

Bryn Mawr College

Scholarship, Research, and Creative Work at Bryn Mawr College

Political Science Faculty Research and
Scholarship

Political Science

2021

Review of Rediscovering Political Friendship: Aristotle's Theory and Modern Identity, Community, and Equality, written by Paul W. Ludwig

Joel A. Schlosser

Bryn Mawr College, jschlosser@brynmawr.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://repository.brynmawr.edu/polisci_pubs



Part of the [Political Science Commons](#)

[Let us know how access to this document benefits you.](#)

Custom Citation

Schlosser, J. A. 2021. "Rediscovering Political Friendship: Aristotle's Theory and Modern Identity, Community, and Equality, written by Paul W. Ludwig." *Polis: The Journal for Ancient Greek and Roman Political Thought* 38.2: 358-362.

This paper is posted at Scholarship, Research, and Creative Work at Bryn Mawr College.
https://repository.brynmawr.edu/polisci_pubs/59

For more information, please contact repository@brynmawr.edu.

Paul W. Ludwig, (2020) *Rediscovering Political Friendship: Aristotle's Theory and Modern Identity, Community, and Equality*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Xvi + 362pp. \$105.00 cloth. ISBN: 9781139149365.

On an early morning in Washington, D.C., Paul Ludwig and his young son stand in a queue for tickets to the Washington Monument. Bored and without any alternative, they find themselves talking to a family from Utah. The conversation grows “animated and heartfelt,” lasting for the entire two hours they pass together in line. They do not exchange addresses or become personal friends, but, Ludwig observes, if the Utah family had needed help, he would have helped them. Why? Modern social theories might attribute this impulse to common humanity or morality, perhaps noting their shared interest in patriotic monuments. Yet Ludwig finds these answers inadequate. Something else transpired among these strangers. “The Utah people,” Ludwig asserts, were his civic friends. “Friends share something” and they “shared a love of the political system, the regime” a love they did not share, “or not in the same way,” with the “foreign tourists” around them.

Civic friendship, as Ludwig illustrates with this story, is not a “pie-in-the-sky ideal” (xiv) unobtainable in these disenchanted times. Rather, civic friends are among us, standing in lines to cast ballots or at the DMV, at school board hearings or union meetings, political rallies and outdoor café tables. Civic friendship has persisted even while modern theories of politics have insisted that each of us is a self-interested individual. The narrow modern view of human nature misses how we still associate and not just for self-interested reasons. We enjoy sharing our lives with others and in doing so we come to identify with groups larger than ourselves. We’re proud of our union membership or the state where we were born. And when these groups are challenged or questioned, we react with anger, defending them beyond what our particular self-interest requires.

But as the story also suggests, we’re not all civic friends. Civic friends share something in particular, a commitment to their own political community. We must live together. Civic friendship requires and reinforces the boundaries dividing political communities and it may exacerbate the conflicts among these. Thus while civic friendship can “bridge . . . other forms of self-expansion, including morality,” crossing divides of civic identification would be a bridge too far.

To develop his account of civic friendship, Ludwig pursues a “dialogue with Aristotle” (xiv). “Civic friendship” translates *politikê philia*, which Aristotle introduces in the *Nicomachean Ethics* to describe *homonoia*, concord or like-mindedness (1167b1). Sarah Broadie and Christopher Rowe translate *politikê philia* as “friendship among citizens.” Ludwig criticizes the translation “political friendship” for having “amoral connotations.” Although he admits that “civic friendship” is “off-putting, dull, and staid,” he retains it, ostensibly because while the term does not presuppose moral virtue, it points to it more than “political.”

