

Aristotle on the Nature of Friendship

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Abstract

One part of the investigations into human nature in the *Nicomachean Ethics* is the subject of friendship. Two whole books, Book Eight and Book Nine, are dedicated to analyses on this subject. Aristotle uses the Greek word *philia* for what we would call friendship. In Book Eight Aristotle proposes that there are three different types of friendship, each with corresponding circumstances that in a way determine each type. There are friendships based on utility, pleasure, and the good. If Aristotle's goal in his investigations in the *Nicomachean Ethics* is to determine the best way to lead a good life, and to achieve *eudaimonia*, or human flourishing, then understanding what friendship is and in fact having good friends is a prerequisite for the acquisition of a life which may be called truly good.

This paper will analyze Aristotle's arguments on the nature of friendship and will examine in what ways that friendship indeed is a component required for living a good life. Although it may appear from a reading of the *Nicomachean Ethics* that it may seem that only perfect or virtue friendships are the types of friendship that are worth pursuing, this paper will argue that all three types of friendships are worthy of pursuit. This argument is supported by Aristotle's definition of friendship in the *Rhetoric* that states that friendship is a type of reciprocal well-wishing. This study will analyze Aristotle's arguments for the three types of friendships and show how his distinctions are relevant to the modern world. This study will also propose that by understanding Aristotle's distinctions one may achieve a clarity concerning human relations and that by practicing caution and moderation in the early stages of friendship will protect a virtuous person from the non-virtuous.

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I. Introduction

Aristotle identifies at a very early stage in the *Nicomachean Ethics* that the objective of the search in the investigations into ethics is in fact correctly identifying the ways of being that contribute to living well. In order to live well, one must strive for and attempt to achieve, by living virtuously, happiness. *Eudaimonia* is the Greek term Aristotle uses to describe happiness, or human flourishing, and he argues that it is the goal of all human activity. *Eudaimonia* is not a state, nor is it an emotion; it is a function or activity for Aristotle. *Eudaimonia* is a function in the sense that it is the final goal of achievement and the sake of carrying out all other activities and in the sense that humans can possess it through cultivation. Happiness, then, is a function that is the goal of all the processes and pursuits that we as humans carry out on a daily basis. Friendship, or *philia*, is a virtue or contains virtue and also is developed through cultivation. In order to live well, we must have good friends, and because of this Aristotle dedicates two books in the *Nicomachean Ethics* to friendship. Although friendship is necessary, there are different types of friendship, each arising by from different circumstances and therefore possessing varying degrees of depth in relation to well-being for Aristotle. Prior to discussing that, however, it is necessary to show that friendship is indeed a requirement for achieving well-being and *eudaimonia*.

In the first book of the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle identifies three basic and easily identifiable types of lives, and contrasts their inherent worth in relation to the pursuit of the well-lived life. The first and the least worthy is the life of pleasure, which is followed by the honor seeking life of politics, and finally the most worthy, which is the life of philosophical contemplation.ⁱ A life dedicated to philosophical contemplation does not seem at first to be the type of life in which socializing or merry-making with friends holds a very prominent place. Philosophizing generally requires solitude and undisturbed quiet for such deep thinking. A philosopher, in fact, seems to appear to shun social and friendly engagements and is more at ease alone with his or her books somewhere far away from the bustling market. Aristotle in fact addresses the autonomy and independence of the philosopher in the following statement.

And the self-sufficiency that is spoken of must belong most to the contemplative activity. For while a wise man, as well as a just man and the rest, needs the necessaries of life, when they are sufficiently equipped with things of that sort the just man needs people towards whom and with whom he shall act justly, and the temperate man, the brave man, and each of the others is in the same case, but the wise man, even when by himself, can contemplate truth, and the better the wiser he is; he can perhaps do so better if he has fellow-workers, but still he is the most self-sufficient. (*Nicomachean Ethics*, Book X, 1177^a27-1177^b1.)

It seems to be the case, then, that the philosopher, who is leading the best type of life that leads to human flourishing, needs friends the least. This, however, is not true, and becomes apparent by understanding what Aristotle actually means by self-sufficiency. The term contains a more encompassing definition for Aristotle that also represents in a way the necessity of friendship.

From the point of view of self-sufficiency the same result seems to follow; for the complete good is thought to be self-sufficient. Now by self-sufficient we do not mean that which is sufficient for a man by himself, for one who lives a solitary life, but also for parents, children, wife, and in general for his friends and fellow citizens, since man is sociable by nature. (*Nicomachean Ethics*, Book I, 1097^b7-11.)

