Acrobatic Friendship: A Path to Nurture Friendship in The Midst of Political Dissonance¹

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INTRODUCTION

Philia is a foundational philosophical subject, and yet friendship is one of the most complicated philosophical issues to pursue. As Lysis itself concludes, "as yet, we have not been able to discover what is a friend!"² Beyond Plato and Aristotle's discussions, various philosophers historically have addressed the issue, such as Marcus Tullius Cicero, Michel de Montaigne, Abel Bonnard, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, and Jacques Derrida. However, it remains nonetheless an unsettled issue, even in contemporary philosophy. This paper explores the issue of friendship from an educational perspective, specifically focusing on verbal and nonverbal communication with two symbolic examples: first, the political disagreement that broke the friendship of Chelsea Clinton and Ivanka Trump, and second, the art and friendship practice nurtured by Ikebana International, within a context of international political dissonance, for over 60 years.³ On Watch What Happens Live in October 2020, Chelsea said that her friendship with Ivanka had ended, even though they once declared that they would remain friends regardless of the 2016 American presidential election result.⁴ Chelsea blamed the end of their friendship on political disagreement, citing the "cruelty and incompetence" of Ivanka's father's presidential administration, and Ivanka's role of "actively taking part" in it.5 In contrast, regardless of ongoing political dissonance among its members regarding the debate over the appropriateness of the existence of American Military facilities

in Japan as a result of World War II, Ikebana International, a non-profit, international, cultural organization of Japanese-style flower arrangement established in 1956 by an American military spouse, has functioned as a successful medium of apolitical American-Japanese friendship for over 60 years, with the motto of *"Friendship Through Flowers.*"⁶ In other words, where it seems that *political tension* was sufficient to break a years-long friendship between two First Daughters of the United States, Ikebana International has successfully found a formula for a kind of global friendship institute that is resistant to political tensions. Which is stronger, friendship, or politics? What are the factors that could make a friendship durable to political conflicts on a larger scale, such as social divides? If yes, what does it look like? Why does friendship matter?

This paper argues that it is possible, important, and morally valuable to make an educational effort for nurturing a type of friendship which has resistance against political tension. The paper refers to this type of friendship as Acrobatic Friendship, due to the metaphorical acrobatics required in order to cross the political and social disagreements that often separate people. Within Aristotle's friendship theory, which defines three kinds of friendships: pleasure (pleasant to each other), utility (profit from each other), and virtue (good to each other), Acrobatic Friendship is a type of utility friendship. However, Acrobatic Friendship is unique because it takes the presumption that discussions within friendship, especially those which involve political dissonance, should go beyond the human centralism demonstrated by verbal communication. Friendship is about the issues faced by human beings, but these issues cannot be navigated using an individualized human approach. In order to articulate the concept and educational possibility of Acrobatic Friendship, this paper looks at two different ways of understanding the educational aspects of friendship, first through the Emersonian Friendship proposed by Naoko Saito, and second, through the *Political Friendship* proposed by Danielle Allen, applying them to reflect in various ways on the publicly-shared aspects of Chelsea and Ivanka's broken friendship. Through a critical analysis of these thinkers' arguments, and a reflection on how they resonate with the characteristics of Ikebana International, the paper conceptualizes the idea of *Acrobatic Friendship* as a relationship that can hold both disagreements and intimacy alongside non-verbal communication through the mediums of art and nature.

EMERSONIAN FRIENDSHIP

The contemporary philosopher John Cooper discusses the character of friendship using a reflection of Aristotle's argument; analytic philosophers break down the components and the conditions of friendship; and in contemporary philosophy of education, Amy Shuffelton explores the possibility of establishing friendship between teachers and students.⁷ Regardless of the various philosophical techniques and discussions used to examine the matter, all of this research shares the assumption that friendship is educational and important to human life.⁸ However, the perspectives for discussing the *educational* aspect of friendship are various.