“Civic friendship,” on Ludwig’s account, emerges from friendship born of instrumentality to become something more. For Aristotle, all common activity involves friendship and every common activity involves some good. The type of good friends share determines the kind of friendship. Although today we tend to restrict friendship to intimate connection where each friend loves the other’s goodness, Aristotle insists that

friends can emerge from shared usefulness or shared pleasure, which while not “simply good” are often what we mean when we speak of goods. Civic friendship is one such kind of friendship. It grows up around shared utility: we appreciate and admire the helpful neighbor or solicitous postal worker; these relationships, for Aristotle, are a kind of friendship, not true or perfect friendship, but friendship “by analogy” (11).

Civic friendship was crucial to economic exchange; more complicated transactions, involving, say, the extension of credit, required the trust that friendship sustained. In antiquity, civic benefactors who sponsored festivals or other public goods also acted out of friendship; their rewards came in the form of honor and public recognition, analogues of the love that inspires a true friendship.

Ludwig’s emphasis on the *thumotic* dimension of friendship emphasizes an often unnoticed aspect of Aristotle’s theory. “Love is dependent on our capacities for anger and self-assertion,” Ludwig asserts; “Aristotelian friendships” are “darker” than most interpreters have recognized (26). All friendships “are best thought of as negative associations, flights from enemies and evils rather than attraction to goods” (31). Ludwig grounds this argument in a reading of Plato’s *Lysis* and moments in Plato’s *Republic*. He then turns to Aristotle’s *Politics* 7 to elaborate how “it is spiritedness [*thumos*] that makes people affectionate [*philia*]” (1327b38-1328a17). Contrary to the argument of the *Republic*, Aristotle suggests that this spiritedness is harsher towards insiders than outsiders: “those who have loved excessively will hate excessively too” (46). Drawing on brief excursions into other works of Aristotle, Ludwig makes the case for “irascible friendship.” Calmed-down (“complacent”) *thumos* is *philia*; a slight against the friend pricks *thumos* into angry reaction. “Affectionate love,” Ludwig concludes, “contains the seeds of its own downfall” because of a “struggle between two sides of friendly passion: quiescence and esteem.” The “dark side” of friendship surfaces when the dignity and identity held in friendly relation are challenged.

The “dark side of friendship” speaks to contemporary debates about identity politics. Friendly passion and passionate solidarity become defensive because they both involve self-esteem and the desire for the esteem of others. Friendship is irascible, easily provoked into angry reaction. While Hegel recognized this “negative orientation,” many liberal theorists overlook or disavow it, meaning liberalism is ill-equipped to accommodate irascible friendship. Rather than seeking to expand concord and political friendship, moderns like James Madison have sought to “divide and rule” (68). Yet this only exacerbates *thumotic* reactions. Instead, Ludwig suggests, the identity of “citizen” needs promotion – and with it the attribution of dignity and honor to this category.

Ludwig’s interpretation of Aristotle’s irascible friendship thus sets up the problem for contemporary liberalism that *Rediscovering Civic Friendship* seeks to address: how to promote popular identification of “citizenness”? According to Ludwig, a first step involves recognizing the degree to which civic friendship continues to exist in civil society. What Alexis de Tocqueville called “associations” persist and models of self-interested individuals ignore or exclude the ways “we are always already involved in loving others” (139). Civic friendship’s persistence challenges the way social scientists think about collective action problems. Two observable phenomena point to civic friendship’s relevance: our disgust at free riders and our desire for the approval of others. “What is actually going on” (159), Ludwig asserts, is neither pure self-interest nor pure charity. The work of friendship is already keeping the polity together.

But the polity is not working as well as it might, leading Ludwig to ask how social policy could support a civil society marked by civic friendship. Ludwig offers a series of proposals to strengthen civic friendship and improve contemporary liberal democracies. Starting from Tocqueville's insight into the "secondary powers" of associations – townships, cities, and counties as well as voluntary political, civic, and small private associations – Ludwig suggests that governments should support these groups while also letting them do their work without direct intervention. "Devolution of powers and subsidiarity" (182) frame Ludwig's recommendations, "scatter[ing] power," in Tocqueville's phrase, to interest more people in public things (186).