By thinking about self-sufficiency, then, in this special and qualified sense, it becomes clear that by living the philosophical life one will necessarily by nature also seek out and cultivate friendships. It is perhaps the activity itself of philosophical thinking that is most self-sufficient when compared with the actions of other types of lives, however the philosopher, like all people, does indeed require family, friends and colleagues in the pursuit for well-being and a life truly worth living. The activities of masons and merchants do indeed appear to require more socializing and friendly relations than the daily activities of the philosopher. However, it must be kept in mind that Aristotle is writing in the fourth century B.C. in ancient Greece and his personal interactions in that culture would have naturally influenced the direction he seeks to take in relation to friendship in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Once this is taken into consideration it becomes clear that the life of the philosopher consists of many good friendships and friendly relationships.

Aristotle was born in Stagira on the peninsula of Chalkidike in 384 B.C., the son of renowned physician. He went to Athens to study in Plato's Academy at the age of seventeen. From teaching in the Lyceum his own school of thought arose. His followers were called the Peripatetics, or the *peripatêtikos*, which means *walking about while teaching*ⁱⁱ and is named so in honor of Aristotle for his way of teaching philosophy. Far from advocating a life as a recluse in a solitary existence, it seems as if Aristotle's way of teaching reflects in a way the opposite type of life to pursue. For Aristotle and his followers philosophized in public, and were known to do so while walking, and this took place in busy ancient Athens near and at the Lyceum and it would follow naturally then, that they were philosophizing and wandering about and socializing and making all kinds of friendships. The life of contemplation is the best life worth living, and it is self-sufficient, then, in the sense that only its activity requires the least amount of social interaction, not in the sense that it requires a life of solitude that lacks human relationships. The *Nicomachean Ethics*, then, can be read as a sort of guidebook to the best way to pursue well-being, that takes into account not only what is best for the individual, but also what is the best route to pursue in the variety of permutations Aristotle called *philia*. Since it is widely accepted that the *Nicomachean Ethics* was written as a set of lecture notes to be delivered at the Lyceum, it makes sense to think of these writings partially as the reflections of a philosopher partaking in various friendships throughout the city of Athens.

II. Types of Friendship

In our quest for the well-lived life we must seek out virtuous friends. One step towards being able to make correct rational choices that will assist us in the acquisition of good friends is being cognizant of the various types of friendship that exist and the corresponding impacts they have on one's search for well-being. In order to figure out what kind of friendship one has with another Aristotle states that it is important to be aware of the fact that all humans are seeking the good. This may be

the good itself, i.e. the good without qualification or something that is good in general for oneself. This is quite a meaningful distinction for Aristotle, for identifying what definition of good we are seeking will assist us in understanding the type of friendship that will be developed. Aristotle identifies three objects of love and three corresponding types of friendship. The three objects of love are the useful, the pleasant, and the good. From this Aristotle states that there are friendships based on utility, friendships based on pleasure, and friendships based on the good. Friendships based on utility arise from relations in business. One may be seeking something useful and another may be able to provide that good or service. Such a friendship is potentially fleeting in the sense that when the desired object or service is no longer sought after or desirable and then the said friendship dissolves quickly. This happens because the friendship was based on utility, i.e. for the sake of something else rather than friendship itself, and there was no deep concern for the other person involved. Friendships based on pleasure are also potentially equally fleeting. This is because the object of pleasure changes frequently and once this happens such a friendship quickly dissolves. Friendships based on utility and pleasure are usually impermanent, and are not the best types of friendships to be sought after due to the fact that in these relationships it is possible for a virtuous person to become friends with someone wicked. Aristotle warns us of this possibility in the following statement.

Because of pleasure or utility, then, even bad men may be friends of each other, or good men of bad, or one who is neither good nor bad may be a friend to any sort of person, but clearly only good men can be friends because of themselves; for bad men do not delight in each other unless some advantage come of the relation. (*Nicomachean Ethics*, Book VIII, 1157^a16-20.)

