

# Civic Friendship

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Civic or political friendship (*politikē philia*) is a bond of reciprocal good will between fellow citizens (*see* CITIZENSHIP) expressed through norms of civic behavior, such as mutual recognition of moral equality, mutual concern, and mutual defense and support. Theories of civic friendship are, at their heart, normative arguments about the proper nature of political unity – that is to say, arguments about how fellow citizens in general should regard and relate to one another in the public sphere.

The original and foremost theorist of civic friendship is Aristotle (*see* ARISTOTLE), who, in *Nicomachean Ethics*, argues that politically equal citizens (*see* EQUALITY) should wish their fellow citizens well and seek to do well by them for their own sakes, rather than exclusively pursuing self-interest or focusing on commitments to members of a particular faction, party, clan, or other group within a political community (Aristotle 1984). Aristotle's conception is championed by numerous contemporary political thinkers, among them Sibyl A. Schwarzenbach (2009), who argues that civic friendship is a necessary condition for true justice, and Hauke Brunkhorst (2005), who leverages civic friendship on behalf of a cosmopolitan theory of solidarity.

There is an important distinction to be made between civic friendship and a general idea of friendship (*see* FRIENDSHIP). Although bonds of civic friendship are, of course, human relationships, they are not intimate personal relationships. That is to say, citizens do not maintain intense and exclusive bonds with this individual and that individual. Indeed, it is debatable whether fellow citizens even need to know one another personally in order to maintain bonds of civic friendship (Aristotle 1984: 1826).

Contrasted with nationalism (*see* NATIONALISM AND PATRIOTISM), civic friendship does not require an especially high degree of loyalty or obedience to the state. Likewise, where nationalism would demand attachment and conformity to a specific national culture, civic friendship may join citizens within multicultural or transcultural networks. Indeed, civic friendship does not even presume a high level of uniformity of political opinion among citizens, although it does presume unanimity regarding basic values, including constitutional essentials (Aristotle 1984: 1845).

## Origins of Civic Friendship in Aristotle

According to Aristotle, citizens who wish their fellow citizens well and seek to do well by them will contribute to political unity and stability. As Aristotle writes, in *Politics*, “For friendship we believe to be the greatest good of states and what best preserves them against revolutions” (1984: 2003). At times, Aristotle places civic friendship ahead even of justice in guaranteeing political unity and stability, writing,

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in *Nicomachean Ethics*, “[W]hen men are friends, they have no need of justice, while when they are just they need friendship as well, and the truest form of justice is thought to be a friendly quality” (1984: 1825).

Aristotle identifies three different types of friendship, based, respectively, on utility, pleasure, and virtue. As he argues in *Nicomachean Ethics*, friendship based on virtue is the most perfect type, insofar as it aims at the pursuit of goodness or moral excellence for its own sake rather than merely the interests or pleasures of individuals. However, each kind of friendship is, in a sense, altruistic, since we are concerned with the welfare of our friends for their sake, not merely for our own (Aristotle 1984: 1826–9). In other words, the moral essence of friendship, wishing one’s friends well for their own sake, applies to all forms of friendship regardless of the reasons we have for entering into the relationship.

This view of civic friendship is connected to the Aristotelian argument that states are best governed by citizens who regard one another as equals and friends, ruling and being ruled by one another in turn, and fostering through their watchful eyes the virtue of their fellows (Aristotle 1984: 1834). In *Politics* Aristotle argues that the best political community, which he calls *timocracy*, is sustained only by the friendship of equals and similars, who possess genuine reciprocal good will (1984: 2057). For Aristotle, it would seem that the highest form of civic friendship can only emerge among “equals and similars,” for only among such men are envy, covetousness, faction, and enmity minimized, and reciprocal good will be maximized. Other forms of constitution, such as monarchy or aristocracy, may involve less ideal forms of civic friendships among inequals and dissimilars (1984: 1968).

Civic friendship, by definition, is nonexploitative although not necessarily altruistic, particularly among inequals. Aristotle acknowledges that people do not enter into utility friendships for the sake of doing a good for one’s friends but, rather, for the sake of receiving goods. Why, then, would superiors (e.g., wealthier) people ever enter into bonds of civic friendship with inferior (e.g., poorer) people? The answer, according to Aristotle, is that wealthier and poorer people benefit in different ways from the relationship:

[E]ach party is justified in his claim, and that each should get more out of the friendship than the other – not more of the same thing, however, but the superior more honor and the inferior more gain; for honor is the prize of excellence and beneficence, while gain is the assistance required by inferiority. (1984: 1838)

## Interpretive Issues

There are a great many interpretive issues arising from Aristotle’s often oblique and occasionally contradictory discussions of civic friendship; but beyond trying to parse, exactly, what Aristotle’s true opinions are, these interpretive issues animate a debate among readers of Aristotle concerning what the proper role of friendship in contemporary politics can and should be, as well as about the proper nature of political unity in the contemporary context.

