

## FRIENDSHIP AND THE COMMON GOOD

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As Dante ascends Purgatory in the *Divine Comedy* and moves through the circle of the envious, he encounters the suffering soul of Guido del Duca. On earth del Duca had grown so full of envy that he would turn livid just seeing anyone else happy. Now in penance del Duca's eyes are sewn shut, blind to all sights of joy, and leaning upon another one of the envious, he, like the rest of them, receives and gives support. When he meets Dante he bewails his all too common sin: "You humans! Why set your hearts on what ends up making friendship impossible?"<sup>1</sup>

Dante recalls this poignant cry later and seeks Virgil's wisdom on its full meaning. Virgil's response does anything but satisfy Dante's curiosity. He launches into a distinction between one type of good which decreases when shared and another very different type, of which "the more there are who say 'ours,' so much the greater is the good possessed by each."<sup>2</sup> Dante becomes even more perplexed and complains, "I am now more hungry for an answer than if I had kept silent, and a greater doubt invades my mind. How can a good that is shared by more people make them richer in it?"<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Purgatorio*, canto 14, lines 86-87.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, canto 15, lines 55-56.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, canto 15, lines 60-63.

It is easy to identify with Dante's perplexity. How can we possess more of a good the more it is shared? So much of experience tells us the opposite: the more something is shared, the less each one gets, the more quickly it wears out, or the more taxing it becomes just to maintain it. In fact, the goods that are frequently called common or public goods are prime examples of this: highways, public utilities, parks, classrooms, teachers, etc. We can also include domestic instances of shared goods, such as a family house or car, or maybe even a parent. To be shared is in some way or other to be divided and portioned out. How then can any good be more fully possessed the more it is shared?

To put this question in a slightly different way: How is it true that the more something becomes ours the more it becomes mine as well as yours? According to Virgil, what is more ours becomes more truly mine and yours, as if the more a good is common the more intimately an individual possesses it. This apparently paradoxical claim suggests that a shared good, such as the common good of a community, is exactly what an individual should be interested in as at least a part of his happiness.

But it can seem contradictory to say that something held in common is a constituent part of one's happiness. What is common seems less of a good for an individual than his own virtuous achievements. In other words, the common good does not seem to belong to an individual *as an individual*. It belongs primarily to the whole multitude and only to the individual derivatively. In this respect the common good may barely seem to be the individual's own, even though it is indispensable for happiness (just as the earth's atmosphere belongs to no one individual but is nonetheless necessary for each person's life). Hence many have argued that the community serves only as a means to an individual's happiness, in the same way most of us probably think about many of those common goods I listed above. This may also seem to

find confirmation in the famous papal remark that such goods, including the state, exist for man and not man for them.<sup>4</sup>

Virgil goes on to advise Dante that his difficulty stems from an attachment to earthly goods and that, if he turned his mind from them, he would find that the spiritual realm holds the solution to his dilemma. Clearly, from a theological viewpoint, God is the common good after whom all common goods are named. But from the same perspective it is also true that through the diversity of the created world the divine glory is magnified, and so we should hesitate to abandon the earthly realm, as if it held no answer for Dante. In fact, I suspect that Virgil himself, if not Dante's Virgil, would understand that the world contains many clear instances of just such a common good Dante is seeking.

What I hope to show is that entirely convincing examples of this kind of common good are very familiar, perhaps so familiar we tend to overlook them. These are friendships. If such goods can be reasonably considered constituent elements of an individual's happiness, we may be able to see how, the more they are common, the better they are possessed.

