



THE  
JUBILEE CENTRE  
FOR CHARACTER & VIRTUES

Insight Series

## *Civic Friendship*

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## 1. The Importance of Civic Friendship

There is a widespread perception that in many countries of the world today there has been an erosion of the norms of public life that sustain democracy and cooperation. Norms of goodwill, trust, civility, forbearance, honesty, willingness to listen, reasonableness in evaluating people's statements and evidence, and concern for the common good are flaunted. As this progresses, members of different political parties and social groups come to be regarded as enemies to be vanquished by any means and whatever the cost, rather than as fellow citizens with equal rights and legitimate perspectives on the public interest. These conditions of factional conflict are often inflamed by demagogues at the expense of democratic constitutional norms. This has occurred in Europe and the Americas since the 2008 financial collapse and as migration of displaced populations has grown, but these phenomena were already systematically documented in the constitutional histories compiled by Aristotle and his school in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE. Aristotle's motivation in founding political science was to understand the role of virtues in societal flourishing, and he concluded that civic friendship (*politikê philia*) and education that promotes it are what best unify a society and protect it from painful and destabilizing factionalism.

Aristotle devoted a remarkable proportion of his ethical and political writings to the topic of friendship, and the influence of his ideas in recent ethical thought has made these writings the primary point of departure for current discussions of civic friendship. He wrote that 'goodwill when it is reciprocal' and mutually recognized is friendship (*philia*), and that friendship is 'the greatest good of states and what best preserves them against revolutions'.<sup>1</sup> Civic friendship unifies a society by sustaining goodwill between its many and diverse members. It also supports honest communication, trust, shared governance, belief in a common good and the possibility of impartial justice, and cooperation in achieving shared goals. It prevents a society from dissolving into warring factions. As Aristotle depicts the unification of a society through civic friendship, it requires that each individual have some civically significant friendships that connect them in friendly ways to diverse others. The civic well-being of a society requires that most if not all of its members have a limited number of these substantial 'civic friendships' and that individuals acquire through these friendships an aspect of civic virtue that could be called civic friendliness or a disposition to

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<sup>1</sup> Barnes, 1984, pp. 1826, 2003 (*NE* VIII.2 1155b33-35; *Pol.* II.4 1262b7-8).

exhibit goodwill toward all the diverse members of the society.<sup>2</sup> When the term *civic friendship* is used to refer to a civic virtue or aspect of civic virtue, it refers to this disposition. What is important to civic friendship unifying a society is how members of the society speak of one another, whether they exhibit friendliness and goodwill when they encounter each other, and whether they exhibit a willingness to act for each other's good in the choices they make and policies they support.

Commentators on Aristotle's works have found it challenging to piece together a consistent understanding of his views on the relationships between justice and friendship and on the relationships between close friendships, civic friendship, and bonds of reciprocal goodwill that unify an entire society. A common observation regarding justice and friendship is that friendship seems to make justice superfluous, so that justice is apparently only necessary in the absence of friendship. This has led to some confusion over the relationship between Aristotle's ideals of civic justice and civic friendship. A major sticking point with regard to the relationships between different kinds of friendship is the question of what the basis of civic friendship is supposed to be. The truest, best, or most complete form of friendship is one based primarily on mutual appreciation of good character, according to Aristotle, but commentators often suggest this cannot be the basis of civic friendship. Friendships may also be based on shared pleasures or friends' usefulness, he argues, but he takes valuing people for themselves to be essential to true friendship, and he seems to equate valuing a person as such with valuing the person's character.

Aristotle says more than once that participants in every community of any kind are friends "to the extent to which justice exists between them".<sup>3</sup> The implication of this is that people enact forms of mutual respect and willingness to act for each other's good to the extent that they deal with each other in ways that are just and mutually recognized as just. Justice requires mutual respect and regard for well-being, so Aristotle's conditions for friendship would be fulfilled when there is justice between two people. Such 'friendships' could be as fleeting as a single commercial transaction, but Aristotle's understanding of a just constitutional system is that requirements of mutual respect and goodwill would permeate the society and shape character. A just constitution is devoted to the common good and its laws establish norms of mutual respect that are favourable to the acquisition of virtues of mutual

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<sup>2</sup> Curren & Dorn, 2018.

