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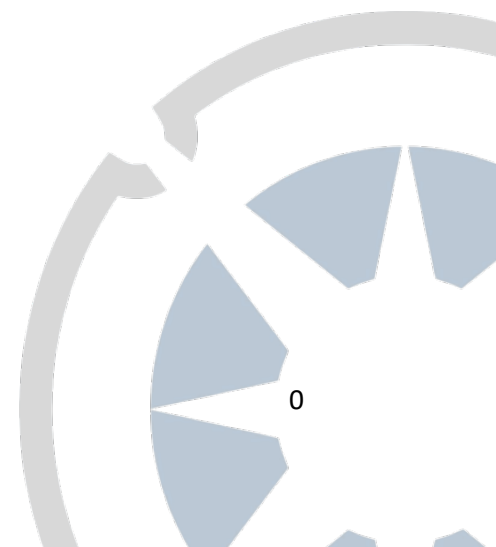
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An Exploration of Civic Friendship: From Aristotle’s Ethics to Martin Luther King Jr’s Political Leadership

By Angel Parham and Ryan Olson

Abstract

Now, more than ever, we are in need of leaders who are able to articulate a vision that brings extraordinarily diverse populations together to seek the common good. Civic life has become ever more polarized, fracturing along political and social lines in ways that seem deeper and less bridgeable than even ten years ago. In the U.S. there are intense debates around education, with educators and parents divided around questions of whether and how to teach about race and justice. Extreme responses on the left and right have led to a low tolerance for different views and an increase of “cancel culture”. Meanwhile, in much of Europe, the ultra-right is on the rise, dividing populations around issues of migration, belonging, and economic insecurity. In the midst of these struggles, we argue that the Aristotelian concept of civic friendship is an idea whose time has come again. While the idea of friendship may seem counter-intuitive and even simplistic given the depth of our divides, it has proven effective during even more turbulent times, such as non-violent resistance to racial conflict during the civil rights movement in the U.S. where Martin Luther King, Jr. explicitly called for movement actors to work to turn enemies into friends. We argue that Aristotle’s concept of “civic friendship” is indispensable given our current challenges and we provide background in both the philosophy and practice of civic friendship, especially for leaders. We first trace the philosophical roots as elaborated in the *Nicomachean Ethics* and then turn to the practical outworking of civic friendship in the writing and life of Martin Luther King Jr.

Aristotle on civic friendship

The bleak condition of political culture in the United States and other Western democracies drives most academics and activists to a desperate search for solutions. As forthcoming work by James Davison Hunter will argue, while most analysts assume that revitalizing institutions such as the family, community, and schools will repair the rift, such accounts overlook the extent to which social solidarity relies not only upon the integrity of social institutions, but on “cultural preconditions that make coming together possible in the first place”. These preconditions are deeply rooted cultural resources that have dwindled to an alarming degree. Hunter explains:

The sources of solidarity from America’s hybrid Enlightenment—America’s unique dialectic of the sacred and the secular—have partly disappeared from shared memory and practice, but they also partly have evolved into deformations of their highest and best ideals. More troubling still, they seem to have been replaced by an alternative and, frankly, nihilistic cultural logic...that not only

renders democratic solidarity impossible but creates the conditions in which the authoritarian impulse becomes impossible to restrain....*If solidarity cannot be generated organically, it will be imposed coercively.*¹

On this account, revitalization of democratic institutions depends to a great degree on the ability to generate the cultural resources that can support the pursuit of goods such as justice, truth, goodness, beauty, and prosperity. This is precisely what reformers such as King envisioned.

Renewal depends on innovations by overlapping networks of leaders generated from outside the dominant institutional core of cultural production. In just this way, the civil rights movement in the United States, like the abolitionist movement in Great Britain, gained traction when leaders from different sectors—the Black church, mainline Protestantism, legislators, business, academia, and the arts—joined forces in common cause. There is not space here to lay out the historical case, which is available elsewhere, but identifying cultural preconditions as mechanisms for change is critically important.

“Democracy exists,” sociologist Gary Alan Fine argues, “and self-determination is possible because there is a middle: a teeming world of tiny publics that acts and responds.” Fine refers to this as a *meso-world* that functions like Durkheim’s “precontractual solidarity,” the crucial notion that “residents know and care about each other.”² How can people know much less care about each other in a vast, depersonalized society, but through groups in which “individual perspectives meld into a shared worldview”? Through group membership and participation, the personal world of individual relationships links up with the structural world. In this way, Fine argues, the personal and the institutional are not fully autonomous, but relate to each other in a “mesh of groups, a world of crosscutting dialogues.”³ *Within* these groups, coordination among individuals facilitates collaboration and shared commitments, and nurtures bonding capital that

builds solidarity within associations. ⁴ Bridging *among* groups across differences creates broader movements for collective action. At the heart of this picture of civil society are personal relationships among group members and among group leadership representatives at a meso-level insofar as they are united in common cause. Although there is little analytical work on the idea of “friendship” in contemporary social theory, this is the concept that best characterizes these essential relationships.

Accounts in social and political theory that do gesture toward the ancient foundations of friendship, typically do so without a rich background understanding that is illuminating and instructive for practice in the late modern world. Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* provides the key text for this richer account, especially book 9 section 6. Aristotle defines friendship among citizens as *ὁμόνοια* (*homonoia*), literally “like-mindedness”. In Latin this is *concordia*, and in English translation it is often glossed with *concord*. Although the Latin term is based on a false etymology from *χορδή* which refers to a string or to the multi-stringed but single tone of a lyre, the musical metaphor gets at the *harmony* of opinion or shared mindset of which Aristotle’s term is evocative. Aristotle argues that concord is a species of friendship, which he famously divides into three types according to their bases: utility, pleasure, and virtue—friends can have a use for one’s own advantage, can derive enjoyment from their association, or, at the level of friendship that Aristotle considers to be the deepest, can relate to one another based on each person’s goodness of character and completeness of virtue.

