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Thinking About Political Friendship: Virtuous Speech and the Human Good of Sociability

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By

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In this paper, I explore how the virtue of 'political friendship' might be cultivated through what I will call 'virtuous speech' in the public sphere.

There has been much scholarly work done on Aristotle's notion of political friendship, and the ways in which this notion is connected to Aristotle's view of community and the common good.[1] What I want to do here in thinking about political friendship is to call attention to Aristotle's foundational concept of man as a political animal, and the way in which he considers *speech* to be the primary indicator of man's political – and therefore social – nature.

I believe there is a fascinating interaction here between speech as an *indication* of man's sociability, and speech as a *means* by which sociability is achieved. If we consider speech as a means by which we create and sustain our social relationships, we must acknowledge, at once, that speech also can be used to undermine those same relationships. How, then, could speech be an indication of man's sociability, if it can also be the means of destroying it? I may not be able to answer that question here, but what I do want to consider is the deeply moral import of our speech, precisely because of its impact on our relationship with 'the other' – the relationship at stake in Aristotelian political friendship. I will argue, however, that the moral import of our speech extends beyond political friendship to our personal relationships, and in this sense thinking about 'virtuous speech' enables us to consider the interconnectedness between 'private' and 'public' virtues.

[1]See for instance von Heyking, John, *The Form of Politics: Aristotle and Plato on Friendship* (Québec: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2016), *passim*; Yack, Bernard, *The Problems of a Political Animal: Community, Justice, and Conflict in Aristotelian Political Thought* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1993), pp. 109-127; Smith, Thomas W., *Revaluing Ethics: Aristotle's Dialectical Pedagogy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), pp. 191-231.

So often, I believe, we do not think of our speech as a moral issue. Perhaps we think it is easy to 'take words back', or that our true intentions are not *really* conveyed by our utterances – particularly our 'posts' and our 'tweets' - which somehow drains our utterances of their moral ,import. Similarly, perhaps we cherish too much our notion of speech as a weapon, and our notion of our interlocutions as a conquest, in order to think about what virtues we would need to use speech *rightly*. So let me make some preliminary observations here regarding the morality of speech.

In essence, it is through speech that we are able to establish and develop both personal and political relationships which are fundamental to our well-being. Whether it is the intense deliberation regarding the good, and the good of the other, which takes place in our family relationships, friendships, and religious communities, or the less personal, and manifestly more difficult conversation and deliberation regarding the common good which we have in politics, speech makes possible for us shared meanings and shared ends with other human beings we could not have on our own, *in isolation*. These shared meanings and shared ends with others are a constitutive part of *our own* self-fulfillment, *our own* self-realization – in other words, *our own human flourishing.*

Thus, because speech is an essential part of our sociability, and because our sociability – on any Aristotelian or Thomist reading - constitutes an essential part of our flourishing, this puts speech squarely on the table as something of great moral import. Simply put, speech is something that can make our lives go well, or go badly.

Indeed, consider that both inter-personal and political dysfunction come about *through some kind of speech*. Demonization, ill-will, and animosity are all incited through speech, and these things affect us *personally* and *politically* by isolating and alienating us in very significant ways. And now, in our age of 'instant speech', which is so often characterized by a near-constant exchange of very brief, unstudied, rhetorical, manipulative and provocative utterances, the power of speech to undermine some of our most important goods – indeed, to undermine our flourishing - should concern us very much.

In these initial remarks concerning the moral nature of speech, I have pointed to a connection between speech and sociability. I now want to explore this connection further, by considering Aristotle's notion of speech as an *indicator* of human sociability alongside Aquinas's interpretation of Aristotelian sociability as a *natural inclination*.[2] Looking at sociability through this Thomist lens of inclination allows us to speak of sociability as one of the *fundamental goods* toward which human beings are inclined, by virtue of their human nature. Indeed, in Thomist natural law theory, humans, by their nature, have certain 'dispositional properties', each of which

[2]For a helpful treatment of Aquinas's notion of man's social and political nature, see Keys, Mary M., *Aquinas, Aristotle, and the Promise of the Common Good* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 67-86.

is oriented toward 'a particular end, or terminal point', and this end is, by definition, a 'good'.[3] Aquinas divides our human dispositions into 'three generic sets – living, sensitive and rational'.[4] Thus, the 'end' of the disposition towards living, for instance, is to continue in existence, or 'individual survival' and all that entails, and so we can refer to individual survival as a 'good'.

In order to consider sociability as a good, we must turn our attention to our rational dispositions. The goods to which we are inclined based upon our rational properties as human beings are first, to understand truth, and secondly, to live together in social communities.[5] Thus, the 'ends' of our rational dispositions can be summed up as what is necessary for the 'promotion of [a human person's] good as a rational and social being.'[6] On this reading, presumably the good of the human person as a rational being is to seek and understand truth things, and the good of the human person as a social being is to live in communities.