<sup>3</sup> Barnes, 1984, p. 1833 (*NE VIII.9 1159b25-31*).

valuing and willingness to act for each other's good. Justice would thus establish a setting in which dispositions of civic friendship could take root.

What ideally takes root even in commercial transactions is not simply a mutual recognition of utility, moreover. In the *Eudemian Ethics* Aristotle offers the empirical generalization that 'civic friendship has been established mainly in accordance with utility', but he quickly adds that people 'would have come together anyhow for the sake of living in company'.<sup>4</sup> This is compatible with his recognition in the *Politics* of a three-fold sense in which human beings are naturally *politikon zôon* or creatures for whom it is natural to live in a city (*polis*) or as part of an organized society: people need (find it *useful*) to be part of a larger society in order to flourish, they are drawn together by the *pleasure* of living together, and their powers of speech enable them to know what is good and just and cooperate in living well (valuing good *character* and contributing to each other's flourishing). Moreover, he explicitly regards societies as not merely economic or military alliances, but as properly concerned with the goodness of their members. We need to like or think well of the members of the groups to which we belong, taking pride in their accomplishments and feeling shame in their failings. These considerations point to the conclusion that Aristotle's ideal basis of civic friendship is not just the *pleasures* of social life and *usefulness* of cooperation but mutual liking or *appreciating the goodness in one another*. This would make civic friendship ideally a form of character friendship, in Aristotle's terms.

If a disposition to civic friendship is a civic virtue then it is surely this openness to seeing the goodness in diverse members of one's society that it is most directly an antidote to the incivility, distrust, and mutual vilification that so often pervade public life. Being open to seeing and appreciating the goodness in one another is civically important. So too is listening to one another, trusting that people very different from ourselves may have legitimate perspectives and interests we have failed to consider. If civic friendliness is openness to seeing the goodness in diverse members of one's society and acting for their good, it is also an important foundation for the public conversations and deliberation essential to a healthy democracy.

Aristotle's view of the origins of the wide civic friendliness that can unify a society is that it begins in a small number of substantial friendships that are civically important. His conception of how these initial 'civic friendships' with 'kinsmen, comrades, [and] partners'

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<sup>4</sup> Barnes, 1984, p. 1968 (*EE* VII.10 1242a6-9).

can lead to a generalized disposition of friendliness toward all members of one's society is that it would involve forming some of these relationships in settings such as schools and clubs that bring different kinds of people together.<sup>5</sup> In these settings people may become friends with people who are in some ways different from themselves, and those relationships would put a friendly face on kinds of people who might otherwise seem alien, strange, and threatening. This kind of transmission of friendliness was predictable from Aristotle's perspective, because we tend to like our friends' friends, 'those who are like ourselves in character' and 'those who desire the same things as we desire'.<sup>6</sup> If these are psychological facts, then the more venues there are in which different kinds of people interact in ways favorable to friendship, the more the society will tend to be unified by civic friendliness and the less likely it is to become civically and politically polarized and uncivil.

From the standpoint of contemporary political sociology, the conditions that lead to civic polarization are complex, but they typically do involve patterns of separation that align across many spheres and thereby inhibit different kinds of people from interacting with each other. These include residential, geographic, occupational, educational, religious, recreational, cultural, and other spheres. An important question confronting many societies today is how they can overcome the separation across all these spheres to promote civic friendship. Although many innovations are conceivable, we will focus our attention on what schools can do. Before considering some ways in which civic friendliness can be fostered, we will first consider the accuracy of Aristotle's observations about the transmission of friendliness in light of contemporary psychology.