Friendships within the context of the *polis* are based on advantage and utility, Aristotle argues, to obtain something beneficial (EN 8.9.4-5). (But this isn’t the invisible hand argument, that individuals seeking private benefit will inevitably achieve a common good.) Human relations within the *polis* derive from, or at least cohere with, Aristotle’s theory of virtue—that

excellence can be found at the mean between two extremes, which one reaches by habitually choosing the right action for the right reasons at the right time with the right emotions. But before we lose ourselves in the text as so often happens, it is instructive to recall the social world within which Aristotle developed this concept, to remember that Greek intellectual and cultural achievements, not least in ethics and politics, were “the logical fruit of the groundwork of agrarians, those Greek farmers who are now all but lost to the European historical record”.⁵

The small farms sprawled across the Hellenic countryside produced olives, cereals, livestock, figs, vines, and fruit. With a certain measure of neighborliness and collaboration, the ethos and practices of these households enabled them to become self-supporting and crisis-resistant, qualities that also contributed to the foundations of a *polis*, a community that centered a shared civic, political, and commercial life. The military defense of the *polis* was provided by the same farmers, the famous heavily armed “hoplites” who preferred decisive engagements via frontal assaults. Each town had a polity that was relatively broad-based (if not a pure democracy as in Athens) and attempted to represent the economic interests of most landowner-citizens with a system of laws. Those with power were typically landowners, who profited from enslaved laborers, typically (if any) one or two per household, as well as from women and children; each of these, in turn, benefited from the householder’s political membership and military service. The Greek *poleis* could be surrounded by networks of town-and-countryside communities that led to “the emergence of a new sort of person for whom work was not merely a means of subsistence or profit but an ennobling way of life, a crucible of moral excellence in which pragmatism, moderation, and a search for proportion were the fundamental values,”⁶ not least because life’s circumstances, like human nature itself, could be tragic and unpredictable.

Such a way of life required independence and self-sufficiency within an institutional and cultural context of interdependence and mutual interest, of community life. “The character of the community is expressed in the individuals who compose it” and “the community is the source of all behavior,” to such an extent that, according to Werner Jaeger’s deeply learned account, *Paideia*, “the Greek mind owes its superior strength to the fact that it was deeply rooted in the life of the community.” Greek wisdom, like its ancient successors, reflected the inescapable belief that human beings are essentially “of the polis” (political), and the goal of formation was to create a “supra-personal life” in the “image of the community” rather than “a perfect independent personality.” As such, the polis, and the civic friendship that Aristotle theorized as central to its success, was dependent upon carefully cultivated cultural resources. Thus, Greek culture began not with the individual but with *humanitas*, the ideal of genuine human nature.⁷

It was this standard of *humanitas* that the intellectuals and artists who emerged from the Greek *poleis* strove to understand, achieve, and hold out. Such a seed would have failed to flower into cultural achievements in the arts, literature, philosophy, science, and law had it not been, Hanson argues, for the middle-class farmers who “provided the capital, the security, the freedom, the entire backdrop for a curious few [intellectuals] to enhance, to question, to nuance, and to transform their own fundamentally sound agrarian political, social, and military thinking....”

To interpret Greek ethical and political thought without accounting for this background is to dis-embed the philosophical from the practical and run the risk of distorting the meaning of the good life. The paradigmatic experience of the Greek middle class pointed to the importance of industriousness in service to and full participation in the life of the *polis*. The introduction of private property, the innovation needed to enhance it, the ability to pass it on as an inheritance,

and a commitment to supporting the common good heightened the need for forming the kinds of people whose *hard work* could achieve this, perhaps above any other virtue. This way of life required a certain kind of person who had been intentionally formed in virtue to participate in the life of the polis..

And what were these virtues, suited to the particular life of the polis? Although industriousness does not appear on Aristotle's list of twelve or so virtues in books three and four of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, most, if not all, of the virtues can be read as compatible with this ideal, notably of course, the two related to one's wealth--liberality and munificence aimed at avoiding wastefulness and stinginess to benefit one's fellow citizens. But also to others.

Courage, for example, is best demonstrated not in premeditated actions based on reasoned calculation but rather in unforeseen circumstances. Temperance concerns one's relationship to pleasure and pain, especially of things that are conducive to "health or vigor," which have a functional cast to them, and when they are aimed at other pleasant things, should not be ignoble or prodigal. Aristotle focuses the virtues concerned with honor—magnanimity and ambition—on a proper evaluation of oneself and one's relation to others, both what one is due and what is noble to aspire to. Neither vanity nor groveling humility is acceptable. So also one should be appropriately angry, truthful, adequately social, and modest with respect to shame. The intellectual virtues were equally at home in the Lyceum or on the farm or battlefield, and *phronesis*—practical wisdom—concerns both the management of one's household (*oikonomia*) based on one's own interests as learned through experience, as well as the management of the political community.

What about this latter context, the political community? Aristotle's discussion of the virtues wends its way toward relations with others in practical matters and public life (EN 4.6.1).

