

## Decisions, Decisions: Carl Schmitt on Friends and Political Will

Frank Vander Valk

*In his *The Concept of the Political*, Carl Schmitt uses the language of friendship and enmity to convey the essence of the political as apart from the economic, social, and religious aspects of life. Schmitt's usage of the terminology of friendship departs from the approach traditionally taken in the history of political theory. For Schmitt, the concept of the friend allows individuals to establish authority within a political community, as well as testing political will and possibilities within that community. In addition, establishing (and constantly reestablishing) a distinction between friends and enemies works to constitute the power-relationships of individuals within a political community. The demarcation of friends and enemies in the ancient tradition, especially in the work of Aristotle, involves a rational association with an "other self" who shares with us a commitment to achieving the "Good" life. Questions regarding the "Good" are distinctly moral in Schmitt's view, and have no relation to the political unless moral considerations reach such a fevered pitch that groups are willing to physically eliminate, and thereby existentially negate, opposing collectivities. Far from being a rational adjudication of the moral worth of another individual, Schmitt's version of the concept of friendship represents an irrational declaration of existence. The test of this declaration is ultimately found in the willingness to enter a state of war in order to kill those who threaten our existence.*

The history of political theory is replete with references to the concept of friendship. Whether considerations of friendship and its relation to the political are explicitly introduced— as is the case with Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Aquinas, Montaigne and Nietzsche— or mainly implied— as is the case with numerous authors from Homer to Whitman— it is difficult to deny that the history of the relationship between political theory and theories of friendship is rich and varied. In that history there are perhaps a few truly profound works on the subject; Aristotle's *Ethics* and Nietzsche's *Zarathustra* come to mind. At the margins of this conversation, using the same vocabulary but with a radically different project in mind, is Carl Schmitt.

It is in Carl Schmitt's most famous work, *The Concept of the Political*, that he elucidates his understanding of the role of the concept of the friend in relation to the

political sphere. By divesting the term friendship of the psychological, ethical and moral components that the history of political thought had grown used to seeing adduced to the concept of the political— that is, by attempting to demarcate, for the first time in his eyes, the autonomous sphere of the political— Schmitt is able to use the concept of the friend as weapon against ways of understanding political activity that conflate politics with other fields of inquiry such as ethics, religion and economics.

Rather than follow the lead of, for example, the Greeks, who entwined the concept of friendship with an understanding of the political, such that each concept was autonomous and related to the other as a grammatical and logical equal, Schmitt makes the political dependent upon a particular understanding of "friend". Schmitt employs the concept of the friend as a sort of existential gatekeeper; in times of

great moment a political community is pressed to make a decision regarding who is sufficiently both different enough and threatening enough to warrant the appellation “enemy”, and who—deserving of the name “friend”—is willing to risk life and limb in a battle to defend a community and way of life.

The understanding of the political that emerges from Schmitt’s work draws heavily upon certain aspects of the history of political theory. In addition to borrowing the language of friendship, Schmitt follows (the standard interpretation of) Machiavelli in treating politics independently of morality; he follows Hobbes in placing great importance upon the figure of the sovereign and addressing the nature of sovereignty within a state; from Rousseau he draws upon the notion of a general will; and on it goes with Bodin, de Maistre, and others. However, Schmitt manages to weave the ideas he adopts from these figures into a novel understanding of the political.

Schmitt uses the language of friendship to describe the political as that which is capable of providing the ultimate existential experience and nourishment. Friendship involves choice, and choice requires decision. By placing a decision about friends and enemies at the heart of the political, Schmitt imbues the political sphere with a capacity to create meaning in one’s life. This capacity to create meaning and sustain the values by which individuals conduct their lives has traditionally belonged to the realms of the moral, the religious or the aesthetic. In Schmitt’s depiction of the centrality of the friend/enemy distinction, the ultimate capacity for instilling meaning in life, for generating and instilling certain values over others, rests with the political. It will be shown how the moment of decision regarding membership within one’s group of friends creates two relationships, one

between friends and enemies, and one between friends, that is to say, between citizens, and their sovereign.

Before we can proceed with the crux of the argument, it will be important to lie out some important groundwork. After a brief examination of some considerations of the concept of friendship in political theory, the first task we must face will be to unpack exactly what Schmitt means by the words “friend” and “enemy”. He uses the words differently than others who, on the surface, seem to write about similar subject matter, namely the relationship between friendship and the political community. In this regard, Schmitt’s divergence from traditional usage can help us better understand the nature of his project.