Although Aristotle was pessimistic about children's capacity for real friendship, there is evidence that children do form peer relationships based on mutual valuing. They also have early-emerging prosocial tendencies and moral concerns for others' welfare, and it is not unreasonable to think that it is possible for them to form dispositions of civic friendship. However, in present conditions, young children may be especially at risk of adopting hostile attitudes towards members of other groups, due to the rapid acquisition of group identities and inter-group attitudes in early childhood and the impact of social environmental messages on children's thinking. This is particularly problematic because negative inter-group attitudes formed early in life are difficult to change in adulthood. Existing research indicates that

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<sup>5</sup> Barnes, 1984, p. 1968 (EE VII.10 1242a6-9). For textual and interpretive details, see Curren, 2000, pp. 129-139.

<sup>6</sup> Barnes, 1984, pp. 2200, 2201 (*Rh.* II.4 1381a15-20; 1381b15 and 17-18).

children are capable of tolerant, fair, and empathic behavior, but this does not guarantee they will value, like, trust, or work together with peers who are different from themselves.

## 2. Psychological Perspectives on the Origins of Civic Friendship

In evaluating Aristotle's observations about the transmission of friendliness and how civic friendship (a virtuous disposition of civic friendliness) might develop, it is useful to consider psychological theory and research on identity and group membership (Social Identity Theory), inter-group contact (Inter-Group Contact Theory), moral development (Social Domain Theory), and motivation (Self-Determination Theory). These relevant bodies of theory and research offer support for a broadly Aristotelian view of how civic friendship can be promoted. In the interest of furthering research on civic friendship and evaluating interventions, it is also useful to consider how a virtue of civic friendship could be measured. A preview of what follows is that we believe that: Young children are capable of civic friendship. The multi-faceted group identities of children may limit civic friendship. Given what is currently known about reducing prejudice in development, some forms of inter-group contact show promise in promoting civic friendship across a variety of identity group divides. Relying on existing measures, civic friendship can be assessed or operationalized in terms of care, cooperation, fairness, and trust.

*Social Identity Theory (SIT)*. Membership in groups plays an important role in the development of the self and virtue. Research drawing on SIT has shown that identifying with social groups, from small peer groups to broader societal groups like gender or ethnicity, is a normal aspect of development. A preference for members of one's own social group is a common early-emerging consequence of group identity. Under certain conditions, such in-group preferences can develop into dislike, hostility, or outright discrimination directed at out-group members. Among the conditions that promote inter-group negativity are perceived threat or competition, salient status differences between groups, and the perception that one's in-group condones hostility. From an early age children are highly attuned to their own group membership and the group memberships of their peers, and children's inter-group attitudes affect a wide range of their decisions in everyday social situations.

*Inter-Group Contact Theory (ICT)*. Environments that condone hostility across group lines undermine civic friendship. By contrast, it has long been thought that institutions that

bring diverse people together as equals can promote it. Aristotle identified intermarriage, brotherhoods, common religious rites, festivals, common meals, and common day schools as such institutions, believing that the promotion of friendly contact in these settings would cultivate dispositions of goodwill reaching across the whole society, through networks of overlapping group membership. Empirical work drawing on ICT largely supports these predictions. From a developmental perspective, bringing children from different social groups together as equal status participants in collaborative activities, with the support of authority figures like teachers, can facilitate the formation of inter-group friendships. Inter-group friendships, in turn, protect against the development of prejudice by reducing children's anxiety about cross-group interactions, increasing empathy across group lines, and promoting respectful behavior. In fact, recent studies point to the importance of inter-group contact for promoting children's consideration of fairness and others' welfare from as early as the kindergarten years.

*Social Domain Theory (SocialDT).* Why are children (and adults) so susceptible to social environmental messages about inter-group relations, and how can differences between people, like ethnicity, religion, occupation, or socioeconomic status have such strong implications for the way we treat others? Research in moral development suggests that, from an early age, children care about fairness and others' welfare, but do not always act on their beliefs when other social pressures are salient. Specifically, research in SocialDT has documented that children evaluate and reason about social events and interactions using three primary domains of knowledge: the moral, social, and psychological. The moral domain refers to prescriptive rules about how individuals ought to treat each other with respect to justice, rights, and others' welfare. The societal domain includes conventions, customs, and traditions designed to promote the smooth functioning of social groups. The psychological domain pertains to matters of personal choice, autonomy, and individual prerogative.