Naoko Saito, for example, classifies friendship into two types: Emersonian friendship is educational, but apostate friendship (occasionally "hanging out" or spending time together) is not.⁹ Emersonian friendship exists in a moment, within the educational conversations exchanged between two people whose interaction has been strengthened by deep trust. Saito interprets Stanley Cavell's quotation that Emerson and his friend, Henry David Thoreau, "offer one another the shock of recognition but not the faith of friendship," to mean that the Emersonian friend teaches his or her friend the mission of his or her life.¹⁰ For Saito, "the shock of recognition" happens when a friend clearly points out to you that they are not just like you, and the practice of being an Emersonian friend is to become the best counsel by offering a critical eye without hesitation.¹¹ Saito even states that the Emersonian friend can be called "the great enemy" in educational terms, because Emersonian friends deeply respect, trust, and love each other, but at the same time maintain a kind of conflict in their relationship.¹² To put it differently, for Saito, since Emersonian friends educationally inspire each other, they have to be independent, to maintain a certain distance, and to hold disagreement.

Saito's argument on Emersonian friendship poses a question we can use to diagnose Chelsea and Ivanka's relationship. Was Chelsea referring to the end of Emersonian friendship, or of apostate friendship? Their relationship might be considered an Emersonian friendship, as this kind of friendship requires an element of disagreement which Chelsea and Ivanka clearly had. However, one of Chelsea's reasons for no longer being friends with Ivanka was that they had not seen or spoken to each other for "a long time."¹³ Saito's example of the Emersonian friendship between Emerson and Thoreau is helpful in clarifying this point: Emerson called Thoreau his great friend even though they did not talk or visit each other after having a fatal argument.¹⁴ As physical distance and disconnection alone cannot terminate an Emersonian friendship, this classification does not quite fit for Chelsea and Ivanka. Indeed, at least part of their disconnection may have been the result of their exceeding Emersonian friendship's "shock of recognition."

Saito claims that trust and respect are at the core of maintaining an educational friendship. Regardless of their arguments, Emerson and Thoreau could sustain their friendship because they did not lose mutual trust or respect. In contrast, Chelsea's comments on breaking her friendship with Ivanka indicate a loss of this trust and respect. If Chelsea were the Emersonian friend of Ivanka, she would have offered her critiques to Ivanka directly, without hesitation, rather than staying away and speaking only publicly about their friendship, through the media. It suggests that Chelsea and Ivanka's relationship was nothing more than an apostate friendship.

POLITICAL FRIENDSHIP

Danielle Allen's argument on friendship offers a different educational interpretation for the example of Ivanka and Chelsea. In contrast to Saito, Allen's understanding offers a way to recover or renew a friendship broken by political tension. Allen believes that the educational aspect of friendship is to peacefully bond people, even those who are in political conflict, by helping them to develop interpersonal trust.

As an educational way to reunite Chelsea and Ivanka as friends, we could consider Allen's proposition of "a citizenship of political friendship" which captures some features of Aristotelian utility friendship in a reflection of the relationship between Elizabeth Eckford and Hazel Bryan Massery of the Little Rock Central High School.¹⁵ "Utility friends develop their relationship on the basis of agreement," Allen says.¹⁶ She defines political friendship as "not mainly . . . a sentiment of fellow-feeling for other citizens, it is more importantly a way of acting in respect to them: friendship, known to all, defines the normative aspirations."¹⁷ For Allen, political friendship is imperfect because it does not achieve virtue, but is educational in that it teaches ways to practice expressing respect for other people in society, even those they recognize as strangers. She states:

We have... found a new mode of citizenship in friendship understood as not an emotion but a practice. One can use its techniques even with strangers and even in the absence of emotional attachments, as in utilitarian friendships like business relations and most other relations among citizens. Political friendship consists finally of trying to be like friends. Its payoff is rarely intimate, or genuine, friendship, but it is often trustworthiness and, issuing from that, political trust. Its art, trust production, has long gone by the abused name of rhetoric. . .¹⁸

According to Allen, the essence of political friendship is not a closeness that comes with the real intimacy of emotion, but rather of equity through practice.¹⁹ The greatest challenge to achieving equity in society is "to convert rivalr[y] into equitable self-interest."²⁰ Compared to justice, which is the other method for dealing with social challenges, Allen states that "friendship goes beyond justice" because "only friends fully succeed at converting rivalry into equitability" through practicing "habits of reciprocity."²¹