Since this is so, there must exist some inherent dangers in seeking or developing friendships based on pleasure or utility. Since the object of love in these cases is based on acquiring some advantage or pleasure, it is possible to form a relationship with a wicked or non-virtuous person. This type of relationship would potentially lead the virtuous person into questionable circumstances. A wicked person could then attempt to corrupt or take advantage of a virtuous soul. Through experience, however, the virtuous person should come to know that a friendship has been formed with someone that is non-virtuous, and appropriate steps may be taken that ensures that no corruption takes place. The worst type of friendship seems to be that in which two wicked people become friends. For the two wicked people necessarily are incontinent, i.e. they both possess a weakness of the will, and will therefore necessarily pursue deeds and actions that are counter to that which is good, and to that which leads to a well-lived life.

Friendship based on the good is the perfect type of friendship and it is the type of friendship we should seek. For this is a friendship between two virtuous people, and it is a friendship that exists for the sake of itself and no other external object. Concerning this best type of friendship Aristotle states the following.

Perfect friendship is the friendship of men who are good, and alike in virtue; for these wish well alike to each other *qua* good, and they are good in themselves. Now those who wish well to their friends for their sake are most truly friends; for they do this by reason of their own nature and not incidentally; therefore their friendship lasts as long as they are good-and

goodness is an enduring thing. And each is good without qualification and to his friend, for the good are both good without qualification and to each other, since to each his own activities and other like them are pleasurable, and the actions of the good are the same or like. And such a friendship is, as might be expected, permanent, since there meet in it all the qualities that friends should have. (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1156^b6-19.)

Here in the above statement we see some specific differences between perfect friendship and those based on utility and pleasure. One difference is whether the friendship persists for an extended length of time. If the friendship does withstand the test of time then we can rightly state that it is a perfect friendship. Likewise, if it is a short-lived friendship, we may correctly assume that there was some non-virtuous aspect to the friendship, which is to be found in friendships based on utility and pleasure. Another difference is that in a perfect friendship one will not find the wicked or the non-virtuous. Such perfect friendships, however, are not very common because truly virtuous people are scarce or uncommon. On perfect friendship Aristotle also states:

But it is natural that such friendships should be infrequent; for such men are rare. Further, such friendship requires time and familiarity; as the proverb says, men cannot know each other till they have ‘eaten salt together’; nor can they admit each other to friendship or be friends till each has been found lovable and been trusted by each. Those who quickly show the marks of friendship to each other wish to be friends, but are not friends unless they both are lovable and know the fact; for a wish for friendship may arise quickly, but friendship does not. (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1156^b25-32.)

These apparent results seem somewhat troubling. Is the proper course of action then to seek out only a perfect friendship which Aristotle admits is quite unique, seek out friendships based on utility or pleasure that put us at risk of forming a relationship with the non-virtuous, or to avoid seeking out friendships altogether? A narrow and somewhat superficial reading of Books VIII & IX tends to support the idea that we should in fact avoid friendships based on pleasure and utility. Yet, how is that possible? Are not most of us if not all of us imperfect in some way and have various virtues from one another? It seems to follow from lived experience that many good friendships do indeed spring from utility and pleasure based relationships. Following Cooper’s line of argument, we should first analyze Aristotle’s definition of friendship itself and then apply it to the three basic types of friendship and see how that affects how they can be conceptualized as a whole.ⁱⁱⁱ A deeper reading of Aristotle reveals indeed that we should necessarily seek out friendships based on utility and pleasure. The first clue to solving this puzzle is found in Aristotle’s treatment of friendship found in his treatise entitled the *Rhetoric*. Aristotle states:

We may describe friendly feeling towards anyone as wishing for him what you believe to be good things, not for your own sake but for his, and being inclined, so far as you can, to bring these about. A friend is one who feels thus and excites these feelings in return. Those who think they feel thus towards each other think themselves friends. This being assumed, it follows 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.

This pleasure and pain of his will be the token of his good wishes for you, since we all feel glad at getting what we wish for, and pained at getting what we do not. Those, then, are friends to whom the same things are good and evil; and those who are, moreover, friendly and unfriendly to the same people for in that case they must have the same wishes, and thus by wishing for each other what they wish for themselves, they show themselves each other's friends. (*Rhetoric*, Book II, 1380^b36-1381^a12.)

Philia, or friendship, then, as Aristotle describes it in the *Rhetoric*, is a sort of well-wishing and actually doing what is good for the sake of that person. Furthermore, there is a constant reciprocity of well-wishing that exists between two friends. When the above definition is considered in relation to Aristotle's treatment of the three basic types of friendship in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, it becomes clear that reciprocal well-wishing exists in all types of friendships. A friendship may have formed initially in a business situation that was centered on possibly self-centered interests, however friendships like other virtues are cultivated over time and two relatively virtuous people may develop a good friendship. A relationship may be initially based on utility or pleasure, however once reciprocal well-wishing or reciprocal good deeds are done for each other's sake, and they are virtuous people, then a friendship may be formed.