A little reflection on ordinary experience will reveal that the most significant and characteristic descriptions of ourselves as individuals involve references to communities of action and

<sup>4</sup> "Such is the teaching of the Church which, for the solution of these social questions, has always fixed her gaze on the human person and has taught that things and institutions—goods, the economy, the state—are primarily for man; not man for them" (John XXIII, Christmas Message, December 23, 1959). Cf. also *Gaudium et spes*, 26, which defines the common good as "the sum of those conditions of social life which allow social groups and their individual members relatively thorough and ready access to their own fulfillment." But these statements should be understood in the light of the more comprehensive principle as enunciated in the same document: "The order of things must be subordinate to the order of persons" (as quoted in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §1912). Friendship, political community and the Church belong to the order of persons, indeed are themselves orders of persons.

life. For example, husband, father, son, teacher, American, and Roman Catholic define me as an individual, and yet each indicates a different kind of friendship and common good. I do not share in such common goods just because I have characteristics in common with others. The fact that I am an animal or a human or even have this or that ethnic heritage does not in and of itself place me in a community or common good.<sup>5</sup> The common goods indicated by the more personal descriptions involve just the opposite of an abstract commonality (*commune in praedicando*<sup>6</sup>). For each of us shares in such common goods precisely as individuals, possessing distinctive characteristics that are found and developed through making unique contributions to those same common goods, that is, to particular communities. The common good is in fact the most intimate as well as the noblest link between us.

The question I am considering here is not peculiar to Dante. It has ancient expression, for example, in Plato's account in the *Republic* of Socrates' conversation with Thrasymachus and Glaucon about justice as a virtue and in Aristotle's attempt in the *Politics* to determine whether the virtue of the citizen is the same as the virtue of the individual. Both of these consider whether the community exists only as a means to fulfilling our individual goals or as an end in itself. Characteristically modern formulations are found in the political writings of Locke, Rousseau, and Nietzsche, where the community exists primarily to protect the interests of fully equipped individuals.

But one seminal work stands conspicuous both for its obvious relevance and for the almost systematic neglect it has received on just this question. I am thinking of Aristotle's

<sup>5</sup> I may identify myself as an Italian-American, but unless such a description points at my involvement in the life of a family, neighborhood, or some other community of action and life, it amounts to a convenient tag, often useful as a pretext for personal gain.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. St. Thomas, *Quaestiones de veritate*, q. 7, a. 6 ad 7.

examination of *philia* or friendship in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Since the failure to appreciate its importance is largely the effect of distortions that modern moral and political philosophy have brought about, careful attention to it may help free us from constrictive prejudices and perhaps provide a viable alternative to the anemic theories of recent times. This essay, however, is not the place for a comprehensive discussion of Aristotle's conception of *philia*. My concern here is to use an element in that conception to find a way through the difficulty raised at the beginning.

It is a commonplace among those who have recently commented on Aristotle's conception of *philia* that the word embraces much more than our word "friendship" (or the equivalents in most other modern languages). *Philia* refers not only nor even principally to the intimate relationship between a small number of people usually unrelated by family ties—the focal meaning of the words often used in translation. For Aristotle, *philia* includes every form of familial relationship (especially those between husband and wife, parents and children, and siblings), the bond between citizens of the same community, and even business partnerships.

Much less commonly recognized, on the other hand, is Aristotle's insistence that the distinguishing mark of friendship in general is shared action (*suzein*)<sup>7</sup> or that he starkly identifies friendship with unity of action: "*philia gar koinônia*."<sup>8</sup> To miss this is to miss much. For without the fulfillment of their mutual benevolence in acting together, as Aristotle argues, friends cannot become a good for one another.

At the end of Book 9 of the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle lists several examples of what he has in mind when he uses the term *suzein*: drinking together, sharing in a game of dice, joining in exercise, and doing philosophy together. Merely

<sup>7</sup> *Nicomachean Ethics* [NE] 1157b20-25.

<sup>8</sup> NE 1171b33

going about one's work in the same place together as another is not what he has in mind. Even sworn enemies can live together in this way. On the contrary, the kind of unity in the actions of friends is greater than a unity of predication only. Their actions are united as a single though complex action, not just as a single kind of action. A philosophical discussion among friends, for example, involves two or more interlocutors engaged upon a particular topic. If it is a true discussion then there is a true unity. A mere passage of words, as when two or more simply ventilate their thoughts, is more like a pile of things that someone has happened to throw together. It has no distinctive unity. But a discussion involves an ordering of question, response, objection, comment—a coordination of speech. Therefore, like any other coordinated effort, a discussion is something really one and yet common to all the participants.<sup>9</sup> The same holds true for the other examples that Aristotle lists. Each is a complex activity in which one friend coordinates his actions with those of the other.