Of particular importance is an unnamed virtue (4.6.4) that is the mean between obsequiousness (the “pleasers,” ἄρεσκοι, 4.6.1) and bad-temperedness or belligerence (the δύσκολοι and δυσέριδες, 4.6.2). This is a virtue that (μέσῃν ἕξιτιν) closely resembles friendship (ἔοικε μάλιστα φιλία, 4.6.4) and indeed its possession is an attribute of the *equitable* friend (ἐπιεικῆ φίλον) . Equitable friendship is one that is not dependent on affection (ἄνευ πάθους), so that the equitable friend behaves toward those who are known and unknown to her based not on whether she is a friend or an enemy to those whom she encounters but based rather on who *she* is, i.e. her character (4.6.5).⁸ This is expressed, of course, as the proper way of relating filtered through *honor* relative to the person and *expediency* relative to the occasion (4.6.5-8). Danielle Allen helpfully names the types at each pole of this virtue’s continuum: the *acquiescent* and the *domineering*. Civic virtue or citizenship is the midpoint between these two, similar to Hannah Arendt’s concept of *respect* that can even empower forgiveness (“a kind of friendship ... without closeness;...a regard for the person from the distance which the space of the world puts between us”⁹) and Ralph Ellison’s concept of *love* that serves as the heart of democracy.¹⁰

This unnamed virtue strikes a mean that may be termed concord—after all, it *seems* (φαίνεται) to be a friendly sensibility or feeling (φιλικόν)—and Aristotle identifies the basic problem in human relations in the polis and more generally as πλεονεξία, “wanting more than” or “rivalrous self-interest”). Relating to others frequently leads to conflict arising from divergent desires that cause a rivalry. Aristotle’s example in this passage is from Euripides’ *Phoenician Women*, the rivalry between the sons of Oedipus, Eteocles and Polyneices, over absolute rather than shared control of their father’s throne (EN 9.6.2). In the polis, this is manifested in the desire to get more than their share of advantages and to do less than their share of the labors (9.6.4). In personal friendship, this is manifested when a friend believes he has a right to more

from his friend because he believes himself to be wealthier, more virtuous, or more useful (8.14.1-2). Just as in the polis rivalry leads to discord, so also in personal friendship, rivalrous self-interest leads to a rupture in the friendship (8.14.1).

For Aristotle, justice provides a partial solution to this basic problem of *pleonexia* in human interactions. According to the *Nicomachean Ethics*, justice is universal among the virtues and also constitutes a particular virtue, the vice of which manifests when one takes more than one's share (ὅταν πλεονεκτῇ, EN 5.2.2), thus exhibiting *pleonexia*. Aristotle divides the particular virtue into distributive justice and rectifying justice. The first concerns the distribution of public goods (διανομή), such as honor, money, and other assets (5.2.12).¹¹ His other category, rectifying justice (διορθωτής), relates to private transactions that are voluntary (selling, buying, lending) and involuntary (theft, adultery, abusive language). Both types of justice relate to “fairness” or, literally, to “equality” (τὸ ἴσον, 5.3.1), such that particular justice is “the ability to manage equality properly.”¹² Distributive justice concerns divvying public goods based on proportion (ἀνάλογος), while corrective justice concerns arithmetical equality (ἀρίθμησις), namely that the perpetrator of a crime has created an inequality with the sufferer such that the application of justice will take away the perpetrator's gain (κέρδος, 5.4.4) and will return “agency” to the wronged party,¹³ whose *freedom* is thus not constrained by the wrongdoing and whose *equality* is re-established by the correction.

Personal friendship ideally obtains among equals (EN 8.5.5), but where there is inequality between friends (for example, of wealth or status), the other friend gives what he can (for example, honor; 8.14.1-4) such that each receives from the friendship, although they may not be giving the same things to the other. Thus, each gives what he can to benefit the other, which equalizes agency and effectively achieves equality.

Justice and friendship, Aristotle says, are concerned with the same things and found in the same people (EN 8.9.1). All people and any polity take hold of the concept of justice in some form, even though it is inevitably conceived of and expressed imperfectly (*Politica* 3.9; cf. EN 8.9.1) relative to distributive and corrective justice in Aristotle's rendering. However, a state exists not only to establish justice but for the sake of the good life (εὖ ζῆν, P 1280a31-34); not only in a common place for the prevention of mutual injustice (ἀδικεῖν σφᾶς) and for commerce, which he says are merely the conditions for a polity, but to foster a community of families and households (P 1280b33-36; cf. EN 8.9.4). But this is only the beginning of the polis. There also occur, Aristotle says, family alliances, associations, common rites, and pastimes that bring people together. These building blocks of the polis are created by the kind of relationships that Aristotle calls friendships (φιλία), for, he says, choosing to live together is friendship.

(ἢ γὰρ τοῦ συζῆν προαίρεσις φιλία, P 1280b36-39). These relationships are the means of achieving key goals of the polis: a complete and self-sufficient life (ζωῆς τελείας καὶ αὐτάρκους) of honor (καλῶς) and flourishing (εὐδαιμόνως) within the community of families and villages (γενῶν καὶ κωμῶν κοινωνία, P 1280b39-1281a2). Aristotle concludes that discussion by emphasizing the point that the *polis* exists not for the sake of living together (οὐ τοῦ συζῆν) but for noble actions (τῶν καλῶν πράξεων, P 1281a2-4). Thus, a conception and expression of justice is fundamental to a polity—and preventing or correcting injustice is one of its preconditions—but the aim is the good life and human flourishing, which are obtained also through the associations of family and civil society, and *these* are made possible by friendship. Here Aristotle certainly means friendship among family members, as he discusses in the EN, but also friendship among citizens of the polis.