John M. Cooper (1990) argues that Aristotle's conception of civic friendship is properly understood to be a variety of utility friendship, based on desire for mutual advantage, rather than a variety of friendship for mutual moral cultivation or for the sake of pleasure. However, he notes that all three types of friendship in Aristotle's scheme involve an element of benevolent mutuality or mutual and disinterested well-wishing. All three forms involve acting for the sake of one's friend: either for the sake of one's friend's pleasure, one's friend's advantage, or one's friend's moral condition. According to this view, in contemporary society, as in Aristotle's time, if fellow citizens are friends by virtue of their citizenship they are friends, mainly, for the sake of mutual advantage or utility. For it is for the sake of mutual advantage, i.e., survival and prosperity, that states come together in the first place.

The view that civic friendship is a variety of utility friendship, though common, is not universal. Alasdair MacIntyre argues that Aristotelian civic friendship is in fact a kind of virtue friendship. It is in part because he judges the civic friendship of Aristotle to be a variety of virtue friendship, rather than of utility friendship, that he concludes that civic friendship is impossible in the modern world.

According to MacIntyre, the modern state is "a collection of citizens of nowhere who have banded together for their common protection. They possess at best that inferior form of friendship which is founded on mutual advantage. That they lack the bond of friendship is of course bound up with the self-avowed moral pluralism of such liberal societies" (1984: 156). In modern society, friendship has been improperly relegated to private life, MacIntyre argues, because "we have no conception of such a form of community concerned, as Aristotle says the *polis* is concerned, with the whole of life, not with this or that good, but with man's good as such" (1984: 156).

In opposition to MacIntyre, Martha Nussbaum takes the position that while the bases of the different types of friendship (utility, pleasure, virtue) are different, the goal they seek to achieve (mutual benefit) is the same. As Nussbaum writes:

Pleasure, advantage, and good character are three different bases or original grounds of *philia*; they are not the goal or final (intentional) end of the relationship. In other words, the two people are friends 'through' or 'on the basis of' these, but the goal they try to achieve in action will still be some sort of mutual benefit. (1986: 355)

Most (but by no means all) interpreters of Aristotle share Nussbaum's view of civic friendship as a variety of utility friendship rather than of virtue or pleasure friendship. The textual evidence certainly favors her interpretation over that of MacIntyre. If, as Aristotle argues, "it is for the sake of advantage that the political community too seems to have come together originally and to endure" (1984: 1833), then it seems plausible likewise for the sake of advantage, in order to maintain a political community of a mutually beneficial character, that the bonds of civic friendship are cultivated. Aristotle makes this point explicitly in *Eudemian Ethics*: "Civic friendship has been established mainly in accordance with utility; for men seem to have come together because each is not sufficient for himself, though they would have come together anyhow for the sake of living in company" (1984: 1968).

From a normative perspective, separating civic friendship from a necessary connection with Aristotelian moral perfectionism, the life dedicated to virtue, is one way of reclaiming it for the modern world. Mutual advantage, in any case, is a purpose much more easily located in a modern political context and, particularly, in the politics of democratic pluralism. The privatization of friendship, which MacIntyre decries, may in fact provide and protect seedbeds of civic friendship among clubs, associations, voluntary organizations, and myriad other constructs of civil society.

## Debates and Controversies

Aside from interpretive matters, Aristotle's conception of civic friendship is not uncontroversial. It may serve as a plausible basis for the political life of a small, relatively homogeneous Greek city-state, but it is less credible as the basis for the political life of a complex modern society. Some scholars, for instance, observe that Aristotle's scheme excludes from the political community many marginalized groups with potentially differing interests, such as women, slaves, and persons of foreign descent.

Some neo-Aristotelian theorists, in contrast, continue to defend the relevance of the Aristotelian conception of civic friendship for contemporary democratic politics, blemishes and all. For example, although the role of women in the *polis* is minimized by Aristotle, Schwarzenbach argues that the value of *philia* in holding the state together suggests "that women have played a critical role in the *polis* even if they have not been officially recognized as part of it." Indeed, due to their important role of reproduction, "they have been *educated* to further the virtue of *philia* in the ideal case" (1996: 104).

Although mainly political thinkers with communitarian (*see* COMMUNITARIANISM) sympathies have embraced civic friendship, a few liberal thinkers also have attempted to reformulate the idea. For example, Bernard Yack places Aristotle in the center of a continuum of political unity leading from Rousseau (who imagines an intimate solidarity akin to brotherhood) and Hobbes (who advocates a purely contractual political bond) (*see* ROUSSEAU, JEAN-JACQUES; HOBBS, THOMAS). Yack characterizes civic friendship as a sense of "mutual concern . . . reinforced by the sense of friendship that should develop out of citizens' sharing in the practices of political justice" (1993: 125). In a political culture characterized by civic friendship, citizens might "develop dispositions to aid those with whom we engage in mutually advantageous interactions" (1993: 126). One could say that this "moderate" view of political unity finds citizens willing and able to sacrifice short-term self-interest for the long-term self-interest that the community as a whole shares.

