the contents of virtue and the good life, but the structure of the argument brings the reader dialectically into an education of virtue over the course of reading the treatise. Its paradoxes, puzzles, and its constant refinement of our common-sense understanding of the world draw us into a process of self-reflection and philosophizing that we can conduct together. Similarly, as mentioned above, his *Poetics* demonstrates how tragedy teaches virtue and specifically political friendship through mimesis.³¹ Being a spectator to tragedy is a moral education.

In concluding this essay with friendship and education, the reader should not be surprised to have returned to the beginning of our inquiry, which introduced *philia* as an existential virtue that both *precedes* inquiry into foundations and concludes it. In discussing the foundations of politics in light of the link between friendship, perceiving, and thinking, we have recapitulated Aristotle's insight that *philia* is a moral and intellectual practice. We perceive the *ēthos*, the form, of our friend in her actions, not in some sort of abstract noumenal reason. The inquiry into political foundations begins then with the scientist's own awareness of his or her friendship practices, just as this essay does not set out to "prove" *sunaisthesis* so much as to invite the reader into considering whether what it says about *sunaisthesis* is so, that is, whether it agrees with the reader's practices. This essay points to this experience, as a friend invites you to perceive something. The degree to which inquiry into political foundations is sunaesthetic will foster the extent to which it yields anything luminous.

Notes

¹ I thank Ronald Weed, Arpad Szokolczai, and the anonymous reviewers for their suggestions for improving this essay. All errors are the fault of the author alone.

² Hereinafter NE.

³ Referring to a “bifurcated” view of reality as false is meant to resist a move in modern philosophical thinking that prioritizes abstractness over the concrete, and general principle over the individual person. If we love another simply on account of God or the good, then that person becomes a mere occasion, a mere accidental recipient of our love.

⁴ English *freó* (“freedom” and related to “frolic” or play (Onians, 1988: 474-76). Even so, Aristotle’s method is to refine broad cultural meanings into clear philosophical meanings, which explains his effort to distinguish different types of *philia*. Our focus will be on the most perfect type of *philia*, which in English is usually referred to as virtue-friendship (as opposed to friendships of utility and pleasure). If we keep in mind the old English roots of “friendship”, this term is actually closer to what Aristotle means by virtue friendship than *philia* is.

⁵ For his part, Plato has the Athenian Stranger legislate festivities throughout the *Laws* as a way of expressing the freedom and nobility of the friendship found in the best practical regime. He argues that there are two main reasons current political societies fail to hold festivals: 1) they spend too much time pursuing wealth (and therefore seek necessary wants, instead of delighting in the freedom that nature’s plenitude affords in leisure) and 2) factionalism (mostly between democrats and oligarchs) leads most people to conceive of politics as conflict, thereby preventing understanding of what is common about the common life (Plato, 1988: 831b-832c).

⁶ Some have argued that contemporary talent shows where TV viewers phone in their votes for best musical or dance performances have promoted civic participation. I leave this claim aside as an empirical question. However, two differences between “American Idol” and Athenian tragedy bear noting: 1) the Athenians practiced not just voting, but judging, as they participated as the jury (see *Politics* 1281b31), and 2) the active citizenry of Athens differs from the passive citizenry that characterizes modern democracies. Finding something essential to democracy in reality television has a way of reducing democracy to a spectator sport (see Fleischmann, 2008).

⁷ See also Josef Pieper, 1971, and Johannes Huizinga, 1971.

⁸ The English language lacks the terminology to describe what nature our souls have that enable us to be political, but also to share friendship in contemplative activity. This essay elaborates what Aristotle might call “sunaiesthetic friendship”. I have used Aristotle’s qualified description of humans as political by nature, but I do not wish to imply the friendship humans enjoy with their intellects as political exclusively. Furthermore, one cannot label humans “social” by nature because “social” is an unfamiliar category for Aristotle.

⁹ An example from Jean-Jacques Rousseau illustrates the difference: ‘Reason engenders vanity and reflection fortifies it; reason turns man back upon himself, it separates him from all that bothers and afflicts him. Philosophy isolates him; because of it he says in secret, at the sight of a suffering man: Perish if you will, I am safe. No longer can anything except dangers to the entire society trouble the tranquil sleep of the philosopher and tear him from his bed. His fellow-man can be murdered with impunity right under his window; he has only to put his hands over his ears and argue with himself a bit to prevent nature, which revolts within him, from identifying him with the man who is being assassinated’ (Rousseau, 1964: 132).

¹⁰ Perceiving and thinking are frequently paired as the constituent elements of human action (see also *Eudemian Ethics* 1244b24-66, *Metaphysics* 1072b17, *On the Soul*, 427a20-427b18).

¹¹ ‘And thought thinks itself because it shares the nature of the object of thought; for it becomes an object of thought in coming into contact with and thinking its objects, so that thought and object of thought are the same’ (Aristotle, 1984c: 1072b20-21; see also Kosman, 2000: 309).

