

# Virtuous Civic Friendships: An Alternative Interpretation of Aristotle's Theory of Political Friendship

**Kiley Komro**

University of Minnesota-Twin Cities

In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle identifies three categories of friendship: friendships of utility, pleasure, and virtue. He further argues that friendships are a necessary part of the *eudaimon* life for people (1155a) as well as a relevant aspect of a successful and unified polity, for they serve the legislators' goal to "expel civil conflict" and promote justice (1155a25). The question arises as to what type of friendship best characterizes such 'civic friendship.' Many scholars, including Sibyl Schwarzenbach in her paper "On Civic Friendships," take Aristotle to argue that political friendships are friendships of utility (105). However, I will argue that a more appropriate interpretation of Aristotle's work indicates that political friendship is actually a virtue friendship. Since Aristotle clearly considers cultivating virtue to be a significant part of a legislator's role in a *polis*, I will argue that it clearly follows that legislators must not only tend to concord and justice between the citizens, but also, to foster the best sort of friendship between citizens. Lastly, I will consider certain aspects of the United States current political climate to show the danger of deflating civic friendship to a relationship grounded solely on utility.

## **I. Schwarzenbach's View of Civic Friendship as Utility Friendship**

Schwarzenbach, in her paper "On Civic Friendship," argues that modern political thought seems to have abandoned Aristotle's premise that a thriving political society is characterized by friendship between citizens among themselves and between leaders and their populace. She states that "a plethora of views on the problem of political unity... barely mention friendship or else explicitly reject it as

a serious contender.” Schwarzenbach hopes to counteract this development by arguing that “political friendship emerges as a necessary condition for genuine justice” and a unified “modern state” (98).

Schwarzenbach begins her argument by offering an interpretation of Aristotle’s theory of friendship. She argues that all types of friendship, including “both pleasure and [utility] friendships for Aristotle necessarily retain the aspect of wishing the other well for that other’s own sake” (100). She further argues that even friendships where “one loves the other friend under some particular and limited description only,” such as advantage or utility friendship, the object of the friends’ love is the other person (100). However, if this is the case, she still must offer a description to save Aristotle’s distinction between utility, pleasure, and virtue friendships. She accomplishes this by arguing that “what in fact distinguishes virtue friendship from the other two kinds is, rather, that the description under which one loves the other is a description of that other’s whole (or near whole) character” (100).

All of Schwarzenbach’s analyses are directed at justifying an expansive reading of advantage or utility friendships so that her underlying assumption that civic friendships are of that type becomes more palatable. Her overall goal is to argue that the political unity necessary to reclaim our overly partisan modern state can be achieved through a “political friendship, that is, the traits of mutual awareness, of wishing the other well for their own sake, and of doing things for the civic friend are still retained... [and] evidenced in a *general concern*” (105). However, I argue that her interpretation of Aristotle’s theory of the three types of friendship and her categorization of civic friendship is not strongly supported by the text. Instead, her claims that civic friendship is characterized by mutual valuing of other citizens for themselves would be better supported by an interpretation of Aristotle that places civic friendship in the category of virtue friendships.

## II. Virtue Friendships

Like Schwarzenbach, I think that political unity is best served by relationships between citizens founded on an appreciation of each other’s value as a person and a desire that each citizen receive the good things in life. However, upon my

analysis of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, I find substantive evidence that somewhat contradicts Schwarzenbach's claim that the quality of 'valuing the friend for themselves' is to be found in all types of friendships. Beginning with his classification of the types of friendships, Aristotle states that the types of love are distinguished by "the three objects of love. For each object of love has a corresponding type of mutual loving" (1156a7). I take this to mean that utility friendships are those in which the object of love is not the person themselves, nor the description under which the person themselves is loved as Schwarzenbach interpreted. Instead, the object of love is that aspect of the person that the friend finds useful, or perhaps even the services the friend provides. Furthermore, in utility friendships the friends do not wish goods on the other for their own sake, rather "those who love each other wish goods to each other [only] insofar as they love each other. Those who love each other for utility love the other not in his own right, but insofar as they gain some good for themselves from him" (1156a10). Aristotle writes further that "those who love for utility or pleasure, then, are fond of a friend because of what is good or pleasant for themselves, not insofar as the beloved is who he is, but insofar as he is useful or pleasant" (1156a15). Thus, we must search for another explanation for how civic friendships contain the qualities of valuing the friend for themselves and their characters, and wish goods for their friend's own sake as both Schwarzenbach and I believe they do.

Now that we can set aside utility and pleasure friendships as contenders for the categorization of civic friendships, I will turn to the remaining type: virtue or character friendships. Aristotle argues that virtue friendships have three main features: they are between equals (1157b37, 1158b), each friend values the other for themselves and their whole character (1157b2), and each friend wants good things for the other, for the other's sake (1155b28). He considers these types of friendships the most complete and friendship-like friendship there is. The other types of friendships are sometimes said to merely "[bear] some resemblance to this complete sort" (1157a). There is one additional qualification of these friendships: "complete friendship is the friendship of good people similar in virtue....Hence these people's friendship lasts as long as they are good; and virtue is enduring" (1156b7).

Virtue friendships are overall the best friendships,

according to Aristotle. Such friends value the other for themselves and their characters. As such, they are willing to do the work necessary to preserve and maintain their friend's virtues (11596). Altogether, it seems that virtue friendships serve the goals of Schwarzenbach's civic friendships more clearly in the text. However, it remains to be seen whether Aristotle would see it that way. In my next section, I will advance my argument that Aristotle too would have categorized civic friendships as virtue friendships, or at the very least, more like virtue friendships than utility friendships.