How, then, does Allen's formulation of political friendship diagnose what we know of the relationship between Ivanka and Chelsea? The question in Allen's context becomes: were they utility friends? Chelsea broke her friendship with Ivanka due to political differences, indicating *a utility friendship* that ended after they were no longer useful to each other. Thinking about Allen's theoretical framework, the pair could have maintained a *political friendship*, which is another type of utility friendship, by practicing mutually respectful attitudes, and then gone a step further, in terms of friendship education, by modelling this political friendship in public. For Allen, nurturing social compromise is the educational aspect of political friendship, and as such, Chelsea and Ivanka arguably have missed an opportunity.

EDUCATIONAL FRIENDSHIP

Allen and Saito's theories each cast a different light on the issues involved in the Ivanka-Chelsea relationship in terms of educational friendship. Saito's argument would assess that the relationship between Chelsea and Ivanka was *not educational friendship* due to the absence of trust. However, Allen's argument would evaluate that both Ivanka and Chelsea *need educational friendship* because they need to build up the quality of trust to find the point of consent. While Saito presumes that *trust is a necessary criterion* for educational friendship, Allen assumes that *trust is the element to develop* throughout the duration of an educational friendship. In this context, Ivanka and Chelsea have two options: either to disclose what they really think about each other's political positions, and fight, or to find a way to become political friends without fighting.

As socially captivating figures, both bearing the title of First Daughter of the United States, it would be better educationally and socially for them to unite. A political friendship between the two would develop their skills of compromise and provide a model for a peaceful society. In this context, Saito's understanding of educational friendship could be a risk, especially given the contemporary social condition in which we see so many conflicts in society. In order to maintain a sense of friendship, the Emerson-Thoreau method would either divide everyone, or become the cause of fatal social conflicts, due to the absence of the quality of trust.

To summarize, even if Emersonian friendship is impossible for Ivanka and Chelsea, political friendship offers a way for them to re-connect with equality. In order to maintain their individual independence, effort would be required to sustain points of compromise, to ensure that political disagreements do not break the foundation of their relationship. Through this practice, they can (re)establish trust—but it requires the superb techniques of an acrobat.

ACROBATIC FRIENDSHIP

Like Chelsea and Ivanka, who represent politically opposite positions in society, in order to achieve political friendship in situations of severe political tension, people need to be acrobatic. It would be like dancing on tiptoes, achieving friendship while holding political disagreements and social consensus at the same time. Similar to ballet dancers, who wear point shoes to stand on their toes, it may be helpful for them to have some mediacy, which in the context of this paper takes the form of political friendship, or Acrobatic Friendship.

Allen and Saito share the assumption that educational friendship is nurtured by verbal communication. Saito emphasizes the importance of dialogue in Emersonian friendship by discussing the quality of conversation she engages in with her female student.²² Saito's concept of conversation among Emersonian friends consists of acceptance and inspiration, and conversation becomes educationally meaningful when words are used to break assumptions.²³ In *Talking to Strangers*, Allen also emphasizes the importance of verbal communication for friendship:

> If citizens keep in mind these guidelines for speaking and listening to their fellow citizens, they will import the expertise of ordinary friendship into the political realm, and political friendship will grow out of that. Political friendship thus generated sustains a democratic polis by helping citizens to accept decisions with which they may disagree, but friendship must be mutual.²⁴

By reformulating Aristotle's *Rhetoric* in the contemporary context, Allen proposes a policy of listening and speaking to establish political friendship in society.²⁵

Unlike Allen's and Saito's positive presumption on the relationship between verbal communication and friendship, contemporary American society rather shows the negative effects of verbal expression associated with both verbal and physical conflicts. Verbal expression nowadays often seems to be used for promoting, not friendship, but political conflict, social division, hate speech, and physical violence.²⁶ As discussed above, regardless of whether it is politically correct or incorrect, honest verbal expression in political contexts can work well as a friendship practice only if it happens within a context of trust. Outside of this, it can be fatal. When non-mincing words are spoken in the condition of mutual suspicion, those verbal expressions can even result in physical violence, which destroys friendships and creates enemies instead.

