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CULTIVATING CIVIC FRIENDSHIP IN EDUCATION

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Introduction

Those of us interested in whether and how civic friendship might be cultivated in education might focus on one of two inter-related concerns (both of which Nancy has spoken about). First, we might focus on the normative concept and conceptions of civic friendship – what does civic friendship mean? What virtues are central to civic friendship? And so on. Or, we might take a more engaged and empirical approach in focusing on what goes on in localities, such as within schools and their immediate communities, to consider whether and how what we consider to be civic friendship (whether that term is itself used or not) is being conceptualised and cultivated. In this presentation, my aim is to say something about both of these areas.

A conception of civic friendship and some challenges

Today we live at a time in which widespread concerns have been raised about various aspects of democratic culture: a trend towards incivility in public discourse, increasing polarisation, fractured communities, and the persistent lack of inclusion and justice for various groups in society. As digital and social media have expanded, serious concerns have also been raised about the impact of such media platforms on the health of democratic lives. Clearly, the current political contexts of many democratic societies hold significant challenges for citizens, for citizenship and for civic character – and so one might wonder why, or even how, the Aristotelian concept of 'civic friendship' is of any value or use.

It is also important to note from the outset how challenging it is to develop a clear conception of civic friendship within contemporary democracies. The concept of *civic friendship* is not

one that is used commonly outside of academic circles, and indeed particular academic circles at that. Not necessarily unconnected to this lack of use in everyday language is the concern that civic friendship is anachronistic, a vestige of past times. Such a view holds that the bonds and mutual fellow-feeling between citizens that characterises civic friendship are simply not possible in large, liberal, representative democracies today. A case in point is the view expressed by Michael Walzer (1974: 601) when he argued that 'We expect citizens to be tolerant of one another. This is probably as close as we can come to that "friendship" which Aristotle thought should characterize relations among members of the same political community. For friendship is only possible within a relatively small homogeneous city, but toleration reaches out infinitely'.

Even if we do not share the pessimism about the viability of civic friendship , it seems sensible to accept the basic idea that the possibility of civic friendship, including its formation in schools, faces particular challenges when invoked in today's contexts. The challenges involved are not only due to size, but include: the heterogeneous and plural nature of liberal democracies, the aforementioned extent of various threats to democracy, and the level of commitment to individualism and the free market which has come with the associated concern that talk of community and the common good is a threat to individual autonomy and freedom.

To start to work through these challenges some core definitional work is necessary in order that we have at least a working definition of civic friendship – and here we need to start with Aristotle. To understand Aristotle's concept of civic friendship requires that we engage with various aspects of his works – the *Nicomachean Ethics*, the *Eudemian Ethics*, *The Art of Rhetoric* and the *Politics* – as well as with contemporary commentaries on civic friendship. Before progressing to what is meant specifically by *civic* friendship, we need to understand Aristotle's wider conception of friendship, or *philia*. Aristotle understands *philia* in this general sense as 'doing well by someone for his own sake, out of concern for *him*, and not, or not merely, out of concern for oneself' (Cooper, 1990: 302). In Book 2, Chapter 4 of *The Art of Rhetoric,* Aristotle (2012: 89) contends that 'your friend is the sort of man who shares your

pleasure in what is good and your pain in what is unpleasant, for your sake and for no other reason'. Here we have the core idea of concern for the good of the other. Aristotle distinguishes between three types of friendships – those based on pleasure, those based on character and virtue, and those based on utility.

While others offer different readings (for example, Price (1999) and Curren (2019)), civic friendship is best understood as a form of friendship based on utility and common advantage, but which – crucially – also includes the *mutual well-wishing for each other's' sake* of Aristotle's general sense of friendship. In his *Eudemian Ethics* Aristotle suggests that 'civic friendship, more than any other, is based on utility, for it is the lack of self-sufficiency that brings people together' (*EE*, 1242a6-9). In addition, Aristotle seems to reserve friendships based on character and virtue for closer, more intimate relationships and to limit the extent of these[1].