During his investigations into the nature of friendship, Aristotle explains how *philia* exists in countless situations, including relationships between lovers. Some friendships between lovers are initially based on utility, others on pleasure. Such relationships are imperfect for Aristotle because of the fleeting nature of mutual feelings over time. Friendships that share an equality in the sense that each person receives the same amount of pleasure or utility arising from the same origin have a good chance of enduring through time. Friendships between a lover and the beloved, in which the lover unequally lavishes attention upon the beloved will be less permanent due to the fact that this inherent inequality reflects also an inherent imperfection. A permanence, however, may result over time if the lovers come to know each other well enough, love each other for each other's sake, and love one another's character. The friendship of two lovers whose relationship is based on pleasure is in a sense less imperfect and potentially more enduring than those based on utility. This is because utility based friendships even between lovers dissolve once the profit or gain from any agreement or business scheme ceases. Therefore, if one decides to enter into a business agreement with a lover, perhaps it would be best to see first through time if there exists equalities of various kinds between the two.

The fate of two lovers in a way lies in the mixture of luck and chance that leads to and occurs during a spontaneous encounter. Our choices and actions in life present limitless possibilities which done correctly may possibly lead to *eudaimonia*. All of our reasoned choices and actions, however, do not comprise the Whole of our lived experience, as Aristotle posits in the *Physics*, Book II, chapter 6:

Chance and what results from chance are appropriate to agents that are capable of good fortune and of action generally. Therefore necessarily chance is in the sphere of actions. This is indicated by the fact that good fortune is thought to be the same, or nearly the same, as happiness, and happiness to be a

kind of action, since it is well-doing. Hence what is not capable of action cannot do anything by chance. (*Physics*, Book II, 197^b1-7.)

The outcome of a successful relationship hinges on a variety of factors however it must be proposed that the cultivation of one's own virtues in some ways determines one's partner in the sense that since true friends are literally, for Aristotle, second selves, then our truest friends will possess similar if not inter-compatible and/or complimentary virtues. Successful permanent lovers seem to possess similar virtues because they are driven by their individual activities that in turn benefits their best friend which whom they share the same goal which is the achievement of *eudaimonia*. Lovers that also happen to be philosophers or artists, or physicians, or other virtuous individuals love themselves, and the reflection of themselves that is shown in their second selves. Virtues, then, for Aristotle, are best practiced amongst one's closest friends because in this way we may most readily achieve the function of human flourishing, or *eudaimonia*.

Virtuous activities, then, and well-being itself depend upon the delicate and subtle ways in which humans convey their desired activities and goals to other potential lovers and friends. There also exists the flawed human trait that initially projects a similarity of virtues onto a lover or friend. Once those projections are proven false through experience, though, it becomes clear that either the friend or lover was wicked or that chance and luck combined in some way so that the final consequence of the partnership between two friends turns into a fleeting relationship. One result of such a failed friendship is sometimes disappointment. Disappointment occurs when one that possesses a virtuous character is troubled in the deepest sense by another virtuous friend's *akratic*, or weak-willed, actions or decisions. When we are disappointed, it is usually with someone whom we respect, who in a way may also resemble ourselves, and that lover or friend would therefore never do such an action and one would expect virtuous reciprocity in respect to basically all actions. Disappointment rarely or never occurs in human behavior when mutual respect or any sense of friendship is initially lacking. We become mainly disappointed with our virtuous friends, not with non-virtuous strangers. This is because of the expectation of a constant comportment of virtuous actions that we hold to our dearest friends, i.e. our second selves.

III. Conclusion

Perhaps then, to pursue the life of philosophical contemplation in conjunction with the search for perfect friendship is indeed the best path to choose for the attainment of *eudaimonia*. Friendship is a necessary component to *eudaimonia* in the sense that reciprocal well-wishing amongst friends, family, business relationships, and even amongst states verifies our potential goodness and cultivates all of our virtues and cultivates human flourishing amongst humanity in general by regarding a person for their own sake and no other reason what so ever. Our modern society has a much narrower sense of friendship than what Aristotle describes as *philia*, nonetheless various friendships do arise in countless situations in our lived experience, and if by chance two people are virtuous, a true friendship may be cultivated. Such a thing is rare, as Aristotle says, and therefore it is very much reasonable to think that a virtuous person counts only a few as his or her truest friends.

