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Plato and Aristotle on Friendship

While Plato and Aristotle's conceptions of friendship are similar in essence, Aristotle gives both clarity and heightened importance to Plato's friendship found in the *Symposium* and *Lysis*. Plato views friendship as yet another manifestation of desiring the good, similar and supplementary, but overall subordinate to the desire for knowledge, or Philosophy. Aristotle places friendship at the helm of the good life, introducing book VIII of The Nicomachean Ethics with, "nobody would choose to live without friends even if he had all the other good things." This paper will analyze the differences and similarities between Aristotle and Plato concerning friendship.

Very little academic material has been written on Plato's account of friendship, most likely attributed to the changing definitions of "friendship" and "love" in modern society. When Socrates speaks of love in the *Symposium*, he praises and approves only of the non-erotic forms of love. Every speaker besides perhaps Aristophanes (who's speech may be ignored entirely for the purpose of this essay) claims something along the lines of "Evil is the vulgar lover who loves the body rather than the soul." (Plato *Symposium*) This is one of the few points of consensus in the speeches, although Socrates makes claims in further detail than the rest. It is for this reason that we will assume that the love that Plato approves of in *Symposium is* friendship.

At the heart of Plato's views on friendship is the struggle that friendship does not seem all that necessary in life. James Haden summarizes his account in the *Lysis* as "those who are good are self-sufficient, and self-sufficiency would seem to rule out any dependency relation and hence any bond of friendship." (Haden 330) Friendship in this dialogue also seems dependent on the presence of evil in this dialogue, as friendship is established out of a desire to avoid evil, as "the good is desired by us only as the cure of evil." (Plato, *Lysis*) Love in the *Symposium* expands upon the deficiency argument, claiming that love is "neither beautiful nor good," since "love cannot be beautiful because it is the desire to possess what is beautiful, and one cannot desire that which one already possesses." (Plato, *Symposium*) Thus, those who are supremely good will not desire friendship.

To borrow a phrase from Kant, friendship is a means to an end for Plato, that end being seeking after beauty itself. Donald Levy describes this process as involving "[using] the objects of one's love as examples, images of absolute beauty." (Levy 288) Of course to Plato, the

supreme good would have been Philosophy (the pursuit of wisdom). Thus our friends should be means to pursue these ends wherever possible. This perspective results in an intellectually snobbish account of friendship, that we should surround ourselves with exclusively educated people to pursue wisdom to the greatest extent.

But the pursuit of wisdom isn't Plato's only concern in examining friendship. Plato also believes in the universal desire for immortality, which leads to procreation, a supreme good. The procreation of children isn't the best way to pursue these ends, though. Rather, we should find friends whom we can create "intellectual children" (Plato, *Symposium*) with, such as legislation or works of art.

Aristotle takes an analytical approach to friendship, first describing the forms in which it presents itself, then making claims of what a good friendship ought to entail. It should first be mentioned that Aristotle's definition of friendship is broader than what we would consider friendship to be, as it includes both familial relationships like those between father and son, and civic relationships such as those between coworkers. John Cooper summarizes Aristotle's definition of friendship in the Rhetoric and Nicomachean Ethics as the "mutual well-wishing and well-doing out of concern for another." (Cooper 621)[1] Reciprocity is central to this idea of friendship, "for it would surely be ridiculous to wish wine well." (Tredennick 203) The objects of our love must love us back in order for us to be friends. Aristotle denotes the rules of reciprocity and mutual well-wishing as distinct from the species of friendship, implying that all three species of friendship share these commonalities. However, as Cooper notes, Aristotle also frequently claims that the two "lower" forms of friendship are at their heart self-centered. Is Aristotle inconsistent here? As in most Aristotelian theories, the answer to his dilemma seems to lie in a mean between self-interest and selflessness. All forms of friendship contain degrees of self-interest and selflessness, but the lower forms contain a greater degree of self-interest and "the admixture of self-seeking in character-friendships [the higher friendship] is significantly less than in pleasure and advantage friendships [the lower friendships]." (Cooper 640)

Setting aside these broad claims about friendship, Aristotle has far more to say about the species of friendship individually, especially character friendship. Aristotle outlines three types

[1] This definition of friendship is contrasted with W.D. Ross' definition of "any mutual attraction between two human beings." (*Aristotle*, p 233) As this definition was adequately refuted by Cooper, it will be ignored.

of friendship: (1) Utility friendships, (2) Pleasure friendships, and (3) perfect, or character friendships. A simple distinction between the three is that character friends are both beneficial and pleasant, pleasure friendships are pleasant but not beneficial, and utility friendships are beneficial but not pleasant. Since utilities and pleasures are impermanent, these friendships are also impermanent. Only character friendships, based on the virtues of the two parties, are lifelong. As Aristotle has the most to say about character friendships, and since they tend to mirror Plato's idea of friendship more directly, this paper will primarily focus on this type of friendship. It should be noted, though, that Aristotle does consider all three of these friendships 'friendships,' and believes that there is a place for all of them in one's life.

Aristotle introduces book VIII of the Nicomachean Ethics with "Nobody would choose to live without friends even if he had all the other good things." (Tredennick 200) Indeed, Aristotle concludes his work on living the good life with a discussion of friendship. Friendship is a necessity for the good life for Aristotle, and any virtuous man will desire friends. While friendship is still a means to an end for Aristotle, that end being the increase of one's virtues and through this achieving Eudaemonia, friendship is integral in achieving this supreme good. Aristotle dissuades his readers from living the solitary life, saying "nobody would choose to have all the good things in the world for himself, for man is a social creature." (Tredennick 246) He also introduces five distinctive characteristics of a good friend, those being (1) wishing for the good of one's friend for their sake (this is the universal definition of friendship mentioned above), (2) wishing for the existence of one's friend for their sake, (3) spending one's time with another, (4) choosing the same thing as another, and (5) sharing in one's joys and sorrows. As Julia Annas notes, "*each* of these marks is found preeminently in the good man's relation to himself." (Annas 540) So while Aristotle believes fostering a relationship with others is supremely important, the self should not be ignored either.

