Interpretation

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Love with Wings

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Partly a work of exegetical scholarship and partly a work of philosophical reflection, *The Form of Politics* is an insightful treatise emerging from wonder over what Aristotle calls *sunaisthesis*, the joint perception of the good between persons. It is this sunaisthetic moment between persons that forges the most complete form of friendship, virtue friendship, which in turn shapes politics. The puzzle for exegetical scholarship, and philosophical reflection, is exactly how virtue friendship is supposed to relate to politics. Aristotle says that friendship resides in political communities, communities that come together for the sake of what is just and advantageous (*EN* 1159b25–1160a30). Yet political friendship or civic friendship is not the same as virtue friendship, although it involves virtue friendship (*Politics* 1261a10–1262a25). Focusing on the nature of the common good helps make political friendship clearer. In a political community, I share and pursue the good of others at the same time as I pursue my own good. For example, a farmer who joins a militia to defend his land may still be assigned to protect his own land, but he acts as part of a plan that aims to protect everyone's farms.[1] All those who share in this plan exhibit the "like-mindedness" (*homonoia*) that comes with friendship.

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[1] Michael Pakaluk, *Aristotle's "Nicomachean Ethics": An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 271–72.

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John von Heyking points out that this does not solve the puzzle. Accounts of the common good state *that* it involves like-mindedness and friendship, but they do not state *what* the common good looks like. It is therefore not clear *what* political friendship is. For von Heyking, the question to ask is: what is the version of sunaisthetic friendship, in politics, which would constitute political friendship?

The standard answer to this question emphasizes that the characteristic activity of political friendship is deliberation over what is just and advantageous to the community as a whole. Von Heyking argues that as deliberation presupposes agreement about the ends, one should be asking what activity the agreement about the ends presupposes. His answer is *festivity*: "the political or civic version of sunaisthetic friendship, and the clearest expression of the common good" (38). Festivity shows the essential unity of the regime, and provides the form and standard of political friendship.

By elevating the practice of festivity to the form of politics, above reasoned deliberation about the just and advantageous, von Heyking offers a kind of peace settlement to the quarrel between poetry and philosophy. From the point of view of Plato and Aristotle, that is to say, philosophy, von Heyking defends these verses from the start of *Odyssey* IX—verses that praise festivity and poetry:

> There's nothing better
> Than when deep joy holds sway throughout the realm
> And banqueters up and down the palace sit in ranks,
> Enthralled to hear the bard, and before them all, the tables
> Heaped with bread and meats, and drawing wine from a mixing-bowl
> The steward makes his rounds and keeps the winecups flowing.
> This, to my mind, is the best that life can offer. (13)

Von Heyking hopes to provide poetry's defense "without meter" (*Republic* 607d), softening Socrates's harsh moral judgment of poetry in Plato's *Republic*.

Von Heyking's defense "without meter" starts with Aristotle, by connecting *Politics* VII and VIII, Aristotle's discussion of the good regime, to the *Poetics*. For von Heyking, Aristotle's *Poetics* endorses festivity and poetry as beneficial to political and human life, assisting in the completion of political and virtue friendship. Poetry blends generality and specificity, teaching practical wisdom through *mimesis*: particular representations that communicate universals. Von Heyking develops a theme in line with other neo-Aristotelians (notably Alasdair MacIntyre) that humans are essentially story-telling animals. In moments of *sunaisthesis*, our stories are transformed by the

stories of our friends. Friends become part of the story of our own life. We then carry this shared storytelling into political life, where it brings unity and collective civic action, shaping the good regime. Yet Aristotle never dissolves the individual character of the person into collective action: *sunaisthesis* after all is about a shared perception between persons, which leads us to love the individual character (*ethos*) of the other person. Von Heyking sees here the limits of philosophy, for the otherness of the other person, his unique character, eludes the grasp of reason.

For von Heyking, the Platonic dialogues are better suited to this problem (87), so the second half of his book examines *Lysis* and the *Laws*. These dialogues provide an image of the practice of *sunaisthesis*. Von Heyking argues that the image of friendship in *Lysis* refutes the well-known charge of Gregory Vlastos that Plato's view of love is about loving a metaphysical universal, not the uniqueness of an individual. Plato, von Heyking argues, presents an image of the practice of *sunaisthesis* that honors individuality through the *daimonic* symbolism of Hermes. Hermes is the spiritual force that creates human friendships, by opening human beings up to the gift of otherness. Praised throughout Greek festivals, poetry, and hymns for this capacity, Hermes reminds that a friend cannot be subsumed under a metaphysical universal of friendship, but that a friend is a mysterious image of the divine, a revelation that the divine interacts with human beings.

The *Laws* develops this theme in a political setting, where music, myths, choruses, dances, and "preludes" (see *Laws* 722d–e) create the like-mindedness among the hypothetical citizens of Magnesia. Moreover, the dramatic action draws attention to how the characters of the dialogue draw together in friendship. Eventually they grasp an insight of a *daimonic* quality: that the divine plays a role in human life.

There is undoubtedly a liturgical quality to von Heyking's understanding of festivity; the Thomist Josef Pieper influences his understanding of festivity (13). Von Heyking's understanding of civic celebrations discloses a transcendent, quasi-religious practice. Not wishing to make them the same as religious practice, von Heyking tells us that Christian liturgical services are "not political" (194). Regrettably, he never elaborates on what the difference between the Magnesian civic religion and the Christian civic religion would be. Von Heyking thinks that the festivity akin to the Magnesian regime can exist in modern times, but a more radical thesis would be that Christianity

changes the classical scope of politics, so that the project of civic unity is necessarily and explicitly incomplete, until modernity resets it.[2]

As the practice of friendship transcends our capacity to understand it theoretically (128), it is fitting for von Heyking to conclude his book with an account of the practice of festivity that shows what the common good looks like. Von Heyking selects the Calgary Stampede, an annual summer festival that takes place in the city of Calgary, Alberta. The Stampede, a festival blending rodeo, agricultural exhibition, and midway, gives the city of Calgary great renown throughout North America, so that Calgary's fame easily surpasses the similar-sized provincial capital of Alberta, Edmonton.

