ON TYRANNY & FRIENDSHIP

Chris Penfield

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For Aryeh Kosman

So they live their whole life without ever being friends of anyone, always one man's master or another's slave. The tyrannic nature never has a taste of freedom or true friendship.

– Plato, *Republic*, 576a

We live in a time of tyranny. This tyranny threatens to metastasize throughout our body politic– taking hold within the political, ecological, economic & social systems that support collective life– turning them against what they are meant to protect & sustain. What is a cancer, after all, if not the tragedy of self-misrecognition, an uncontrolled profusion of self-division to the point of dissolution?

The apocalyptic hue of this sentiment colors public discourses & private anxieties alike. It may thus seem cold comfort to suggest that the problem of tyranny is ancient, coeval with democracy itself & accompanying it like a shadow. Yet we might do well to consider the radical perspective of a thinker who, despite having been canonized for millennia as the inaugurator of western philosophy, helps to shed light on the present. Given voice through the character of his teacher, Socrates, whose political execution for the crime of questioning authority still reverberates some 2420 years later, Plato diagnoses & proposes the remedy for the political psychology of tyranny– that is, the tyrannical deformation of *psyche*, the ancient Greek word meaning *soul* (breath, life force).

Soul politic might be a better suited term for indicating what it is that tyranny corrupts: the complex identity, inner harmony & animating spirit of a people (or person). The psychological problem of tyranny is not about the pathological profile of some

individual– even that of a megalomaniacal narcissist trying to shape the world in his own image. Rather, the problem concerns the collective conditions giving rise to a world thusly misshapen. Since these conditions are foundational to our shared lifeworld, to the field of experience, meaning, history & value that defines our common social reality, it follows that all of us must ecounter tyranny as a problem, in our relations with ourselves as much as with others.

This is certainly the view Socrates advances as the protagonist of Plato's *Apology*. Speaking at his own trial & risking death, Socrates zealously defends his philosophical vocation as a practice– an *ethos* or way of life– in care of the soul. To the extent that one inhabits a social world in decline, in which people live according to values detrimental to their greater flourishing (like wealth attachment & pleasure consumption) & thereby distortive of their proper nature, philosophy becomes essential as a source of critical examination & transformation. Like us, Socrates & Plato lived in a decadent country gravely weakened by decades of senseless & extravagant war. A country whose once robust democratic institutions, dispossessed by repressive oligarchy, had become fragile & reactionary. That such a society, which still enjoyed its reputation as the cultural & intellectual capital of Mediterranean antiquity, could not tolerate critical truth-telling, especially the kind that would expose its own poverty of virtue

& wisdom, has long served to signal the toxic insecurity attending authoritarianism.

The injustice of Socrates's execution– echo specter & augury of civic slide into tyranny– haunts Plato's reflections upon justice, to which we now turn. Like Socrates, we, too, must muster the forces of critical reflection to care for our soul politic so badly riven today. Plato's concept of friendship as collective ethos offers one place to start.

No Justice, No Peace

The opposition between two figures, the tyrant & the friend, fundamentally structures Plato's thought. Each term of this opposition refers not only to a character type, but to a basic mode of relationship: the form of relation to oneself & others. Within society, our way of relating to others always reflects & informs how we shape our own ethical substance, our ethos or self-crafted character. Tyranny names one such relational form: a violent zero-sum mode wherein the self, driven by deep insecurity, strives to dominate others. Its antipode is friendship: an intrinsically regenerative mode of care & reciprocal overflow within & between self & others.

These two forms of relation are reflected in all domains of human interactivity, from the political & economic to the interpersonal & ethical. The philosophical task is thus to evaluate these forms, analyzing their role in shaping our social world & understanding which to resist & which to cultivate. Nowhere is this formal difference so pressing as in the topic of Plato's most famous work, the *Republic*, where the question pursued by Socrates & his band of interlocuters is the nature of justice itself. The answer to this question hinges on how to understand relational value as such.

The dialogue begins by counterposing two accounts of justice: one, suggested by Socrates,

based on a model of care; the other, proffered by would-be rival Thrasymachus, based on a model of domination or might. According to the first, justice can be understood as *pastoral*, a kind of good shepherding. A just leader tends to her flock for their own benefit, aiming to bring about conditions of life conducive to both individual & collective flourishing. Justice is thus "virtue of soul," the inner harmony & well-being of a person or people that promotes happiness of self & friendship with others. Conversely, it is never just to harm others; leaders who rule to the detriment of the people are thereby vicious of soul, unhappy because unjust.