Research in SocialDT has provided evidence that children exhibit moral concern for fairness and equality from as early as the preschool years. Challenges arise, however, because many social events and interactions are multifaceted and require children to weigh and balance different, and sometimes competing, moral, societal, and psychological considerations. Recent formulations of this theory argue that the conditions that SIT has shown to promote prejudice and ICT has shown to exacerbate inter-group tensions also lead children to prioritize conventional concerns like status, hierarchy, or exclusive norms over what is morally just.

*Self-Determination Theory (Self-DT)*. How, then, might children come to think, feel, and act in a ways that exemplify civic friendship in times of inter-group tension? One approach is to focus on the central role of motivation in virtue. Self-DT is a framework for understanding motivation and its relationships to basic psychological needs, well-being, social contexts, and the role of integrative processes in the formation of a cognitively, motivationally, and emotionally coherent self. Self-DT is comprised of several sub-theories. Basic Psychological Needs Theory (BPNT) suggests that well-being requires the fulfilment of three psychological needs: relatedness, competence, and autonomy. Organismic Integration Theory (OIT) defines a continuum of internalization of values, goals, and aspirations, with four levels from least to most autonomous. At the autonomous end of the scale are *identified motivation* (acting from values one identifies with or accepts as one's own), and *integrated motivation* (acting from identified motives that one has integrated into a coherent self-system).

Self-DT holds that psychological need satisfaction is the result of successful fulfilment of basic human potentialities, and that the satisfaction of these needs plays a central role in the degree to which values, goals, and aspirations are integrated in a person's identity. The degree to which social contexts of character formation are need-supportive is therefore crucial to the emergence of genuinely virtuous motivation, which can be psychologically characterized as a state of integrated motivation that is appropriately responsive to the value of what is at stake in the world in which one acts. Self-DT provides insight into how just communities can support and shape the self-integrative processes through which virtuous states of character develop.

A comprehensive understanding of the formation of civic virtue, and civic friendship in particular, would need to bring together the perspectives of these four bodies of theory and research. SocialDT and Self-DT offer insight into cognitive and motivational aspects of civic virtue and how children come to exhibit the attributes of civic friendship. At the same time, polarized group identities may undermine the development of civic friendship, while the right forms of inter-group contact may promote it. Self-DT predicts that people will be happier when their social world is harmonious and everyone in it is treated fairly. Yet, SIT research has shown that group identities can generate prejudice, even in young children. Understanding how social contexts, including the character and extent of inter-group contact (ICT), influence the expression of goodwill and trust toward members of other groups is important to promoting civic friendship.

Can a virtue of civic friendship be measured? Civic friendship is a multifaceted disposition to like and be willing to act for the good of diverse members of one's society, so assessing it requires the use of a variety of cognitive, emotional, and behavioural measures. Given this multifaceted nature, we believe it can be assessed or operationalized in terms of care, cooperation, fairness, and trust. The capacity for all of these is present in early childhood.

Care can be assessed using measures of helping, sharing, and comforting. Young children are able to help peers achieve goals like cleaning up toys, share items like snacks, and comfort those in distress through the provision of items (e.g., a stuffed animal) or kind words. Cooperation can be assessed using measures of joint play and creative efforts. The ability to initiate and sustain cooperative play is a hallmark of early social development; young children readily construct elaborate scenarios involving coordination and problem solving in cooperation with peers. Fairness can be assessed using measures of protection from harm and unequal treatment. From as early as three years of age children defend others' rights to be free from physical harm (e.g., hitting) and psychological harm (e.g., teasing), and to be included equally in play and learning activities. Trust can be assessed using measures of selective belief in testimony. From early childhood onward, children are careful consumers of information, distinguishing between possible informants on the basis of factors as diverse as past accuracy, consensus, and shared cultural group membership. Cognitive and emotional measures can also be used to assess children's motivation for their behaviour. If children are virtuously motivated, it should be evident in their positive emotions following relevant decisions, interactions, or events, and in their moral reasoning about the value of others.