What element of friendship is retained in non-intimate version at the level of the polis?

Moderating rivalrous self-interest and generous service are central. Recall also the brotherly relationship with which Aristotle begins his explanation of concord; this points to the importance of equality (EN 8.10.6). Aristotle characterizes a friendship between brothers as similar to chosen companions, who have the same affections and the same character (ὁμοπαθεῖς καὶ ὁμοῖθεις, 8.11.5) and, in the context of a polity, are equal and equitable (ἴσοι...ἐπιεικεῖς, 11.5). Equity makes a polity work because, on Aristotle's definition, it contains the notion of self-sacrifice: to be equitable is to make the choice and to have the habit of not claiming one's rights *unduly* but is inclined to take less than his due, even though legally he could claim more (ὁ μὴ ἀκριβοδίκαιος ἐπὶ τὸ χεῖρον ἀλλ' ἐλαττωτικός, καίπερ ἔχων τὸν νόμον βοηθόν, EN 5.10.8). The equitable person (ἐπιεικῆς) is guided by the interests of his friends and his country, even to the point of laying down this life for them (EN 9.8.8-9). Seeking the good for one's friends does not depend on an emotion but on a fixed disposition, such that each friend seeks his own good and reciprocates equally by wishing his friend's good (EN 8.5.5).

Danielle Allen characterizes a friend so conceived as a "second self" and the self-interest involved as not, of course, rivalrous self-interest but equitable self-interest. Thus, friendship goes beyond justice, which could limit one to protecting, seeking, or enforcing one's own rights. For this reason, Aristotle argues that civic friendship is indispensable for the *polis* and for accomplishing the goal of the polis, human flourishing for all citizens. Practicing equitable self-interest requires, in Allen's summation,

(a) an *orientation* toward others, a recognition how and why we have an interest in their good; (b) *knowledge* that rivalrous self-interest [of various kinds] is the basic political problem for democracy; (c) *habits* as flexible as friendship for distributing benefits and burdens with a view to equality and autonomy; and (d) a *psychological state* that in politics is called consent, but in other contexts, goodwill.¹⁴

At the level of practice, this plays out in our speech, both in the public sphere in leadership and civic roles and the private sphere among our intimate relationships and acquaintances. Both what we say and how we say it are important. Aristotle discusses civic friendship in its *content*—the interests (συμφερόντων, 9.6.1), if not opinions (δόξα), of each citizen and the common interest (τὸ κοινὸν, 9.6.4)—and its *rhetoric*—seeking agreement (ὁμογνωμονῶσι), choosing/adopting a course of action (προαιρῶνται), and taking action to accomplish it (πράττωσι, 9.6.1).

How might we begin to apply Aristotle’s civic friendship to the polarized American context? Needless to say, Aristotle believed these practices were appropriate for what we would consider small-scale polities. The kind of agreement Aristotle envisioned about justice and citizens’ interests was also imagined by James Madison, but Madison had in mind a “large republic composed of citizens united by ‘one harmonious interest’ and ‘common cause,’ regardless of the circumstantial distinctions that characterize an extensive commercial society.... While a large population of citizens spread over an extensive territory will certainly not know each other personally, improved means of communication mean that they can know each other’s views and character and become capable of engaging in deliberative politics.”¹⁵ To accomplish this, citizens must be willing to “engage in the deliberative process with the aim to – and in the spirit of – finding common group and common cause...despite our differences and perspectives,” and ultimately be willing, as George Washington “implored his fellow citizens to ‘entertain a brotherly affection and love for one another.’”¹⁶ We would argue that the interpretation of civic friendship provided here is capacious enough to include Madison and Washington’s aspirations.

Lest this American ideal be considered merely a creation of or aspiration among famous elites, the ideal of *comity* developed among Africans of many ethnic groups arriving in the

American colonies, have recently been described by historians, perhaps most notably by David Hackett Fischer. “Knit-together culture,” “solidarity,” and strong “ties,” are among the terms that have been used to describe the social bonds among diverse groups of African peoples in early America:

Rural field slaves on large plantations and free people of color in urban New Orleans acted in different ways. But they shared a common spirit of comity. It made a difference in their lives and in the history of the American republic.¹⁷

In our own time of deep polarization after decades of the culture wars, this spirit of comity, of affection, of equitable self-interest, of civic friendship must be conveyed in content and in rhetoric. As to content, efforts must be made to represent the truth claims, what is at stake in the truth claims (Aristotle’s “interests”), and their relation to the public interest. This will require moral communities to recover the intellectual foundations and moral argumentation within their own communities, such that those interests can be rigorously, coherently, and cogently conveyed. As to rhetoric, seeking agreement, deciding on courses of action, and participating in those courses of action will require the kind of discourse that has been all too rare. The original analyst of the culture wars, James Davison Hunter, laid out the rhetorical part of the solution as follows.

Reviving the art of argument and persuasion certainly depends upon a conducive environment and the linguistic capacities that give vitality to coherent cultural expression. Just as important would be an affirmation by all parties of certain ground rules for civil but principled engagement. ... First, those who claim the right to dissent should assume the responsibility to debate. ... Second, those who claim the right to criticize should assume the responsibility to comprehend. ... Third, those who claim the right to influence should accept the responsibility not to inflame. ... Fourth, those who claim the right to participate should accept the responsibility to persuade.¹⁸

These ground rules align closely to the ideals of civic friendship in pursuit of equitable self-interest. To revitalize democratic institutions in this way, citizens must be willing to claim less than their rights according to justice and to operate based on equality and power-sharing. Within

tiny publics and other small communities, that “unnamed virtue” between acquiescence and domination could revivify common life—a common life that could be scaled by leaders of such communities who develop civic friendships with other leaders across the endlessly diverse sectors of a late capitalist society in the public interest and despite the obstacles constantly presented by a highly polarized and contentious national discourse.

