

Reflections on Friendship in Political Theory

Derek Edyvane · Kerri Woods

Published online: 20 December 2012
© Springer Science+Business Media Dordrecht 2012

Introduction

Interpersonal political conflicts stemming from moral disagreements and clashing particularistic loyalties form the necessary background of contemporary political theorising. These circumstances lend considerable urgency to the task of articulating a basis for social unity and yet also contribute to scepticism about the prospects of success in that enterprise. However, theorists of friendship, from Aristotle to Montaigne to Arendt and beyond, have not necessarily seen moral and political conflict as inimical to friendship. Indeed, civic republicans and communitarians see in the relations of friends something akin to ideal relations of fellow-citizens.

This collection explores the possibilities of (political) friendship across different and conflicting particularistic commitments. The papers address a range of overlapping and interconnected concerns, including the significance and potential of friendship in managing conditions of diversity and pluralism, the relationship between friendship and civic respect, friendship and resistance, and the possibilities of global friendship. By addressing these questions, we hope to illuminate a broader range of issues in contemporary political theory, including the management of tensions arising from pluralism, the limits and possibilities of affective concern and the demands of justice, and the nature and function of moral education.

The idea of friendship as a specifically political concept has been largely neglected in the field of contemporary political theory. However, recent years have seen the gradual growth of a literature on the topic. Whilst the essays presented here complement recent interventions, they also address the idea of friendship in different and distinctive ways that help to push the debate in new directions.

D. Edyvane (✉) · K. Woods
School of Politics and International Studies, University of Leeds, Leeds, UK
e-mail: d.j.edyvane@leeds.ac.uk

K. Woods
e-mail: k.woods@leeds.ac.uk

Existing treatments of the topic often engage with the idea of friendship either as a matter of largely historical interest or, in a broadly communitarian vein, as a feature of, or as a means to the realisation of, the good society. The papers collected here, by contrast, adopt a more realistic perspective, and seek to use the tradition of thought on the idea of friendship in order critically to examine the value of the concept as a political resource and, specifically, as a response to contemporary domestic and global problems including those of inequality, intolerance, oppression, insecurity and global injustice.

Whilst existing contributions to the literature tend often to adopt a rather ‘rosy’ view of the idea of friendship as a political concept, this collection offers a more balanced and critical perspective and includes dissenting and sceptical treatments of the topic. In these ways, the collection provides a step forward in the growing literature on the topic of friendship as a political concept. We devote less attention to the task of ‘recovering’ the idea of friendship and more attention to the task of assessing whether and how the concept may be pressed into contemporary political use.

Most contemporary philosophical treatments of friendship take as their starting point Aristotle’s seminal discussion of the idea in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (Aristotle 1976, books 8 and 9). For example, some of those thinkers labelled ‘communitarians’ have appealed to Aristotle’s notion of ‘virtue friendship’ as a model of civic association.¹ This collection also begins with Aristotle, but offers an interpretation markedly different from the communitarians. Russell Bentley argues that a political association founded on Aristotelian virtue friendship would present an unacceptable threat to liberty and that, in order to overcome that threat, contemporary civic friendship needs to be conceived in much thinner terms. Eleni Leontsini shares this concern. Challenging the communitarian appropriation of Aristotle, Leontsini suggests that the resources for a thinner form of civic friendship are to be found not in Aristotle’s notion of ‘virtue friendship’, but rather in his account of ‘advantage friendship’. This scepticism about the contemporary deployment of Aristotle’s idea of virtue friendship reaches its peak in Simon Hope’s contribution to the collection. Hope argues that friendship so conceived is of no political value whatsoever. It is enough for civil association, he contends, that citizens refrain from outright hostility and violence towards each other. Friendship is simply unnecessary and often unwelcome.

In contrast to these sceptical interventions, Derek Edyvane and Samuel Clark each seek to develop a different way of thinking about friendship, suggesting that the bond may be of political value after all, specifically as a mode of *resistance*. Beginning from a consideration of the vice of misanthropy and drawing on the thought of Michel de Montaigne, Edyvane outlines an account of friendship as a ‘negative’ virtue, the value of which resides primarily in its capacity to resist the evil effects of misanthropic cruelty. Clark, too, sees value in friendship as a mode of resistance. Drawing on military memoir and autobiography, Clark suggests that friendship, interpreted as a form of ‘comradeship’, may have an important political role as a counter to the overbearing state and to other forms of authority.

¹ See, for example, Alasdair MacIntyre’s discussion of political friendship in *After Virtue* (MacIntyre 1985, pp. 155–156).

Edyvane and Clark emphasise that the tradition of thought about friendship is much richer than the general preoccupation with Aristotle can sometimes lead us to believe. By drawing on neglected strands of that tradition, they identify and defend a different sort of role for friendship in contemporary political life and thought. But this qualified defence of friendship as a political concept provokes a host of more practical questions and concerns. Kerri Woods addresses some of those concerns by examining what notions of civic friendship can tell us about the limits and possibilities of global friendship as a resource for the theory and practice of global justice. Woods argues that contemporary analyses of civic friendship and its role in stabilising justice reveal both the potential value and the enormous challenges of global friendship as a political concept.

So, while the collection casts a sceptical eye over some of the ways in which the idea of friendship has been used in contemporary political theory, it also maintains that there is a vitally important role for friendship in our thinking about politics. What is needed above all are new and fresh ways of interpreting and applying the concept. In the final contribution to the collection Mihaela Georgieva surveys some of the most recent philosophical literature dedicated to exploring the idea of friendship. Georgieva provides a fitting conclusion for the collection as a whole, finding in this literature encouraging signs of the development of a 'rich and illuminating conversation' around themes of friendship, loyalty and civic virtue.

References

- Aristotle. 1976. *Ethics*, trans. J. A. K. Thomson. London: Penguin.
MacIntyre, Alasdair. 1985. *After virtue*, 2nd ed. London: Duckworth.