Once we have addressed some of the issues regarding Schmitt’s use of language, it will behoove us to turn our attention to the role of political will in Schmitt’s thought. This discussion follows naturally from the discussion of friendship, as the concept of the friend turns out to be a way for Schmitt to introduce his ideas about political will. Similarly, consideration of political will lead us into reflection about the nature of sovereignty in Schmitt’s work. The final step will be to combine Schmitt’s insights about friends, decision, political will, and sovereignty in order to arrive at a more comprehensive understanding of the political.

Once we take into account the above focal points of inquiry, I argue that Schmitt ultimately uses the concept of the political to simultaneously establish two things, order and conviction. Having made this argument, I return to a consideration of how Schmitt’s work in this area compares to previous understandings of the role of friendship with regard to the political. It is at this point that the originality and significance of Schmitt’s contribution can honestly be assessed.<sup>1</sup>

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Considerations of the political implications of friendship, for all intents and purposes, begin with Aristotle. Although friendship receives no extended treatment in his *Politics*, it appears in both the *Eudemian Ethics* and the *Nicomachean Ethics*. The latter work, the more widely read of the *Ethics*, devotes roughly one-fifth of the total length to considerations of friendship. Friendship (*philia*) was of central importance to the Greeks, and Aristotle notes that “those who frame the constitutions of states set more store by this feeling than by justice itself” (1955, p. 228). Aristotle describes three basic forms that friendship can take, corresponding to the three objects of friendship he specifies: the useful, the pleasant, and the good.

The most basic, as well as most base, form of friendship is that in which the individuals involved “do not love one another for their personal qualities, but only so far as they are useful to one another” (Aristotle, 1955, p. 231). In a similar manner, those who find pleasure in each other’s company are drawn to each other in the name of that pleasure. Friendships of utility and pleasure are transient, for as soon as the advantage gained from the relationship disappears, so, too, will the friendship. These friendships are “accidental” and do not involve a lasting concern for the friend as such. Aristotle maintains that “it is only between those who are good, and resemble one another in their goodness, that friendship is perfect” (1955, p. 233). Perfect friendship can contain utilitarian elements, but it exceeds utility-friendship by virtue of the former’s concern for the friend *qua* good man. At the core of Aristotle’s conception of friendship are psychological and moral components. The political aspect of friendship is discussed against the framework of these non-political considerations.

There is a certain ambiguity in Aristotle’s treatment of civic friendship. On one hand, it seems that civic friendship is a form of utility-friendship, with citizens essentially entering into a contract with one another in order to secure an outcome based on self-interest. In this interpretation, consideration of the good is essentially reserved for extra-political activity, often involving an extended relationship with others who are themselves in possession of the good (see Cooper, 1977, for a version of this argument). However, it can also be argued that civic friendship focuses on a “good” outside of the citizens as individuals, namely the health and well being of the state (e.g., Woldring, 1994). This tension in Aristotle’s work continues to play itself out in more contemporary discussions of friendship.

Schmitt is not alone in using the language of friendship in modern times. Jacobson (1963) notes that the revolutionary generation in America was motivated by sentiments of friendship, as is evidenced in the Articles of Confederation (esp. articles III and IV). This is clearly the case in the writings of Thomas Paine, especially in his *Common Sense* (1989). Unlike Schmitt, however, the majority of more recent treatments of the relationship between friendship and politics have attempted to enlist the psychological and moral dimensions of the concept of friendship in the name of a liberal, democratic, polity (see Martel, 2001; Schall, 1996; Kahane, 1999). Whereas Schmitt, as we shall see, tries to demonstrate that the choice between friend and enemy is one that can serve as a test of political will and a form of existential affirmation, the vast majority of academic political theorists choose to enlist the Greek concept of *philia* in a rather banal defense of life-affirming possibilities of democratic political forms.

### **Friends, there are no (political) friends**

Schmitt's ostensible purpose for writing *The Concept of the Political* is to, at long last, provide a positive definition of the political, as against both the contrasting definitions of social scientists and philosophers— playing off the political against the economic, the moral, etc.— and the “unsatisfactory circle” of defining the political in terms of the state, and the state in terms of the political (Schmitt, 1996, p. 20). This “definition of the political,” Schmitt tells us, “can only be obtained by discovering and defining the specifically political categories” (1996, p. 25). In short order, Schmitt provides his readers with a definition that meets his criterion: “The specific political distinction to which political actions and motives can be reduced is that between friend and enemy” (1996, p. 26). Although in no way derived from them, Schmitt notes that the political dichotomy of friend and enemy mirrors the dichotomies that mark off other fields of inquiry: morality's “good and bad”, for example, or the “ugly and beautiful” that characterize aesthetics. However, one ought not to make the mistake of believing that there can be any cross-fertilization between such categorically different fields as politics, ethics, aesthetics, or economics. As we will see, the unshakeable belief in the autonomy of political categories is one of the things that sets Schmitt off against other theorists of politics and friendship, such as Aristotle and Plato, who use similar language, but with drastically different intentions and results.