Civic Friendship in the Twenty-First Century: Crossing Seemingly Unbridgeable Divides

How, then, do we cultivate this “unnamed virtue” at the mean between obsequiousness and belligerence? How do we cultivate equitable rather than rivalrous self-interest? The challenge seems especially great within the context of our current polarization. Today’s contentious politics seem to have been turbo-charged by the protests of 2020. These waves of protest emerged from a COVID-raged and racially contentious U.S. in the wake of the murder of George Floyd, and went on to take root and find resonance around the world. Black Lives Matters protesters, in particular, were clear that foundational social and political foundations must be fundamentally transformed:

We saw with our own eyes the oppression, no inclusion. We are dying, the pain everywhere everyday. We fall to our knees, we can’t breathe, but we rise up....In cities in every state across America and around the world we say ‘Black Lives Matter!!’ Now, it’s time to transform. We are united, we are loud and we are strong....change is coming.
-Black Lives Matter

There is little in this Black Lives Matter exhortation, or in the tenor of the public debate over the last few years, to suggest that we are on a path to embrace and cultivate the “unnamed” virtue that closely resembles friendship in our public life. And this is true not only of contentious racial politics in the U.S. As the organizers’ call notes, the cry echoes “around the world” as protestors mobilize against historic and contemporary forms of injustice.

While there is nothing new about critique and protest, many commentators have observed that this twenty-first century version in democratic polities seems to proceed from quite a different foundation than was the case a century ago.¹⁹ We argue, along with Hunter, that the decisive difference is in the fact that the well of deep cultural resources from which protest drew a generation ago is running dry. This paucity is particularly devastating when it comes to fissures around race, that area of social life which has been particularly fraught for generations.

The idea that our current troubles are largely cultural is bolstered by the fact that on almost any area of measurement—racially motivated violence; socio-economic life chances; widespread acceptance and promotion of non-white aesthetics and cultural production—there have been real changes for the better. This is not, certainly, to ignore that racial violence and oppression still occur, only to say that they are not as much a matter of course as they were in the nineteenth or mid-twentieth centuries. In this sense, the twenty-first century carries more promise and opportunity for racial minorities. In *Talking to Strangers*, Danielle Allen affirms the argument that what we are facing is less about ingrained structural inequalities than it is about settled cultural narratives. She notes that even though there have been real gains in civil rights in the U.S. since the 1960s, there has nevertheless been an increase in racial distrust. She explains:

A great deal of interracial distrust now is a product more of retrospection than of immediate personal experience and prevails along fossilized boundaries of difference. We still have economic policies and social patterns to frustrate yellow, green, blue, black, pink, brown, and red. Yet continually this frustration—with unemployment, crime, and public education—is understood in racial terms. ‘White’ blames ‘black’ and ‘black’ blames ‘white’ and who knows what others blame one another and then slip also into the black-white muck. It takes time to build up a record of experiences and narratives to justify distrust, and our repeated fallback upon race as an explanation exposes history’s gravity. Within democracies, such congealed distrust indicates political failure. At its best, democracy is full of contention and fluid disagreement but free of settled patterns of mutual disdain. (p.xiii)

The issue, then, is not so much one of increased racial inequality as it is of changed cultural foundations. Allen devotes the rest of the book to arguing for the importance of cultivating civic

friendship to bridge seemingly unbridgeable racial divides. Doing so requires, we argue, a bolstering of cultural resources that has been in steady decline for decades. This is where a revisiting of the thought of Martin Luther King Jr. is instructive, as his work and thought draw deeply on this well of increasingly scarce resources.

Even the most ardent Black Lives Matter protesters are unlikely to argue that the structural context of the 1950s and 1960s was *more* congenial to Black Americans than is the case now. The community faced much lower levels of education and literacy. Legalized segregation and discrimination ruled the day. Physical violence against Black people in particular was even more widespread than at present, and less likely to be publicly condemned. Despite these pressing realities, King and his fellow civil rights activists took an approach to social and political change that was much more conducive to Aristotle's conception of civic friendship than is the case today. In "Black Lives Matter and the Civil Rights Movement", Dewey Clayton draws a clear distinction between the two movements in his exploration of the cultural themes undergirding King's politics: "In his unique blending of familiar Christian themes and conventional democratic theory, King succeeded in grounding the movement in two of the ideational bedrocks of American culture" (463, citing Doug McAdam).

Phil Gorski's examination of King in *American Covenant* continues this line of thought. King figures as one of several intellectuals in Gorski's argument that in order to address what ails the riven politics of the U.S., it is necessary to draw on the resources of its unique "civil religion". He explains: "The civil religion is a narrative that tells us where we came from and where we are headed, not just what our commitments are. It embeds our values and commitments within particular stories of civic greatness—and collective failure" (14). For this reason, Gorski builds his account around stories of people like King who embody the civil

religion. Central to King’s approach is his ability to strongly critique injustice while at the same time building on the deep cultural foundations that are capable of sustaining a democratic polity.