So, civic friendship is not of the intimate kind of character friendships. This said, civic friends do care about the "kinds of persons" their fellow citizens are; they care about the wellbeing of their fellow citizens, and are therefore committed to enquire and learn about the interests of fellow citizens (Schwarzenbach, 1996, 2015). As such, civic friendship is undermined when political associations are dominated by narrow interests and factionalism and when levels of material inequalities are high (Mayhew, 1996). In fact, in the *Eudemian Ethics* Aristotle suggests that civic friendships 'are the only ones that are not merely friendships, but *partnerships* between friends… The justice on which a friendship of utility is based is justice par excellence, because it is civic justice' (EE 1242a10-14; emphasis added). The terminology of partnership is instructive, and speaks to the mutual connection and fellow-feeling between citizens. Members of a partnership look out for the interests of

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[1] Those who have many friends and mix intimately with them all are thought to be no one's friend, except in the way proper to fellow citizens, and such people are also called obsequious. In the way proper to fellow citizens, indeed, it is possible to be the friend of man yet not be obsequious but a genuinely good man; but one cannot have with many people the friendship based on virtue and the character of our friends themselves, and we must be content if we find even a few such (NE 1171a16-20).

others, working on the basis of mutual trust and concern. So too, members of a partnership are aware that their own immediate interests may have to be renegotiated in the context of the collective and the common good. This does not ask of citizens that they meekly allow their interests to be subjugated, but that (1) they trust that fair and inclusive processes have been followed in which all voices have been paid due attention and (2) they perceive that their fellow citizens share this mutual trust and well-wishing.

Civic friendship exhibits a close connection with concord, or the condition of agreement within the political community. According to Aristotle concord is 'not identity of opinion… nor do we say that people who have the same views on any and every subject are in accord…, but we do say that a city is in accord when men have the same opinion about what is to their interest, and choose the same actions, and do what they have resolved in common' (NE 1167a22-29). In this sense, concord is not about homogeneity, though of course once again the context Aristotle had in mind was much less heterogeneous than democracies today. As I mentioned earlier, a core principle of civic friendship translated to today's context is that citizens work to mediate their differences in ways that maintain, rather than constrain, the stability of the political community.

A developed sense of civic friendship in today's climate does not require that citizens necessarily care about *all* interests, actions and experiences of others within their political communities. Clearly, whether a fellow citizen prefers blue cars or red cars or prefers to live in a city or a village is largely, if not wholly, immaterial so far as the health of the democratic community is concerned. Neither does this expectation of care require citizens to care about *each and every* citizen on a personal level – that is clearly impossible. Rather, central to what in my view is a workable notion of civic friendship is that care and concern operate on a general level in the sense that citizens do (or should!) care about the interests, actions and experiences of other citizens and on a more directly specific level when they encounter fellow citizens in more intimate settings (Schwarzenbach, 1996).

The virtues attendant to, and associated with, civic friendship

Turning more directly to the *cultivation* of civic friendship in, and indeed through, education a foremost challenge must be to ascertain what kind of person someone who possesses civic friendship might be. We might say – at a more general level – that a civic friend is someone who understands themselves as part of a common endeavour, viewing and acting with care and concern for their fellow-citizens (here again the idea of mutual fellow-feeling is crucial), and doing so with the interests of their fellow-citizens at heart. Such a conception contrasts with a citizen who is overly selfish and acts with disdain and contempt for others in their communities. So how might education form children who do understand themselves as part of a common endeavour and who view and act with care and concern for their fellow-citizens?

As Nancy has suggested, one way to begin to respond to this question is to consider the precise virtues that are attendant to, and are associated with, civic friendship. To be clear, my argument is that to develop a clearer idea of the more abstract notion of civic friendship we need to attend to those virtues that can readily been understood to be central to and for civic friendship. But what might those virtues be?

Though not necessarily a settled list, I think it would be generally accepted that civic friendship requires citizens who are civil, open-minded, intellectually humble and, to some degree or other, care for others. These virtues are important and are certainly necessary for the fellow-feeling, concern and regard for fellow citizens that civic friendship involves. However, I am not convinced they are sufficient if we have a more substantive sense of civic friendship in mind that can, for example, be differentiated from more general concepts such as tolerance or respect (both of which place less of a burden on citizens). My concern here, educationally, is whether such virtues go far enough in terms of engendering a commitment to the welfare of other citizens and to the general common good of the community (or indeed communities). We might say that while virtues such as civility, open-mindedness and intellectual humility are prerequisites of civic friendship, they cannot do all of the work

needed for civic friendship to develop or flourish. This brings into whether other virtues – virtues I would also cast as civic virtues – are also fundamental to civic friendship.