Yet, although we can state separately the two aspects of the human person as a 'rational' being and a 'social' being in this way, it is important to note that Aquinas asserts that sociability is a specifically *rational* good. That is, just as we are inclined to the good of truth through our rational nature, so are we inclined to sociability. So there seems to be a sense in which our capacity and desire to search for truth is connected to our capacity and desire to seek out human community. I cannot properly explore this connection here, but let me try to state it another way: perhaps there is a way in which our sociability is *dependent* upon our desire to seek for truth. We cannot have false notions about how to actualize, and sustain, the existence of our human communities; we have to use our 'desire to understand' to drive us to find the true principles that underlie cohesive, healthy communities.[7]

In this way, there is another connection between the rational goods of truth and sociability: they are both specifically connected to speech. If our desire for truth leads us to discover true principles governing our social existence, this discovery will take place *through speech*. Indeed, Aristotle argues that it is through speech that we reason about moral matters – that is, about the just and the unjust, about that which is fundamental to our human sociability.[8] Thus, speech is not only an *indication* of our human sociability, it is also the essential means by which we come to the truths necessary for the good of sociability to be realized.

Thus far, I have suggested various ways to consider the relationship between speech and the good of sociability. I have argued that the notion of sociability as a rational good is particularly significant as we consider its relationship to speech. What I want to do now emphasize that

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[3]Lisska, Anthony J., *Aquinas's Theory of Natural Law: An Analytic Reconstruction* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), p. 100.
[4]*Ibid*., p. 100.
[5]See Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1a2ae, qu. 94, art. 2.
[6]Lisska, p. 102.
[7]On the need for 'truth' in the form of 'art and prudence' to build political community from our inchoate inclinations for sociability, see Keys, pp. 77-87.
[8]Aristotle, *Politics*, 1.2.

because sociability is a good to which we are *inclined*, it is, this sense, a good *to be achieved*, rather than simply a description of the human condition. For Aquinas's theory of action holds that through both our practical reason and our will we are inclined toward the general 'goods' of our dispositional properties, but that it is only through virtue that we are able to grasp what these goods will look like in a particular circumstance, and what to do in order to bring them about. That is, it is through virtue – most especially the virtue of practical wisdom (*phronesis*) – that we are able to actualize the potential for goodness latent in our natural inclinations. In this way, our inclination for sociability can only be realized *in practice* through the development and exercise of the virtues.[9]

But what does it mean to say that the virtues are necessary to actualize our inclination for sociability? At this point, one direction to take would be to discuss various virtues – perhaps we could call them 'civic virtues' - which enable us to live together well in communities, for instance, justice, tolerance and so forth. However, considering the connections I have tried to draw earlier between speech and sociability, I want to approach the issue of the virtues necessary for sociability, by emphasizing the importance of virtue for *speech*. For instance, how would the civic virtues be manifest in our speech? That is, what would 'virtuous speech' look like?

Instead of focusing on specific virtues for sociability, I want to take a step back and consider a more general notion of virtue as it pertains to speech. I will argue that virtuous speech is what I will call 'practically intelligent speech', or in other words, speech that is guided by practical wisdom (*phronesis*). Like any other (Aristotelian) virtuous act, virtuous speech includes both a cognitive and appetitive element; that is, it done with a cognitive grasp of the goodness of the end one is trying to achieve with the act, as well as a desire for that good end.[10] Thus, in this context, virtuous speech that which is uttered with an *understanding* that sociability is a fundamental human good, as well as with the *motivation* to achieve and maintain it. However, virtuous speech not only requires this cognitive and appetitive commitment to sociability, but also, and crucially, demands an understanding of *how* speech can work to actualize the good of sociability within a particular context. Let me try to address these various elements of a virtuous act as it pertains to speech.

As a way in to examining virtuous speech, it is important, I think, to start with the notion of 'practical intelligence' in Aristotelian virtue. For Aristotle's notion of virtue *is* a notion of intelligence; indeed, a virtuous disposition is precisely what gives the agent the ability to 'grasp' –that is, to *know* – what needs to be done in a particular situation in order to bring about what is 'good'.[11] In this sense, practical intelligence is the ability to discern what is *true* – that is, what is truly good to do, in this particular context.[12] Now, an essential part of the virtuous act is that

[9]See Hamilton-Bleakley, H., 'The Art of Ruling in Aquinas's *De Regimine Principum*', *History of Political Thought* 20 (1999): 575-602, for a discussion of how virtue 'completes' nature in Aristotelian/Thomist ethical theory.
[10]See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (hereafter *NE*), VI.1-5.
[11]*NE*, VI.5.
[12]*Ibid*., VI.2.