Just exactly how it is decided, and by whom, which group(s) qualify as the enemy is a central component of Schmitt's presentation of the concept of the political. The designation of an enemy is no fanciful decision. The consequences and implications of such a decision are of the

utmost importance, and Schmitt does not expect that this decision be taken lightly. He declares, in fact, that, “[t]he distinction of friend and enemy denotes the utmost degree of intensity of a union or separation, of an association or dissociation” (1996, p. 26). In keeping with Schmitt's refusal to let non-political categories shade over, unnoticed, into the political, it is made clear what the enemy need not necessarily be; the enemy need not be on the objectionable side of moral, ethical, aesthetic, or economic antipodes. Indeed, the enemy is “the other, the stranger; and it is sufficient for his nature that he is, in a specifically intense way, existentially something different and alien, so that in the extreme case conflicts with him are possible” (Schmitt, 1996, p. 27).<sup>2</sup> But, what of the nature of these conflicts?

The decidedly political conflict, for Schmitt, will not revolve around non-political categories by focusing upon such things as trade embargoes, Olympic boycotts, or refusal to allow “artistic” materials into one's country. Rather, “[t]he friend, enemy, and combat concepts receive their real meaning precisely because they refer to the real possibility of physical killing. War follows from enmity. War is the existential negation of the enemy. It is the most extreme consequence of enmity” (Schmitt, 1996, p. 33). It is important to be clear on this point, as Schmitt can appear to be saying something he is not, in fact, saying. Yes, politics is about friend/enemy groupings; and, yes, the most extreme form of the antagonism between friend and enemy is war, but Schmitt is *not* claiming that war is the most complete embodiment of politics.

It is the mere possibility of war, the very real chance— but not necessarily the likelihood— that a fight to the death may result from enmity, which constitutes the political. (The recognition of this possibility has a vast array of consequences for a

political community. I will examine the most important of these consequences, along with the concomitant implications thereof, in the following section. It is important, however, to complete the current task, that is to say, to explicate Schmitt's use of the concept of friendship.) Schmitt takes great care to point out that "[w]ar is neither the aim nor the purpose nor even the very content of politics" (Schmitt, 1996, p. 34). War is the extreme, the case that overshadows other cases and must always, because of its extremity, be kept in the minds of individuals who conduct activity in the traditionally defined realm of the political.

We go to war with our enemies and we fight on the side of our friends. We protect our friends from our enemies. These insights come as no surprise, but for Schmitt the above rules of thumb constitute a nearly complete and independent rationale for engaging in combat. Schmitt argues that,

war...has no normative meaning, but an existential meaning only, particularly in a real combat with a real enemy. There exists no rational purpose, no norm no matter how true, no program no matter how exemplary, no social ideal no matter how beautiful...which could justify men killing each other for this reason. If such physical destruction of human life is not motivated by an existential threat to one's own way of life, then it can not be justified (1996, pp. 48-49).

Since the concept of the friend, rather than some moral or religious concept, provides the context for war, it is crucial in understanding Schmitt to examine his understanding of the nature of the friend/enemy distinction.

It is now possible to discuss the novelty of Schmitt's use of the terms "friend", "enemy", and "friendship" in the context of thinking about the political. As much as we can learn from what Schmitt explicitly says about what it means to have, or be, a friend in the political realm, we can learn almost as much from noting some important deviations in Schmitt's work from the way that the concept of friendship has been used in political thought. Two such deviations will be addressed. First, there is a much larger gap between "friend" and "friendship" in Schmitt's usage than is the case with the tradition in general. Second, Schmitt uses the friend/enemy grouping to radically enforce a distinction he sees between politics and ethics, whereas writers in the tradition tend to use the concept of friendship as a way to fuse, or at least, connect, politics and ethics. Noting where, and why, Schmitt deviates from the traditional mode of approaching the relationship between friendship and a theory of politics— taking stock of what he is not doing— can help shed light on his true reason for adopting the language of friendship.