King was fully aware of the moral rot that had spread through American society as a result of racial prejudice, just as Malcolm X and Stokely Carmichael were. But unlike the latter two, King did not conclude that the American project was beyond redemption, and he rejected calls for racial separatism and violent revolution. (150)

What was it that enabled King to see and think in this unique way—to hold together realities that are in tension with each other? Gorski and others have argued that it has to do with his unique intellectual and spiritual formation.²⁰ This formation instilled and strengthened resources distilled from centuries-old sacred and secular traditions of learning. Claybourne Carson’s edition of King’s autobiography examines his Christian formation in seminary together with his deep reading of classic and canonical works throughout his educational journey. King combined this deep intellectual formation with a keen political eye attuned to the social realities before him and his community. This combination convinced him that something like “civic friendship”—as counter-intuitive as it seemed to be for a harassed and violently repressed minority—was indispensable to moving forward together.

Indeed, we must not lose sight of how remarkable it was that King would urge the Black community to cultivate friendship by practicing a kind of love that “can transform opposers into friends” (Washington:140). While some believed that King’s injunction to turn opposers into “friends” was politically naïve, it has quite deep philosophical roots traceable back to Aristotle’s “civic friendship” conception in the *Nicomachean Ethics*.²¹ We turn now to an examination of how King drew on political ideas from antiquity in ways that are startlingly relevant for his twentieth century context. We argue that these ideas continue to hold promise for bridging our own persistent racial divides.

The Trouble with “Friendship”

But we must remember as we boycott that a boycott is not an end within itself; it is merely a means to awaken a sense of shame within the oppressor and challenge his false sense of superiority. But the end is reconciliation; the end is redemption; the end is the creation of the beloved community. It is this type of spirit and this type of love that can transform opposers into friends. It is this type of understanding goodwill that will transform the deep gloom of the old age into the exuberant gladness of the new age. It is this love which will bring about miracles in the hearts of men.

-Martin Luther King, Jr. “Facing the Challenges of a New Age”

King knew well before approaching his audience that his talk of “love” and “friendship” would meet with cognitive resistance. Therefore, in calling his largely Black audience to love and friendship with many hostile white Americans, he acknowledges the concern listeners have that “it is very easy to become sentimental” with all this talk of love (Washington:140). King is quick, however, to explain that he is not speaking about love in a sentimental or affectionate sense. Rather, he is invoking a quite different idea of “love” drawn from the Greek language. As a way of helping his American audience better understand what he is calling them to embrace, he explains:

The Greek language comes to our aid at this point. The Greek language has three words for love. First it speaks of love in terms of *eros*. . . . *Eros* is a type of esthetic love. . . . And then the Greek talks about *philia*. *Philia* is a sort of intimate affectionateness between personal friends. It is a sort of reciprocal love. Then the Greek language comes out with another word which is the highest level of love. It speaks of it in terms of *agape*. *Agape* means nothing sentimental or basically affectionate. It means understanding, redeeming good will for all men. (Washington:140)

It is this last kind of love that King calls his listeners to cultivate, the “understanding, redeeming good will for all men”. King’s discussion of “friendship” and “good will” in the same passage of his speech evokes Aristotle’s discussion of these same two concepts where he explains:

...people cannot be friends unless they first come to feel goodwill, although feeling goodwill does not make them friends, because they only wish for the good for whom they feel goodwill; they would not actively help them or take any trouble for their sake. (Aristotle: 239)

Aristotle goes on to say that we can think of goodwill as “undeveloped friendship”, the first step toward a future friendship. This analysis of the order of building relationships relates well to King’s vision of what the civil rights movement is ultimately about—turning enemies into friends on the way to building the Beloved Community.

The beginning of this complex, visionary process is to move from enmity or indifference to cultivating good will that desires good for the other. We can imagine how difficult it must have been for Black people to hear such an injunction. How could one wish good will toward white people who were setting dogs on Black people, flattening them with high pressure firehoses, or burning crosses on their lawns? It was possible because King was engaged in a long game, indeed the only game he saw as capable of bringing about a future that allowed the American experiment to come to greater maturity. Turning enemies into friends meant working consciously to transform them into “civic friends” not bosom buddies.

This idea of civic friendship builds, as we have noted, on the idea of concord. Concord presupposes a kind of “friendly feeling”, which Aristotle describes as even more valuable to rulers than justice, because it is difficult if not impossible to rule a polity shot through with enmity. He explains:

Concord...seems to be a friendly feeling...There is said to be concord in a state when the citizens agree about their interests, adopt the same policy and put their common resolves into effect....Thus concord is evidently...friendship between the citizens of a state, because it is concerned with their interests and living conditions. (Book IX, vi, 1167b), pp.239-240

It is important to note that there is nothing here about emotional attachment or affection. Rather, with civic friendship the bond between citizens is their agreement on their interests and their resolve to work together for the furthering and improvement of their common life. Note that people with very different political convictions and preferences can nevertheless agree broadly

on their shared interests. For instance, the great majority will agree that we all prosper when excellent education is available to all, when crime is low, when good paying jobs are plentiful, and when we remain committed to orderly constitutional rule. Libertarians will have a very different way of pursuing these goals than political liberals, but there are broadly shared ideas of what is good.

But then Aristotle goes on to complicate this picture of civic friendship by stipulating that it takes a certain kind of person to be a civic friend: an equitable person. But if only equitable people can be civic friends, then we appear to be in trouble for there are plenty of individuals and groups who “are eager to get more than their share of advantages” and who, consequently, are factious and unwilling to do what is right. And yet, Aristotle did not take this cultivation of civic friendship to be a utopian pursuit. It is a difficult pursuit that requires much work, but not a utopian one that can never be achieved—there is a world of difference between these two poles. Both Aristotle and King reflect on the nature of this complicated vision and how to achieve it.