Four seem to me to be particularly important, not least with the focus and audience of this seminar series in mind, but also if we are serious about helping children to come into meaningful relation with others in their community. These are: solidarity, forgiveness, sacrifice, and service. In my view, a well-developed and detailed account of civic friendship should have something to say about each of these four virtues, but given the time available, my focus in the remainder of this presentation will be on service.

Since its inception, the Jubilee Centre has conducted numerous studies on young people's service – including what it means to develop a 'habit of service'. These studies have been firmly focused on the development of social action or service-learning programmes which, to draw on a definition of social action provided by a leading organisation in the UK, comprises practical action *in the service of others*. However, these studies have generally suggested that while service is a core concept of social action – as one social action provider recounted, 'service and citizenship go hand in hand with social action' – notable hesitation surrounds the term. In the Centre's *Habits of Service* study a number of social action providers indicated that they had strong reactions *against* the term, with one stating that 'service is a word they really didn't like'. What were the reasons for this aversion to the concept? For this provider, 'service implies to me…you go into service, you become a servant. And therefore you're doing what you're told to do and it implies something far away from what we want which is child-led or student-led. It goes against that somehow…And I just think it seems like it's kind of subservient, the word subservient, rather than actually taking action and being proactive and a leader, leading the stuff – rather than sort of sitting back and letting it happen to you, that's what it implies to me'. Another provider suggested that while 'service absolutely is the core of what we're about, we just would never use the word'. Similar views were also expressed by a number of the young people spoken with.

More recently, over the last few months we have been conducting interviews with school leaders as part of our Civic Virtues through Service to Others project. Once again, similar hesitations about the term 'service' have materialised. A number of the school leaders stated that they do not talk about service. Some put this down, again, to negative connotations of service – either because it is suggestive of subservience or because serving others might be viewed as condescending those being served. Others spoke about how service conjured up images for themselves and their pupils of military service. One school leader stated that 'social action is a phrase that feels empowering, it feels strong. They hear it and see it in their own social media platforms. It's about making change, being part of a change, whereas service does feel more subservient. It just has that root, I guess, doesn't it? And so we don't use that language at all'. A further point worth mentioning here is that a number of the schools who reported that service – and indeed civic virtue – is not a concept used in the day to day lexicon of the school, instead spoke in much more general terms, citing some sort of general proxy, often left relatively vague and ill-defined, instead (here the term 'community' was the most common).

Alongside the concerns that service involves subservience, a further issue raised in previous Centre studies and our current empirical research is that service is viewed largely as a *process* rather than a *quality*. That is to say that typically service is a concept used as a verb (Jane engages in service, for example) rather than as a noun (service is a quality Jane possesses, for example). This framing of service as an action rather than as a deeper quality is a fairly ubiquitous feature of empirical studies that have examined the understandings and practices of service-learning providers, educators and young people themselves. One school leader in our civic virtues study reported that 'service… doesn't ring necessarily true of virtues, but more of an action'. Therefore, a pertinent issue is that we can clearly recognise an individual *doing* service, but understanding what we mean by *being of service to others* is far less intuitive or immediate. As befits the description of the field of character education as being a 'semantic minefield' (Berkowitz, 2016), precise conceptual clarity – whether at a theoretical or everyday level – remains elusive.

I might even tentatively posit a connection between the equating of service with subservience/or condescension and the viewing of service as an action rather than a more rounded quality. When conceived as an action, the motivations, equitable relationships, and ways of being involved in service to others require further work, existing and operating externally to the service itself rather than being an inherent part of it. With regard to the specific concern about inequitable relationships, the imbalance is typically cast in terms of the way in which service can be constituted: through the provision of short-term palliative, and potentially imposed, responses, rather than through the formation of relationships which bring those involved together in a shared enterprise of solidarity, mutuality and common interest to determine and challenge directly the structural causes of the challenges faced. My argument here is not the service *cannot* be understood as an action (which would be illogical) but rather that service – and more specifically service to others – can also be a much deeper and richer quality that shapes positive, helping relationships within communities. Indeed, while not necessarily ubiquitous, a number of organisations and researchers working in the fields of character education, citizenship education and social action *do* identify service as a civic virtue – as we do here in the Jubilee Centre.

