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AQUINAS AND ARENDT ON FRIENDSHIP AND THE LIFE WE LIVE WITH OTHERS

Joseph A. Guillermo
Ateneo de Manila University, Philippines

This paper explores how Thomas Aquinas and Hannah Arendt, emerging from radically different metaphysical and historical contexts, each engage Aristotle's concept of friendship to respond to the crises of political life in their respective eras. Aquinas, working within a medieval theological framework, elevates Aristotle's virtue-friendship (philia) into a teleological union grounded in caritas, where human beings, through grace, may even be called friends of God. Both thinkers resist the reduction of human relations to utility or private preference. Aquinas affirms that political life, properly understood, participates in a divine order where friendship sustains community through mutual moral striving. Arendt, by contrast, critiques the modern loss of a common world and proposes that friendship should be redefined in terms of respect in order to preserve the dignity of individuals as they live in the company of other humans. The paper argues that placing Aquinas's amicitia vis-à-vis Arendt's philia politikē reveals two distinct yet complementary visions of relational ethics. Ultimately, this study affirms that political friendship—whether understood theologically or secularly—remains indispensable for restoring meaning, action, and solidarity in contemporary public life.

Keywords: Aquinas, Arendt, Friendship, Common Good, Respect

THE CONTRIBUTION OF ARISTOTLE TO THE DISCUSSION OF FRIENDSHIP

Although Thomas Aquinas (c. 1225-1274) and Hannah Arendt (1906-1975) emerge from distinct metaphysical and historical frameworks, their interesting engagements on the issue of friendship invite our attention. Aquinas develops his account within the intellectual tradition of medieval Christian theology, which during his time was undergoing an intellectual revolution in terms of how Aristotelian thought was engaging with the Faith. Arendt, by contrast, responds to the moral and political collapse of the twentieth century, particularly the totalitarian violence of the world wars, by reexamining classical Greek political thought, especially Aristotle's account of the *polis*, to explore how to address the lacuna modernity has created. Both offer

critiques of the isolating tendencies of modern individualism as both see friendship serve as a crucial structuring principle of communal life. As such, despite their different premises and aims, Aquinas and Arendt converge in viewing friendship as an important feature of becoming human. Their solutions also offer ways to resist the isolating tendencies of modern individualism and serve as an important scaffold to allow for the flourishing of human life.

Aquinas presents *amicitia* as a teleological union of wills directed toward a transcendent common good, which Aquinas points to God; whereas Arendt reimagines *philia politikē* as a mode of mutual respect operative within the space of appearance, where individuals acknowledge each other's distinctness without flattening them into the sameness of the masses. This alignment—moral in Aquinas, political in Arendt—suggests different yet converging visions of how friendship sustains community by resisting privatized self-interest. Both argue that a genuinely human life is only possible through relations with others and that such relations can only be dignified if it is more than merely strategic or instrumental. For Aquinas, friendship grounded in caritas directs the human will toward the shared good and reflects participation in divine order. For Arendt, political friendship is reimagined as a mode of respect and world-building that sustains plurality without dissolving it into sameness. This paper explores how each thinker articulates a vision of community that preserves plurality not by erasing difference, but by fostering conditions, whether they are theological or political, in which shared goods can be recognized, pursued, or at the very least, meaningfully disclosed through the bonds of friendship.