It is at this point that Thrasymachus, "hunched up like a wild beast," can no longer be restrained, bursting in upon the discourse & hurling himself at Socrates & his friends as if to maul them (*Republic*, 336b). Taking on the aura of a wolf,[i] Thrasymachus hounds Socrates for his pollyannish naivety, arguing first that justice is nothing but the advantage of the powerful, then that injustice itself is virtue. In the first case, the meaning of the word *justice* would be defined & enforced by those who occupy positions of authority, much as our criminal justice system delivers its so-called justice in ways that consolidate hierarchy, hegemony & privilege. What passes for just, whether morally or legally, merely reflects the dominant interests of those who rule. And what one wants, Thrasymachus maintains, is to count among

the powerful. If, from the perspective of the powerless, this unabashed pursuit of self-interested dominance is unjust, then so be it. In that case, to enjoy the spoils of injustice is what we all desire; only those who are strong enough to do so are willing to admit it. As one such celebrant of irrepressible might put the point on June 1, 2020, addressing the nation's governors & calling for the violent suppression of racial justice & pro-democracy protestors: "If you don't dominate, you're wasting your time."

We have, then, two directly competing ideas of the just: one, indexed on the relational form of tyranny, according to which justice is either a mask worn by the dominant or the defeated complaint of the powerless; the other, indexed on the relational form of friendship, according to which justice establishes & sustains reciprocal well-being for one & all. The challenge posed by Thrasymachus to Socrates is a real one: how to adjudicate this bedrock difference between the lupine (the big bad wolf) & the pastoral? Why ought we prefer to be members of a flock, whether sheep, sheepdogs or shepherd, rather than wolves delectating in the feast? Indeed, why should we think the shepherd is not tending the flock simply out of self-interest, grooming them for her own ends rather than acting for the benefit of the sheep?

A Radiance Freely Given

To resolve this set of questions, it must be shown that on the model of care, justice is an intrinsic virtue, good for its own sake, such that one would rather live justly, even as a simple day laborer working another's field, than rule as absolute tyrant among the unjust. This is precisely the project undertaken for the remaining bulk of the *Republic*, though with contested & uncertain success. An alternate route appears in a roughly contemporaneous Platonic dialogue, *Phaedrus*, where the problem of tyranny is transposed in the erotic register. Here, the topic is love, upon which Socrates & his friend, Phaedrus, converse while enjoying a scenic spot outside the city walls. The question is whether love itself, as mode of relation & desire, is virtuous or vicious.

The formal difference between tyrant & friend shines forth in the qualitative distinction this dialogue presents between two kinds of lovers, the wanton & the true. It will be Phaedrus himself— whose name in ancient Greek means *radiant* & not, incidentally, *wolf*, as misremembered by Robert Pirsig in *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*— whose uniquely beloved beauty of soul irradiates for Socrates this essential erotic difference.

Socrates first presents the psychology of the ignoble lover, "ruled by desire and enslaved by pleasure." Ruled by himself rather than ruling, he[ii] is essentially insecure because self-estranged. Since he is thus determined by weakness of character, this lover seeks to cultivate the inner poverty of the beloved, making himself appear comparatively better by rendering the other worse off in fact. Fundamentally jealous, he inculcates defect & dependency in the beloved by stunting the latter's personal growth, debarring other sources of experience & learning. Just as the toxicity of this kind of love is contagious, spreading from lover to beloved, so, too, are its characteristic effects of bondage. The lover, dominated by his own appetites, indentures the beloved to them in turn: to fall in with a wanton lover "is inevitably to enslave oneself to someone who is untrustworthy, peevish, jealous, disagreeable, harmful to one's property, harmful to one's physical condition, and above all harmful to the education of one's soul." In short, the beloved becomes an object of consumptive desire, prey to the uncontrolled rapacity of one whose love is "like the desire for a satisfying meal. As wolves cherish lambs, so lovers befriend boys" (*Phaedrus*, 238e-241c).

