

John von Heyking and Thomas Heilke, eds. *The Primacy of Persons in Politics: Empiricism and Political Philosophy*

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For most of us, when we think of politics, it is the persons and personalities that incarnate the political: politics takes place in the actions of politicians, their advisors, and, on intermittent occasions, among the voters. But as is generally known, this is often not how contemporary social and political scientists view politics. Social science tends to look at politics either as an idealized realm (under the watch of constitutional law as in the accounts of Habermas or Dworkin) or as an agglomeration of specific empirical instances attached to social, psychological, neuro-biological or anthropological laws. In both cases, these idealized forms and empirical facts, so at odds with each other on the surface, come together in our modern liberal regime where democratic institutions and processes, rules, laws and regulations, are said to contain the moral ideal of our human aspirations, while constantly deconstructing and revealing their own empirical shortcomings with a hope to lifting us ever closer to our moral perfection.

In this social science/legalist view of politics, the political itself has little or no proper substance, but shuttles in uncertainty between empirical insufficiency and moral absolutism. And to the extent that those who would still see politicians and persons as the meat and potatoes of politics—i.e. the view of the “the man in the street”—are themselves influenced by our dominant intellectual trends (mainly via the media and our insufficient educational institutions), they will often fall into a wholly predictable cynicism regarding these very politicians. And, as if on cue, the politicians will respond with invocations of profound and entirely vacuous sentiment peppered with words such as transparency, accountability, community, inclusion and respect while assiduously disrespecting the very

possibility that politics is a worthwhile and substantive undertaking in its own right.

That many political thinkers have attempted to break free of this depressing institutional orthodoxy is not surprising. Among those who have, a number have explicitly returned to persons as the focus of politics. And among those, German political philosopher, Tilo Schabert, has made a major contribution to understanding politics as a realm of reasoning and acting proper to persons as political actors. The essays collected in the volume *The Primacy of Persons in Politics* by editors John von Heyking and Thomas Heilke, provide an in-depth overview of the meaning, the impact, the breadth and relevance of Schabert’s work as presented by a number of authors as well as a contribution from Schabert himself.

What most impresses about this collection is its ability to reflect the wide-ranging influences and implications impacting on and deriving from Schabert’s investigations. From essays on the meaning and history of modernity, to friendship both as the form of politics and in its practical workings through empirical studies of contemporary politicians, this collection allows us to discover a thinker seeking to re-orient our contemporary approach to politics and its study in a forceful and profound way by bringing us back to persons.

However, in Schabert’s hands, persons is not a simple referent to political actors as we often see them through our cynical lens. Rather, Schabert’s use of the term persons implies a host of activities and relationships that constitute the very core of human endeavour. Schabert employs the term persons specifically to counter the social science/legalistic understanding that focuses on institutions that reduce human action to imperious will held in check by constitutional processes. This is not to say that Schabert ignores institutions. Instead, he seeks to break out of the straightjacket liberal democratic institutionalism places around persons as full political actors. Rather than the institutions with their regulations

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and moral imperatives wholly determining the content of political acts, persons are seen as the shapers and molders of political institutions. To quote the editors' introduction:

“At a deeper level, Schabert's insight reflects the ancient view that institutions, laws, constitutions and regimes or polities are reflections of the individual characters that compose them. Thus, a democratic polity reflects the democratic souls that constitute it. More precisely, a democratic polity *is* the democratic souls that constitute it.”

The reference here to “the ancient view” is instructive. In the lines that follow the above quote, the editors note that, for Schabert, humans fundamentally create themselves through political thought and action. But the editors immediately note that Schabertian creation is not exactly the creation we moderns have come to prize. It is neither Nietzsche's *Übermensch* nor Machiavelli's *virtu*, precisely because it is a form of creativity that activates human potential rather than conforming it to Machiavellian necessity or Nietzschean will to power. Similarly, it is not the Kantian subject legislating itself or even the embedded subject of today seeking the public recognition of its various identities. Schabert's notion of creation is at once freer, more substantial, and more humane.

That Schabert's notion of creativity is also more in line with classical views, be they Platonic or Aristotelian, initially appears somewhat surprising given that creativity is not often associated with eternal Platonic ideas or Aristotle's forms. And yet, Schabert, in accord with a number of twentieth and twenty-first century political thinkers, has rediscovered the fundamentally political and hence creative aspect in classical political philosophy. Indeed, classical political philosophy was precisely a meditation on form and movement as it honed in on the alterations between political regimes within the overarching notion of politics as self-government. The Greek regime was specifically a creation of citizens in which various elements of the city would come to the fore, dominate and then give way to other elements, especially in the interplay between the few and the many as each in its turn sought to capture the government of the public thing.