Aquinas and Arendt engage deeply with Aristotle's account of friendship; however, they diverge fundamentally in how they reinterpret its political and moral significance. Aquinas appropriates Aristotle's notion of *philia* (friendship) as the shared pursuit of the good and reorients it toward a transcendent end (Schwartz 2007, 67-68). For Aquinas, true friendship ultimately finds its perfection not in mutual virtue alone but in a virtue that perfects all virtues, namely *caritas*, the divine love that unites rational creatures to God and to one another. This theological elevation allows Aquinas to preserve Aristotle's emphasis on virtue and reciprocity while overcoming the limitations posed by the natural inequality through an analogical extension. In contrast, Arendt does not attempt to perfect or transcend Aristotle's model; rather, she critiques the embeddedness in material exchange and political sameness that characterize modernity and totalitarian systems. Instead, she seeks from Aristotle to recover the *form of relationality* that friendship makes possible—namely, *respect*—without binding it to shared virtue or social equality. Unlike Aquinas who affirms that "concord is a union of wills, not of opinions," at least in six places, (Schwartz 2003, 25-26; Schwartz 2007, 22-23) where he grounded it in a teleological orientation toward the *bonum commune*, Arendt reimagines the possibility of communal unity not defined by a metaphysical condition but rather relatively informed and limited in worldly and contingent terms as it is embedded in materialism (Cain 2024, 1-2). For Arendt, community is something held together by the public exercise of judgment, the sharing of appearances, and the practice of mutual recognition. In her view, Aristotle's *philia politikē* fails as a foundation for modern plurality precisely because it cannot accommodate difference without calcifying into a hierarchy or collapsing into maximizing utility. Arendt's early critique of the materialism of Aristotelian political

friendship thus prepares the way for her substitution of "respect" for "friendship" in the public realm, a move that distances her from Aristotle and, by extension, Aquinas. In this way, Aquinas and Arendt represent two sharply contrasting paths of engaging Aristotle's legacy: Aquinas internalizes it into a theologically integrated framework of beatitude and divine communion, while Arendt extracts from it a worldly ethic of respect suited to the conditions of modern plurality. Where Aquinas preserves the possibility of unity through a shared transcendent *telos*, Arendt insists on a unity that does not erase distinctness, which is a concord without metaphysical convergence.

In order to understand what constitutes friendship in both Aquinas and Arendt, it is essential first to understand the foundational structure they are building it from, which is Aristotle's theory of *philia* as outlined in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. For Aristotle, friendship is not incidental to ethics or politics, but rather it is integral to a flourishing life. (Cooper 301-303) In Book VIII, he describes friendship (*philia*) as either an excellence or something closely related to excellence, and calls it "most necessary with a view to living." He identifies three kinds of friendship (utility, pleasure, and virtue), each distinguished by the good that grounds mutual affection. True or *perfect friendship* arises between those who are equal in virtue and who love each other for the other's sake, whereas the more common forms, namely the friendship of utility and pleasure, are grounded in contingent or mutable benefits. Aristotle (1984) writes that "equality and likeness are friendship," remarkably when grounded in "the likeness of those who are like in excellence (1159b3-4)." In perfect friendship, there is mutual recognition of moral goodness and the desire for the other's good in that very respect (115a9-10 – 1156b8-10). By contrast, friendships of utility and pleasure dissolve easily since their basis, namely, usefulness or enjoyment, is unstable as their friendship is predicated on utility that eventually can be exhausted as contexts change (1156a31-1156b1). Although pleasure lasts longer than utility, both friendships are contingent on something that can easily change (1156a31-1156b1). Both Aquinas and Arendt engage deeply with this Aristotelian framework, yet move in opposite directions.

Aquinas builds upon Aristotle's account of virtue-friendship by incorporating it into a theological framework grounded in the theological virtue of caritas. For him, friendship is not only a moral bond between equals but also can be an analogous relationship that can extend even to God. Of course, through the revelation and incarnation of Jesus, this friendship becomes more accessible (John 15:13). As such, he reinterprets concordia not as agreement in opinion but as unity of wills directed toward the bonum commune, which ultimately derives from God as the source of all good. Arendt, by contrast, rejects the metaphysical and hierarchical premises underpinning Aristotelian friendship. As Cain notes, Arendt de-materializes *philia politikē*, refusing its basis in shared virtue, status, or likeness. Instead, she reconfigures political relationships through the concept of respect, which is a reciprocal acknowledgement of difference that sustains plurality without requiring intimacy or consensus. Respect for her is not caused by anything specifically material, save for the immaterial dignity we presume all humans have. Thus, while both thinkers appropriate Aristotle, Aquinas elevates friendship through a theological teleology oriented toward divine unity, whereas Arendt recasts it in secular terms to meet the demands of a post-totalitarian, pluralistic public realm.