Each is in fact a common good. A fine play of chess together, an exhilarating basketball game, and an illuminating conversation are all common endeavors enjoyable in themselves. It seems that an individual wants to share with his friends the activities he enjoys and in which he may even think his whole life consists, because his good is thereby increased, indeed, perfected—to the extent it becomes common. On the face of it, there is no opposition here between the good of the individual and the common good. The individual's good is found in the common good.

This may become clearer in considering how such activities can devolve into something altogether different from their origins, as when one of the participants treats the common action as his exclusive possession. In monopolizing a conversation, for example, someone attempts to make the common

<sup>9</sup> Cf. St. Thomas, *Summa Theologiae* I-II, q. 28, a. 1.

action his own and directed finally to himself. But then the conversation will suffer for it and degenerate into something else, a soliloquy or perhaps a shouting match. Like King Midas, he will have destroyed what he sought to possess.

On the other hand, someone could participate in a common activity, realizing that it belongs to all involved, but nevertheless still see it as finally ordered to his own separate interests. A basketball game, for example, might be played as a means to fame or physical prowess; a conversation joined as a means to academic promotion. If there is a mutual understanding among the participants about such a purpose for their joint action, then it may amount to a friendship of the useful kind, in which the common good is in fact a common means. But not every common activity is pursued as something only useful. If, for example, there is no mutual understanding about the purpose, but rather a misunderstanding, with some members wanting what they can get *out of* the interaction and others wanting what they can get *in* it, then the realization that some members are being used by others may spell the end of the association.

Consider also the different intentions people bring into the classroom. Someone may study with a teacher to learn the tricks of the business world, for example, while another studies with a teacher to learn some philosophy. In both cases the students enter into a common and coordinated activity with their respective teachers. Ideally, in each case the teacher expounds the subject in a manner appropriate to the student, and the student follows him with attention. Their minds meet. The difference between the two cases is, however, that in the first there does not have to be anything more than a relationship of utility. The teacher, wanting to earn his living and promote his career, and the student, wanting to prepare for a career, treat what goes on in the classroom and the agreements between them (e.g., so many lectures for so much tuition) as common means. But in the second case, even though

it will involve elements of the first arrangement, the teacher and student can enjoy the coordinated activity of teaching-and-learning for what it is and not just for what it offers. The teacher of philosophy likes to help others in coming to know because perhaps he sees himself in the service of truth and goodness. The student for his part enjoys listening to the lecture and joining in discussion because he finds philosophy an enjoyable subject of study and loves the truth. Each therefore finds his good in the common action of teaching and learning. Moreover, if there is goodwill between this pair, each enjoying the other's participation in the activity, then there is friendship of the nobler kind. Among friends of this kind the common good, that is, the collaboration, is an intrinsically choice-worthy activity.

The teacher's function demands something higher and more profound than the function of the person who merely communicates a knowledge of things. The "teacher" is a person who knows how to create a close relationship between his own soul and the soul of a child.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, we might say that in the first case there is only instruction, on account of the utilitarian purpose behind the arrangement. But in the second there is genuine teaching, since both teacher and student participate in a common good that can bind their souls together.

We can press this example a little further and ask whether it is the case that the more a coordinated activity such as teaching-and-learning is shared the more each participant gains? Let us assume for the moment that it is shared more when each participant moves, in this case, from the role of teacher to learner and back again, and not simply when there are more participants.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Pius XII, Allocution to the Italian Catholic Elementary School Teachers' Association, November 4, 1955.

<sup>11</sup> This is akin to Aristotle's citizens of a well governed community all taking their turn governing and being governed (*Politics* 1332b25).