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When Homer's heroes, or Plato, or Aristotle spoke of friendship, it was with the understanding an individual, specific friend could stand as a singular case of the larger phenomenon known as friendship. Greek friendship— whether it be the ritualized friendship of Homer's heroes, *xenia* (or guest-friendship), Plato's *philia/eros* admixture, or the various forms of friendship elucidated by Aristotle— in its important connection to the political had to do with the psychological, personal, and affective dimensions of interpersonal relations. The question for thinkers such as Plato and Aristotle, especially in light of the effects of democratization upon Greek political culture, was to what degree these

more-or-less private or interpersonal bonds were either a reflection or prerequisite of a just political order. For Schmitt such private conceptualizations of friendship have little place in an effort to understand the political. He is adamant that

[t]he friend and enemy concepts are to be understood in their concrete and existential sense, not as symbols or metaphors, not mixed and weakened by economic, moral, and other conceptions, *least of all in a private-individualistic sense as a psychological expression of private emotions and tendencies* (Schmitt, 1996, pp. 27-28).

If the enemy is that which threatens a community, the friend, for Schmitt, is no more than an individual who obeys, with other community members, the command of the sovereign to partake in armed combat.

In order for Schmitt's work to make sense it is necessary that the individual citizens of a particular state see their enemies and friends not as "my enemy" and "my friend", but rather as "our enemies" and "our friends". Schmitt addresses this point in an important early passage in *The Concept of the Political*:

The enemy is not merely any competitor or just any partner of a conflict in general. He is also not the private adversary whom one hates. An enemy exists only when, at least potentially, one fighting collectivity of people confronts a similar collectivity. The enemy is solely the public enemy... (1996, p. 28).

The type of friendship that Schmitt is describing is not the type of friendship Socrates and Crito share when the former suggests that the latter ought not to care too

much what "most" people think about the nature of their friendship (Plato, *Crito*, 44c). As Andrew Norris notes, Schmitt "has far more to say about the enemy than the friend" (Norris, 1998, p. 4). The friend is to be understood only in relation to the enemy, and no positive theory of friendship *per se* is developed in Schmitt's account. The centrality for Schmitt of the term "friend" should not fool the reader into expecting a fully developed theory of friendship, a theory that would just, as it turns out, happen to have interesting and potentially important political application.

Schmitt uses the term "friend" only as an heuristic device that helps him to uncover, as we shall see, the existential component of the political as made manifest in the various formulations of political will. The answer to the ubiquitous political question, "Who are your friends?" acts as a screening device. In part, providing an answer to that question will involve answering, as well, an unspoken question: "For what convictions are you willing to die?" Nothing in Greek literature on friendship comes close to putting the question this starkly. Aristotle's perfect friendship involves a shared pursuit of the good life, but it is a pursuit that, as mentioned above, may not necessarily possess a political component. Only by Schmitt's hand does an account of friendship become subsumed into an existential test of conviction via the process of choosing one's friends.

In large part, Schmitt deviates from the traditional— and completely sensible— discussion of the political dimension of friendship as a particular case of a more comprehensive theory exactly because he wants to insist upon the complete autonomy of the political. Whereas in Plato, "we find the concept of friendship linked with the concept of justice" (Hutter, 1978, p. 94) and in Aristotle we find the claim that "it is only

between those who are good, and resemble one another in their goodness, that friendship is perfect,” (1955, p. 233) Schmitt clearly understands the political dimension of friendship to be categorically divorced from considerations of justice or universal claims about “the good”. It is not that Schmitt makes no connection whatsoever between ethics and the concept of the friend— after all, part of the point of deciding upon the friend/enemy grouping at any one time is to protect the way of life of a particular people, a way of life that may indeed contain an essentially moral dimension— but rather that the ethical cannot intrude upon the very definition of the friend. What was a central consideration regarding friends in Greek thought is expressly precluded in Schmitt’s treatment of the matter.

### **The Eruptions and Disruptions of Political Will**

For Schmitt, the friend/enemy distinction is useful as a tool for providing a focal point for the discharge of political will. The friend/enemy grouping is not the endpoint of Schmitt’s foray into the political; it is but the first step in the longer process of trying to understand the role the political plays in the lives of living, breathing, human beings. It is impossible to fully understand Schmitt’s project without understanding the various shapes that political will takes. The concept of political will is evoked, albeit in different forms, in order to help explicate each of the following: the definition of the friend; the definition or proving of sovereignty; and finally, a means of testing of the viability of political ideas, programs or the strength and nature of partisan commitments. It is these forms of political will that begin to fill in the outline provided by Schmitt’s formulation of

the political moment as that point where one’s friends are being decided upon.