FRIENDSHIP FOR AQUINAS

For Aquinas, *amicitia* transcends affective or utilitarian bonds; it is a rational, moral union of wills in which individuals voluntarily orient themselves toward a common good, and it is something that is identified with charity (Schwartz 2007, 5). Intellectually and spiritually, the good life unfolds in a social existence grounded in virtue (*a consociatio in virtute)*. In the *Summa Theologiae*, Aquinas asks which among various goods may be considered necessary components of happiness. His list includes enjoyment, understanding, a right will, bodily health, external goods, and the fellowship of friends. Each of these goods plays a different role: some are preparatory for happiness, others perfect it, and some accompany it as natural concomitants. What is interesting is how Aquinas argues that the happy person (felix) needs friends explicitly, and he draws his position from Aristotle to develop this opinion. He (ST, I-IIq.4a.8c) writes,

> [friends exist not] to make use of them, since (felix) suffices himself; nor to delight in them, since he possesses perfect delight in the operation of virtue; but for the purpose of a good operation, viz. that he may do good to them; that he may delight in seeing them do good; and again that he may be helped by them in his good work. For in order that man may do well, whether in the works of the active life, or in those of the contemplative life, he needs the fellowship of friends.

It is important to note that for Aquinas, friendship serves as the paradigmatic model for the relationships that rational beings ought to cultivate. This set of potential friends extends beyond fellow human beings and also includes angels and even God. Yet the idea of *amicitia* with God places considerable strain on the Aristotelian conception of friendship that Aquinas inherits, where friendship for Aristotle requires a degree of equality in power and status and the possibility of shared activities, mutual choices, and reciprocal affection. Aristotle writes, "This is clear if friends come to be separated by some wide gap in virtue, vice, wealth, or something else; for then they are friends no more, and do not even expect to be (Aristotle 1984, 1158b34-36)." By these criteria, friendship with God appears implausible: human beings do not share time or activity with God in any ordinary sense, cannot engage in truly mutual dialogue with Him, often feel abandoned or unheard, and lack access to His purposes. The ontological gap between divine omniscience and human finitude renders this Aristotelian interpretation of such friendship problematic.

As such, Aquinas must strain Aristotle's definition of friendship by introducing analogy and "grace" to make such unequal friendship intelligible within the Christian theological framework. As Daniel Schwartz notes, Aquinas views theological language as fundamentally analogical because it allows men to illuminate inaccessible divine realities by drawing, directly or indirectly, from the structure of their worldly experience (Schwartz 2007, 1-2). This includes analogies drawn from human social life. While such analogies do not entail a commitment to the literal truth of the human relationships used as their basis, Aquinas's theological use of friendship presumes the reliability of his observations about actual human interaction. That is, even if

friendship with God functions analogically, the human phenomena it draws upon must be sufficiently robust and intelligible to serve as meaningful models. Thus, Aquinas's theology, especially when treating themes like divine love and communion, presupposes, and simultaneously affirms, a rich and serious account of human friendship as a moral and spiritual ideal.

The analogy holds well, especially with how Aristotle describes human friendship as a relationship that can itself be morally serious and structurally sound because people can improve themselves in their shared pursuit of the good, rooted in mutual goodwill, cooperation, and the unity of wills. It is precisely the possibility of a perfect friendship, as Aristotle described it, that allows Aquinas to envision a *bonum commune* where human relationships can move beyond utility or consensus towards a common good that is not merely shared but unitive, as human actions are directed toward a higher end through grace. The analogical friendship with God, although asymmetrical and impossible in the Aristotelian model, thus becomes formative for human friendship when grace allows for a direction from which humans can orient themselves to be perfect, which in turn becomes formative for political life. If creatures can be drawn into communion with God through grace, then human beings can also be drawn into communion with each other through reason and virtue, ordered toward the same divine end.

In this reconfiguration, especially in the Christian theological thesis that Jesus became human to be friends with humanity, friendship becomes the relational form of teleological orientation in the way in which persons relate to one another and together participate in the return to their source. In other words, political life, especially when predicated on a healthy relationship like friendship, finds its highest expression not in procedural agreement or contractual peace, but in its participation in a metaphysical order where every act of love, cooperation, and justice contributes to the realization of the overall plan of the Creator. As such, the bonum commune, properly understood, is thus both the shared pursuit of temporal flourishing and a foretaste of eternal communion with a God that extends His friendship to us and therefore becomes the ultimate telos of all friendship, all politics, and all being.