Think of the friendship St. Augustine extols in the *Confessions*:

. . . to talk and laugh aloud and yield to one another; to read inspiring books to each other; to joke and be earnest together; to disagree at times without contention, as a man might do with himself, and by these infrequent disagreements to season our more frequent agreements; to teach and be taught. . . .<sup>12</sup>

So close in fact did St. Augustine and his friends knit their lives together that when one of them died, the other felt as if his own self was split in two. Upon the death of his dearest friend St. Augustine felt it unbearable to live as a half self, but he could not let himself die since then his friend would die completely.<sup>13</sup> The lover of Shakespeare's *Sonnets* echoes the same idea in contemplating the cares old age besets him with:

Tir'd with all these, from these would I be gone,  
Save that, to die, I leave my love alone.<sup>14</sup>

Their lives together, that is, their friendships, are examples of a deeply definitive common good. The expression that a friend is a second self grasps at identifying this kind of common good, as does the expression that in friendship two souls become one.

The work that forges such close union is far and beyond what typically counts for becoming friends, probably in part because what goes by the name friendship is most often for utility or pleasure. Even for what might count as "true friendship", mutual likes and dislikes, some occasion to meet regularly, and rendering favors once in a while are often sufficient. But the kind of friendship that St. Augustine had and that Aristotle defines as true friendship requires more than just friendly association. It needs a specific kind of cooperation:

<sup>12</sup> Book IV.8.

<sup>13</sup> *Confessions* Book IV.6.

<sup>14</sup> Sonnet 66.

several people coming together with the same noble purpose, for example, the pursuit of truth, and forming a common life, in this case, by way of mutual teaching,

becoming turn by turn pupil and master of the others . . . so as to learn more by drinking in [noble things] in conversation, than by the very lectures! . . . Without pride or the spirit of rivalry, seeking only truth, the friends thus gathered together would, so to say, multiply one another, and their common soul would reveal a wealth of which no sufficient explanation would appear to be discoverable in any single part.<sup>15</sup>

This common soul is the common good of friendship, indeed it is friendship itself in its fullness. It is a greater good for the individual precisely because of its being held in common. Human fulfillment is found in being a part of a common action of virtue, in being a member of a society of good people. Within it each member is called into action in many and various ways, bringing him to heights insurmountable to himself alone.

Lamb says somewhere that if, of three friends (A, B, and C), A should die, then B loses not only A but 'A's part in C,' while C loses not only A but 'A's part in B.' In each of my friends there is something that only some other friend can fully bring out. By myself I am not large enough to call the whole man into activity; I want other lights than my own to show all his facets. Now that Charles is dead, I shall never again see Ronald's reaction to a specifically Caroline joke. Far from having more of Ronald, having him 'to myself' now that Charles is away, I have less of Ronald.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> A. G. Sertillanges, *The Intellectual Life: Its Spirit, Conditions, Methods* (Washington D.C. 1998, 54-55).

<sup>16</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (New York 1960, 92).

Often this realization is brought home only when a friend passes away, thus continuing the unique contribution of a friend even in death.<sup>17</sup>

It is only reasonable then that someone should prefer this kind of community to his private concerns. Even in a friendship of utility partners must order some of their own personal interests to the common good, such as a business contract, which is in fact a common means. The difference is that business partners expect to gain something mainly *through* their collaboration, whereas friends concerned with an intrinsically choice-worthy good expect to gain something *in* their collaboration. Their common life, their sharing in the activities which each finds most pleasant and good, is worthwhile in itself and becomes the source of each friend's happiness. This kind of good insofar as it is common reaches more directly and intimately to the individual than any private good. Here, then, we have an exact description of the good Dante is seeking.

So much for establishing the *quia ita est*, now let us examine *why* it is so. Aristotle offers four different reasons why an individual advances his own good when he joins another in a common activity, apart from the use he may gain from it. These are the same four arguments Aristotle offers as proof that the happy man needs friends.<sup>18</sup> For in arguing that friendship is necessary for happiness, Aristotle demonstrates that a life in common with one's friends is an integral part of the full exercise of virtue, and not just something useful or superfluous. One needs the collaboration and common life found in friendship first to delight in those activities which are good and pleasant to oneself, second to perform these activities more continuously and easily, and third to achieve proficiency

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Wendell Berry's *The Wheel*: "The best teachers teach more/ Than they know. By their deaths/ They teach most. They lead us beyond/ What we know, and what they knew" (New York 1994, 239).