Toward the end of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle calls us to consider how to put his lengthy philosophical reflections into practice. As he does so, his concern about the cultivation of goodness is at the top of his list. He acknowledges that “it is not enough to know about goodness; we must endeavour ourselves to possess and use it, or adopt any other means to become good ourselves” (Book X, part ix, 1179b, p.277). This work of cultivating goodness in ourselves is no easy feat, and he notes that many people do not care to make the effort because the typical person refrains from doing wrong not because they wish to avoid disgrace, but rather because they seek to avoid punishment. Such people are plentiful in any polity, and Aristotle has this to say about them: “What discourse could ever reform people like that? To dislodge by argument habits long embedded in the character is a difficult if not impossible task.” (Book X,

part ix, 1179b,p.277). Given this aspect of human habit and character, he concludes that we will be doing well to achieve even some small portion of goodness.

King also recognizes the difficulty of cultivating goodness and is not at all naïve about the seriousness of the struggle. He addresses the challenge by drawing on centuries of philosophical and theological wisdom, and his focus is on our need to acknowledge and address the fault line running through the center of human hearts which so often keeps us from doing what is best and right. In his autobiography, King warns his audience that whenever we set out to build something good in the world, there are forces within and outside of ourselves that work against us. These internal and external forces are evidence of “a tension at the heart of the universe between good and evil” (Carson:357). He considers great thinkers from a variety of religious and philosophical traditions who describe this tension. Within Hinduism it is illusion/reality; in Platonic philosophy, body/soul; in Zoroastrianism it is the god of light/god of darkness; and in his own Judeo-Christian tradition the struggle is between God and Satan. He goes on then to cite further literary, philosophical, and religious examples including Jekyll and Hyde where the destructive half attempts to overwhelm the best half; Plato’s analogy from the Phaedrus of the struggle between the good and the wicked charioteer of the soul; and Goethe’s whimsical observation that “there’s enough stuff in me to make both a gentleman and a rogue” (Carson:375). The strength of King’s diverse literary, philosophical, and religious allusions is that even though he is coming from a Christian perspective, his analysis taps into something that both religious and non-religious traditions hold to be true—whatever the cause, we are often beset by a struggle that makes it difficult for us to do what we know we ought to do, and as a result, we consistently give in to the impulse to maximize our own individual comfort and short-

term pleasure rather than engaging in the harder task of working toward the long-term good of ourselves and others.

What, then, are we to do? If the cultivation of civic friendship requires a polity of “equitable” people, then we appear to be doomed before we begin. Surely many Black Americans during King’s day thought so as they looked out at the racially violent landscape they and their children were required to navigate everyday of their lives. As a means of addressing this challenge, both Aristotle and King invite us to engage in the difficult, nuanced dance between habit and law. Habit consists of internally absorbed modes of thinking and acting that direct our actions while law is that force outside of ourselves that does the same.

When it comes to goodness, Aristotle notes that there are different theories about what makes for a good person. Some believe it is inborn, others that it is acquired through habit, and yet others that it is imparted by instruction. Of the first, he notes that there is nothing we can do there, only divine dispensation determines our inborn disposition. And of the other two, while it is certainly good to cultivate habits that dispose us to goodness and it is absolutely necessary to instruct young people in ways that teach them to enjoy and dislike the right sorts of things, neither of these is guaranteed to make anyone good. At this point, Aristotle notes that this outcome of goodness can “be achieved by living under the guidance of some intelligence or right system that has effective force”, in short, the law. He describes law as a form of practical wisdom that has the power to compel and is necessary for the many.

King also balances his call for the internal transformation of individuals with an appeal to the necessity of good laws. In “The American Dream” speech, he addresses the argument some people made that fighting for legal change was not effective because it could not bring about real change. Thus, the argument went, rather than focusing on law, one should engage in education to

change hearts. King acknowledges the importance of education saying “[education] must continue to play a great role in changing attitudes, in getting people ready for the new order” (Washington:213). At the same time, however, he agreed with Aristotle that we cannot count on education to fully do the job. At some point, law must step in, and King makes this clear with a compelling statement:

We need legislation and federal action to control behavior. It may be true that the law can’t make a man love me, but it can keep him from lynching me, and I think that’s pretty important also. (Washington: 213)

This turn toward the law in the thought of both Aristotle and King make it clear that while each was driven by higher ideals, neither was socially nor politically naïve.

Nevertheless, we must not lose sight of the fact that both of these great thinkers maintained a staunch conviction that we must continue to engage in the dance between cultivating an internal disposition toward goodness and maintaining the external force of the law to compel those who will not be persuaded in any other way to do what is right. In each case, moreover, the importance of working to cultivate both goodness and civic friendship continues to be foundational to their vision of the good society. As he begins to conclude his meditations in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle comes to the following conclusion about how to balance the state and the individual:

The best solution would be to introduce a proper system of public supervision of these matters. But if they continue to be completely neglected by the state, it would seem to be right for each individual to help his own children and friends on the way to goodness, and that he should have the power or at least the choice of doing this....Moreover, individual tuition, like individual treatment in medicine, is actually superior to the public sort. (Book X, part ix, 1180a-1180b, p.280)

The conclusion is that law, though necessary, also has its limits, and in most cases what will be necessary is for individuals and smaller groups to work to cultivate goodness in each other as they work to become the kinds of people capable of civic friendship.