Plato and Aristotle both place "the good" at the center of their friendships. Plato believed good to be the form of the good, which ideally would be pursued through Philosophy. Thus, friends who facilitated this learning and allowed us to create intellectual children would be our best friends. Aristotle believed pursuing the good meant fostering virtue, which would lead to Eudaemonia. Thus, friends who increase our virtues are the ideal ones. Having a common interest, Philosophy being an example of one, is important in Aristotelian true friendships. At the

end of book IX, Aristotle comments "everyone wishes to share with his friends the occupation (whatever it is) that constitutes one's existence." (Tredennick 253) Being a polymath, Aristotle chooses to take a broader sense of occupations than the Philosophy centered Plato. But regardless, each form of friendship does set out to improve the intellectual virtues of the parties involved. And even broader than this, each form of friendship is a means to an end of "the good."

While Plato doesn't explicitly recognise the lower forms of friendship (utility and pleasure), we can infer from his definition of love that he saw them as "lower" forms much like Aristotle. As noted above, Plato frequently addresses his disapproval of the love of physical beauty over the mind. Under an Aristotelian reading, this appears to be an attack on pleasure friendships, which would be fickle and based mostly on sex. Utilitarian friendships are more difficult to find parallels for in either *Symposium* or *Lysis*, most perhaps because Plato would not have believed them to be friendships in the first place. Plato classifies loving another as recognising that the "beauty of the mind is more honorable than the beauty of the outward form." (Plato, *Symposium*) Since a beautiful mind to Aristotle would have been one filled with virtue, we can conclude that Plato only considered virtue-based friendships to begin with.

However, another reading of Plato would place him in stark contrast to Aristotle on the grounds of Utilitarian friendships. If friendships are a means to an end of Philosophical growth, then perhaps all forms of friendship are Utilitarian to Plato. Friendship is a temporary first step on a ladder that ends with admiring "beauty absolute, separate, simple, and everlasting." (Plato, *Symposium*) Under this reading, there is no incentive for Plato to remain friends with an individual once you have moved to the next rung on the ladder. Indeed, remaining friends with an individual may have been a hindrance in observing the commonalities of all beauty. Granted, as Levy notes, "not everyone is always engaged in seeking this." (Levy 288) One does not have to operate in the realm of observing true beauty at all times. But Plato does not recognise the value of having a friend outside of its utility to lead to something greater, which is in great contrast with the Aristotelian belief that "nobody would choose to live without friends even if he had all the other good things." (Tredennick 200)

This utilitarian difference between Plato and Aristotle is the first of a few key differences in their beliefs, another being the issue of reciprocity. In *Symposium*, Plato claims that the lover of people is a mere manifestation of the lover in general, who may love "money-making or

gymnastics or philosophy." (Plato, *Symposium*) In all three of these instances, what we love could not possibly love us back, and thus reciprocity is not a condition of love. He uses the same logic in *Lysis*, claiming that "people are commonly said to like quails, wine and philosophy without there being any return of affection." (Annas 533) Aristotle, in defining friendship as "mutual well-wishing," sets reciprocity of love as a condition of friendship in any form. This distinction can be attributed to the differences in the general goals of each conception of friendship. Since Plato is always aiming at forms and the abstract in his philosophy, he cannot set reciprocity as a condition for love. If he did, he would need to make the argument that the form of the good loves us back, and forms do not love. Aristotle, in his more virtue-based and human-centric philosophy, can provide us with a more practical definition of friendship. As Plato admits in *Lysis*, we would not consider friendships where one individual hates the other a "friendship." (Haden 330) For this reason, *Lysis* ends in aporia concerning reciprocity in friendship, and Aristotle can avoid this confusion with his stipulation.

The final of the great differences between Platonic[2] and Aristotelian friendship is the origin of friendship or the "issue of deficiency." Plato saw friendship in *Lysis* and love in *Symposium* arising out of a deficiency of these things. Aristotle, on the other hand, saw the desire for friendship as a natural human instinct, as man is a "social creature." (Tredennick 246) If friendship, a manifestation of a desire for the good, arose out of a lack of good, virtue friendships would not be able to exist. In making friendship a desire out of being good, Aristotle can sidestep this problem. Aristotle goes the other direction in claiming it is bad people that cannot form friendships. Aristotle believes "being bad implies being internally conflicted," whereas "the good man is constant." (Annas 540) It should be noted that Plato also believes that the bad cannot be friends, saying in *Lysis* that "the bad…are never at unity with one another or with themselves." (Annas 541) But unlike Aristotle, he doesn't believe that the truly good need or desire friends.

In conclusion, Plato and Aristotle have views on friendship that are similar with regard to their pursuits of the good and disapproval of lower forms of friendship, but resolve (or don't resolve) the issues of reciprocity and deficiency in different ways. Aristotle, in presenting a view on friendship that values it in and of itself, has a more nuanced and practical approach to friendship which appears to have more value as a "handbook to friendship." That being said,

[2] Here meaning Plato's idea of friendship, rather than the commonly misused term "Platonic friendship."

Plato's view on friendship resonates with the radical pursuer of Philosophy, placing wisdom and the form of good above all else, even above our love of others.

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