For Aquinas, the common good must ultimately be understood in terms of perfection, which he explicitly ties to God Himself, who is the origin and end of all things. As he writes, "the divine goodness is the end of all things (Aquinas, ST, I q.44 a.4); therefore, the perfection of all creation lies in its ordered return and direction towards God. Within an exitus-reditus framework, where all comes from God and all goes back to God in the end, the *bonum commune* is not merely a coordination of temporal goods or civic harmony, but the participation of rational creatures in the divine life. As such, a life of virtue is not the final aim of human society, but a necessary path toward "the enjoyment of God," as Aquinas states in De Regno: "It is not the ultimate end of an assembled multitude to live virtuously, but through virtuous living to attain to the possession of God (Aquinas 1949, 60)." It is precisely in this context that Aquinas elevates friendship not merely as a moral or civic virtue, but as a theological and analogical bridge between the human and the divine. Aquinas must strain Aristotle's definition of friendship by introducing the concepts of analogy and grace, making intelligible a form of friendship between radically unequal beings: God and human. Friendship in this case becomes a preparation of the soul for beatitude by

ordering the will toward the *bonum commune*, which ultimately culminates in God as the highest good. In this way, political life becomes more than the maintenance of social order; it becomes a participatory path in the soul's journey toward eternal communion with God.

THE LOSS OF A COMMON WORLD IN MODERNITY

Is this premodern evaluation of Aquinas still relevant in our contemporary configurations? This is important to ask because he is coming from the axiological presumptions that are fundamentally alien to the means-end framework that has not only become dominant in modernity but also has redefined the very structure of meaning itself. Arendt (1998) warns that the modern condition is one in which the instrumental rationale of means has fundamentally replaced the intrinsic *telos* or final cause that gives actions their dignity and direction (305). In Aristotelian terms, modernity has mistaken a qualified good (usefulness) for an unqualified one (the good in itself), leading to the erosion of intrinsic value. As Arendt puts it, modern man "trusts in the all-comprehensive range of the means-end category," and now lives in an age where "utility established as meaning generates meaninglessness (154)" Actions are no longer guided by deeper purposes, but by what merely functions—and this, Arendt argues, produces a crisis of meaning and a loss of common direction. The result is a self-undermining dialectic where "there is no way to end the chain of means and ends," thus, even ends are eventually converted back into tools for other purposes (154). This produces what Arendt identifies as the "dilemma of meaninglessness," a condition she derives from her reading of Nietzsche's diagnosis of nihilism. Within this logic, not only is the uniqueness of action effaced, but its foundational condition, namely human plurality, is also devalued and obscured. In contrast to premodern frameworks like Aquinas's, where meaning is anchored in participation in a *telos* all men are properly directed towards, modernity unmoors meaning from any transcendent or intrinsic source, reducing human activity to function and perform within the configurations of material conditions. For Arendt, this confusion imperils both political action and the very relational fabric that sustains public life.

This modern dislocation of meaning from intrinsic ends not only distorts the nature of human action but also corrodes the conditions necessary for genuine political relationships, particularly those grounded in reciprocity and shared purpose. For Aquinas, the unity of wills (*concordia*) and mutual benevolence fostered through *caritas* provide the foundation for the kind of civic friendship that promotes social harmony. These are not abstract ideals but concrete expressions of a metaphysical order in which individuals participate by willing the good not only for themselves but for one another. However, such relational depth requires a stable conception of the good, something modernity has displaced. Arendt's diagnosis of modern utilitarianism reveals how this displacement results in a fundamental inability to sustain common meaning. Those who love the same person—whether it be a friend, a ruler, or God—are "one" in the form of the beloved. This formal unity of will makes room for difference without dissolving the bonds of charity. Nevertheless, Aquinas also warns that intentional rejection of the rule of truth, as in the case of heretics who are disruptive

of this unity, not merely because of differing opinions, but because their rejection involves a wilful break from the common form that unites a relationship, an agreement to a common truth. Once the final cause is lost, the very idea of *concordia*, which is the harmonization of individual wills toward a common *telos*, becomes unintelligible. What remains is a concept of respect limited only to the most basic and intimate dynamics of hierarchical relationships as found in family. However, this kind of respect is stripped of its ethical substance and limits itself to unequal admiration or strategic recognition of what one can get from such a relationship.