Social policy can also promote the equality upon which civic friendship depends. Ludwig emphasizes that efforts here must respect how property and exchange are the basis of friendship; the pride, esteem, and honor accrued in the commercial realm matter through friendly relationships. This means that policies should support reciprocity rather than "leveling" (227) – preserving relationships equal enough to preclude domination or exploitation but not so equal as to obviate differential social recognition. What Jill Frank calls "a democracy of distinction" might ensue, one where conflict is mediated by friendship.

Building on Aristotle, Ludwig propounds a "middling regime of civic friendship" (237) where a strong middle class predominates, lessening unhealthy divisions between rich and poor and promoting a middle-class morality of equality. Although this morality is not fully ethical, virtue can still be a concern; it just does not entitle the virtuous person to rule. Concord (*homonoia*) becomes practical in such a regime, which also suppresses destructive manifestations of *thumos* such as envy and covetousness. But concord is more than the absence of unmediated conflict; it rests in "basic agreement" about a regime. Civic friendship promotes "enough solidarity" for political coherence; this in turn requires some civic education (*paideia*) that can shape citizens' attachments. Although today's liberal democracies do not speak of *paideia* like Aristotle's Greeks, Ludwig notes that they still promote "love of equality and freedom" (284).

Civic friendship makes equality into a goal to be admired. It thus initiates a positive feedback loop wherein equality leads to equality. Many of Ludwig's specific policy proposals speak to this phenomenon: encouraging reciprocity in patronage and commerce, for example, can build civic friendship and thus the shared identity of citizens. National service, which Ludwig also endorses, would have a similar function.

Yet the "dark side" of friendship is not restricted to what Ludwig names. The context of Aristotle's discussion of *thumos* and *philia* suggests a greater issue that haunts Ludwig's book from the outset. Aristotle introduces these observations after his discussions of how nations living in cold regions and those of Europe are full of *thumos* while "Asiatic nations" lack *thumos*. The Greeks occupy the middle position, having just the right measure of *thumos*, allowing them to live under the best political regime and continue to be free. Whether or not Aristotle intends to approve the biological determinism of these observations, they call attention to the boundaries of the nation that enclose civic friendship, boundaries that Ludwig highlights with his mention of the "foreign tourists" at the Washington Monument who could not be his civic friends (or at least "not in the same way"). Civic friendship is partial and does not admit outsiders. Does this civic friendship encourage ethnonationalism? In his discussion of immigration, Ludwig admits that distinguishing "race-based cultural supremacy" from "constitutional

(regime-based) likemindedness” (312) is difficult. Civic friendship is often mistaken for nativism. But aside from calling for more “scholarly scrutiny,” Ludwig does not explain how the production of like-mindedness can avoid the forms of violence with which it has long associated – nativism, yes, but also settler colonialism, racism, and many other forms of oppression.

The differences between the liberal state in which Ludwig encloses civic friendship and the democratic polis in which Aristotle theorizes *philia* are important here. Aristotle’s own status as a resident foreigner in Athens may well have helped him conceptualize how anyone, regardless of citizenship status, could practice *philia* and, indeed, even excellent friendships. But perhaps more important, the politics of this friendship were democratic more than liberal. Friendship instantiated equality and provided the basis for political freedom; friendship thus challenged the very boundaries demarcating friend and enemy, citizen and non-citizen. “Political friendship,” the translation I’d prefer, expands the very notion of the political as it enlarges the circle of those with whom one is friendly. Ludwig’s desire to rescue liberalism from itself by showing the real work of civic friendship may have the result of affirming the fugitive democracy upon which liberalism has long been parasitic – and thus illuminating a path forward for greater solidarity and cooperation not just with “Utah people” but with those apparent “foreign tourists” too.

Joel Alden Schlosser
Associate Professor and Chair, Department of Political Science
Bryn Mawr College
jschlosser@brynmawr.edu