Whether this tentative connection between being hesitant about service and viewing service as an action rather than a quality is valid or not, the lack of a well-developed vocabulary and language of *service to others* in schools is a worry if we are committed, as I think we should be, to cultivating civic friendship. A worthwhile contrast might be drawn with schools in which service – or serving others – *does* form a central and explicit part of the language, ethos and culture of the school. The sort of language I have in mind is one that views service and serving others as directing and giving oneself (one's time, one's efforts, one's interests, one's love and so on) to others, for their benefit. Service on this view requires that the moral agent willingly works to support the interests of others, while also holding open the possibility that the interests of others are in important ways bound to their own. Oftentimes, although not necessarily always, service is directed towards others and communities who are in need, and takes place largely through engagement in the organisations that comprise civil society (though I do not wish to rule out that service to others can also play an important role in shaping commitment to more overtly political, or

indeed professional, contexts). While focused on addressing the needs of the intended beneficiaries, when properly understood, service to others involves the active tracking of the interests, capabilities and needs of others. Through viewing others and engaging with them with dignity, the agent who serves others is able to discern and deliberate about how the interests of others are served best. Service to others is, then, about appropriately informed and directed helping actions in support of others and, as Guitián, (2017: 180) suggests, service 'can only be a virtue when the assistance provided respects the human dignity of the people affected by the action. This way service becomes a manifestation of love'.

To return to empirical data, some schools *are* working in ways that seem more aligned with this understanding of service than the more hesitant views considered earlier. A school, for example, that I researched in Australia had service as one of the school's core values. A Christian foundation, the school worked hard to develop in pupils the virtue of serving with an open heart. Though offering pupils a Christian education, school leaders, teachers and pupils at the school spoke of how the idea of serving others was open to, and important for, all in the school community. This development did not consist only of engagement in a range of actions and activities, though clearly these were important. Rather, a clear and common language of service as a virtue was apparent and permeated the school, acting as a foundation from which activities and discussions could build.

Data collected recently as part of our current project on civic virtue through service to others gives a further picture of how the embedding of an explicit and meaningful concept of service forms a basis for extending oneself to one's fellow citizens and the community. One school leader, for example, compared their current school with their previous school. Whereas the former did not use a developed language of service – according to the leader if service is used the general response is "What do you mean I'm serving somebody? Why would I be doing that?" – the latter school was one in which a vocabulary of service to others, including the community itself, permeated the culture. Several other leaders echoed this latter view. One, from a primary school, spoke of the importance of serving others to

engendering dignity and pride in our local community and the community beyond. A leader from a different primary school spoke of how, in their school, service was conceived as a core part of what it means to be a person and a citizen given that 'we are all in service of each other'. A further leader, this time in a secondary school, recounted how service to others lies at the heart of the school's work on character education and the ways that children at the school encountered role models of those who have and do serve their communities as well as undertaking service to others themselves.

To bring the presentation to a close, I am aware that I need to double-back to the main focus at hand. More bluntly, what have these comments about service got to do with civic friendship? My intention has been to suggest that civic friendship asks a lot of citizens, as it does of educators. It requires particular qualities – including civic virtues – that connect people to other citizens within their communities. Before we can develop meaningful educational interventions for civic friendship, as educators we need an explicit and clear vocabulary and language of civic friendship and – as I hope to have suggested – its attendant virtues that has meaning and purpose. In the presentation I have suggested that there is some uncertainty and discomfort with the language of civic virtues in some schools, which speaks to how schools, school leaders, teachers, social action providers and young people themselves, are grappling (we might even say struggling) with certain fundamental questions in which this seminar series is interested, and which are of vital importance for any developed notion of civic friendship. There is a clear concern that young people might be positioned as superior to or as dominating others. At the same time, drawing on the virtue of service I have suggested that at least in some schools, there is attendance to deeper conceptions that ask a great deal of us personally and socially – though some questions around the requisite pedagogical strategies and approaches, including social action/service-learning, remain.

These schools offer a positive and hopeful conceptions of service to others that speak not only to children's own lives, but which are infused by sense of purpose and meaning. Such language is needed in order that young people can learn as they engage with others, and

with their own developing sense of citizenship. Without such a language, the social bonds, concern, and mutual fellow-feeling civic friendship requires are unlikely to materialise – in fact, the whole project of cultivating civic friendship is unlikely to get off the ground at all.

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