Schmitt says very little about the nature of the political friend. As we have seen, he will have no part of a conception of friendship, as the key measure of truly political activity, which incorporates elements of ethics or aesthetics. Instead, for Schmitt the question of friendship leads into an analysis of the role of will in politics. Traditional considerations associated with the concept of friendship in light of its connection to the political are put aside in order to focus on the crucial moment of decision, the moment in which an enemy is identified as such. As Schmitt argues,

political thought and political instinct prove themselves theoretically and practically in the ability to distinguish friend and enemy. The high points of politics are simultaneously the moments in which the enemy is, in concrete clarity, recognized as the enemy (1996, p. 67).

These moments, which take place in exceptional times of extremity and danger, offer the opportunity for sovereignty to assert and reassert itself as the friend/enemy groupings are constituted.

Who is the enemy? Norris suggests that it is “the case that the enemy of which Schmitt speaks cannot be conceived apart from a notion of friendship in which people are brought into ‘collectivities’” (1998, p. 5). These collectivities share certain characteristics that enable members thereof to speak sensibly of “us” and “them”. But this distinction is not enough; “they” are not always the enemy. The us/them grouping becomes the friend/enemy grouping precisely at the point where the way of life of a collectivity becomes threatened. The enemy “is one who threatens one’s own

existence and way of life” (Drury, 1997, p. 88). This way of life, this *Lebensform*, contains a certain double-nature. It is made manifest in everyday activities, which may encompass such non-political spheres of life such as the religious or the economic, while its content is clarified through the activity of will.<sup>3</sup>

At this point, Schmitt parallels Aristotle, at least to a certain degree. Schmitt sees politics, and the designation of friends and enemies, as the pinnacle of human activity. Politics, as noted, allows for the existential affirmation of who and what we are, both as individuals and as a potential “fighting collectivity”. Other endeavors are subordinated to, if not embodied in, the demands of politics and, subsequently, to the decision of the sovereign. Aristotle also recognizes that “all associations may be regarded as parts of the association we call the state,” and that “all these associations are parts of...the body politic” (1955, p. 245). Aristotle, however, clearly imbues the most important form of friendship with ethical content, while Schmitt drains that content. Perhaps it is exactly this deviation from Aristotle that accounts for the ease with which Schmitt found himself propagandizing for the Nazis. Whereas Aristotle places the state in an organic relationship with its constituent elements, Schmitt ascribes to the state a higher ontological status than is ascribed to the parts thereof.

For Schmitt, the high point of politics is simultaneous with the recognition of the enemy, and in this recognition the meaning of the term “friend” is “he who can be counted on to fight and die for the state.” Friendship, in its most perfect political realization, occurs in those fleeting moments of decision, when sovereignty is asserted and the possibility of death in battle is imminent. At the point where the friend is most important, the individual citizen

matters least. The relationship between friendship and the state is quite different for Aristotle, in whose theory “civic friendship is but the reflection, in the lives of individuals, of the constitution of the state” (Stern-Gillet, 1995, p. 153). This being the case, Aristotle notes that the most wide-ranging examples of civic friendship, as well as justice, are likely to be found in a democracy, “the citizens of a democracy being equal and having many things in common” (1955, p. 249). Civic friendship, for Aristotle, is accompanied by individual deliberation, reciprocal legal responsibilities, and the possibility, if not the promise, of an ethical component.

The recognition of the enemy cannot take place, for Schmitt, but through an expression of political will. And in the same way, the identification of friends also serves as an example of the expression of political will. In the sense in which Schmitt understands the political, friends cannot be chosen but for choosing enemies. To truly invoke political will is to affirm or reaffirm a particular friend/enemy grouping. Schmitt’s divergence from the tradition on this point is illustrative; for many political theorists the identification of friends entails no necessary simultaneous designation of enemies.

Schmitt does not think the selection of friends can allow for neutrality towards those who fall outside the circle of friendship. Such a choice is a profoundly important existential act of will. One defines one’s self in this political moment. The way one will exist, the very way of life which people are able to partake of, is the crux of the designation of the enemy. As Schmitt points out, “war is the existential negation of the enemy” (1996, p. 33). The corollary to this point, and perhaps one of the two or three most important insights that Schmitt provides in this area of thought, is



that war is also the existential affirmation of the friend.

The extent to which Schmitt's theory of the political takes for granted this affirmation of the values of the friend, which is of course nothing more than an affirmation of the way of life that one shares with the figure of the friend, is sometimes lost on scholars. Charles E. Frye (1966), for example, portrays Schmitt's *The Concept of the Political* as a rather one-dimensional paean to a violent, static, aggressive authoritarian state. Frye displays no appreciation for Schmitt's attempt to use the tool of the friend/enemy distinction as a means of establishing and affirming sovereignty and of testing political conviction. A more contemporary, and very profound, thinker is still able to dismiss Schmitt's understanding of the political as "nothing but an alibi for thoughtlessness and vulgarity" (Drury, 1997, p. 90). It is by no means incontrovertibly true that such a portrayal of Schmitt captures the fullness of his project.