For the Greeks, as well as for Schabert, this constant creativity was undertaken by persons, not simply individuals with their interests, but by persons engaging their full powers within the complexity of political life to govern themselves, which meant to freely determine the limits they would place on themselves: an interplay of freedom and restriction that would define each city. In this context, the Greek city is instructive specifically as to the dynamics of how persons enacted their creativity. As is commonly known, the city was a relatively small affair in both inhabitants and geography. It was that place where citizens did not require representation but could speak and talk face to face. The immediacy of human interaction fomented and encouraged Greek self-government.

The immediacy of the Greek city rested upon something that is, in many ways, anathema to we moderns: exclusion. The city, by its nature was small and exclusive. And exclusion applied not only to those who were foreigners but also to a large portion of the population. Yet, it was within the Greek city, in its immediacy that free political action was conceived on the basis of something that is central to Schabert's analysis: friendship.

It is well known that Aristotle placed friendship at the center of his ethical and political thought. Schabert similarly emphasizes the role of friendship as key to the politics of creative persons. This is made clear in the friendships Schabert analyzes in his masterful empirical studies of figures as diverse as French President Francois Mitterrand and Boston Mayor Kevin White. Each of these individuals cultivated and established a number of friendships that could be called upon to assist and bolster these political players on a variety of levels whether personally or in the public realm.

At its core, friendship is a creative act that brings together individuals with their distinct and temporal existence into a larger whole based upon common concern, interest and aspirations. It is an effort at defining order out of a chaotic and often chance encounter, but one upon which human reason and nature place their stamp. At the same time, it is manifestly exclusive rather than egalitarian. It requires immediacy, intimacy and a fundamental sharing of intention that is far more substantive than the trite contemporary references to “creating community” indicate.

Friendship, creativity and persons resonate throughout Schabert's work in an overt effort to counter much of the depersonalization and institutionalization of politics that is constitutive of our modern experience, (along with precursors of a sort in the Christian notion of will and, according to Schabert's analysis, in Cicero's functional approach more typical of the Roman thinkers). The essays in this collection, each from its own perspective, work through the implications of the analytical categories of friendship, creativity and persons.

In a pair of essays, David Tabachnick and Toivo Koivukoski, use the tools of persons and creativity to address the philosophic and historical turns that have brought western thought to its contemporary approach to politics. While much has been made over the last two centuries of the bureaucratic malaise of modernity in combination with its obsessive fetishistic focus on individual tastes, few thinkers have been able to propose much beyond outright pessimism or a rather naïve hopefulness that modern apathy can be augmented by everything from volunteerism to aestheticism to political activism. Schabert takes a different route. Rather than ceding all the terrain to modernity and its impersonal structures, Schabert recognizes the benefits of egalitarian democratic institutions while asserting that modernity does not and cannot give a full account of human political flourishing. As Tabachnick notes:

“Unlike Heidegger, Schabert does not see [modernity] as a complete or all-encompassing process. Having diagnosed the early modern origins of the sickness, he also seeks to reveal a still healthy realm that remains concealed in the practice of elite political actors. For Schabert “executive politics” or the practice of political leadership is the vestige of political creativity, where politics remains fluid and powerful—less encumbered by the pressures of the modern state.”

The creativity of classical friendship survives the modern malaise and does so in the specific location of the modern executive. This explains Schabert’s empirical focus on executives such as the French President and Boston’s Mayor, as well as his interest in the relations between national executives, particularly Mitterand and Helmut Kohl. But locating contemporary friendship in the executive immediately raises questions about the nature of modern friendship, given that the executive was a function virtually unknown in the Greek cities and is largely absent from the thought of Plato and Aristotle.

To understand the meaning of this rather odd juxtaposition of friendship and the executive, we can begin by noting that Schabert does not confuse the executive institution with the activity of friendship; he simply identifies the executive as the modern location in which friendship has the greatest latitude to exist and grow. Politics, it could be said, takes place in the modern executive.

The remaining essays in this collection explore the precise nature of this problem, from an analysis of friendship as the form of politics (von Heyking) to analyses of how creative friendship and politics manifest themselves through modern power structures (Heilke and Avnon) to empirical and methodological applications and amplifications of creative friendship (Thumfart, Lanczi and Neveu). What comes to light is a paradox, indeed two, which correspond to the nature of friendship generally, and what it reveals about our contemporary political life when placed into the context of the modern executive specifically.