The modern transformation of mutual recognition into unreciprocated admiration, which in our contemporary experience is most evident in the cult of political personalities, raises the pressing question of whether *concordia*, the unity of wills Aquinas regarded as foundational to social harmony, is still possible in contemporary political life. *Concordia* makes sense within a premodern framework structured by a transcendent moral order, in which individuals were bound not only by law or contract but by a common orientation toward the *bonum commune*, which in turn is understood as part of a Divine order. As such, charity did not demand sameness of opinion; instead, the harmony of wills would always be directed toward the good. In contrast, the modern age—characterized by nihilism, instrumental reason, and the collapse of shared metaphysical frameworks—no longer sustains this transcendental presumption to be charitable to the other.

As Arendt observes, modern political life is increasingly shaped by image, performance, and competition for attention, rather than by shared deliberation or even concern that goes beyond private preference and with regard for the person from the distance which the space of the world puts between us (Arendt 1998, 243). The kind of *concordia* Aquinas talks about, once rooted in recognition of moral and rational equality, is replaced in our modern relationships by hierarchical esteem or passive admiration, further fragmenting the public realm. What emerges is not merely a loss of solidarity, but a profound alteration in how individuals relate to one another: not as co-participants in a shared world, but as rivals, spectators, or followers in an uneven and depersonalized field of influence. This erosion of *concordia* signals more than political polarisation; it reflects the displacement of a relational ethic grounded in shared ends with a transactional model devoid of common purpose. Where Aquinas envisioned political friendship as the outworking of caritas in public life, modernity—according to Arendt—leaves us with the shell of community but without its sustaining spirit. The challenge is whether a politics of respect can recover the relational ground once provided by *concordia*, without reverting to hierarchy or nostalgia.

For Arendt, this crisis is deeply tied to the modern prioritization of predictability and utility, represented by the victories of what she calls the *homo faber* and the *animal laborans* (Arendt 1998, 320-326). These victories reduce politics to the management of human affairs and humans as objects whose behaviour could be directed in a specific way. Arendt argues that action, which once served as the foundation of political life, is inherently unpredictable because it unfolds in the space of human plurality, where individuals engage in speech and deeds without complete control over their consequences. In contrast, work is characterized by its ability to impose form upon the world, transforming raw materials into stable, durable objects according to a preconceived plan. The modern transformation of politics into a domain of rational

administration and policymaking reflects this prioritization of work over action, as political institutions increasingly seek to shape human affairs in the manner of artisans producing objects where they are aiming for efficiency, stability, and measurable outcomes rather than the open-endedness and unpredictability of genuine political engagement.

This modern shift in the structure of meaning and authority has profound implications for how individuals relate to one another in political life. In a political order increasingly shaped by the logic of work and necessity, individuals are no longer seen as agents capable of initiating action or forming bonds through shared ideals. Instead, they are treated as interchangeable components within an administrative system, whose value lies in their ability to fulfil functional roles. The result is a form of social cohesion that mimics *concordia* but lacks its moral and relational substances. People are treated as tools for a particular end rather than agents who can freely choose their relationships. Where *concordia* in Aquinas's framework was grounded in shared participation in a transcendent moral order that is measured by virtue and sustained through *caritas*, modern political unity is achieved through bureaucratic regulation and stratification, both of which create a condition for totalitarian control. The standard of unity is no longer the common good, but the contingent needs of institutional survival and systemic efficiency. In this environment, *perfect friendship*, understood by Aristotle and expanded upon by Aquinas as the mutual recognition of virtue and the willing of the good, becomes vulnerable to totalitarian methods as modern politics adhere to a different axiological presumption. The perfect friendship of premodern times fails to conform to the dominant modern logic of work and labor, where necessity displaces deliberation, and relationships are valued for their productivity rather than their moral depth. This transformation displaces the ethical and theological centre of political life, substituting procedural control and instrumental value for meaningful engagement and shared moral vision. In contrast to Aquinas's ideal of concord as a union of wills oriented toward the good, modern political relations are increasingly depersonalized, regulated by systems that leave little space for genuine friendship, virtue, or the freedom of political action. The erosion of *concordia* in modern political life makes the return to a transcendent moral order problematic, and if anything, such a return opens itself to abuse and usurpation of other metaphysical claims that do not postulate a transcendental principle. Arendt takes up this difficulty by proposing that political relationships should be predicated on the concept of "respect."

