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Friendship in Aristotle's "The Nicomachean Ethics"

By

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Aristotle was born in Stagira in northern Greece in 384 B.C.E. and lived until 322 B.C.E. He was the son of Nichomachus, the court physician to the Macedonian royal family. He was trained first in medicine, and then in 367 he was sent to Athens to study philosophy with Plato. He stayed at Plato's Academy until approximately 347 when Plato died. Though undisputedly a gifted pupil, Aristotle did oppose some of Plato's teachings, and when Plato died Aristotle was not appointed as head of the Academy. It is thought that he then spent several years traveling and increasing his knowledge, in Turkey and its islands. He returned to Macedonia around 338 to become the tutor of Alexander the Great. After Alexander later conquered Athens, Aristotle returned there to set up a school of his own, known as the Lyceum. Members of the Lyceum conducted research into a wide range of subjects, all of which were of interest to Aristotle himself: botany, biology, logic, music, mathematics, astronomy, medicine, cosmology, physics, the history of philosophy, metaphysics, psychology, ethics, theology, rhetoric, political history, government and political theory, rhetoric, and the arts. In all of these areas, the Lyceum collected manuscripts and assembled one of the first great libraries. After Alexander's death, Athens began to rebel against Macedonian rule, and Aristotle's political situation there soon became precarious. To avoid being put to death, he fled to the island of Euboea, where he died soon after.

Aristotle was a prolific writer and polymath, and his work radically transformed most, if not all, areas of knowledge he touched. It is thought that he wrote between 150 and 200 treatises, but only approximately 31 survive today. His writings that remain span a wide range of disciplines, from logic, metaphysics and philosophy of mind, through ethics, political theory,

aesthetics and rhetoric, and into such primarily non-philosophical fields as empirical biology. He was the first to classify the areas of human knowledge into distinct disciplines such as mathematics, biology, and ethics. He is also considered the father of the field of logic, due to being the first to develop a formalized system for reasoning.

The Nicomachean Ethics is the name normally given to Aristotle's best known work on ethics. The work consists of ten books and is understood to be based on notes from his lectures at the Lyceum, which were perhaps edited by or dedicated to Aristotle's son, Nicomachus. The theme of the work is the Socratic question which had previously been explored in Plato's works, of how men should best live. In his Metaphysics, Aristotle described how Socrates turned philosophy to human questions, whereas Pre-Socratic philosophy had only been theoretical. Ethics, as now separated out for discussion by Aristotle, is practical rather than theoretical. It is not only a contemplation about good living, but also aims to create good living. In The Nicomachean Ethics, Aristotle devotes two of the ten books to the topic of friendship and its role in the good life. *In this essay I will discuss what Aristotle had to say about the subject of friendship in this work, and why it was so critical to his concept of the good life.*

“Even when travelling abroad one can observe that a natural affinity and friendship exist between man and man universally. Moreover, friendship appears to be the bond of the state; and lawgivers seem to set more store by it than they do by justice, for to promote concord, which seems akin to friendship, is their chief aim, while faction, which is enmity, is what they are most anxious to banish. And if men are friends, there is no need of justice between them; whereas merely to be just is not enough—a feeling of friendship is also necessary. Indeed the highest form of justice seems to have an element of friendly feeling in it.

And friendship is not only indispensable as a means, it is also noble in itself. We praise those who love their friends, and it is counted a noble thing to have many friends; and some people think that a true friend is a good man.” (Aristotle, 453)

Aristotle begins by noting the inherent nobility of friendship and its natural occurrence not only among men, but amongst other animals as well. He points out that friendship is like politics, in that both modes of relation seek to promote a concordance between parties. He also notes that between friends there is really no need for justice, or perhaps it would be clearer to say that justice will be naturally occurring in the relationship, for in true friendship both parties will wish that the other is treated favorably and therefore act accordingly.

Aristotle next turns his attention to the root of friendship, love, and tries to determine what arouses this emotion within man.

“It seems that not everything is loved, but only what is lovable, and that this is either what is good, or pleasant, or useful. But useful may be taken to mean productive of some good or of pleasure, so that the class of things lovable as ends is reduced to the good and the pleasant. Then, do men like what is really good, or what is good for them? [F]or sometimes the two may be at variance; and the same with what is pleasant. Now it appears that each person loves what is good for himself, and that while what is really good is lovable absolutely, what is good for a particular person is lovable for that person. Further, each person loves not what is really good for himself, but what appears to him to be so; however, this will not affect our argument, for ‘lovable’ will mean ‘what appears lovable.’” (Aristotle, 455-457)

In establishing these three motives of human love, he is also setting up a prelude for his distinction of three varieties of friendship. Love of the useful can be seen as a means towards a further end of love of goodness or pleasantness, and can therefore be dismissed as an end in itself. While both what is seen as good or seen as pleasant may not actually be good for one except on a superficial level, people or things that are ‘truly’ or essentially good are ends in themselves and therefore ‘truly’ lovable. Love of the variety of means, love based upon usefulness, pleasantness, and even superficial good are mere approximations of the love of good as an end in itself. These distinctions are the foundation and framework upon which are built Aristotle’s three varieties of friendship and their relation to each other.