Civic Friendship for Our Twenty-First Century Divides

What insights might we draw for our unique twenty-first century context? Although friendship is not the first kind of relationship that comes to mind when the average person thinks about politics today, it was once seen as a crucial component of political community and social solidarity (Von Heyking and Avramenko 2008). And while the idea and ideal of civic friendship has diminished in the modern era it has not completely disappeared. Several scholars have examined the unique strengths of civic friendship when it comes to thinking about how to incorporate citizens across their many social differences in a given polity (Schwartzbach 1996; Allen 2004; Bray and Chappell 2012).²²

As we have noted above, there is little in the structure of twenty-first century societies to suggest that what we confront now is more difficult, violent, or economically challenging than was the case in earlier eras. While troubles abound—notably violent conflicts in Ukraine and between Israel and Palestine—wars also tore apart earlier societies. And while extreme-right politics raise alarms across the world, it would be difficult to argue that the context of the U.S. South where King and his activists worked was somehow less violent or daunting than what we face today.

What *has* changed, however, are the cultural foundations underlying our current conflicts. King appealed to the best ideals of the American project, was deeply formed by classic and canonical texts in social and political thought, and drew from the deep wells of the Christian tradition, especially as these had developed within the Black church. In this sense, he continued in the footsteps of generations of Black intellectuals before him going back at least to Phillis Wheatley in the 1770s.²³ The planks of this cultural bridge have become increasingly undone as the most prominent civic and political actors—notably Black Lives Matter on one side, and

Trump activists on the other—either tacitly or explicitly reject the intellectual, political, and spiritual traditions from which a figure like King could emerge.

The kind of concord, goodness, and equitable self-interest necessary for civic friendship will require new habits of citizenship supported by renewed cultural resources. This does not mean “going back” to some ideal era. There was, after all, little that was ideal about the 1950s for Black Americans of King’s time. The renewal of tradition necessary for civic friendship will require leaders that are able to metaphorically build societal vessels based on time-tested wisdom, while also charting a course through the stormy seas of a new day.

¹ James Davison Hunter, *Democracy and Solidarity: On the Cultural Roots of America’s Political Crisis* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2024), v.

² Gary Alan Fine, *The Hinge: Civil Society, Group Cultures, and the Power of Local Commitments*, First edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021), 2.

³ Fine, 3.

⁴ Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone*.

⁵ Victor Davis Hanson *The Other Greeks*

⁶ Victor Davis Hanson, *The Other Greeks: The Family Farm and the Agrarian Roots of Western* (University of California Press, 1999), 3.

⁷ Werner Jaeger, *Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture*, trans. Gilbert Highet, vol. Volume 1: Archaic Greece, The Mind of Athens (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), xiii–xiv, xxv–xxvi.

⁸ οὐ γὰρ τῷ φιλεῖν ἢ ἐχθαίρειν ἀποδέχεται ἕκαστα ὡς δεῖ, ἀλλὰ τῷ τοιοῦτος εἶναι

⁹ Hannah Arendt, Danielle S. Allen, and Margaret Canovan, *The Human Condition*, Second edition (Chicago ; London: The University of Chicago Press, 2018), 243. See the parallel drawn in Danielle S. Allen, *Talking to Strangers: Anxieties of Citizenship Since Brown V. Board of Education* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 119.

¹⁰ Ralph Ellison and John F. Callahan, *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, Modern Library ed (New York: Modern Library, 1995), 154. This parallel is noted by Allen, *Talking to Strangers*, 119. The argument through this section draws from Allen, chapter 9.

¹¹ ἐν ταῖς διανομαῖς τιμῆς ἢ χρημάτων ἢ τῶν ἄλλων ὅσα μεριστὰ τοῖς κοινωνοῦσι τῆς πολιτείας

¹² Allen, *Talking to Strangers*, 121.

¹³ “Agency is the good it [i.e., ‘straightening-out justice’] distributes according to the principle of strict equivalence,” according to Allen, 123.

¹⁴ Allen, 137. See her latest recommendations in Danielle S. Allen, *Justice by Means of Democracy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2023), 199–227.

¹⁵ Colleen A. Sheehan, “Civic Friendship in America: A Madisonian Retrospective,” *Perspectives on Political Science* 49, no. 4 (October 2020): 251–52, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10457097.2020.1794734>.

¹⁶ Sheehan, 254, 255.

¹⁷ David Hackett Fischer, *African Founders: How Enslaved People Expanded American Freedom* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2022), 572–73.

¹⁸ James Davison Hunter, *Before the Shooting Begins: Searching for Democracy in America’s Culture War* (New York: Free Press, 1994), 238–39.

¹⁹ Dewey M. Clayton, "Black Lives Matter and the Civil Rights Movement," *Journal of Black Studies* 49, no. 5 (July 2018): 448-480; Perry Bacon, Jr

²⁰ See Gorski, *American Covenant*, Chapter 6 and Angel Parham, *The Black Intellectual Tradition*, Chapter 2

²¹ The term "political friendship" has also been used to refer to the same Aristotelian concept.

²² Although Bray and Chappell do not, strictly speaking, use the concept "civic friendship", their discussion of race and what they call "civic hospitality" comes so close that it seems reasonable to include their work here. I will address this later on in the essay.

²³ Henry Louis Gates identifies Wheatley's work as the beginning of a distinctive Black intellectual tradition in the U.S.