Patrick Deneen argues that the ancients self-consciously sought to transform varieties of friendship that existed among families, tribes, and clans, which in their particularity might be destructive of the common good and public safety of an entire city, into "constructive civic friendships in order to secure political stability" (2001: 52). In doing so, they created a conception of civic friendship that is analogous to civic life and "inseparable from conceptions of the *polis* and democratic practice itself" (2001: 52). From this perspective, the significance of the conception of civic

friendship is that it works to create a certain kind of democratic politics – one that is characterized by a kind of political unity that constrains interests without denying or suppressing them.

## Other Views of Friendship and Politics

Although Aristotle is the most important theorist of civic friendship, he was not alone among the ancients in observing the political importance of friendship. Indeed, conceptions of friendship figure prominently in many classical theories of political community. However, these other conceptions represent relatively minor components of broader theories of politics, in contrast with Aristotle whose conception of civic friendship can be said to constitute the basis for an entire theory of civic life. These theories are also less formally elaborated than that of Aristotle, and may even be characterized as commonplaces.

For instance, in the *Symposium*, Plato's Pausanias claims that the powerful bond of friendship between Harmodius and Aristogeiton (who were lovers) brought down the despotic reign of the Pisistratidae and established *isonomia* (equality under the laws) in Athens (*see* PLATO). For this reason, Pausanias suggests, it is usually in the interests of despotic rulers to discourage strong friendships between citizens (Plato 1961: 536). Plato also argues in the *Republic* that a tyrant can have no true friends, only lackeys and servants, as well as enemies, since he is set apart from his fellows by inequality, distrust, and fear (1961: 802). Both of these themes are common among ancient thinkers.

Although Aristotle contends that general bonds of civic friendship will protect the state from revolution and upheavals, this bit of wisdom is not shared by Cicero, who pessimistically opines that friends also may aid one another in political intrigues and conspiracies. Cicero writes in *De Amicitia*:

Association with depraved men for such an end is not, then, to be shielded by the plea of friendship, but rather to be avenged by punishment of the utmost severity, so that no one may ever think himself authorized to follow a friend to the extent of making war upon his country. (1884: 35)

The modern period marks a transition, of sorts, between a view of civic friendship that closely adheres to the life of the city and a view that is national or even transnational in scope. Montaigne (*see* MONTAIGNE, MICHEL DE) parts company with premodern thinking when he offers a view of friendship that ascends beyond the domain of the *polis*, making friendship an abstraction independent from direct human relationships. Montaigne writes in "Of Vanity": "I consider all men my compatriots, and embrace a Pole as I do a Frenchman, setting this national bond after the universal and common one. I am scarcely infatuated with the sweetness of my native air" (1957: 743). This view is quite universalistic, attached to all of humanity, and serves as a precursor to the French revolutionary concept of fraternity (Brunkhorst 2005: 12–13).

However, Montaigne also famously privatizes friendship, setting the private sphere, potentially, at odds with the public sphere. In “Of Friendship” Montaigne declares: “In the friendship I speak of, our souls mingle and blend with each other so completely that they efface the seam that joined them, and cannot find it again” (1957: 139). Attached to the person of Étienne de la Boétie, this view of true friendship is so romantic and intimate that the independent self seems to dissolve within it.

Rousseau draws from both forms of friendship found in Montaigne, linking the intense intimacy of true personal friendship to national citizenship, creating a view of fraternity that is both more abstract and less humanistic than anything that Montaigne would have been likely to accept. Something like this idea of fraternity was embraced by the Jacobins during the French Revolution, who induced soldiers and citizens alike to pledge oaths to the nation and to one another; eventually, it was popularized in the revolutionary motto: liberty, equality, fraternity (Martin 2011: 22). The revolutionary idea of fraternity can be viewed as an extreme version of civic friendship, one that promotes a deeper and more self-sacrificial political unity than even Aristotle would have been comfortable with.

Since the French Revolution, some liberal thinkers have ruminated on the significance of the bonds of civic friendship, observing that if such bonds do not develop, fellow citizens can gradually become strangers or even enemies, increasingly fearful, frustrated, and narrowly self-interested. In a society such as this, even the modest instrumental purposes of liberal citizenship – personal freedom, basic social justice, and civil peace – could be jeopardized. Benjamin Constant recognized this problem and, in his famous address on the liberty of the ancients and the moderns, argued that modern citizens, preoccupied with private interests and pleasures, could become estranged from politics and consequently never develop the sense of solidarity and civic responsibility needed to preserve their shared civil liberty. Even so, Constant continued, if people could be induced to participate in politics, if only fitfully and episodically, they might come to see themselves as citizens with responsibilities, while at the same time recognizing their countrymen as individuals with rights. Although individuals would not necessarily practice citizenship *because* they believe it to be noble or good, the practice of citizenship might, nonetheless, prove to be both noble and good, ultimately producing “a pure, deep, and sincere patriotism” out of an original commitment to personal freedom (Constant 1988: 327).

**See also:** ARISTOTLE; CITIZENSHIP; COMMUNITARIANISM; EQUALITY; FRIENDSHIP; HOBBS, THOMAS; MONTAIGNE, MICHEL DE; NATIONALISM AND PATRIOTISM; PLATO; ROUSSEAU, JEAN-JACQUES

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