<sup>18</sup> NE 1169b3-1170b19.

in the performance of such activities. The fourth argument proceeds along the lines that a virtuous friend is a kind of good without which someone would lack the sufficiency of goods required for happiness. The point of all these arguments is that friends become a good for one another precisely insofar as they share in the same life. If this is true, then it would seem to follow that the more they share in that life, the greater goods they become for one another.

The first two of these arguments depend upon the notion of human fulfillment as an activity, and not as some kind of possession which, once gained, makes action otiose. To be happy is to live and act continuously, so far as it is humanly possible.

I. The first argument sketches out like this:

- (1) The good person delights in performing good actions.
- (2) But one cannot delight in something unless one knows it.
- (3) We are able to observe others better than ourselves, and their actions better than ours.
- (4) Therefore, the actions of good people are more accessible objects of delight to one who is oneself good and their friend.
- (5) It follows then that the good person needs good friends since he needs to see the good actions of a good person whose actions are like his own.<sup>19</sup>

The crux of this argument is the third premise. It is precisely because a friend's actions are more easily seen and known than our own that friendship is an integral part of happiness.

One reason why we are hindered from knowing ourselves as easily could be that we are more likely to err in judging our own affairs because of the natural affection toward ourselves. This affection can distort the perception of oneself, as a bitter

<sup>19</sup> NE 1170a14-1170b19.

taste lingering on the tongue can distort the taste of other things. Such an argument seems to assume something like an inordinate self-attachment which plagues human nature and from which one is freed only with the help of a friend. We can see that Aristotle is accurately describing the human condition as it is.

We are not able to see what we are from ourselves. This is plain from the way in which we blame others without being aware that we do the same things ourselves; and this is the effect of favor or passion. There are many of us who are blinded by these things so that we misjudge.<sup>20</sup>

So blinded, in fact, that we may blame those who are not at all deserving of blame. Nevertheless this private affection mars our vision of ourselves more than of others, since sometimes we may be quite correct in our estimation of the faults of others, though blind to our own. Aristotle takes this as a sign that we may recognize and praise the goodness in others while failing to see, or at least see clearly, the goodness in ourselves.

But when the other person is a friend, his actions are, insofar as he is a friend, one's very own. Thus, in the company of a friend we delight in his actions as we would delight in our own, and praise them as we would, if it were not unseemly, praise our own. This is why we naturally seek the company of those who cherish the same things we do. Friends not only increase each other's pleasure in the activities that they share, but even help complete that pleasure. For we see in our friends more clearly than in ourselves the goodness of those actions.

II. The second argument proceeds along these lines:

- (1) It is commonly acknowledged that the happy life must be a pleasant and delightful life.
- (2) But the life of a solitary man is burdensome, for the pleasant activities that he can engage in are necessarily interrupted, and it is difficult for him to act continuously.

<sup>20</sup> *Magna Moralia*, 1213a10-26.

(3) But in the company of another there can be an exchange of activities, such that by delighting in one's own virtuous deeds and those of a friend one's life becomes continuously delightful.<sup>21</sup>

This second argument focuses on the limitations that nature imposes upon an individual in performing acts of virtue. But what is the character of these limitations? Since the individual under consideration is supposed to have a sufficiency of goods, it has already been assumed that he has no need of useful friends. By hypothesis he faces no constraints on the score of basic needs. But Aristotle is arguing that even with an abundance of goods it is difficult for a solitary individual to act continuously. Wealth itself does not ensure that one can sustain an active and continuous, let alone complete, life of virtue.

Perhaps the reason why someone cannot act continuously is in the very nature of human activity. Such activity consists in a becoming and is not something that of itself endures. To be sure, an activity as such is not something in a state of becoming, but only insofar as it is, or at least involves, an activity of a physical thing. Thus, the act of seeing is not a becoming strictly speaking, but rather the terminal point of a becoming; but insofar as the act of seeing is brought about through a motion (the action of the visible upon the organ of sight), then it involves motion and hence work. Even the act of thinking involves physical work, since it uses the senses and other organs. For this reason human activity is always in some way laborious or at least discontinuous.