It may be that Allen's suggestions to raise the standards of speaking call for standards that are too high for the current social situation, and that contemporary social conflict is the result of having given up on holding space for compromise in public. If verbal communication negatively promotes the destruction of human relationships in society, it could explain why Chelsea simply took her distance from Ivanka, *unfriending* her without directly saying why. In order to meet the actual needs of the contemporary social situation, educational friendship has to be initiated on a much more foundational stage than that discussed by Allen or Saito. In other words, the initial stage would need to explore a way to turn the silence of a broken friendship from an unfriending strategy into an opportunity for an educational, Acrobatic Friendship. For that, we need to expand educational friendship to include non-verbal communication.

In order to move the discussion towards non-verbal, educational, Acrobatic Friendship, this paper recycles some of what Allen and Saito discarded. From Saito, Acrobatic Friendship reclaims the value of just spending time together, which, in her description, "may be harmless but unnecessary."²⁷ Due to a practice of apostate friendship, Saito judges time spent together as being outside of educational practice. However, it could be considered an educational practice under Acrobatic Friendship because this friendship requires both parties to spend time together without fighting, particularly those who are positioned politically as opposites. In this case, limiting verbal communication may offer a strategy to relieve tensions. Acrobatic Friendship also reclaims the value of "real intimacy" that Allen discarded.²⁸ It sounds impossible, because if people can have real intimacy with each other, they are no longer political enemies, rather they become family or Emersonian friends. How, then, can Acrobatic Friendship achieve real intimacy in the presence of political disagreements? Acrobatic Friendship requires real intimacy *only* at the moment and *only* in the space when and where people are secured from political tension, as trapeze artists *only fly* when they are performing in safe conditions. Acrobatic Friendship involves emotions, which develop through spending time together, but supports non-verbal methods of communication for those who have political disagreements.

How can such a politically-secure space be created, one that makes Acrobatic Friendship possible? Can all of these aspects really fit together? It is possible if it does not depend on a foundation of human centralism. In comparison to political friendship, which is driven by verbal communication, Acrobatic Friendship is less human-centric because it applies the medium of nature and the arts, allowing non-verbal communication to nurture friendship. Various friendship theorists actually address the wordless medium of friendship. For instance, Shuffelton reflects on a sunflower painting (not by Van Gogh, but by her friend) as a symbol of the friendship with her Polish student, Olaf, who took her English language class.²⁹ In another example, right after World War II, Admiral Arleigh Burke, an American Navy who hated the Japanese very much as an enemy, reflects on the beginning of an unexpected friendship with his Japanese hotel room maid when, without verbal exchange, a flower he had bought for himself was employed by the Japanese woman to pleasantly decorate his hotel room in Tokyo.³⁰ This latter example calls to mind "Friendship Through Flowers," the motto of Ikebana International, not only because Ikebana International was originally incubated in the same hotel where Burke stayed, but also because it shows the power of nature's beauty in dismantling political and language barriers between those who were, until only a couple of years ago, war enemies.³¹

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The examples of friendship mentioned above, between student and teacher, between low-status employee and high-status hotel guest, and between civilian and military associate, are actually more persuasive than the example of Ivanka and Chelsea's friendship in explaining the necessity of a medium for educational friendship that avoids extreme human centralism, and particularly relationships that hold not only political dissonance, but also the matter of "asymmetry", in which one has absolute power compared to the other.32 Allen posits a risk, that "The danger of pursuing something like friendship in political relationships is that one can fall into obsequiousness."33 Given that they share the same social status, asymmetry wouldn't be a serious issue between Chelsea and Ivanka. However, the classification between agreement and obsequiousness within political friendship is important in defending the sincerity for example of Olaf, the room clerk, and the flower artists. Ikebana International skillfully handles this issue. The institute allows participants to overcome sensitive ethical questions of asymmetrical power balances, and to avoid the risk of obsequiousness between military associates and civilians, by switching the power balances in and outside of the institute. Socially and politically, American military associates are more powerful than local Japanese civilians, a power balance reflected in the result of World War II, but at the Ikebana lessons, flower arrangement techniques are *taught* by local Japanese civilians. The *inconsistent* space created for flower arts allows locals and American military associates to be friends because the aesthetic space silences political disagreements and allows them simply to enjoy being together.