Politics today is no longer grounded in the mutual recognition of each individual's unique perspective and capacity for action. Instead, individuals are increasingly evaluated through the lens of their function within impersonal systems. Just as a craftsman evaluates tools by their utility, modern political structures assess persons based on productivity, conformity, or social capital. The collapse of respect into admiration or esteem signals a broader shift of equal political partners collapsing into lopsided intimate relationships that are hierarchical, affect-driven relationships marked by compassion and intimacy that define and exclude in terms of group identity as opposed to being seen as an individual. This dynamic is not only fundamentally private relationships but, in Arendt's evaluation, anti-political. In such formations, individuals are no longer recognized in their distinctiveness but are absorbed into

cliques defined by a fraternal logic which is a "politics of identity" that, as Arendt warns, risks turning solidarity into exclusion and fraternity into a vehicle for political manipulation. (Chiba 515-516) Arendt observes that this transformation strips politics of its essential feature, namely plurality, and reduces human relationships to stratified roles. When individuals are no longer seen as co-creators of a shared world but as performers of assigned functions, *respect* as a political virtue disappears. In its place emerge forms of alienation reinforced by metrics of efficiency, prestige, and technocratic control. This loss of relational grounding contributes to the disintegration of liberal democratic institutions and the appeal of totalitarian movements, which promise order and certainty at the expense of spontaneity and freedom. Modern systems, far from cultivating the conditions for action and judgment, suppress them in favour of predictability and compliance. Arendt's response is not to recover a lost metaphysical foundation, as Aquinas might have prescribed through *caritas* and the *bonum commune*, but to articulate a mode of political relationship suited to a secular, pluralistic world. *Respect*, for Arendt, is not based on a transcendental virtue that allows for unity, but on the capacity to see and acknowledge others in their irreducible distinctness. It is this recovery of *respect*—as a secular analogue to *concordia*—that holds open the possibility of renewing political life in the absence of transcendence.

ARENDT'S THEORY OF RESPECT

Arendt draws from Aristotle's notion of *philia politikē* to develop a depersonalized conception of political friendship rooted in mutual respect rather than intimacy, thus reconfiguring the classical tradition for a modern public sphere. Rather than endorsing Aristotle's model of perfect friendship, which emphasizes mutual recognition of virtue and is inherently private and apolitical, Arendt engages with political friendship as a form of regard that preserves distance. She sees perfect friendship as "unworldly," because it centres on character and personal excellence rather than the shared world of political action. In contrast, Arendt's political vision prioritizes plurality and the maintenance of a common world where strangers can coexist. Arendt writes that "respect, not unlike the Aristotelian *philia politikē*, is a kind of 'friendship' without intimacy and without closeness (Arendt 1998, 243)," emphasizing that such respect is "a regard for the person from the distance which the space of the world puts between us" and is not based on intimate admiration or practical considerations but on the recognition of shared participation in the public realm. 'Respect' in this sense is a kind of friendship only if we understand friendship in an unusual non-intimate way, whereby even strangers may be imagined and called our 'friends.'

