

Book Reviews

John von Heyking: *The Form of Politics: Aristotle and Plato on Friendship*. (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2016. Pp. xv, 233.)

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John von Heyking warns us in his preface that “the task of understanding a philosopher’s view of friendship obliges one to try to understand nearly everything else about that philosopher” (xiii). Although acknowledging that his “meagre attempt” will necessarily fail, he provides a marvelous exposition that brings together key components of Aristotle’s and Plato’s views of friendship and its essential place in political life. Moreover, he offers his own vision of this relationship that guides his study throughout, a vision both thought-provoking and moving, which, like the works of Aristotle and Plato he studies, prepares us to better understand and practice the activities of a good human life.

Von Heyking’s stance, accordingly, is not merely as an expositor of Aristotle and Plato, but as a thinker and teacher. Aristotle and Plato are primary interlocutors in his larger conversation, which includes Churchill, poets ancient and modern, twentieth-century thinkers, including Hannah Arendt, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Leo Strauss, and Eric Voegelin, and “scholars of festivity,” including Josef Pieper and Karl Kerényi. Indeed, von Heyking describes his book as bridging such work on festivity with the political-theory scholarship on Plato and Aristotle (13). In times of festivity, including celebrations of foundings and other holidays, citizens achieve a rare “unity in play,” in which like friends they become aware of the good they share (39). This political friendship, usually seen “when the entirety of political society comes together,” is central to Aristotle’s and Plato’s political thought. Differences aside, both thinkers “foreground the phenomena of virtue-friendship and political friendship among reflective statesmen and citizens.” Both understand this political friendship as the common good of the best regime and a reminder of what operates in the background of even inferior regimes, as their condition and aspiration. In this sense, friendship is “the form of politics,” to which von Heyking’s title refers (10–12, 32).

Reversing historical order, von Heyking begins with Aristotle, whose account of friendship and politics “remains within the bounds of common sense,” before moving to Plato, whose “daimonic horizon” transcends those bounds (xiv, 30, 32, 48, 99). He acknowledges that in the *Politics*

Aristotle excludes play—mere refuge from the burdens of labor—as a proper leisure activity for the citizens of his best regime. The music education that Aristotle recommends nevertheless teaches these citizens, in von Heyking's words, "to sing and to be their own song" (65). More important for his argument concerning festivity is Aristotle's treatment of tragedy in the *Poetics* and hence "the civic festivals in which [the tragedies] took place" (58). In "the contemplative mode of mimesis" Aristotle discusses in the *Poetics*, von Heyking finds "a festive play," even "a higher form of play" that resembles the active leisure of the citizens of the best regime (62). As an "education in sympathetic understanding and objective reflection, conducted with others in a participatory mode," moreover, tragedy fosters "an education in civic friendship at its highest," "a civic version" of virtue friendship, in which friends "perceive together" the good manifest in each other (65; see also 22).

Turning to festivity in Plato's thought, von Heyking discusses friendship in the *Lysis*, where allusions to the liminal god Hermes help to "[lift] the veil of philosophic mania" (31, 98, 99, 100, 102). Von Heyking, however, relies primarily on the Athenian Stranger's insistence in the *Laws* that "choral festivity" constitutes "the quintessential form of civic action" (149). The Stranger recommends that the city sing and dance in choruses, divided according to age, for no fewer than three hundred and sixty-five festivals per year, one per day. Although the dances "will be ecstatic," "their ecstasy will be drawn out by Nous," for "Dionysian elders" will "refigure ancestral songs" so that "they will be moderate and guided by reason" (148–56). Just as friends perceive together the virtues of each other and share their perceptions, these choruses will come "to discern the virtues in others and share their discernment" (149).

Von Heyking's focus on festivity distinguishes his work from others on ancient friendship and allows him to respond to contemporary cynicism about politics while "retrieving a vocabulary about the moral good of friendship" that modern thought has obscured (15). Given the scope of his work, it is nothing less than festive itself, a *sumphonia* in which various voices celebrate together the common good of humanity.

Only occasionally does von Heyking sound a discordant note in this playful unity. There may be daily festivals in the city of the *Laws*, for example, but von Heyking warns that they include not only the choruses on which he focuses but also "pyrrhic dances that mimic combat" and "spirited war games, in which death is a real possibility" (151). The citizens "spend their days in festivity" (146), but their festivals are not simply the free pastimes appropriate to leisure in Aristotle's sense, inasmuch as they are directed to military preparation and war. Thus it is not surprising that the education provided by the choruses is "very different" from that of the manic lovers Socrates describes in the *Phaedrus* (157). Although von Heyking argues that both the Athenian Stranger and Socrates support his thesis on festivity, he now admits that this question of their differences requires "a separate, extensive study" (157).

Von Heyking argues that “the *Laws* represents Plato’s agreement with Aristotle” (133), leaving us to wonder whether the *Republic* represents Plato’s disagreement with Aristotle (and Socrates’ disagreement with the Athenian Stranger). Moreover, does not von Heyking’s organization of his book as an ascent from “Aristotelian sobriety” to “Platonic daimonism” indicate Plato’s divergence from Aristotle, one that has implications for their understanding of festivity? How authoritative is Aristotle’s virtue friendship, for example, which serves throughout von Heyking’s book as a standard for civic friendship, if Plato’s “dramatic dialogues are better suited to communicate the liminal mystery of personhood and otherness” (87; see also 48)?

During his voyage home, Homer’s Odysseus is entertained by the Phaikians’ sumptuous banquet and a bard who sings about the conquest of Troy. This is “the best that life has to offer,” Odysseus claims (*Odyssey* IX 1–12). Von Heyking says that this passage directed him to the connection between civic friendship and festivity. Aristotle, he notes, quotes this passage as evidence that the ancients regarded such festivity as the “pastime of free persons” (*Politics* 1338a14). Although Aristotle “does not fully agree with... ‘those of earlier times,’” he “sees enough truth in the statement to use it to advance his own view of political friendship” (13 and 62–64). Given the fissures von Heyking suggests but leaves in the backdrop of his sweeping vision of cosmic and political unity, a skeptical reader might suspect that he describes himself. That is, he exaggerates agreement among the ancients he treats, finding enough truth in their work to advance his own view of political friendship. Such skepticism does not diminish admiration for von Heyking’s effort, not only because it is needed in times of political cynicism and by “democratic individualists” who “dance alone” (164), but also because of the beauty of its humane vision.

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Hugh Liebert: *Plutarch’s Politics: Between City and Empire*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016. Pp. xvii, 264.)

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It is a nearly impossible task to articulate the basic orienting principles of Plutarch’s political philosophy in any brief scope. A master of rhetorical subtlety and indirect illumination through the significant detail, Plutarch has left one of the largest and most varied bodies of work extant from any