

Aristotle's account of True Friendship

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Human beings are social creatures. Although there are some people that might find pleasure in solitude, it seems clear that the majority of people do seek companionship if possible. Chief among these companionships are friendships. For some people, this is what makes life worthwhile, the presence of friends. Even though this topic seems to be very important, Aristotle spent two whole books on the topic, very little has been written about it by philosophers the last hundred years.

This paper will deal with the Aristotelean notion of friendship, with special focus on Friendships of Virtue. The paper will answer questions like what Aristotle meant by friendship, what kind of friendships exist, and how we go about acquiring the highest type of friendship. It will deal with problems of egoism, raised by Kant and Kierkegaard in opposition to Aristotle's high praise of friendships. Lastly, it will evaluate Aristotle's friendship with common experience of the notion. Throughout our life we get into different kinds of relationships. Some relationships are forced upon us, like family ties. These are relationships we are born in, and we cannot break them anymore than we can stop breathing. Even denying their existence does not change the fact that your mother and aunts are who they are. Other relationships are not forced upon us but we do not have complete control over them, like love interests. We do not choose who we want to fall in love with even though we do choose the situations that makes it possible for the feelings to appear. The third kind of relationships are friendships. Friendships are, in the old Greeks' view, the most important kind of relationships you can be involved in. One of the reasons is that you can choose your friend, unlike family. But what kind of friend you are, depends solely on your character. To the old Greeks, friendships brought out the best in us, and a man without friends would be poorer without it.

Aristotle distinguished between three kinds of friendships: friendships of utility, friendships of pleasure and friendships of virtue. Friendships of utility is a friendship based on usefulness. The friends are friends only insofar as they are useful to each other. An example of this might be car salesman and the car buyer. Assuming they know each other, both want something the other can provide. They are useful to each other insofar they can provide the goods the other person need. This kind of friendships do not last long because they are contingent on the goods that are provided.

Friendships of pleasure is based on the amount of pleasure the participants get from the relationship. An example of this might be the people who go to parties together. They enjoy each other's company, but this is the primary

reason for the friendship. They are friends primary for the enjoyment they bring to themselves.

The last kind of friendships is the friendship of virtue. This kind of friendship is exclusive, in the sense that it can only be between two people. Unlike friendships of utility and pleasure, where there can be a circle of friends, the friendship of virtue is only one-on-one. The reason is that the friends have no love to spare for other virtuous friendships. Friendship of virtue is also unique in that it can only happen between two people of same virtue, and the friends have to be virtuous. Where friendships of utility and pleasure exist for the utility and pleasure for oneself, the friendship of virtue is for the friend.

Some people might object to this definition of friends. They point out that when you do something, the ultimate reason for doing it, is for yourself. One would be more honest with oneself and other if one could admit this. This is not necessarily a bad thing, insofar as we understand what is in our own interest. When Aristotle claims that the friendship of virtue has as its mark that the friends do well for their friends for the sake of the friend, he is confused about human nature. This never happens. They would therefore conclude that there are no difference between friendships of virtue and friendships of utility and pleasure in this respect. What set them apart is not selfishness versus unselfishness.

I do not believe that Aristotle is wrong in saying that friendships of utility and pleasure is for our own sake, and friendships of virtue is for sake of the friend. The three kinds of friendships are ordered in levels, in the Aristotelean scheme, where each level inherits features from the levels below. Friendships of pleasure, which is level two, would therefore inherit some of the features of friendship of utility. For instance, friends of pleasure are being useful to each other, and they bring pleasure to the relationship. On the other hand, friendships of utility does not have a pleasure component. In the same sense, friendships of virtue will have features from both utility and pleasure. Friendships of virtue are both pleasurable and the friends are useful to each other, and you could argue that the virtuous friends are primary friends for their own sake.

Is this a contradiction in Aristotle? Lets assume that we have tickets to a concert. If a friend of utility would ask us for the ticket, we would provide him with it with the stipulation that he would pay it back in one form or another. If it had been a friend of pleasure who had asked, we would go with him to the concert because we like to go to concerts with friends. We enjoy company on these occasions, and it brings us pleasure. In a virtuous friendship, we would go to the concert with him and we would enjoy it. The payment we

get might be just to know that we made the friend happy. The difference between the two first examples and the last one was that in the former examples, the who the friend was did not matter.

In the example of the friend of utility, he had something to offer you in return for the ticket you would provide him. Let us assume that he can get a Howard Stern autograph in return, and let us assume the friend's name is Alex. It would not matter to us whether or not Alex was the one who receives our ticket. What matter is that we wanted a Howard Stern autograph in return for ticket. It is not the person, but the utility that is at the center of attention, and Aristotle thinks that this is an act for oneself, we want the autograph, and not for the friend, Alex wanted ticket. In the example of the friend of pleasure, let us call her Lisa, we can follow the same line of argument as above. It is not as much Lisa herself that we want at the concert, but rather a friend, any friend, to be with us at the concert. It is the company of a friend we enjoy, not the company of Lisa. With the friendship of virtue, however, it is not as much the enjoyment we get from the event, not the payment we get from it after the fact, but rather the friend himself that motivates us to do what we did. With a friend of virtue, we would want to be at the concert with him, and nobody else. We do get personal gratification from it, but we get it from a specific person rather than a general person.