As Aristotle recommends striving for that which is moderate in all things, perhaps then it would not be incorrect to say that part of a definition of well-being would contain the notion of several, or a few good friends that are engaged in virtuous activities. Friendships of course will develop through activities based on utility or pleasure that may or may not be lasting. These types of friendships are also necessary for the practicality of a so-called normally functioning state which also in some ways expects that a sort of mutual cordiality exist amongst its inhabitants. We seek out friends, then, because it is a part of our nature and in doing so we may actually have true friends which Aristotle calls our second selves, people that we truly love because their virtues and activities reflect our own virtues and thus resemble ourselves. Friendships arise spontaneously and by chance therefore perhaps by seeking moderation in general one may practice moderation in developing friendships by approaching new relationships with a particular degree of caution.

Virtue may be perceived, however it is only through the hindsight that temporality provides through which one may come to know if truly another is virtuous or wicked. To think or say that someone is virtuous without actually knowing whether such a thing is true or not is in many ways just a projection of hope. While hope is in general a good thing when pursuing a life well-lived the acquiring of true friends is of such great importance that true knowledge gained through experience is the only verification of the formation of a perfect friendship for Aristotle. In other words, hope is just wishful thinking that acts as a temporary replacement for sensible verification when considered in relation to the cultivation of true friendships. Caution, then, in the spirit of Aristotelian moderation then, should be used as a form of protection against a forfeiture of *eudaimonia* at the beginning and early stages of all friendships.

It is only when two people truly become acquainted with one another and are able to see each other's virtues and love each other for the sake of that person when caution fades away and true friendship forms. By approaching friendship with caution, then, relationships with the non-virtuous are minimized, thus proving again that exercising moderation is a virtuous activity because it assists us in achieving the well-lived life by acting as a gateway or checkpoint at two passageways that lead to either encounters with the virtuous or with the non-virtuous. Caution and moderation, if practiced by the virtuous, will assist in the formation of friendships with the virtuous. Likewise, fewer encounters with wicked people allows one a better chance of the possibility of achieving *eudaimonia*.

It is also wise for states to proceed with caution when partaking in relations with other states. If a state is virtuous, and wants to protect and in fact truly advocates the well-being of its citizens, then it will approach with great caution, and hesitation, any type of relationship with another state that may consist of questionable virtues. The wicked are to be avoided at all costs, therefore in order to truly trust each other states must in some ways respectively reflect another's virtues. Diplomacy, is, in fact, the way in which states cultivate mutual well-wishing through respectful, (and at times cautious) virtuous activity. When states recognize that this well-wishing is for the sake of its state and its citizens and nothing else, then true friendships amongst states form, and this is something permanent and it is something worth striving for.

As it stands, then, friendship for Aristotle is a virtue or contains virtue and is a necessary component of having a life that may be considered well-lived. The extempore blossoming of a friendship is initially approached with caution by the virtuous person for the sake of one's happiness and for the sake of moderation.

So, how are we to choose our friends? (Or is that even a fair question with respect to luck and chance?) The *Nicomachean Ethics* does not contain any strict rules through which conduct must be observed. It does however, show that through the development of one's virtues similar good people will become friends and maybe even more. All three types of friendships should be pursued while living the best type of life, one of philosophical contemplation. If a virtuous person pursues this life then he or she may perhaps be able to differentiate easily the good from the wicked, and in doing so will assist in the cultivation and possibly eventually the permanent acquisition and possession of *eudaimonia*.

Friendship, then, holds a place in our lived experience as a relationship based on reciprocal well-wishing with people that we love who hold similar virtues. Such friendships exist amongst individuals such as best friends and spouses, family members, and even amongst states. All individuals and states should attempt to cultivate good friendships because by doing so the best activities that lead to human flourishing are made apparent and are recognized for their inherent meaning and value. Luck and chance will determine whom we meet, however, virtuous people will seek out friends that are considered to be second selves, and the acquisition of such friends will contribute to the achievement of the permanent possession of human flourishing and the possession of a life well-lived.

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ⁱ *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book I, 1095^b13-19.

ⁱⁱ Liddell and Scott's Greek-English Lexicon, pg. 629.

ⁱⁱⁱ See *Aristotle on the Forms of Friendship* by John M. Cooper.