“There being then three motives of love, the term Friendship is not applied to love for inanimate objects, since here there is no return of affection, and also no wish of good for the object—for instance, it would be ridiculous to wish well to a bottle of wine: at the most one wishes that it may keep well in order that one may have it to oneself; whereas we are told that we ought to wish our friend well for his own sake. But persons who wish another good for his own sake, if the feeling is not reciprocated, are merely said to feel goodwill for him: only when mutual is such goodwill termed friendship. And perhaps we should also add the qualification that the feeling of goodwill must be known to its object. For a man often feels goodwill towards persons whom he has never seen, but whom he believes to be good or useful, and one of these persons may also entertain the same feeling towards him. Here then we have a case of two people mutually well-disposed, whom nevertheless we cannot speak of as friends, because they are not aware of each other’s regard. To be friends therefore, men must (1) feel goodwill for each other, that is, wish each other’s good, and (2) be aware of each other’s goodwill, and (3) the cause of their goodwill must be one of the lovable qualities mentioned above.” (Aristotle, 457)

In this passage Aristotle has begun his general definition of friendship. One cannot be friends with an inanimate object because friendship is defined by its reciprocal nature, and a thing can never generate good will in return. Likewise, friendship exists only where there is mutual good will between persons. Participants in a friendship must also be aware of the mutual good will. It is not explicitly stated in the above passage, although it is later on in the work, that friends must engage with one another in order to truly make the passage from mutual good will to friendship. Friends must have interaction in order to sustain the friendship. This involves both the reciprocal element and the awareness of the mutual good will for either would be hard to maintain without interaction. Finally, as friendship is based upon love, this love must be based upon one of the motives for love, which in turn begets the three varied forms of friendship.

“Now these qualities differ in kind; hence the affection or friendship they occasion may differ in kind also. There are accordingly three kinds of friendship, corresponding in number to the three lovable qualities; since a reciprocal affection, known to either party, can be based on each of the three, and when

men love each other, they wish each other well in respect of the quality which is the ground of their friendship. Thus friends whose affection is based on utility do not love each other in themselves, but in so far as some benefit accrues to them from each other. And similarly with those whose friendship is based on pleasure: for instance, we enjoy the society of witty people not because of what they are in themselves, but because they are agreeable to us. Hence in a friendship based on utility or on pleasure men love their friend for their own good or their own pleasure, and not as being the person loved, but as useful or agreeable. And therefore these friendships are based on an accident, since the friend is not loved for being what he is, but as affording some benefit or pleasure as the case may be. Consequently friendships of this kind are easily broken off, in the event of the parties themselves changing, for if no longer pleasant or useful to each other, they cease to love each other. And utility is not a permanent quality; it differs at different times. Hence when the motive of the friendship has passed away, the friendship itself is dissolved, having existed merely as a means to that end." (Aristotle, 459)

Here Aristotle breaks down the concept of friendship in general into three varieties which correspond to the three motives of love. Again, only love based upon good, or in other words, virtue in itself, is love based on an end rather than a means. As means are only transitory methods, the only version of love or friendship with any grounds in permanence is based on good, which is an end in itself. He elaborates further upon each of the kinds of friendship below.

"Friendships of Utility seem to occur most frequently between the old, as in old age men do not pursue pleasure but profit; and between those persons in the prime of life and young people whose object in life is gain. Friends of this kind do not indeed frequent each other's company much, for in some cases they are not even pleasing to each other, and therefore have no use for friendly intercourse unless they are mutually profitable; since their pleasure in each other goes no further than their expectations of advantage....

With the young on the other hand the motive of friendship appears to be pleasure, since the young guide their lives by emotion, and for the most part pursue what is pleasant to themselves, and the object of the moment. And the things that please them change as their age alters; hence they both form friendships and drop them quickly. Also the young are prone to fall in love, as love is chiefly guided by

emotion, and grounded on pleasure; hence they form attachments quickly and give them up quickly, often changing before the day is out....

The perfect form of friendship is that between the good, and those who resemble each other in virtue. For these friends wish each alike the other's good in respect of their goodness, and they are good in themselves; but it is those who wish the good of their friends for their friends' sake who are friends in the fullest sense, since they love each other for themselves and not accidentally. Hence the friendship of these lasts as long as they continue to be good; and virtue is a permanent quality. And each is good relatively to his friend as well as absolutely, since the good are both good absolutely and profitable to each other. And each is pleasant in both ways also, since good men are pleasant both absolutely and to each other; for everyone is pleased by his own actions, and therefore by actions that resemble his own, and the actions of all good men are the same or similar. Such friendship is naturally permanent, since it combines in itself all the attributes that friends ought to possess. All affection is based on good or on pleasure, either absolute or relative to the person who feels it, and is prompted by similarity of some sort; but this friendship possesses all these attributes in the friends themselves, for they are alike, *et cetera*, in that way. Also the absolutely good is pleasant absolutely as well; but the absolutely good and pleasant are the chief objects of affection; therefore it is between good men that affection and friendship exist in their fullest and best form.