Another advantage of Ikebana International is the silent culture that it practices and supports among members. For instance, it is inappropriate for military spouses to complain publicly about psychological pressures caused by sending their beloved ones to the battlefields, especially in times of national emergency. Their personal feelings on such matters

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are instead silently shared with those who can read between lines. In a similar way, Ikebana International provides a space to share consolation with the beauty of flowers, where members share the sorrows and struggles attached to their daily lives without expressions of language in the space where they gather together to create individual flower arrangements. It is another kind of *inconsistency* that members know that they share personal feelings with each other nonverbally, never actualizing them in language. This is how Ikebana International has arranged friendship between its members, who have been placed in the middle of political dissonance.

Acrobatic Friendship, thus, is possible to achieve in a space of social paradox because the *inconsonance* actually functions to make a *politically gravity-free* space where people can gather together without conflicts. At the same time, Acrobatic Friendship is limited because it does not have a clear solution for solving the root of political tensions and may not be powerful enough to change the political power balance in society either. However, Acrobatic Friendship is an educational effort to rationally and emotionally maintain bonds among people that allow them to be constructive. It is educationally meaningful because it provides an apolitical space in society. In order to find a similar point in relation to power, an *a-powerful* space, in Acrobatic Friendship, communication facilitated by art and nature is more helpful than language in activating habits of reciprocity.

The proverb, "Amicus certus in re incerta cernitur" has two indications: first, that friends take your side when you are in crisis, and second, that uncertain conditions help you realize who your true friends are.³⁴ Acrobatic friendship takes the latter interpretation. When linguistic communication is not at the center of an interaction, we depend on simplified physical expressions to convey what we think and feel. Emerson describes in his essay, "Friendship," a friend with ". . . whom, though silently, we warmly rejoice to be with! Read the language of these wandering eye-beams. The heart knoweth."³⁵ It could be rather an advantage to establish friendships quietly, especially in contexts where society is deeply divided by linguistic expressions. In order to physically spend time together whilst holding space with serious conflicts, art and nature should be applied as mediators, to allow for a space of non-verbal compromise.

CONCLUSION

As First Daughters of the United States, Ivanka and Chelsea may share similar private feelings and experiences, but their foundational political disagreements are related to public matters. As such, within the formula of Acrobatic Friendship, their personal feelings associated with incidents beyond their control (such as the unavoidable public and political status imposed by their parents' political roles, and being two out of five living American daughters whose fathers were dishonorably impeached) would be expressed wordlessly, outside of language, by way of a mediated, apolitical space of educational friendship. This educational space should be non-verbally secured within the foundation of art and nature, to heal the break in their friendship caused by an excessively human-centric social and cultural context. They may still be far from achieving the political friendship that Allen expounds, but Acrobatic Friendship could be an initial step for them in reuniting as friends with trust, and as a basis for the future possibility of becoming Emersonian friends.

This paper has pursued the concept and possibility of Acrobatic Friendship, which is an independent but interdependent friendship, as well as the practice of nurturing trust in friendship without losing one's individual self, not in terms of political citizenship, but as a vulnerable, feeling human. Acrobatic Friendship holds Saito's belief that friendship is educational when it holds disagreement, as well as Allen's belief that friendship is educational because it can forge a path towards agreement. To this end, Acrobatic Friendship pursues the educational aspect of silence to pursue social agreement in the midst of political dissonance, because it allows people an apolitical escape from an overly human-centered discussion. The founder of Ikebana International reflects that, "it was 'Magic' or 'Miracle'... [that] Ikebana International was founded."³⁶ A housewife must have required acrobatic skills to establish the institute, which created a space for apolitical, international friendship among those who, to this day, retain clear memories of being each other's enemy. However, it is no longer suitable to call Ikebana International *magic*, because it has been sustained for over 60 years. The conclusion is that we all need to be acrobats in working towards a more peaceful society, and in developing new skills to make and maintain our friendships by applying both language communication and silence, selectively and respectively.³⁷

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2 Plato, *Lysis, or Friendship*, trans. Benjamin Jowett, http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/lysis. html.