¹² Aristotle would probably have dismissed Montaigne's assertion about his friendship with La Boétie that 'our souls mingle and blend with each other so completely that they efface the seam that joined them, and cannot find it again' (Michel de Montaigne, 1976: 139). One must have a sense of oneself in order to give of oneself (see *Politics* 1263b5).

¹³ "Noetic" is the adjectival form of "Nous", Aristotle's difficult to translate term for "mind" or "intelligence". He speaks of Nous in two ways: 1) as one's individual intellect and 2) as the active intelligence that animates all of reality, and in which our individual souls participate.

¹⁴ See *On the Soul*, iii.2.425b11 and *Metaphysics* xii.9.1074b34, where Aristotle states our noetic activity participates, and is grounded in, divine Nous (see Kosman, 2004: 141).

¹⁵ See Sokolowski's use of "categorical" as a way of explaining moral seeing (2000b: 454).

¹⁶ See E. A. Goerner, 1983: 572-74. He quotes Michael Brenson in *New York Times*, 19 June 1983, sec. 2, pp. 1, 24. A photograph of the Queen Tiye head may be found on the website of the Metropolitan Museum (http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/phar/ho_11.150.26.htm) (accessed December 9, 2008).

¹⁷ Flakne, 2005: 42; Kosman, 2004: 150. Inspired by the Book of Acts, medieval Christian theologians attributed friendship and common perception to the Holy Spirit (see Augustine, 2006, IV.4; for details, see Heyking, 2008: 115-38).

¹⁸ I use the term "pathetic" to signify the identity of the knower and the thing known, which, for Aristotle, is made possible by the nature of the soul as the 'place of forms (*topos eidos*)' ("On the Soul," in Aristotle, 2001: 429a27-8). In calling thinking "pathetic," I do not infer spoken words are "affections (*pathemata*)" of the soul (see Sokolowski, 2008: 277-80).

¹⁹ Sokolowski demonstrates how Aristotle's theory postulates the identity of the knower and the thing known, instead of postulating that representations or images of the thing known get imaged in the knower's mind.

²⁰ See Aristotle, *Physics*, 1984d: 247b1-10.

²¹ Sachs, "Introduction," in Aristotle, 2001, 37-8.

²² Discussing *De Anima* III.6.

²³ Immanuel Kant, 1998: 56. Kant criticizes "philosopher[s] of intuition," including Plato and later German romantic philosophers. Intuition produces vanity and self-satisfaction, which is, Kant sarcastically observes, 'to be sure, far more inviting and splendid than the law of reason whereby one must work to acquire a possession.' Kant refers to Aristotle's philosophy as work (though flawed for being metaphysical), however, because he 'analyzes all knowledge a priori into its elements, and as an artisan of reason who puts these elements back together from reason' (56). This suggests Kant failed to see or ignored Aristotle's understanding of the noetic or perceptive dimension of thought. Joseph Pieper calls Kant's view of knowledge (and the general view of modernity) as exclusively discursive, as opposed to receptive and contemplative, the 'most momentous dogmatic assumption of Kantian epistemology' (Pieper, (1952: 8), citing Bernhard Jansen, *Die Geschichte der Erkenntnislehre in der neueren Philosophie*, (1940: 235)).

²⁴ Rhodes, 2003: 178. The comment refers to the previously cited essay by Kant. On the "construction" of modern philosophy in general, see Lachterman, 1989.

²⁵ See Walsh, 2008.

²⁶ Voegelin's comment on this passage is pertinent: 'One should be aware that we always act as if we had an ultimate purpose in fact, as if our life made some sort of sense. I find students frequently are flabbergasted, especially those who are agnostics, when I tell them that they all act, whether agnostics or not, as if they were immortal! Only under the assumption of immortality, of a fulfillment beyond life, is the seriousness of action intelligible that they actually put into their work and that has a fulfillment nowhere in this life however long they may live.... One shouldn't take their agnosticism too seriously, because in fact they act as if they were not agnostics!' (Voegelin, 2000b, 227-8).

²⁷ Kosman (2004) and Flakne (2005) begin their analyses by addressing this impasse. My reliance on their work is evident in my citations.

²⁸ Sachs, "Introduction" *Nicomachean Ethics*, xvi. Alternatively, one can follow the Christian Aristotelian, St. Thomas Aquinas, in identifying the completion of human happiness in the vision of God after death.

²⁹ See John 15:13.

³⁰ See Salkever, 2008: 53-83.

³¹ On the "protreptic" argumentative structure of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, see Smith, 2001. On the political teaching of *Poetics*, see Hewitt, 2006: 10-26; Davis, 1992. On the mimetic character of phronesis, see Wall, 2005: 329-30.

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