Such friendships are of course rare, because such men are few. Moreover they require time and intimacy: as the saying goes, you cannot get to know a man till you have consumed the proverbial amount of salt in his company; and so you cannot admit him to friendship or really be friends, before each has shown the other that he is worthy of friendship and won his confidence. People who enter into friendly relations quickly have the wish to be friends, but cannot really be friends without being worthy of friendship, and also knowing each other to be so; the wish to be friends is a quick growth, but friendship is not." (Aristotle, 459-465)

In the above passages, Aristotle expands on his belief that friendship based upon goodness is the only true form, and why the forms based on utility or pleasure are merely approximations of the true form. He also notes that this true form is the rarest of the varieties, due in part to the relative lack

of virtuous men, and in part to the relative lack of time that one has at hand compared to the amount of time needed to cultivate this type of relationships.

In the next parts of his work Aristotle discusses various ways that reciprocity can be balanced in friendships between persons of unequal status or disposition, examines parallels between the kinds of friendship and various kinds of political governance, and the relationship between friendship and self-love. For the purposes of the essay I will be skipping over these sections and move directly toward his concluding section of the portion of the work devoted to friendship in which he discusses whether or not a virtuous or supremely happy man even has need of friends and why.

“[I]t appears that a virtuous friend is essentially desirable for the virtuous man. For as has been said above, that which is essentially good is good and pleasing in itself to the virtuous man. And life is defined, in the case of animals, by the capacity for sensation; in the case of man, by the capacity for sensation and thought. But a capacity is referred to its activity, and in this its full reality consists. It appears therefore that life in the full sense is sensation or thought. But life is a thing good and pleasant in itself, for it is definite, and definiteness is a part of the essence of goodness, and what is essentially good is good for the good man, and hence appears to be pleasant to all men. We must not argue from a vicious and corrupt life, or one that is painful, for such a life is indefinite, like its attributes....But if life itself is good and pleasant (as it appears to be, because all men desire it, and virtuous and supremely happy men most of all, since their way of life is most desirable and their existence the most blissful); and if one who sees is conscious that he sees, one who hears that he hears, one who walks that he walks, and similarly for all the other human activities there is a faculty that is conscious of their exercise, so that whenever we perceive, we are conscious that we perceive, and whenever we think, we are conscious that we think, and to be conscious that we are perceiving or thinking is to be conscious that we exist (for existence, as we saw, is sense-perception or thought); and if to be conscious one is alive is a pleasant thing in itself (for life is a thing essentially good, and to be conscious that one possesses a good thing is pleasant); and if life is desirable, and especially so for good men, because existence is good for them, and so pleasant (because they are pleased by the perception of what is intrinsically good); and if the virtuous man feels towards his friend in the same way as he feels towards himself (for his friend is a second self)—then, just as a man’s own

existence is desirable for him, so, or nearly so, is his friend's existence also desirable. But, as we saw, it is the consciousness of oneself as good that makes existence desirable, and such consciousness is pleasant in itself. Therefore a man ought also to share his friend's consciousness of his existence, and this is attained by their living together and by conversing and communicating their thoughts to each other; for this is the meaning of living together as applied to human beings, it does not mean merely feeding in the same place, as it does when applied to cattle.

If then to the supremely happy man existence is desirable in itself, being good and pleasant essentially, and if his friend's existence is almost equally desirable to him, it follows that a friend is one of the things to be desired. But that which is desirable for him he is bound to have, or else his condition will be incomplete in that particular. Therefore to be happy a man needs virtuous friends." (Aristotle, 561-565)

Through an argument which explains how even a supremely happy person could not in fact be supremely happy without friendship based upon goodness, Aristotle demonstrates that all human beings would benefit from relationships of this sort. He also points out that even the perception of a friendship based on goodness is intrinsically good and pleasant, a condition which does not necessarily follow from friendships based on utility or pleasantries. He reiterates the need for interaction between friends, and shows that these interactions are not only a necessary condition, but are also an inherent benefit of a friendship based on goodness in that they provide a continued source of pleasantness for the individuals involved.

Aristotle devotes such a large portion of his book on the good life to friendship for a very important reason. There can be no good life without true friendship. As the idiom goes, "no man is an island." Good friends encourage us to become better, both by example and by inciting us to want to do well by them. Good friends can be both a mirror to contemplate upon and reflect and a window to the world.

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