Such lupine love is the erotic expression of tyranny, precisely mirroring Socrates's depiction of the tyrant in Book IX of the *Republic*. Like the wanton

lover, the tyrant is bound in a prison of his own making, entrapped by a horde of various fears & desires. Because he has a corrupted inward "regime," trying to rule over others without first learning to govern himself, his need to dominate betrays his own weakness. This toxic lover– drawn to the path of least resistance to satisfy his wants– nurtures deficiency in the beloved & feeds off his poverty. So, too, the tyrant comes to crave the sycophantic adulation of the less powerful, even though such signs of servility can never quell the insatiable insecurity within. Far from mighty, the tyrant is thus "in truth a real slave to the greatest fawning and slavery, and a flatterer of the most worthless men." And just as the lover's unjust desire reproduces a cycle of ill-being & subjection, so does the tyrant, who is necessarily "envious, faithless, unjust, friendless, impious, and a host and nurse for all vice," condemn those near him to share in his misfortune (*Republic*, 579a-580a).

What, then, of the other, true lover? To understand the difference in kind between the relational forms of tyranny & friendship, we must return to the concept of *psyche* or soul. The reason the ignoble lover invariably harms the education of the beloved's soul is the same that explains the tyrant's sad self-regime: unable to govern themselves, they are unfit & unfree. That is, they suffer from psychological disharmony, self-divided &

prisoner to their own violent excess (hubris). Plato presents the soul in both *Republic* & *Phaedrus* as a complex of reason, desire & (something like) mettle or spirit. To be enslaved to pleasure, power-lust or any other appetitive drive is to be discordantly ruled by one distorted aspect of ourselves– like addiction, a kind of self-alienation in which our full person is not the author of what *moves* or motivates us.

This self-incurred condition of bondage, in turn, damages the soul at its very core, for the power of self-movement defines the essence of *psyche* itself: "since what moves itself has been shown to be immortal, one is not ashamed to say that this very characteristic constitutes the essence and definition of the soul. Every body that is moved from without lacks a soul, but every body in which movement comes from within has a soul, as that is the nature of the soul" (*Phaedrus*, 245e).

Philosophy, as the practice of critical thought in care of the soul, provides one means of attaining such integral self-movement. So does the soul-enriching experience of beauty in true friendship. The higher erotic mode occurs when the lover, awestruck by the beloved's beauty, is recalled by way of aesthetic rapture to an affirmation of pure being itself. The lover is thereby "initiated into the vision of what is," an ecstatic movement mythologically likened to direct participation of the soul in divine essence. In other words, the soul, inspired,

recollects & affirms its higher or deeper self, *feeling* itself reflected in the universal. Importantly, however, this intensive transport of the lover remains always an experience of the unique beloved: singular source of "the flood of passion" that nourishes the lover's soul (*Phaedrus*, 248b-251c).

Socrates develops this diluvian image to express the logic of overflow proper to friendship. The movement begins in the outpouring beauty of the beloved inundating the lover. Then, "when he is filled to the brim, some of it spills over; and as the wind or an echo rebounds from smooth, hard surfaces to the place from whence it originated, so the stream of beauty returns to the beautiful darling through his eyes, which is the natural route to the soul." The beloved, an affective wellspring, suffuses the lover's soul with radiant beauty; awash & aglow, the lover returns the spillover, not in the manner of exchange but freely given, the sublime experience of singularity conducting beauty's superabundant course, which "in turn fills the soul of the beloved with love" (*Phaedrus*, 255a-d).

The reciprocal efflux & interflow between true lover & beloved describes the relational form of friendship in its erotic mode. As a movement of desire, such love stands in precise contrast to lupine craving; it is a regenerative circuit of soul-stirring

renewal rather than unilateral voracity; a mutual bestowal & delight rather than consumptive exploitation; a fecund relational logic of gift & connection rather than the ultimately impotent logic of possession & conquest. The experience of beauty teaches us that harmony of self & immortality of soul are made real through relations of overflow or care with others. For this very reason, those who elevate themselves & each other through friendship, through the shared love of beauty, wisdom & the good, lead the happiest lives. Such souls are justly ordered, self-motivated not by lustful lack, as ones enfettered by appetite, but by joint desire for excellence in living. The tyrant, by contrast, possesses the basest soul & leads the most miserable life (*Phaedrus*, 248d), remaining bound within himself & enslaved to a false image of the good (injustice as virtue) through the mis-apprehension of himself: a tragic failure of self-recognition.