Arendt's critique of Aristotle's materialist grounding of political friendship enables her to reconceive *philia politikē* not as a bond rooted in utility or shared virtue, but as a secular stance of *respect* suited to the realities of modern plurality. In Aristotle's framework, political friendship ultimately serves the cohesion of the *polis* and is therefore instrumental, preserved so long as it supports communal stability and shared material interests. This reliance on utility, Arendt argues, renders political friendship fragile and unable to withstand the fragmentation of modernity. For her, a

new foundation is needed, one that retains the political value of interpersonal recognition without depending on shared ends or intimate bonds. By reinterpreting *philia politikē* as *respect*, Arendt preserves its political relevance while severing it from the classical emphasis on closeness or sameness. In her account, respect is not rooted in familiarity, virtue, or theological unity—as in Aquinas's caritas-informed friendship—but in acknowledging the other as a distinct and equal subject who co-inhabits the shared world. Where Aquinas anchors political community in a transcendent *bonum commune* as directed towards God, Arendt insists that plurality itself, disclosed through speech and action, forms the basis of political life, which is a political life now disjointed from a transcendental direction. Civic engagement, for her, is not about achieving unity of will, but about preserving the space where differences can appear and be judged. Thus, Arendt's reworking of Aristotle represents not only a departure from classical teleology but also an alternative to Aquinas's theological model of concord. Rather than seeking harmony through shared ends, Arendt articulates a politics grounded in mutual visibility, in which *respect* replaces *concordia* as the relational condition that allows freedom, plurality, and judgment to flourish in a secular age.

Arendt's non-teleological conception of action emerges as a pointed critique of modern political systems that have reduced politics to administration and individuals to instruments of imposed collective goals. In totalitarian regimes and bureaucratic democracies alike, politics becomes a tool for fulfilling a supposedly common good, willed into existence through centralized authority (instead of a transcendental good as Aquinas would have imagined), thereby justifying coercion, surveillance, and systemic violence. This instrumental logic collapses the distinction between public action and private interest, turning human beings into objects valued solely for their utility. Against this backdrop, Arendt offers a radically different vision: the public realm as a space of co-appearance, where individuals engage one another as equals, negotiate their differences, and resist domination by necessity or ideology. At the heart of this vision is Arendt's insistence that action is non-teleological—it is not subordinated to any ultimate end but is valuable in itself because it affirms human freedom and plurality. Unlike work and labor, which are governed by predictable outcomes and instrumental logic, action is spontaneous, open-ended, and unpredictable. It occurs in the *space of appearances*, where individuals disclose their identities through speech and deed, not to serve a preexisting good, but to participate in world-making. This resistance to instrumentality is what gives political action its dignity and transformative potential: it acknowledges each person as a unique originator of meaning, rather than a means to someone else's end. In contrast to Aquinas's framework, where political life ultimately participates in a divine teleology ordered toward beatitude, Arendt insists on secular politics grounded in the freedom to begin anew. Her non-teleological model protects against the dangers of ideological totality by preserving the unpredictability, relationality, and mutual disclosure that constitute genuine political action. In doing so, Arendt reclaims politics not as the realization of necessity, but as the performance of freedom in a shared world.

Arendt effectively reframes Aristotle's concept of friendship as an ethical relationship grounded in *respect,* which is a practice that indirectly shapes the political sphere by preserving plurality and equality without collapsing into utility or intimacy.

For Arendt, the political value of friendship lies not in personal affection or shared virtue but in the cultivation of *respect;* there is a mutual recognition that enables individuals to encounter each other as equals in the public realm. Unlike modern interpretations that conflate respect with esteem or hierarchical admiration, Arendtian respect resists evaluation based on merit, status, or usefulness. It recognizes the other not for what they achieve or possess, but for their inherent capacity to appear, act, and contribute to the shared world. Alex Cain points to how the Latin root *respicere*—"to look back"—emphasizes the reciprocal and relational nature of respect. To respect someone, in this sense, is not to assess them but to acknowledge their presence as someone who can "look back" and respond (Cain 2024, 5). This gaze affirms both equality and distinctness, enabling a political space where individuals are not absorbed into collective identities nor reduced to instruments of institutional function. Unlike relationships grounded in emotional closeness or utility, respect maintains a necessary distance that preserves the public realm as a space of plurality rather than fusion. It affirms each person's uniqueness without demanding assimilation or personal intimacy. In this way, Arendt's ethical reconstruction of friendship through *respect* offers a powerful alternative to both Aristotelian materialism and modern instrumentalism. Where Aquinas grounds political unity in a theological love that binds wills toward a telos, Arendt's vision sustains political life through mutual recognition without transcendental guarantees. Respect, for her, is the condition that allows individuals to engage politically, not through sameness, but through the shared appearance of difference in a common world.

