

Aristotle on Friendship

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November 22, 1993

This is a short reflection on an important Aristotelian concept, friendship. What I want to focus on mainly is what appears to me to be the critical mechanism that gives rise to friendship in the "best" sense, and how the need for friendship arises of necessity from love of self. The mechanism is important because it seats "friendship" and "love" in intellect, and shows how friendship and love work. We tend to seat friendship and love in "heart" or see these ideas as part of our irrational, hormonal, or biological nature. While Aristotle does not deny "heart," friendship and love in its purest form is an intellectual concern and critical for living well, individually and in community. In a nutshell, this mechanism, in lay terms, works something like this: When we love ourselves--properly-- we are our own best friend. When we are our own best friends, we recognize in others qualities which mirror that which we love in ourselves. We see others as other selves. The affinity, affection or love that arises from this profound commonality expresses itself necessarily as friendship. So, it is this mechanism I want to examine .

First of all, what is friendship? For the Greeks and for Aristotle, friendship has a wider meaning than for us. The Oxford dictionary defines a friend as "one joined to another in intimacy and mutual benevolence independently of sexual or family love." This is a narrower definition than Aristotle intends.

Friendship in the **Ethics**, or *philia*, includes those Oxford relationships, but also embraces both more and less intimate bonds. On the more intimate side, the bonds between parent and child or husband and wife, and on the less intimate side many other looser relationships: civic connections, business partnerships, religious ties, political bonds, social clubs, neighborhood connections. These bonds of friendship can emerge from within an endless variety of potential fraternal groupings. Modern possibilities could include: members of unions, student communities, college communities, civic, provincial, national communities, stamp collectors, sailors, men, women, or any number of combinations of groupings where people find common cause. Aristotle would have no problem seeing the bonds that tie us, instructors and students in Liberal Studies 301, as bonds of friendship. For Aristotle the social

and political considerations of friendship are as wide as the definition of friendship is broad, which is why Aristotle devotes as much attention to the subject as he does.

The possibilities for bonding in friendship are not restricted to communities of equals. They include relationships between rulers and ruled, young and old, rich and poor, master and apprentice, student and teacher. And while parties in such unequal relationships may hold vastly different positions in terms of age, power, wealth, learning, or experience, the bonds of friendship are real, even though the things they give each other are different.

Aristotle devotes two books to the topic, roughly 20 percent of the **Ethics**. Yet, the material in these two chapters is largely neglected by scholars. This is strange because for Aristotle friendship is considered as necessary for a flourishing life. Happiness requires it and the moral excellence Aristotle defines as justice is impossible without it.

What then is so important about friends for Aristotle? The short answer: "Friends enhance our ability to think and to act." But, "to think," or "to act," as we learn from the Ethics, are to be understood "teleologically" or, in other words, towards ultimate or final purposes. Acting isn't just acting. Thinking isn't just thinking. "The aim of action," in fact, is "the good," which he later identifies with "happiness." and, "happiness is the end of our actions." Well, if action (right action) brings us to the good, what then about that other activity that friendship enhances, namely thinking (right thinking)? Near the end of the Ethics Aristotle identifies thinking, or the "activity of intelligence" (the highest order of thinking) with "the complete happiness of man." The goal and gold of life's project is to be happy and friends help us get there.

But how does this work and why are friends somehow indispensable to a full life? The key to understanding the mechanism of friendship--how friendship enhances our teleological purpose--how friends help us get to the gold--happiness--the good--arises from Aristotle's notion of "self-love."

To understand how friendship works, we need first to understand how we relate to ourselves. Aristotle arrives at this point by noting that anything we wish or might wish from our friends we also wish for ourselves. So, let's check that out first by asking what we wish from others. He suggests five points.

Let's try them on in both senses by applying each statement first to a friend and then to our selves.

- 1: (A friend is) (I am) someone who wishes for and does what is good for me. (T or F)
- 2: (A friend is) (I am) someone who actively wishes for your my existence and life. (T or F)
- 3: (A friend is) (I am) someone who spends time with me (myself). (T or F)
4. (A friend is) (I am) someone who desires what I desire. (T or F)
5. (A friend is) (I am) someone who shares my sorrows and joys. (T or F)

Turning these on ourselves produces some interesting ideas. Negative responses to any of these answers serve as a test of internal harmony . They suggest also ways in which we can regard ourselves (psyches or souls) as consisting of various elements.

These five characteristics or sentiments can--in a good individual-- one whose internal soul or psyche is not divided against itself-- reflect with as much truth on self as on a friend and to the extent that a friend might share these five characteristics in common with me, the friend can be regarded as another "self." The sentiment, affection, or affinity that arises in us for a friend who shares these five characteristics with us, might be called love. We love those who possess these characteristics. Then, is it not reasonable to turn that sentiment back onto ourselves if we answered in the affirmative to those qualities about ourselves.

In other words is there such a thing as self love? Does charity (another word for love) begin at home? Or, to use the lovely equivalent Greek proverb, is the "knee closer than the shin?" What does it mean to be our own best friend in the best sense?

Here Aristotle differentiates between self love directed towards the irrational parts of the psyche or soul versus self love directed towards the rational parts of the psyches or soul. Irrationally directed self-love-- the gratification of emotion or appetite is base . However, the self love that comes from the gratification of the rational or the most "sovereign" element in us, our ruling " intelligence," is noble and good. This then is where the mechanism for friendship kicks in.

This ruling element, or intelligence, is actually identical with what we truly are. A good person should be a self lover. Why? Because in loving ourselves, we perform noble actions. More importantly, we will benefit others. Why?

Because intelligence always chooses what is best for itself. A good man always obeys his intelligence, and the actions of such men are performed in the interests of friends, community and country. The good deeds, or the right actions that follow from self love must be directed somewhere and that generally means directed to others. In plain words we need others to do good deeds to. Reciprocally, in misfortune we need those who will direct good to us. Consequently a happy man needs society and friends. Does that make sense? Friends emerge as a consequence of right inwards self--identification with intelligence-- that which is unequivocally directed towards the good. Intelligence in turn is necessarily direct outwards and usually toward others. Love of self reflects necessarily as love of others.

Aristotle puts more substance around this argument by reminding us that those others to whom we are now of necessity directing our good deeds are to a greater or lesser degree other "selves." Now, our very "existence" is pleasant and desirable because we perceive it as good. These other selves to whom our reflected intelligence is directed, are desirable and pleasant too. Friends enhance our pleasure and happiness--because, to return to the initial claim, they enhance our ability to think and to act.

The key in this mechanism is the claim that "intelligence," that which is truly us, is somehow infallible. But what guarantee is there that the sovereign in us is not a tyrant? What makes intelligence so good? After all, if intelligence was not good, friends might not enhance our happiness. For Aristotle, "intelligence" is that which apprehends fundamental principles, and is "always truthful." (from **Posterior Analytics**). So, "intelligence" for Aristotle, is an intellectual characteristic which reigns like a pope within us, and can never err when it speaks "ex cathedra." Another way of putting it is that if intelligence speaks falsely, it is not intelligence that speaks.

In Book X of the **Ethics** Aristotle claims that "intelligence" is the "highest possession we have and its objects the highest objects of knowledge." Interestingly, Aristotle suggests that a wise man--one who presumably has identified completely with intelligence--is self sufficient! Such a man would presumably need no friends at all! This apparent contradiction is partially resolved where he notes that such a life is however "more than human." Humans, Aristotle, notes are composites of soul and body, and far from able to identify completely with intelligence. Friends come in handy, it seems, even for those absorbed in purely theoretical pursuits.