the agent knows not only *what* should be done, but also, *how* it should be done. In Aristotelian language, a virtuous action needs to be characterized by first, a good end, and secondly, the right *means* to that end.[13] Indeed, Aristotle argues that if we identify a good end, but are ignorant of the right way to attain that end, our action, ultimately, will not be good.[14] For we only really understand what we are trying to achieve when we understand the right way to achieve it. Or, said another way, if the means are wrong, then we will 'miss the mark' and fail to bring about the good end in question.[15]

If we turn back to how practical intelligence might be applied to speech, the relationship between good ends and good means in a virtuous act seems to me to be a very promising concept for thinking about how to use speech *rightly* in order to bring about the human good of sociability. It points back to the assertion I made earlier, that virtuous speech would have to encapsulate an understanding of *how* to achieve sociability in the particular. Indeed, said another way, this would be an understanding of how to use speech *as a means* to bring about sociability.

Let us step back and consider the idea of speech 'as a means' in a more general way. If we think about the 'purpose' of our utterances, we know that whatever purpose we may have in making the utterance, it is not just to make the utterance itself. There is a purpose – a state of affairs which we are trying to achieve - above and beyond the speech.[16] Now, if a virtuous act is one which brings about a good purpose, it might be tempting to conclude that *virtuous* speech is simply whatever speech we see fit to use as a means in our attempts to accomplish a good purpose. But we need to be very careful here. For the morality of our speech is found not just in the end we are trying to accomplish with our speech, but also in the *way* that we use our speech to accomplish it. That is, we cannot use speech in a *bad* way in order to bring about a *good* end.

And now, it seems, we are getting closer to understanding how a notion of virtuous speech may throw some light on the moral paucity of our current public discourse. For if it is true that we cannot use bad means to bring about good ends, then I propose that there are certain things we should never do with our speech, precisely because they will always be *bad things to do*, no matter what end we are trying to achieve with our speech. Although I cannot construct an adequate argument here regarding what those sorts of things might be, I suggest that things such as, for instance, alienation, oppression, abuse and persecution are things we should *never* seek to do to others with our speech.

Why? Why will these things always constitute 'vicious speech'? The answer must be that these are things which will never enable the actualization of the human good. Alienation, oppression,

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[13]See *Ibid.*, III.2-5.
[14]See *Ibid.*, VI.9.
[15]See *Ibid.*, II.6.
[16]For reasons of space, I cannot adequately address the notion of 'speech acts' here. For a survey of this topic as it has been developed by thinkers such as J. L. Austin and Quentin Skinner, see Hamilton-Bleakley, H., 'Linguistic Philosophy and the Foundations', in *Rethinking the Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, eds. Brett, A., and Tully, J. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 20-33.

abuse and persecution can never be used as means – that is, they can never be used as a *method* - to achieve a good end, because they are things which, *in and of themselves*, undermine the human good. And they undermine the human good precisely because they pervert the good of sociability – that is, they transform our relationships with 'the other' into an evil for us, into something that makes our lives go badly. In this way, they put sociability beyond our reach, and make political friendship an impossibility.

And yet, it seems clear that in our contemporary discourse – particularly in our online discourse - we do these things, or have these things done to us, *much of the time* with speech. It is not, of course, limited to political discourse, and therefore does not only affect political friendship. Indeed, any perusal of my teenager's social media feed will display a constant stream – literally – of downright contempt that seems to know no bounds. And how is Aristotelian friendship – which is marked by a goodwill toward the 'other', and a 'self-conscious reciprocity' of loving and being loved[17] - supposed to develop and thrive in an environment of this kind of vicious speech?

But although I have made a distinction here between political and personal discourse, so often this distinction is blurred in real life. The demonizing, harsh nature of our political rhetoric has become so personal is so many ways, that we should not be surprised to find that what hinders and threatens personal friendship will also hinder and threaten political friendship. As Salkever explains, both Aristotelian friendship and Aristotelian political friendship 'require the partners to consider one another as separate selves' – that is, as persons in a relationship of reciprocity.[18] In vicious speech, we lose the sense of the other as a 'separate self', and seek instead to dominate and abuse others for *our* purposes.[19] Thus, it turns our relationship with 'the other' into one of attempted exploitation, and the possibility of friendship, and political friendship, is gone.[20]

However, let me back up a bit and suggest that, in most cases, we do not usually *set out* to abuse, oppress and persecute others *as our end goal*. That is, I do not think that most of us, ultimately, think of ourselves as having bad ends when we communicate. We set out to achieve some other purpose – say, the promotion of a certain candidate for political office, or the rights of a certain identity group, or the advancement of some religious/anti-religious idea, or the correction of some injustice, or awareness for some other social cause, etc. - and then use verbal abuse *as a means* to achieve that purpose. And somehow, because we perceive our purpose to be good, we

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[17]See Salkever, S., 'Taking Friendship Seriously: Aristotle on the Place(s) of *Philia* in Human Life,' in *Friendship and Politics: Essays in Political Thought*, eds von Heyking, J. and Avramenko, R. (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008), pp. 53-85, p. 65.