In this sense, friendship, according to Arendt's thought, serves as a microcosm of political action. Within the intimate sphere of friendship, individuals experiment with the practice of freedom, engaging in a life of equality, dialogue, and judgment that political life demands. Intimate friendship then becomes a preparation to develop the emotional direction from which one can be friends with fellow citizens, even though they are strangers in their private lives. This kind of relationship is sustained not by blind loyalty or personal affection but by the reciprocity of respect, which is a posture that enables honesty, promise-keeping, and the possibility of forgiveness. Since friendship resists domination and instrumentalization, it becomes a space where individuals can speak without fear, freed from the calculus of utility or the constraint of realizing a specific end. As Arendt suggests, this lived experience of mutual regard prepares individuals for political life by cultivating the habits necessary for plural coexistence. In contrast, modern political systems often reduce individuals to predictable roles or functional categories, treating governance as a matter of management rather than meaningful action. Friendship grounded in respect becomes one of the last remaining spaces where freedom is practiced rather than administered.

CONCLUDING REMARKS: FRIENDSHIP AND COMMUNAL LIFE

Despite their differences, Aquinas and Arendt offer complementary perspectives on how friendship can restore a sense of political community. For Aquinas, the union of wills in friendship mirrors the rational participation in the bonum commune. This does not mean uniform agreement but a shared orientation toward

justice and the common good, where differences in opinion do not undermine friendship but rather enrich it. As he states, "nothing hinders those who have charity from holding different opinions (Aquinas, ST, II-II 29.3.ad.2). For Arendt, friendship forms a *microworld*—a space of mutual respect and dialogical engagement that prepares individuals for political life without collapsing into private intimacy or ideological loyalty. Within this microworld, individuals experiment with thought and speech, encountering one another not as instruments or allies but as equals capable of judgment.

Unlike political relationships grounded in allegiance or consensus, Arendtian friendship fosters a reciprocity of respect that allows for accountability, disagreement, and the development of civic responsibility. This space, though more intimate than the public realm, mirrors its conditions: plurality, appearance, and mutual recognition. In Arendt's account, friendship is not a withdrawal from politics but a training ground for it; it becomes a domain where individuals learn the habits of listening, contestation, and co-presence. It is through friendship that the ethical groundwork for *civic respect* is formed. Political engagement, in turn, requires the extension of these habits into the public world, where citizens act as "civic friends," oriented not toward domination or self-interest but toward the preservation of the world they share. When placed in conversation with Aquinas's participatory and teleological vision of the *bonum commune*, Arendt's *philia politikē* offers a robust framework for restoring meaningful political relationships in an age marked by fragmentation and alienation. Both thinkers reject the reduction of community to shared utility or aggregated preference. While Aquinas grounds political life in the shared pursuit of divine beatitude, Arendt articulates a secular counterpart centred on speech, action, and mutual recognition. Together, they provide complementary visions: Aquinas emphasizes the teleological participation in the highest good, while Arendt insists on the world-building capacity of human plurality, each pointing toward a relational ethics that resists the depersonalizing tendencies of modern politics.

When placed in conversation with Aquinas's *amicitia*, Arendt's *philia politikē* offers a compelling framework for reimagining political relationships in an era of fragmentation and alienation. Both thinkers resist the reduction of community to mere utility or the aggregation of private preferences, insisting instead on the primacy of shared engagement and ethical relationality. Aquinas grounds political life in a theological horizon—the shared pursuit of the beatitudes through *caritas*—while Arendt offers a secular alternative rooted in speech, action, and mutual recognition within a plural world. Though their frameworks differ, they converge in affirming that political life depends not on coercion or conformity, but on the cultivation of relationships oriented toward the good. Aquinas emphasizes teleological participation in a transcendent order; Arendt foregrounds the world-building power of human plurality. Together, they point toward a relational ethics capable of resisting the instrumental and depersonalizing logic that threatens political life in modernity.

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