At the theoretical level essays such as von Heyking’s draw out the paradox inherent in friendship, and in politics, between the ideal of friendship, which is highly exclusive and governed by virtue (according to Aristotle) and the compromises of political friendship which mixes virtue with interest, strategy and machinations of various sorts. As von Heyking explains, the “peak” of friendship, or friendship as *sunaitesis*, is the purest form of friendship in which conversation and thinking are put in common—the most perfect unity attainable by humans.

But this friendship is problematic because, on the one hand, it points beyond itself to a pure unity that would appear to dissolve the individuality of the distinct friends, while on the other hand, it cannot escape the practicality of friendships that can decay and change over time as friends become mere allies, or even worse, enemies. But for von Heyking, and Schabert, it is precisely this indeterminate nature of friendship, and hence

of politics, that makes it the most human endeavour, weaving universal desire with practical attainment. And, while political friendship is certainly less pure than virtue friendship, it is, in some regards more substantive as it includes the whole breadth of the human, from its most intellectual and spiritual pleasures to its fleshy demands.

As such, political friendship both unifies and excludes. Politics is the unity of bodies, interests, languages, etc., that by their nature exclude one city from another, one class from another, but in doing so, provide the immediacy of friendship whereby human flourishing can come into being and pass away again. It is precisely political friendship that modernity has sought to exorcise. Here we can refer to Machiavelli’s disdain for the aristocracy and his advice to the would-be prince/executive to rely instead on the masses who seek only a negation: the right not to be oppressed.

This original paradox, evident in both Greek action and thought, brings us to the second paradox that comes to light as we attempt to find space for Schabert’s creative friendship within the modern executive with its Machiavellian reliance on negation. In the modern context, friendship is certainly operative and remains the heart of political thought and action at the level of national leader, political leader, cabinet leader, etc. (Heilke) but within this democratic executive framework, creative friendship appears, surprisingly, as autocratic (Avnon).

The modern autocrat is the person who takes hold of the institutional machinery of constitutional liberal democracy and makes it his or her own. Behind the façade of modern democracy is the person of classical political analysis, forming alliances and friendships, moving matters forward through a series of personal actions. Schabert labels this personal action as autocratic or monocratic, identifying the paradox whereby the democratic form is moved by a small circle of true political actors in what constitutes an oligarchic or autocratic structure. As Avnon notes: “Since the creative person’s *style* of governance is autocratic, whereas the form of governance is democratic, this choice of concepts creates a paradox.”

Avnon uses an interesting but apt word to describe the autocratic element of modern executive power, referring to it as a *style*. This peculiarly modern word suggests the transformation friendship appears to endure as it comes to light in the contemporary context. Within the modern constitutional realm, institutions become depersonalized under a regime of ever-increasing law. Where classical political analysis focused explicitly on the particularity of the variety of regimes as manifestations of dispositions of the citizens’ souls, modern political thought, in an effort to be more “scientific” (i.e. more abstract), foregoes substance in favour of rules and institutions. As a result, modern friendship may be characterized as a “style” (autocratic or monocratic) as well as a substantive relationship. This is not to say that the creative friendship Schabert champions is not legitimate. Rather, it suggests that

modern democracy, in its attempt to purge political friendship, not only fails, but creates institutions that highlight the autocratic and exclusive aspects of friendship beyond what would have been possible in the Greek city.

And here lies Schabert's signal contribution to modern political thought. What comes to light in this volume is a dual paradox. On the one hand, we have Schabert's theoretical and empirical studies that highlight the endurance and even flourishing of creative friendship within the very modern structures designed to purge political friendship in favour of indifferent bureaucratic egalitarianism. Moreover, this creative friendship is both more substantive and attainable when compared to the proliferation of moralizing attempts to create human dignity or inclusive community through a muddle of religious, artistic, mystical, activist or judicial contrivances. On the other hand, friendship and politics comes to light in the contemporary context as a form of autocratic style. As such, we have two paradoxes: 1.) friendship and politics survive in the modern world, despite efforts to suppress them, and 2.) where it does survive—in the executive—it survives, as autocracy, despite and because of the façade of equality sought by our liberal democratic structures.

Given the odd convergence of a democratic ideology that seeks to purge political friendship while simultaneously encouraging it in the executive as autocracy, we are left with the question as to how friendly Schabert's creative friendship is. Schabert identifies a space for friendship that survives the strictures of modern governance. At the same time, modernity appears to alter and rework friendship into a monocratic mold. The modern form, it seems, while not eviscerating politics and political friendship entirely, certainly alters it from what was on display in the Greek city and from Aristotle's fulsome descriptions of virtue friendship. And this raises the interesting investigation for another time: Is political friendship, and friendship simply, more suited to certain political forms and regimes than others? And is our current regime/form, more hostile than most to this fundamental and persistent human bond?

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