Friendship makes up for these physical limitations. For in living with another, so Aristotle argues, it becomes easy to act continuously. Among friends there is an exchange of actions, as when they do favors for each other, and especially when they live and act together. Those friends who like to do philosophy together, for example, usually spend their time

<sup>21</sup> NE 1170a4-11.

discussing some topic of common interest. If it is a good discussion then there is a continuous, pleasant, and ordered succession of speech and thought. For by commenting, questioning, correcting, etc., each one in a discussion thinks for his neighbor, thus lightening what would otherwise be burdensome for one alone. By putting their heads together, they accomplish the same thing more easily and hence pleasantly than would the solitary individual. Thus the common action between oneself and a friend, that is, the friendship itself, becomes one's own continuous action.

Aristotle marshals these arguments to show that a friend is a necessary good for happiness. But as we have seen, friends become good for one another insofar as they share in the same life. So, to be more precise, what these arguments show is that a common life centered on true human good is an essential part of happiness. One's own happiness, in other words, necessarily involves a common good. But are we not faced here again with the dilemma of a common good being a constituent element of a purely personal good, namely, happiness? No, for notice that the arguments treat happiness not as an inner and purely subjective quality of the individual, but as the fulfillment of such a quality in action. As an activity, specifically, the activity of true friendship, happiness can be shared among many. For the action of two friends together is one real thing. Thus even though each friend is acting on his own, each individual action is unintelligible apart from the collaboration. Each individual action is a part of the complete action and not a whole in itself.

Simply participating in a common action, however, is not sufficient for friendship. One must delight in the action of the other, the part that he has in the common endeavor and in his enjoyment of the action. Even if two athletes enjoy what they do together for its own sake, as an art, that is, a physical and mental excellence, they may still not be friends. More is needed. As Aristotle says, friends desire not only to share in an activity, but also that each delights in it as the other



does. Here is a more precise sense of well-wishing: to wish another a good by wishing that he participate and delight in this common good. Without such a disposition there can be no friendship.

This consideration leads to another characteristic mark of *philia*: beneficence. It presents perhaps an even more acute difficulty. Why does a friend wish to do good to another? How exactly is the act itself of benefiting a friend one's own good, not considering good things that may come from such an act, like receiving a favor in return or keeping the friend in debt and hence attached to oneself?

We can glean an answer in Aristotle's argument that the benefactor loves the beneficiary more than the beneficiary loves the benefactor.<sup>22</sup> Two of his four arguments bear on the question at hand.

I. Every artisan is in some way affectively attached to the product of his own mind and hands. One thinks of the opening lines of *Don Quixote* in which Cervantes expresses the kind of anxiety typical of a father expecting the birth of his child. This also holds true for the benefactor who loves those whom he has treated well, for the favor or service, insofar as it has been received, is the benefactor's handiwork.<sup>23</sup>

But Aristotle goes further and adds a more general reason. Everyone, he argues, loves and chooses his own existence. But human existence consists in activity, specifically in the activity of life and thought. We may recall Aristotle's striking synecdoche: "To exist is to perceive or think."<sup>24</sup> Thus it is in the activities of conscious and thoughtful life that we find pleasure and desirableness. But since the operation or act of the mover is in the moved, the product of work is also desirable as an extension of the mover himself. Therefore artists,

<sup>22</sup> NE 1167b17-1168a27.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. NE 1167b34-1168a10.

<sup>24</sup> NE 1170a35.

poets, and benefactors love their work, because they love their own existence.

II. Beneficence is an act good in itself, intrinsically excellent. Hence the benefactor takes delight in the one he benefits as in one in whom he finds his own excellence. But why is it an act of excellence? One reason seems to be that there is an excellence in being able to help others as well as oneself. In general, it is a greater perfection to be able to perfect others as well as oneself, just as teaching is an excellence and a fulfillment of learning.