### III. Virtuous Civic Friendships and Concord

It is clear throughout the sections on friendship in the *Nicomachean Ethics* that Aristotle sees friendship as an integral part of a successful political society. He states that "friendship would seem to hold cities together, and legislators would seem to be more concerned about it than about justice" because good friends won't need justice and regulations from political leaders in order to do right by their fellow citizens (1155a25). Though it is clear Aristotle believes in a sort of civic friendship, he does not state clearly how to classify it according to his three kinds of friendship or whether it forms an independent type of friendship altogether. However, in considering his description of concord, I argue that virtue friendship would best characterize civic friendship.

Aristotle states that "concord would seem to be similar to friendship" (1155a25). Indeed, he goes farther by arguing that "a city is said to be in concord when [its citizens] agree on what is advantageous, make the same decision, and act on their common resolution" (1167a25). Furthermore, "concord, then, is apparently [civic] friendship... for it is concerned with advantage and with what affects life [as a whole]" (1167b, brackets in original). At first glance, this statement would seem to indicate that concord, and the friendship it implies, is a relationship based on mutual utility. I argue that this interpretation is incorrect for in the next breath, Aristotle claims that "concord is found in decent people.... They wish for what is just and advantageous, and also seek it in common" (1167b5) and that "base people, however, cannot be in concord" (1167b10). Therefore, base people, or unvirtuous people, cannot develop civic friendships. From these, it seems quite clear that concord, or civic friendships, must be a sort of virtue friendship. I think perhaps the source of confusion

is inappropriately conflating 'advantage' with 'utility'. In the context of the above passage, the advantage that is discussed is not for some immediate good for an individual such as would be served by utility. Rather, it deals with an advantage that is held in common, shared between the various citizens. Additionally, the advantage mentioned is that which "affects life [as a whole]" (1167b, brackets in original) which more appropriately refers to the advantages of a whole life well lived with virtue.

Additional evidence for my argument that civic friendships are virtue friendships can be found earlier in the text. To clarify the statement that civic friendships are founded on advantage, I'll briefly discuss the type of advantage specific to civic society. In a political community, Aristotle writes that citizens and legislators "aim not at some advantage close at hand, but at advantage for the whole of life" (1160a20). Advantage for the whole life, I would argue could roughly correspond to the good. The good, as we know from the rest of *Nicomachean Ethics*, is achieved through a whole long life (1100a7) of activity in accordance with virtue (1099a15) accompanied by sufficient external goods (1099a30) and friends (1170b17).

Furthermore, cultivating virtues within their citizens seems to be part of the excellence of the legislator. Aristotle wrote "it is finer and more divine to acquire and preserve [the good] for... people and for cities" (1094b10), and "the goal of political science [is] the best good; and most of its attention is devoted to the character of the citizens, to make them good people who do fine actions" (1099b30). Clearly, there is a relationship between legislators' goals to promote concord, chase away enmity between citizens, and develop their virtue. With legislators necessarily preoccupied with habituating good character, it seems right that the friendships that develop between such citizens would recognize the value of their counterparts as tied up with their virtue. I see a strong connection with the legislators' responsibility to tend to the virtues of the citizens and their other roles around producing advantageous conditions for people's whole lives and their goal of producing concord. Each of these goals feed into one another. Thus, it seems quite fitting to categorize the relationships between citizens on a horizontal axis, and between citizens and their legislators on a vertical axis, as

virtue friendships.

#### **IV. Legislators' Responsibility for Civic Virtue and Concord: Worries About American Politics**

Considering politics today, it is quite obvious that people care about the ethical characters of their fellow citizens. Citizens worry about the questionably moral choices of their elected officials—vote trading, bailouts to big corporations over small businesses, and campaigns marked by big-spender schmoozing. On top of these activities between legislators, newspaper opinion columns are replete with editorials lamenting the rise of rancorous partisanship, especially in the wake of the 2016 and 2020 elections. It seems quite obvious that the United States has lost even the semblance of civic unity or agreement over what is advantageous for the nation as a whole. I argue that this situation may stem, at least in part, from an abdication of responsibility by our leaders to “aim at concord among all, while they try above all to expel civil conflict, which is enmity” (1155a25). While citizens seem to care increasingly about their fellow citizens' moral character, legislators seem to have set aside any hope of developing any kind of relationship among citizens marked by mutual valuing of another for themselves.

Congress has done little to catalyze an appreciation among citizens of their common good and common goals. Not only have they failed to address the rising partisanship among the populace, they seem to fuel it with rhetoric saturated with political rage and revolving around stimulating contempt and partisan enmity. Some elected officials, like retiring senator Tom Udall, have raised concerns about “a culture [that] valued partisanship over the country's best interests” (Broadwater). I think that many of us are tired of the discord and contempt that marks our political relationships. I believe that one possible solution to these attitudes is a shift from thinking of our fellow citizens as means to our individual advantage to an appreciation of them as people who are valuable in and of themselves.

In most modern liberal democracies and republics, there is an underlying doctrine of viewpoint neutrality—that a precondition for living together in a diverse nation is in part contingent on one's fellow citizens minding their own business on certain (sometimes moral, especially religious) matters. I am not convinced that such neutrality is inconsistent with

forming character friendships between citizens. However, that would be a subject for further questioning. Altogether, if politicians and ordinary people could begin to cultivate relationships even at the local or community level founded on desiring the good things in life for their neighbors because they are good neighbors, a new culture of unity could arise.

### References

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