Some might object to this interpretation of friendships of utility and pleasure. They would argue that friendships, of any kind, is more than a fulfillment of a slot. In any friendship, there is something about the friend that makes the friendship. Otherwise we would not be anything more than acquaintances. If friends can be replaced as easily as it sounded in the concert example, then maybe it was not really friendships at all.

This is a difficulty in Aristotle. The question is not as much whether friends can be replaced as easily as Aristotle seems to suggest, but rather whether or not we should call friendships of utility and pleasure, friendships at all. I would be inclined to argue that Aristotle's notion of friendship is too broad. He should not have included friendships of utility and pleasure as actual friendship. However, as he has done other places in his work, his usage of the idea of friendship is actually common usage.

After Socrates discussions of friendship in **Lysis**, he did consider Lysis and Menexenus friends. We do consider people friends, even though they are not close and we do not spend much time together. Examples of these might be colleagues, fellow students, neighbors and even your mailman. They might not be close friends, but they are friends in some sense of the word. These people Aristotle would call friends of utility or pleasure, depending on your relationship with them. And although they are fleeting friends, here today and

gone tomorrow, Aristotle does believe they are important because they are your connection to the rest of the world.

Aristotle called the virtuous friend "another oneself". Virtuous friends share more than just mutual enjoyment of each others company, they are also soulmates. Aristotle believes that only the virtuous man can become a virtuous friend. The reason is that only the virtuous man will seek out the ultimate good, and that among the goods, there is the virtuous friend. A man cannot say to be self-sufficient without a friend like this, because he would be missing a key component to what a self-sufficient man should have. In his friend, he sees the reflection of himself, and he discovers new sides within himself that he would not otherwise be able to find. The friend, in the Aristotelean scheme, becomes an extension of yourself.

There is a problem with this view, however. Kant believed that an act could only have moral value if and only if you were not the primary beneficiary of the act. With Aristotle's definition of the true friendship, it seems that a true friendship should not be a moral goal. At best, a true friendship is morally neutral. It does not give you moral points to have a virtuous friend, because it really does not say anything about your moral character. Aristotle would disagree with this. He believed that having a true friend should be the center of what a moral person should have and work for. Can these views be reconciled and if not, who is right?

Kant does not believe that friendship is a morally worthwhile occupation, although he sees the need for it. He worries that since friendship is basically a way to satisfy one's own need, that people do not seek friendship for the sake of itself. Rather than taking the Aristotelean definition of friendship, he defines true friendship as the kind of friendship where the friends take care of the other in the Kantian sense. Since he agrees that we have certain need that needs to be taken care of, he believes friendships can take care of this need. Since we take care of our friend's need, he will take care of us. This makes friendships more morally valid, but it is still not perfect.

Aristotle would disagree with Kant's reasoning. He does not believe that self-interested acts are morally disagreeable. Even the virtuous man in Aristotle, is self-interested in his actions. To Aristotle, an action is good whether or not you enjoyed doing it and received pleasure from it. The goodness of the act is separate from the benefits. In the same way, true friendships are good for both friends by themselves. The benefits of having a friend are so great, that most people would want it. However, since it is very hard to be a virtuous man, only a select few can have these kinds of relationships. The moral worth of having true friendships seem to stem from the fact that it happens between virtuous men.

In Kant's view, the virtuous man should not need friends in the Aristotelean sense. A truly virtuous man is friends with everybody. He does not limit himself to a few friends, which would seem exclusive. Since he loves everybody equally, he does not love anyone more than another. This is the goal we should strive for, according to Kant. When we love a friend, we are basically making sure our own needs are taken care of. If you are really good, you are friendly, but you are friendly to everybody no matter their connection to you and what you get from the relationship. Since friendships are exclusive, you are forced to play favoritism according to Kant. The good person does not need friends because he gets what he needs from the people he is interacting with daily. People of lesser virtues, who need friends, are blocking the world out because they are unable to deal with it. They create a safe environment through their friends, and they are sacrificing the particular to the universal.

Aristotle would disagree with this view. He believes that the way to get to the world is through your friends. Since we are political beings, we do not live in a vacuum. Our friends do have other friends beside us, and we become friends by connection. Through the friends we do have, we meet other people and are forced to deal with them accordingly.

Some people might be confused about this since Aristotle did write that true friends cannot be more than one-on-one. This is true for Aristotle, but it does not mean that friendships of pleasure and utility has to have this feature. In friendships of utility and pleasure, there is a possibility for circle of friends. It is this circle that leads you out to the world. Also, one person can have different kinds of friends at the same time, but he cannot have more than one virtuous friend at one time.