Andrew Norris has attempted to address this depiction of Schmitt. He maintains, rightfully so, I think, that "Schmitt's attempt to characterize politics in terms of friendship and enmity is both more complicated and more interesting than critics suggest" (1998, p.3). Norris sees Schmitt as harnessing the fearfulness associated with war and death to imbue life itself with meaning. As Norris observes,

it is not that groups need to be constantly at war with one another to be political...but that the people belonging to them see war and what it demands as a real possibility, i.e., that they are reminded of their commitments.... Life will lack meaning unless it contains commitments cherished above mere physical existence (1998, p. 8).

Leo Strauss (1995) makes a similar argument, suggesting that Schmitt is not so far away from generating an ethical foundation for his political project. Political will, then, provides individuals, through their friendly association with other members of a political community, with an opportunity for existential affirmation of their own commitments. The confluence of political will, existential affirmation, and the friend/enemy grouping is crucial for understanding Schmitt.

Political will is further expressed in the establishment of a sovereign authority. One of the keys to understanding what Schmitt is attempting in *The Concept of the Political* is to recognize the importance of the moment of decision and exception. It is the decision regarding the particular contents (both theoretical and practical, that is to say, pertaining to the actual inclusion of real, physical beings) of the friend/enemy grouping that is the high moment of politics. That decision, because of the exceptional (read: potentially fatal) nature of the circumstances in which it must be made, cannot be entrusted to a group of individuals who, given time, would likely have coalesced around a specific set of defining characteristics. Rather, some sovereign authority is vested with the capacity to make the decision in question, and to exercise such powers as are found to be "necessary and proper" to putting that decision into effect.

Indeed, Schmitt sees sovereignty as being "the monopoly to decide" (1985a, p. 13). The sovereign is not described as deciding on moral or economic issues, unless those issues escape the boundaries of their own domain and become political conflicts. Instead, "sovereignty...resides in...determining definitively what constitutes public order and security, in determining when they are disturbed, and so

on” (Schmitt, 1985a, p. 9). Ernest-Wolfgang Bockenforde succinctly sums up the logic behind Schmitt’s conception of the sovereign:

Political unity constitutes and preserves itself by suspending tensions, antagonisms, and conflicting interests; it strives toward unity and community in such a way as to relativize and integrate these conflicts. For this to happen, however, the possibility of a final decision, i.e., a decision beyond final appeal, is needed. Thus, sovereignty, which includes this authority of making a final decision, is a necessary authority for the state as a unity of peace (Bockenforde, 1998, pp. 41-42).

The nature of the sovereign, therefore, mirrors the nature of the political. Both the sovereign and the political depend heavily on the possible. Just as the political, by virtue of transcending other spheres of life, becomes the decisive component of existence, so too does the sovereign become the decisive component of the state.

It is by virtue of the practical necessity of agency and dispatch in times of crisis that the sovereign is the repository of political will. To the degree that the exceptional situation functions to identify, or, what may be a better term, *expose* the political, the sovereign accumulates the power of life and death over the citizens of a state. It is at this point, when the sovereign has acquired the power over life, that political will is partially usurped from the people. As Schmitt notes in *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, “only political power can form the people’s will” (1985b, p. 29). In a political world where power is vested with the sovereign, the formation of political will, and thereby the formation of

the variety of ways of life by which people live, also rests with the sovereign. This is the case until the next moment of crisis, until the next exception, when a new friend/enemy constellation is formed and sovereignty is subsequently redistributed.

### **The Double Consequence of Deciding Who Your Friends Are or Order and Conviction**

As we have seen, for Schmitt the important thing is not just *having* friends in the political sense (for this can hardly be avoided), but *deciding* upon who your friends are. This decisionism is virtually non-existent in traditional considerations of the political dimensions of friendship, which are much more inclined to address affection between citizens than questions of sovereign will. The decision regarding friends and enemies, although usually deferred to a sovereign power (such as the State), has two important consequences. Schmitt uses the friend/enemy grouping as a rhetorical tool and a call to action. If one takes Schmitt at his word, and agrees with his definition of the political, one will be forced into a moment of decision. That decision, “who are my friends and who are my enemies?”, subsequently establishes a relationship, not only between friends and enemies, but among friends as well.