Entirely One from Many

We can see now, in response to Thrasymachus in *Republic*, why justice, conceived on the model of friendship, is an intrinsic virtue. To act justly is to care for the soul, to nurture one's power of agency & movement. It is not possible to benefit from harming others, at least not with respect to one's higher good, because it is by caring for others that we also care for ourselves. The need to dominate is always an effort to mask or compensate for weakness– the externalization of one's own inner discord– be it an individual, group or nation. The key to distinguishing between justice & injustice lies in the value accorded to relationality as such: the affirmation of reciprocal overflow, on the one hand, or the denial of alterity through self-closure & antagonism, on the other.

For this reason, the fullest articulation that Socrates gives of justice in the *Republic* invokes friendship as its conceptual cornerstone, only now applied to one's ethical self-relation. Speaking in terms of an individual soul, but in a manner that holds equally for the collective *psyche* of a people, Socrates concludes that the best definition of the just person is one who cares for, attends to & "rules himself; he arranges himself, *becomes his own friend*, and harmonizes" his soul's complexity, becoming "entirely one from many, moderate and harmonized. Then, and only then, he acts," a fully

self-realized agent. To become one's own friend is to create oneself as a symphonic whole, the beauty of which affirms both the singular value of each aspect of the soul (desire, spirit, reason) & the positivity of their difference through the achievement of plural oneness: *e pluribus unum*.

Justice thus names the mode of action "that preserves and helps to produce this condition" of self-harmony; *wisdom*, the knowledge that guides it (*Republic*, 443d-e); & *beauty*, we might add, the shared intensive experience that inspires it.

Post-Scriptum

An extra word or two may yet be needed on our own political tyranny & prospects for civic friendship.

The French have a term tailormade to describe power in contemporary America. Coined after the title character of playwright Alfred Jarry's absurdist masterpiece, *King Ubu* (1896), *ubuesque* refers to the traits of a ludicrously vile ruler: the comically extravagant cruelty & cowardice of the tyrant figured as clown. To compare a leader to Ubu— the caricature of toxic male ego, a despot both childish & sinister— usually implies a moral objection to the violent excesses of power. Only philosopher Michel Foucault seems to have treated the ubuesque not as a moral category but an historical & political one; it is not just a form of vice deserving of scorn, but a specific function of power requiring careful analysis. "This grotesque mechanism of power," he argues, is quite precise: "the maximization of effects of power based on the disqualification of the one who produces them" (Foucault, *Abnormal*, 12). The more manifestly odious & absurd the wielder of power, the more effective its exercise; for this very grotesquerie, in its garish ostentation, demoralizes its potential opposition.

A deeply cynical situation: the indignant reaction

of showing power to be ubuesque does not serve to challenge so much as to reinforce its operation. This is why obsessing over the million Triumpian tyrannies, those of yesterday & those of tomorrow, only relays & magnifies their power effects. To counter the strategic impasse, one must instead demonstrate how Trumpism functions by producing this circuit of obsession.

For this purpose, Foucault's analysis can be updated to account specifically for the Trumpian ubuesque, defined as the *outrageous*, or that which passes beyond all reasonable limits. The 'disqualification' of the once & would-be future President maximizes the power effects he produces, in part because his manifest lack of qualification informs his transgressive appeal. But the more saturnalian the perversion of civil & civic standards, the more insidious the carnival barker's invitation to indulge that most basic of nihilistic impulses: to vilify otherness & negate futurity, with or without the return to mythic glory.

Put succinctly, *MAGA* and its tributaries are resurgent predatory chauvinism peddling grievance-lust as patriotism. Whomever its mouthpiece, the strategic objective of this demagoguery is to dominate the flock by dividing it, consolidating the faithful while marginalizing the opposition. The effect is to sunder American

integrity in the name of a supremacist American identity: to poison our own future in false praise of our past.