3 Ikebana International, https://ikebanahq.org/.

4 Andy Cohen, "Does Chelsea Clinton Talk to Ivanka Trump?" *Watch What Happens Live with Andy Cohen*, October 2020, video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Z-Jn9PExLYI&feature=emb_logo; Scott Stump, "Chelsea Clinton Explains Why She and Ivanka Trump Are No Longer Friends," *Today*, October 2020,video, https://www.today.com/news/chelsea-clinton-why-she-ivanka-trump-are-no-longer-friends-t193148; and Jennifer Drysdale, "Chelsea Clinton on What Ended Her Friendship with Ivanka Trump," *ET*, October 2020, video, https://www.etonline.com/chelsea-clinton-on-what-ended-her-friendship-with-ivanka-trump-154054.

5 Cohen; Stump; Drysdale.

6 The founder of Ikebana International is Mrs. Ellen Gordon Allen, an American military spouse who accompanied her husband, Ret. Gen. Frank A. Allen to Tokyo after World War II. See Ellen Gordon Allen, "The Magic Carpet of Ikebana International," in *Ikebana International: Our Founders' Story and History of Chapter #1 "Friendship through Flowers,"* ed. Dayton H. Frost, (Washington, D.C.: 1976).

7 John M. Cooper, Reason and Emotion: Essays on Ancient Moral Psychology and Ethical Theory (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999); Amy Shuffelton, "On the Ethics of Teacher-Student Friendship" in Robert Kunzman, ed. *Philosophy of Education* 2011 (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 81-89, file:///D:/ PES21/readings/amyPESfriendship.pdf.

8 Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Friendship*, 1841, https://archive.vcu.edu/english/engweb/ transcendentalism/authors/emerson/essays/friendship.html.

9 Naoko Saito and Hiromi Kimura, America no Idainaru Tetsugakusha Emerson karano Dengon: DJibun wo Kaeru Toiukoto [Message from Ralph Waldo Emerson] (Tokyo: Gentosha, 2019), 140-179.

10 Stanley Cavell, *The Senses of Walden* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972),32.

11 Saito and Kimura, 164.

12 Saito and Kimura, 168 & 171.

13 Drysdale, "Chelsea Clinton," Chelsea states that they have not spoken each other since 2016.

14 Saito and Kimura, 177.

15 Danielle S. Allen, Talking to Strangers: Anxieties of Citizenship since Brown v. Board of

Education (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 119; David Margolick, Eliza-

beth and Hazel: Two Women of Little Rock (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012).

16 Allen, Talking to Strangers, 135.

17 Allen, 140.

18 Allen, 157.

19 Allen, 129 & 140.

20 Allen, 137.

21 Allen, 137 & 129.

22 Saito and Kimura, 141, 143.

23 Allen, 144-145.

24 Allen, 158.

25 Allen, 157-158.

26 For instance, Black Lives Matter Movements and the Capitol Hill incident on

January 6th, 2021 are both related to a violent and unsatisfied need for verbal expression.

27 Saito and Kimura, 142.

28 Allen, 129.

29 Shuffelton, 81.

30 Naoyuki Agawa, *Friendship Across the Seas: The US and the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force*, trans. Hiraku Yabuki (Tokyo: Japan Publishing Industry Foundation for Culture, 2019), 114 & 112-119.

31 The Imperial Hotel at that time was designed by Frank Lloyd Wright.

32 James Stillwaggon, "Friends with Beneficence: Asymmetry and Teacher Identity," in Robert Kunzman, ed. *Philosophy of Education* 2011 (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 90-92. file:///D:/PES21/readings/3257.pdf, 90.

33 Allen, 129.

34 Cicero, *Laelius de Amicitia [Friendship]*, 17:64. The proverb is introduced as a creation of Ennius, https://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Cicero/ Laelius_de_Amicitia/text*.html.

35 Emerson.

36 Ellen Gordon Allen, "The Magic Carpet."

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