Among friends it is decided who will be sovereign, that is to say, who will have the right and authority to make decisions regarding the physical well being of the community, and the entry of that community into war with the enemy. In addition, this moment of decision also establishes the threshold of acceptable conflict. There are two “us and them” relationships established in the political moment: the friend/enemy grouping establishes the most extreme form of the “us and them” relationship, the form that is most overtly political, in Schmitt’s

sense of the word, while a second such relationship demarcates rulers from ruled and is political in a less obvious, but equally important sense.

We have seen how the first form of the relationship works to bring into sharper focus the existential values of a community. The possibility of death has a way of forcing individuals to be sure what it is about their way of life that they will be willing to die for. Regarding the second form of the us/them relationship, Schmitt maintains that “the substance of the political is contained in the context of a concrete antagonism [that] is still expressed in everyday language, even where the awareness of the extreme case has been entirely lost” (1996, p. 30). Our daily lives constantly express a political will through the medium of secondary political activity that both anticipates and recreates the existential sovereign moment of decision. Just as the fact that the possibility of war is of equal, if not greater, importance than the fact of war, so too is the possibility of the exercise of sovereign authority as important as the actual exercise thereof.

It would be a mistake to assume that, for Schmitt, the political only appears at a moment of crisis on the eve of armed combat. Schmitt himself is at constant pains to preempt this reading of his work. He states, for example, that “[w]hat always matters is only the *possibility* of conflict” (1996, p. 39, my italics), and that the “ever present *possibility* of a friend-and-enemy grouping suffices to forge a decisive entity which transcends the mere societal-associational groupings” (1996, p. 45, my italics), and finally, that what “always matters is the *possibility* of the extreme case taking place, the real war, and the decision whether this situation has or has not arrived” (1996, p. 35, my italics). The political moment is echoed in the submission of the ruled to the rulers—the submission of those who will fight to the death if called upon to

those who will make the decision that such a fight is necessary to preserve the integrity of the community. As long as the possibility of war exists the political continues to exist as well, if only as a matter of preparedness for potential future conduct.

Schmitt’s emphasis on the possibility of real war and physical death clearly indicates the importance of unity, a strong sovereign, and a capacity for exceptional martial activity. War, as has been mentioned, is a means to defend a way of life, but it is also, however indirectly, a means of discovering a way of life. War, in and of itself, is (nearly) incapable of creating existential values, and it would be a mistake to paint Schmitt as attempting to argue this position. War is the extreme possibility that must be always kept in mind. *The Concept of the Political* is Schmitt’s attempt to isolate the political in order to remind us what is really at stake; what turns out to be at stake is not only our lives, but, more importantly, those things which we value even more than our lives. Being confronted with the true nature of the political forces us to adjudicate our values in light of the possibility of death.

The decision regarding friends and enemies can therefore be described as testing our political convictions in two separate, though related, ways. Most obviously, the friend/enemy grouping establishes order within a society, testing our willingness to establish security against other values. Less obvious is the testing of exactly these other values, which differ from community to community and from time to time. It is the second way that the friend/enemy decision tests political convictions that has been left without sufficient examination. For Schmitt’s emphasis upon decision implies choice, and choice itself implies possibility. Just as the possibility of war is important, so, too, is the possibility that a potential fighting collective

may choose to turn away from war in the name of another set of values that do not require immediate armed conflict (although the possibility of future conflict can never be discounted).

If, as Norris argues (1998, p. 3), “Schmitt’s references to physical conflict...are defensive in nature,” then it seems fair to suggest that the sovereign decision to go to war involves also a decision about the contours of the political community in which one might find one’s friends. Going to war is the ultimate statement of purpose. It is the most extreme form of affirmation of a particular set of values. However, this affirmation, as I have suggested, comes not only in the extreme case. Routine political life—the mere party politics to which Schmitt disparagingly refers—contains a political element.

Schmitt’s sovereign is powerful and demands compliance from citizens with declarations of war, but he is not absolute. Not only is the integrity of the sovereign threatened by outside forces, but sovereignty is constantly at risk internally as well. To be sure, as Schmitt points out, each “state provides...some kind of formula for the declaration of an internal enemy” (1996, p. 46). But simply setting the limits of acceptable internal conflict does nothing to insure that those who are at the root of the conflict will not choose to define themselves against their former friends. At this point the sovereign faces an internal challenge that results in civil war, an unsuccessful armed rebellion, or a *coup d’etat*. The moment of crisis in which sovereignty is asserted, that is to say, the political moment, can be just as easily generated by internal as by external factors.