### 3. Fostering Civic Friendship in an Age of Polarization

In order to foster civic friendship, schools and other spheres of social interaction must be free of negative influence in the messages they send about members of diverse groups and in the terms on which the members of various groups are able to interact. A long tradition of philosophical understanding of civic education supported by Inter-Group Contact Theory holds that *just school communities* in which students collaborate as equals can be effective in fostering attributes of civic friendship.

Lawrence Kohlberg experimented with a distinctive conception of a just school community involving democratic processes through which students created and enforced rules consistent with norms of mutual care, trust, and collective responsibility. It was thereby a community of equals who collaborated in ways that would favour knowing and valuing each other. In time, the model came to be defined more as a moral community of equals and less in terms of democratic structures. We would add that in order to foster the virtue of civic friendship a just school community must be equally welcoming to diverse students and equitably committed to their success. It must treat them as equals in the school culture, opportunities provided, and in the administration of discipline and punishment. Care should be taken to ensure that negative stereotypes do not engender stigmatizing patterns of exclusionary punishments that mark a group of students as too wilfully bad or dangerous to remain within the school community.

Creating school communities that are welcoming, collaborative, and fair to all students can provide settings in which inter-group contact can facilitate civic friendship. When direct intergroup contact is not possible, and even when it is, extended or indirect intergroup contact can also be beneficial. When social groups have few opportunities to interact directly (as in the case of geographically distant groups), extended or indirect contact, in which children learn about in-group members who have positive relationships with outgroup members, can be especially effective at meeting the conditions predicted by ICT to improve inter-group attitudes. For young children in particular, reading and discussing books about in-group peers with out-group friends has been shown to reduce biases towards ethnic outgroups, recent immigrant groups, and peers with disabilities. When used as a precursor to direct inter-group contact, such interventions reduce not only bias but also the unease or apprehension that children may experience in meeting different kinds of peers for the first time. The benefits of direct contact can in this way be enhanced.

When 'common' schools for diverse students cannot be created there may also be fruitful ways to create remote or occasional intergroup contact of the right kind. An updated version of 'pen pal' programs could be adapted to bridge the chasms of friendliness between members of different social and geographic groups. Teams of students could be brought together through teleconferencing and other means to collaboratively research challenges in their respective communities and develop and promote proposals to address them. The value of the U.K.'s National Citizen Service as a vehicle for promoting civic friendship could be enhanced through targeted expansion. It is a 2 to 4 week youth development and public

service program involving team-building, leadership and communication training, connecting with organizations and community leaders, and completion of a social action project. It is designed to promote ‘capable, connected, and compassionate’ citizenship and provide an institutional bridge from school to work.<sup>7</sup> Such a program could be targeted to bridge a specific civically worrisome chasm, such as the rural-urban divide. It could do this by engaging joint rural-urban youth teams in projects, ideally in both a rural context and in an urban context, making it a practical rural-urban youth leadership and public service bridge through which mutual understanding, respect, and civic friendship could be promoted. This could be one aspect of a more comprehensive, integrated approach through which civically significant friendship and cooperation could develop through the school years.

Apart from such steps to promote friendly inter-group contact that can seed the formation of dispositions of civic friendship, there are ways in which other aspects of civic education can make a difference. Learning the perspectives of members of other groups within one’s society, learning the importance of civic cooperation to solving common problems, and practicing the virtues of intellectual humility and open-mindedness in civic debate can all contribute to diverse members of society seeing the goodness in each other, understanding the usefulness of cooperation, and enjoying a better quality of civic life.

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<sup>7</sup> National Citizen Service website, <http://www.ncsyes.co.uk/what-is-ncs>.

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