Kierkegaard thinks even less of friendship than Kant. To him, the idea that the friend is another self makes all the difference. Since friendships are a matter of reciprocity, then the friendships are not pure love in the Christian sense. We should love each other regardless of whether or not we get something back. Aristotle did not think that you can have friendship if only one of the partners give, and the other receives. To Kierkegaard, having friends is just a matter of stroking your own ego. You congratulate yourself for having so many good friends, because it reflects on how good you are. Friendships are ultimately a matter of loving yourself for loving someone so lovable. Instead of following this course, Kierkegaard believed that one should have a more Christian aspect to our life. Instead of loving your friend, you should love your neighbor. Since your neighbor is anyone who happens to walk in the door, no preferential treatment is possible. It is the removal of the self that makes the love for the neighbor preferable to the love of the friend. Only by removing yourself from the picture can you feel God, because loving

yourself, you are essentially shunning God. It is through God and His commands, that we love the world, and He does command us to love everybody equally. We can only love everybody equally by loving our neighbors, since loving the friend will always leave someone out.

Aristotle does not seem to think that self-love is as bad as both Kierkegaard and Kant believe it is. In fact, he believed that only the good person is capable of self-love, since the bad person would loath what he would find in himself. It is the hallmark of a good person to have good friends, because good tends to attract good. The good person would be attracted to other good people, even though it is self-serving. The kind of person Kierkegaard is promoting, Aristotle would think was lacking something fundamental. For those who love everybody, ends up loving nobody. If you shun your fellow man in order not to make friends, then you are not loving them as much as you are capable of. Friends help you distribute the love you have for the world. Kierkegaard's ideal person would have goodwill towards everybody, but he would not be happy about what he did. Kierkegaard and Kant is confused about what self-interests really mean. The virtuous person would do what was in his long term self-interest. This often lead to the good of other people, because the virtuous person receives pleasure from it. In friendship, he is cultivating a good relationship for himself, but in that he is also promoting his friend. Through his friendship, he has to deal with many other people that is some ways related to his friend. Knowing that his friend might be hurt if someone would happen to them, it would be in his self-interest to promote their happiness too. It is in this sense that we can reach the world through friendship. We are promoting the good of the world through our own wish for self-preservation.

Kant and Kierkegaard are presuming that human nature is something that should be avoided. They seem to believe that human nature is base, and should therefore be modified through the will. Aristotle believes that human nature is good. Human nature is the indicator of how we should act. Since human nature seems to promote relationships, it is clear that friendships are the best kind of relationships. Friendships should therefore be sought by everybody because it is good.

The different categories of friendship as introduced by Aristotle, is a good way to think of friendship. The question is whether or not his ideals are too high. Aristotle believes that only the virtuous can have virtuous friendships. Since only a select few can truly be called virtuous, not everybody has the capacity for this kind of friendship. For the majority of people, the best they can hope for is the friendship of pleasure. Some might object to this. They would argue that even though they are not virtuous in the Aristotelean sense, they have nonetheless true friendships. Their main problem seems to come

from the idea that one has to have wisdom and age in order to be really virtuous. Young people therefore can only hope for pleasurable friendships.

It seems that Aristotle is too elitist in his idea of friendship. Even though it is true that true friendship can only grow into being over time, it does not mean that young people are incapable of experiencing it. There are friendships among young people that go beyond pleasure. They have all the characteristics of what Aristotle would call a friendship of virtue without the participants being old men. Rather than claiming that only a select few are capable of friendships of virtue, one should rather hold that most people are capable of this kind of friendship. It does not mean that everybody will experience it in their life time. Since friendship is a matter of meeting the right person, and being interested enough to develop the relationship into a friendship, many might be blind to potential friendships. Aristotle is right when he claims that true friends has to have the same virtue. We cannot imagine to be friend with someone who does not share our values. I am not thinking about values like, what color or car brand you prefer, but rather moral values that is the basis for who you are. It seems plausible that a Nazi and a Jew could not be friends, even if they shared the same hobbies. Their values would be too different to sustain the friendship. It seems equally clear that you could not trust a someone who lies a lot, so friendship with a bad person insofar as we are talking about a true friendship seems impossible.

It is unclear why Aristotle would call friendships of utility friendships. He seems to be indicating that any relationships that is reciprocated is a kind of friendship. I am not sure I agree with this. There seems to be many people in our life, that we do favors for and who does favors for us, without anyone calling it a friendship. An example might be students who help each other studying. It might be that we are more protective of ourselves today than Aristotle was in his time. One of the hallmarks of Aristotle is that he is able to illuminate issues that seem clear to us. This is true for friendships. In his structuring the topic of friendship, he is also making it clear what he means by the term. How he defines the term follows from this. With renewed interest in the topic, it is possible that this topic will be brought back to the realm of philosophy