Heaven doth with us as we with torches do,  
Not light them for themselves: for if our virtues  
Did not go forth of us, 'twere all alike  
As if we had them not.<sup>25</sup>

A related reason is that by doing favors for one's friend one gains admittance into the friend's life. Friends do for each other what each would have or could have done for himself. Thus if one's friend lives a good life, to do good to him is to participate in a life intrinsically worth living, to perform in fact a virtuous deed. Beneficence in this regard is a kind of *suzein* or "acting together." It should not be surprising then if friends of this kind want to be more and more useful to each other, for in doing this they participate in the other's life more intimately, knitting their common life even more strongly together.

Consider Lily Dale's plea to her betrothed in Trollope's *The Small House at Allington*:

I pray God that [I] may . . . be of use to you, —to work for you, —to do something for you that may have in it some sober, earnest purport of usefulness; —that is what I want above all things. I want to be with you at once that I may be of service to you. Would that you and I were alone together,

<sup>25</sup> Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure*, I.1.

that I might do everything for you. I sometimes think that a very poor man's wife is the happiest, because she does do everything.<sup>26</sup>

This passage is remarkable in that Lily in no way sees her service as a burden or as a form of enslavement (after all, her betrothed was "her catch"). Her happiness, as she sees it, is found in being useful to her husband. To be useful is to be virtuous and good and, evidently, happy.

How are we to understand this sublimation of utility? First, it must be said that it is only within the context of marriage that such an avowal of exclusive and lasting devotion could ever make sense. But to an extent this love of service is evident in every friendship based on virtue. For friends like to do favors for each other, to be of some use, though not necessarily to define their lives by service to each other. And in being useful to each other they participate in each other's lives more intimately.

In the *Summa Theologiae* Thomas Aquinas makes it clear that the point of benefaction is to participate more closely in a common life with one's friend, not only in action but even in affection.<sup>27</sup> He argues that friends are present in each other's heart (*vis appetitiva* or *affectio*) when they wish and do something good for one another in the way that they would do it for themselves. For each considers the other, just so far as they are friends, to be another self.

This discussion of beneficence would be significantly lacking without a word on the ultimate act of beneficence, namely self-sacrifice. It is first of all well to note that belief in an afterlife, in a reward after death for good deeds, is unnecessary to see the good in sacrificing oneself for another. Indeed, it is somewhat irrelevant, since a reward after death presupposes the goodness of the action. As it is, there have been those

<sup>26</sup> London 1964, 140.

<sup>27</sup> ST I-II, q. 28, a. 2; cf. NE 1165b27 and *Rhetoric* 1381a3.

who, without the hope of a future life, have risked their lives to save another's. For by doing all they can for the sake of their friends or homeland, suffering the loss of material goods and perhaps even life itself, they have chosen for themselves a great good: to perform a perfect work of virtue.

The reason why one who performs this kind of act achieves a form of excellence is that he becomes the cause of his friend's safety and life. Just as it can be better and more virtuous that one friend concedes to the other the opportunity to achieve something great, instead of doing it himself, likewise it can be greater that one friend saves the other's life instead of his own.<sup>28</sup> But even though it is a great good to preserve the life of a friend, the true friend will not seek to do it simply as his good. On the other hand, neither will he seek to do it simply as his friend's good. For in the first case the friend would be treated as a mere occasion for oneself to achieve a splendid act, whereas in the second case one has become ordered to the friend as to an end. In either case one would be seeking happiness in a private good. Rather, friends come to one another's aid because their lives are so united that when one is delighted, pained, or even threatened, so is the other. Thus, one friend rushes to save the other's life because he is saving his own, which he shares with his friend. What such friends desire to possess and promote most of all is a common life—a common good. Apart from this kind of analysis, one would be left attempting to explain these extreme situations in terms of a kind of inconsistency or shifting of preferences between another's good and one's own.