The anti-Trumpian response of *outrage* to this wreckage of moral & political norms only encourages the dynamic by feeding the trolls, confirming the fragility of our democratic mores for those who are already hostile to them. Outrage reproduces that to which it reacts. Inducing the outrage of one's opponents is thus precisely the affective aim of Trumpism– hence the mass psychology of *owning the libs* (or *making them cry again*) & the media apparatus producing & selling it. Indeed, we twenty-first century consumers of mediatized information are most of us willing prisoners in the cave of the outrage machine, which operates as a mechanism of cognitive & social sorting. Like rage more generally, outrage is an affective mode of separation that, despite appearances, enervates rather than activates. It is a self-reinforcing feeling, in the way that righteous anger binds one to its cause, yet it also signals the absence of means to transform its object: the situation occasioning it.

Both disempowering & compulsive, outrage is the experience of lacking agency in the face of an aggressively dislocating world. Worse, the experience itself deepens the lack, for the feeling

of outrage fosters the very discord that begets it, enthralling spirit at the expense of self-harmony. This is how outrage corrupts soul's essential power of self-movement: not because it stems from the wrong reasons or desires, but precisely because it attaches one to the felt disconnect between right reason & desire, to the gulf one senses between what is & ought to be. As mode of motivation, outrage invests spirit in ever-hardening resentment. It is accordingly well-suited for exploitation; the ubiquity of outrage, its countless sources of amplification, speak to its political & market value as capitalizable affect. Yet what is thereby equally attested to is the underlying widespread need for connection, for the feeling of fellowship & "shared destination,"[iii] to counteract the static sense of powerlessness that cleaves us even as we harbor it in common.

The nature of contemporary tyranny is to feed off the outrage it engenders, spreading throughout the soul & body politic the divisiveness it needs to operate. By no means did this logic of domination expire with the term of the forty-fifth presidency. The subterranean untruth of tyrannic political psychology extends deep into the tissue of the society it rends– witness modern medicine as our most recent dividing line. How, then, might we embody & be*soul* a logic of care, an ethos of friendship, that would strengthen the relational

fabrics within & between communities of all kinds? How might we illuminate forms of injustice suffered in common; renew commitments to protecting the supports & resources that enrich collective life; & challenge one & all to attend to our modes of response in the face of the outrageous?

What experience of singularity, what unforeseen overflow, might we then encounter? For when the sensation of outrage gives way to the shared feeling of solidarity; when the intolerable is no longer an inescapable weight but a rallying cry; when joy becomes a weapon that remains joy; then outrage is transfigured into something else, something affirmative, self-moving & beautiful. This is friendship's calling today.

Notes

i.

Socrates, alluding to a popular ancient belief that a person seen first by a wolf is rendered mute, says of Thrasymachus: "I was astounded when I heard him, and, looking at him, I was frightened. I think that if I had not seen him before he saw me, I would have been speechless" (Book I, 336d; see Bloom, fn. 30, p. 444). Throughout *Republic*, the image of the wolf figures as enemy of the flock & kin to the tyrant: see, e.g., Book III, 415e-416a; & Book VIII, 565d-566a.

ii.

Plato uses male-specific pronouns for lover & beloved. I've kept this masculine gendering here not just out of fidelity to the original, but to preserve the space for meaningful criticism. The fact that only male citizens exercised political freedom in Athens backgrounds the fact that erotic relations of the kind Plato depicts only take place (in the text) between male partners. This point illuminates the philosophical connection between freedom & friendship, even as it provides the basis for historical & cultural critique of male supremacism in ancient Greece.

iii.

This phrase is from Pope Francis's essay, "A Crisis Reveals What Is in Our Hearts," published November 26, 2020 in *The New York Times*. Francis continues: "What ties us to one another is what we commonly call solidarity. Solidarity is more than acts of generosity, important as they are; it is the call to embrace the reality that we are bound by bonds of reciprocity."

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ATTENTION CITIZEN!

"Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears"

With Marc Antony's famous invitation ringing in the streets, we remember what it feels like to be gripped by words of a common world. What we associate with, or don't, and all the reasons for moving closer or farther from an issue, a place, a proposition. Who belongs and who doesn't get a chance. Who finds favor and who remains nameless, stateless, staggered. We make it our short-bound business to spread ideas through things: this little pamphlet you have in your hands. You are among good company.

For all the makers who generously contribute to our world once common.

This pamphlet was published in February 2022 by Andante Books, an independent publishing house in Port Townsend, WA and Rome, Italy.

Pamphlet designed by Jacqueline Mention.
Printed by Corvus Crafts in Port Townsend, WA.
First Andante Edition of 200 copies.

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