[18]*Ibid*., p. 65.

[19]For a perceptive and prescient analysis of our modern political discourse as one of attempted domination and subordination through using persons as 'means' to our own ends, see A. MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press), pp. 6-24.

[20]See Hittinger, R., 'Natural Law and the Human City' in *Contemporary Perspectives on Natural Law: Natural Law as a Limiting Concept*, ed. González, A. M. (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), pp. 29-41, who argues for the necessity of reciprocity in political friendship. Whenever anyone attempts to place themselves outside of this reciprocity, this 'spell[s] the death of political friendship'. (pp. 39-40).

lose the *understanding* that the goodness of our purpose is intricately tied to the way we try to bring it about. But that understanding is fundamental if we are to create and sustain political friendship.

Now, I think the word 'understanding' is key here, and it brings us back to the idea of practical, or moral intelligence. Moral intelligence is developed through experience and repeated instances of careful moral deliberation, and it is what allow us to grasp just how deeply our purposes are connected to our methods. And again, this applies to our speech just as much as anything else. *There is a kind of moral intelligence required to understand how 'this particular good' requires a certain kind of speech to bring it about.* For instance, if I want to encourage my young daughter to be educated, I would not say to her that she is worthless, useless, and stupid in order to motivate her in her education. For – besides the obvious problems with this kind of speech, not the least of which is that it is untruthful – an essential part of being educated is the process of self-knowledge that comes from inquiry and introspection. If I were to use this kind of abusive speech which attacked her sense of self, it would compromise the integrity of the very purpose I am trying to accomplish.

Or, if I wanted to 'combat hate' among my fellow citizens, I would not do it by demonizing on social media those who had significant differences of opinion to me on various current issues, since with this kind of speech I am perpetuating the very thing I am trying to stop. Thus, I am not putting forward here a utilitarian argument where we could weigh out the harm that comes from abusive speech and justify it if the benefit is greater than the harm. Rather, I am asserting that in order to have virtuous speech, there must be a kind of integrity between our means and our good ends. To lose sight of this integrity implies a kind of *ignorance* regarding the true nature of the end one is trying to achieve.

Now, importantly, this ignorance is not a matter of naiveté. The ignorance regarding ends and means can be a culpable, and even dangerous kind of ignorance. It is culpable in that just as moral intelligence is developed through careful moral deliberation, so is moral ignorance fed by a persistent lack of attention to moral deliberation, a persistent lack of thought regarding human flourishing and how to bring it about. And again, this applies to speech just as much as to anything else. If we persistently fail to take notice of how our method of speech really can distance us from the flourishing we are trying to achieve, this signals a kind of stupidity which will significantly impair our ability to live a moral life.

Perhaps 'vicious speech', then, would be something like 'stupid speech' – speech which is uttered from a kind of willful ignorance and complacency regarding the way speech works to help, or hinder, us in our attempts to grasp the human good. This is the opposite of 'virtuous speech' as 'morally intelligent speech' – speech which is informed by a perceptive understanding not only of the fundamental goods that speech can bring into our lives, but also of *how* speech can do this, right here and right now.

In conclusion, in thinking about political friendship, I have not put forward any particular virtues which could be considered especially important for galvanizing political friendship in the public sphere. Instead, I have focused on the notion of virtue itself – that any virtuous action will be characterized by an integrity between ends and means, purposes and methods, and it takes a person of moral intelligence to be able to act this way. This, I think, is in the spirit of Aristotle's take on political friendship, which is that it can really only be practiced among virtuous people. To practice political friendship is to think about the human good in relation to 'the other', who is 'separate' from oneself. Vicious people cannot do this.

Furthermore, I have specifically focused on how this virtuous disposition might help us in our speech. For, since political friendship is the practice of thinking about the human good in relation to the other, it must also be the practice of speaking about it. Speech is the means by which we come to understand the truths about our human condition, and what is truly good for us. It is also the means by which we construct a society in which we can attempt to achieve those goods. In this way, it creates and sustains our sociability, and our political friendship. We need virtuous speech, then, to craft the relationships which fill the deepest needs of our rational nature. Vicious speech cannot not do this.

Finally, because vicious people cannot sustain goodwill toward 'the other' – either in friendship, or in political friendship, and because vicious speech undermines *all* the relationships which are fundamental to our well-being, it is difficult to see how a hard line can be drawn between private and public virtues in this sense. The virtuous disposition which enables one to recognize the good of sociability, and drives one to discover the good speech needed to achieve it, seems to me to be informed by a deep moral intelligence which will seek out both personal and political friendship.

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