Schmitt begins his essay by defining the state as “a specific entity of a people” (1996, p. 19). Notice his language...“a people.” A state, that unit in the context of which a sovereign makes a decision about

friends and enemies, is not just an entity of generic individuals (although, this may be true of the liberal democratic state, and this is exactly why Schmitt is disparaging of liberalism), but rather is an example of a people, a specific people with commonality enough to tie them together as a collective. The cohesiveness of this collective is secured not only by acquiescence of individuals to the sovereign, but also by an acceptance by individuals of their particular location within the state. The establishment of sovereign authority within a state not only protects against foreign aggression, but also locates individuals internally.

Just as the possibility of armed combat reinforces and tests political conviction, so too does the constitution of the state, as embodied in the sovereign, exist as a possibility. Where the authority of the sovereign is observed, the actual constitution of the state is endorsed, but it is endorsed only as one possibility among many. Just as individuals live with an intuitive recognition of the possibility of war, they also live with the knowledge that a different way of life, with a different set of friends, is always a possibility, should they respect the authority of a different sovereign. Schmitt tells us that peace cannot be eternal, but he fails to admit that sovereignty, as vested in any one body or individual, is equally subject to degradation and existential annihilation.

Endorsing a particular constitutional possibility from a menu of possibilities establishes an individual’s relationship to the sovereign as well as to other individuals. These individuals then become friends, and a pattern of friendship is either established or reinforced. Schmitt admits as obvious the fact that conflicts from other spheres of life often spill over into the political realm (1996, p. 36).<sup>1</sup> What he is less keen about admitting is that it is through these interruptions that challenges to sovereignty are introduced.

One of the sovereign's powers, as has been mentioned, is the ability to limit the scope of conflict, but conflict would not arise unless there was internal discord of a sort. If that discord is animated by a principle seriously at odds with the way of life defended by the sovereign, a moment of crisis—the exception—arises. In that exceptional moment a choice is made within a community either to accept the *status quo* or risk civil war instilling a new set of political principles. Thus, the friend/enemy grouping tests the existential convictions of individuals as members of a fighting collective, but the grouping also tests the existential convictions of individuals as individuals within the context of a complex relationship of friendship.

This second form of testing political convictions, of testing the limits of political possibility, draws Schmitt partway back to the Greek model. At the level of the individual, who is constantly aware of the various possibilities for the manifestation of sovereign authority, political and existential acquiescence to the sovereign entails a constant reaffirmation of the existential conditions of one's life. Moral and aesthetic judgments and actions are not political judgments and actions, but the former can inform the latter. Recall the Aristotelian notion that the particular form of civic relationships (friendships) among citizens is but a reflection of a constitution that the citizens have endorsed and under which they live.

Schmitt enforces a radical separation between the political sphere and other spheres of existence. The political is about friends and enemies, life and death; it is not about morals, economics or aesthetics. However, to the degree that Schmitt leaves the door open for the intrusion of these elements, and insofar as the friend/enemy decision embodies two tests of political conviction, Schmitt does not preclude a

partnership of the political with other spheres of life. As long as the political is supreme—which it must be since all decisions are made by, or with the grace of, the sovereign, and deal ultimately with death and existential negation—there is room for consideration of the good life. What Schmitt has contributed to the debate is the recognition that this debate, rather than being absolutely central to and indispensable for an understanding of the political, must necessarily be subordinated to the political.

Although it is the case that there appears to be room for some affinity between Schmitt and the Greeks on the question of moral consideration entering into the political realm, Schmitt's contribution to political thought is radically different than previous considerations of the role of the friend in the political. Whereas the friend figure has been seen as a tool for the discovery of what we *ought* to be, both as individuals and as members of a polity, for Schmitt the friend figure is a way to discover who we *are*. Schmitt's friend is not engaged in a rational discovery of "the good" or the best possible political order, but rather, he partakes in an irrational declaration of existence.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> I have chosen to focus my attention on Schmitt's most well-known and important work, *The Concept of the Political*. My reasons for this have as much to do with the denseness of the work as with the misunderstandings to which the book has been subject.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27. It is important to note Schmitt's language here. The enemy is not merely different, for even friends may be different. Rather, the enemy is different "in a *specialty intense way*". It is "in the *extreme case*" that conflicts may arise. Examples of this sort, denoting the

extremity and unusualness of the elevation of conflict to the level of (potential) battle between friends and enemies are located throughout the essay. (Italics are mine.)

<sup>3</sup> This is a very different point from one that will follow, namely, that political will operates as a means of testing the viability of specific political programs, platforms, and so on.

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