What I have been arguing about the extreme situations applies just as well to ordinary situations in communal action. For consider first how we must depend upon each other for necessary provisions simply because, being material, we tire and require rest—a necessity of nature. In fact, any one of

<sup>28</sup> NE 1169a13-36.

us cannot possess the requisite skill or intellectual strength to be a farmer, carpenter, doctor, mechanic, and all the rest. This holds as well even for the nobler arts and other pursuits, such as music, painting, philosophy and politics itself. Only the union of many can make up for the naturally imposed limitations of each. But at the same time this union opens up for each person a range of activities more in line with his rational nature. For example, in procuring all that he needs for himself and his family, each person works for the good of others. The farmer must plow the field not only for himself; the doctor must treat others besides his own; the musician must have an audience. If man were entirely self-sufficient his sphere of influence and causality would, at least in this respect, be limited to himself. But since he is not, the fruit of his skill and labor extends to many. Those who have come together in a political community become, to various degrees, causes of one another's lives and, in different ways, indebted to one another. In a self-sufficient community, this kind of communion gives birth to the marvels of social virtue, such that in the virtue of each the virtue of all is involved.<sup>29</sup> "Neither evening nor morning star is as wonderful."<sup>30</sup>

Apart from such relations not only does the individual become like that "brotherless, homeless outlaw" reviled by Homer,<sup>31</sup> he also becomes dispensable, "like an isolated piece at checkers."<sup>32</sup> He simply has no place. Thus such a one may be said to be free, as a brick in a pile is free from the order of the building, whereas one living within ordered relationships may be said to be unfree.

The universe is like a household, in which the freemen are least at liberty to act arbitrarily and where all or most things

<sup>29</sup> Cf. *Politics* 1332a38.

<sup>30</sup> NE 1129b29.

<sup>31</sup> *Iliad* 9, 63.

<sup>32</sup> *Politics* 1253a6.

are ordered, whereas slaves and wild animals have little to do with the common good but for the most part are free to act arbitrarily.<sup>33</sup>

An arbitrary life obviously comes at a price. Without a role or place in an ordered community, that is, without friendship, even a simple act of kindness becomes impossible, for how could one intend a benefit to another as a form of goodness for oneself?

In a system made up of different parts, those which possess reason are like the limbs in an organism, for in both cases they are built for cooperation. This truth will leave a deeper impression if you practice telling yourself, 'I am a limb (*meros*) of the whole order of rational beings.' If you think of yourself as only a part (*meros*), you will have no love from the heart for mankind, and no joy in the acts of kindness for their own sake. You will do them as a bare duty, and not as good works for yourself.<sup>34</sup>

But as a participant in an ordered variety of friendships, an individual can perform his duties joyfully and transcend what otherwise would seem to be the narrow limitations imposed upon him by nature.

Human association is a good unique in plenitude and duration. It is unlimited with regard to diversity since it is a union of many variously talented men and women. It is virtually immortal since it is continuously open to all who can participate in the manifold human activities they comprise. For this reason the good for a community has been called

<sup>33</sup> *Metaphysics* 1075a20. Cf. Joseph Ratzinger, "The Holy Spirit as *Communio*": "Although paradoxical to contemporary thought, freedom consists in becoming a part of the house, in being included in the building [of the household]. This idea is not paradoxical from the perspective of the ancient concept of freedom. For the ancients, whoever belongs to the house is free, and freedom is finding a home" (*Communio* 25, Summer 1998, 336).

<sup>34</sup> Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* 7.13.

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“more beautiful and more divine” than the good for one person.<sup>35</sup> It responds to that natural desire for totality, for complete and lasting goodness.

The envious that Dante meets in purgatory sought in their earthly lives to truncate this good of community to a kind of private concern. They thought the good another receives was always at the expense of someone else, usually themselves, as if there were a limited supply of goodness that got divvied up among far too many people. What they failed to see on earth they begin to see, though blind, in their circle of purgatory, for in giving support to another, each receives support. The image Dante provides us is of a community in which no part offers a sufficient explanation for the whole. No longer is “mine” opposed to “yours,” since their common work of purification reaches to a far greater depth in their souls than anything that belongs to them as separate individuals. What each is beginning to possess, and what we ourselves strive to possess in communities of virtue, is a participation in a good that is richer precisely because it is common.

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<sup>35</sup> NE 1094b10.