Von Heyking describes the Stampede because he thinks it highlights the goods of tolerance and civic friendship. This raises the issue of whether von Heyking's defense of poetry "without meter" actually succeeds in softening philosophy's harsh moral judgment of poetry exhibited in Plato's *Republic*. For von Heyking does not think all political festivals are praiseworthy; he rejects the festivals of the French Revolution and Nuremburg rallies because they lack justice (194–95).

The Stampede also lacks justice. To put it mildly, no participant in the Calgary Stampede would ever mistake it for a temperance movement, and it takes no wild act of the imagination to consider how intemperate acts threaten justice. Von Heyking concedes that there are aspects of the festival that nourish injustice (202); yet he defends the festival on account of other just and advantageous aspects, such as multicultural tolerance. For example, it fosters participation from a variety of cultures that never experienced rodeos, such as immigrant Muslims. They wear cowboy hats over their hijabs (203), and the city of Calgary sets up prayer tents so they can still participate in the festival during Ramadan (201). By assessing the festival so plainly in terms of what is just and advantageous, it is clear von Heyking considers the merits of the Stampede from the moral judgment seat of philosophy. He reasons about the festival's merits as a spectator, placing himself and his readers at a critical distance from the festival. This critical distance is not unlike that of an Edmontonian who, one summer, asks his friends if it is worth descending from Edmonton to Calgary in order to see the festival. How would this Edmontonian reason about it?

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2 See Pierre Manent, *Metamorphoses of the City: On the Western Dynamic*, trans. Marc Lepain (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 4–9.

An enlightened Edmontonian might think that the best life is pursued by a decision not to participate in the festival, and instead to converse about the problem of what justice is in the company of friends. This Edmontonian sees the festival as incomplete in terms of the best life. He grants that in attending the festival he could share in some just activities and lead a good life, but he recognizes its defects. So it is by discussing justice with friends that one takes seriously the *problem* of living a good life.[3] This discussion draws the Edmontonian to the best life. From this perspective, the good regime should be praised not for allowing its citizens the leisure to participate in festivals, but because its promotion of leisure encourages its citizens to pursue the nightly conversations conducive to the best life.

This path of reasoning is emboldened by von Heyking's portrayal of the festival in terms of what is just and advantageous. He judges the festival from the perspective of philosophy, so he must be prepared to meet a challenge from the perspective of philosophy as to the ultimate worth of the festival. However, von Heyking's portrayal of the festival has the character of setting up a screen around the city. When he removes the screen it is to hint at divine transcendence, not philosophy.[4] He does not tell us how festivity takes us to philosophy, for festivity cannot be the best life. However he would attend to that notable gap in his book, von Heyking would likely argue that the philosophic path presupposes an understanding of what the festival is. The Edmontonian may be doubtful of all the advantages of the Calgary Stampede, but he at least takes the festival seriously. His counterpart is the smug and cynical Laurentinian who would not be caught within five hundred miles of the Calgary Stampede, and so fails to understand political life.

Von Heyking's philosophical goal is to draw from the ancients to teach his reader a way to think about friendship and politics in modernity that does not descend into smugness and cynicism. Von Heyking offers a rich meditation on friendship's role throughout life past and present, with reference to a variety of political and literary figures. Winston Churchill, Abraham Lincoln, Gail Caldwell, Geddy Lee, Thomas Mann, and C. S. Lewis all feature. Von Heyking's treatment of the friendships of the duke of Marlborough

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[3] Stephen Salkever, "Taking Friendship Seriously," in *Friendship and Politics: Essays in Political Thought*, ed. John von Heyking and Richard Avramenko (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008), 64.

[4] See Leo Strauss, *The City and Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 28.

is a magnificent demonstration of why Leo Strauss urged Churchill's *Life of Marlborough* to be "required reading for every political scientist."[5]

Ultimately, Von Heyking's quarrel between the ancients and the moderns is not a matter of reason, but a matter of love. The Romantic Movement's exaltation of bodily erotic love, captured in Lord Byron's assertion that friendship is love without wings, is his real modern adversary. Von Heyking is surely right that we now see friendship as "diluted eros" (93)—only consider one of the latest neologisms, "bromance," to spot the extent of the decay. It would do us well to reflect on how *sunaisthesis* evinces wonder, deepening our own moral lives and our own political regime. Von Heyking is well aware of Tocqueville's critique of democracy (128–30); standing against Byron with Aristotle and Plato would go some way toward combating democracy's corrosion of the spirit of association that exacerbates the drift toward loneliness. Only friendship, rightly understood, can save us now. *The Form of Politics* is well summarized by an epithet Evelyn Waugh attached to a man who never made an enemy nor lost a friend: "Oh dear friendship, what a gift of God it is. Speak no ill of it."[6]

5 Leo Strauss, "Churchill's Greatness," *Weekly Standard*, Jan. 4, 2000, http://www.weeklystandard.com/churchills-greatness/article/11653.

6 Evelyn Waugh, *The Life of Right Reverend Ronald Knox* (London: Penguin Books, 2012), 115. The author of the epithet is Fr. Bede Jarrett, OP.