Aristotle on Friendship

In Books VIII and IX of the *Nichomachean Ethics*, Aristotle creates a treatise on friendship. His treatment of friendship is a comprehensive one and, while it raises a number of questions that need clarification, it ultimately is strong and comprehensive enough to give us an understanding of friendship sufficient for the further study of ethics. In this paper I will explain Aristotle's theory of friendship and show where he leaves gaps that need to be filled.

Aristotle defines friendship in the *Rhetoric* and similarly the *NE*[1]. In the *Rhetoric* he says:

> *We will begin by defining friendship and friendly feeling. 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 things about. A friend is one who feels thus and excites these feelings in return.*[2]

In general, we might describe it as a relationship involving a mutual active interest and part in the welfare of the other. He distinguishes friendship from two similar types of relationships, goodwill and unanimity, which involve no established relationship and no internal drive.

Aristotle classifies friendship into three kinds: character-based (CB), advantage-based (AB), and pleasure-based (PB). CB friendships—the ideal case—have their foundation in mutual admiration of parts or all of the other person's character. Each friend admires one or more virtues in the other. The virtues need not be mutual; for example, I may admire my friend's intelligence and he may admire my kindness, whether or not we disagree on other things. Aristotle considers this to be the best kind of friendship, and when both friends are virtuous, the perfect friendship. CB friendships are the most permanent of the three kinds because one's character is relatively stable, whereas one's advantageous opportunities or taste in pleasures are not.

Aristotle argues that CB friendships are the best because the friends "do this by reason of their own nature and not incidentally; therefore their friendship lasts as long as they are good—and excellence is an enduring thing."[3] This is consistent with Aristotle's views on virtue in the rest of the *NE*. It suggests that these friendships can only take place between adults who have been habituated to virtue and have a correct understanding of the good. Aristotle acknowledges this immediately: "But it is natural that such friendships should be infrequent; for such men are rare."[4] But this seems somewhat problematic: can't adolescents (still prone to their passions) have mutual admiration of virtues in one another? The test suggests that Aristotle would say no, because young people cannot yet practically understand virtue: "…for he in inexperienced in the actions that occur in life…and further, since he tends to follows his passions, his study will be vain and unprofitable…it makes no difference whether he in young in years or youthful in character…For to such persons, as to the incontinent, knowledge brings no profit…"[5] But these relationships do seem to occur in the real world. In this respect, Aristotle's model of the ideal case of friendship is good but may not be definitive.

The other two cases are considered friendships only by way of their resemblance to the ideal case (CB)—that is, they are relationships which include mutual well-wishing and well-doing, but each friend is concerned more with his own personal gain than with his friend's, and in this respect they are incomplete. Personal pleasure is at the root of PB friendships, and personal utility (usefulness) is at the root of AB friendships. Since personal gain is their foundation, they are transitory, subject to disputes, and limited in their well-wishing and –doing.

These friendships are limited in that they are not other-centered, but self-centered. Thus, these friends have their own gain in mind rather than the other friend's gain, and will tend to wish- and do-well only if the benefits to them exceed the costs to them. In a CB friendship, each

friend is much more willing to wish- and do-well for the other because he is focused on his friend's gain from the friendship instead of his own. "And each is good without qualification and to his friend, for the good are both good without qualification and useful to each other. So too are they pleasant…"[6]

John Cooper argues[7] that although these kinds occur only incidentally (as opportunities arise), they eventually involve mutual well-wishing and –doing; thus, Aristotle is justified in classifying them as friendships. Cooper notes, too, that if these other kinds didn't count as friendships, then friendships would be an extremely rare form of relationship. If Aristotle's work is to have any practical use, he needs to extend his notion of friendship to kinds not based solely on virtue.

The first of these is AB friendship. This type rests upon the utility of a partnership to each friend, and is formed because each partner is useful to the other. He argues that since old people seek usefulness, these friendships will predominate among them. These friendships also occur often between business partners and those united in a common effort. They dissolve as soon as one person is no longer useful to the other, "for [those friends] were lovers not of each other but of profit."[8]

Aristotle follows this consistently, granting that any men, whether good or bad, can have an AB friendship in their desire for profit. But there seems to be a problem that arises between Cooper and Aristotle: if mutual well-wishing and well-doing develops within an AB friendship, what happens when the friendship is no longer profitable? Aristotle says it dissolves—but this is hard to see on Cooper's interpretation. It doesn't seem right that an established relationship between two people, whether business partners or elderly people, should end as soon as it is no longer profitable. We would rather say that it becomes "past its prime," or even goes into a state

of acquaintanceship (which we might consider a state of knowing, but of little or no well-wishing and certainly no well-doing). Aristotle concedes that "we ought to make some allowance for our former friendship,"[9] but this applies only after the friendship has ended. The unclear point is whether, on Cooper's interpretation, any relationship can or should continue at all.

The last main kind is PB friendship. Founded on the ability of the relationship to increase each person's pleasure, PB friendships are more like the ideal case than AB friendships, because the friends enjoy each other's company (not necessarily part of the AB case). In this respect, the friends enjoy either something about the other's character (e.g. wittiness) or performing an activity together (e.g. exercising). This kind of friendship predominates among young people, who seek passion and pleasure.

These friendships also need not include just good men, as each friend loves the pleasure he gets from the relationship, not the other friend himself. These friendships are most permanent when both friends enjoy the same activities or qualities in each other. They are then least permanent when the opposite is true, and this is obvious from our experience in real life: if my friend enjoys bowling and I enjoy playing blackjack, and we have only passing interests in each other's activities, then our friendship will be only a passing one.

As young people "live under the guidance of emotion,"[10] their pleasures change quickly and thus their friendships change quickly. Aristotle is right in attributing these friendships mostly to young people. The same problem with Cooper's interpretation, however, also arises in this case: we see young people changing friends all the time, but it's difficult to say that their friendships actually dissolve.[11]

Aristotle puts some qualifications on his distinction in general. First, the three main kinds are able to shift their bases; that is, a PB friendship can become an AB friendship, and so

on with all three cases. His theory suggests that a friendship need not have the same basis in common (e.g. one gets pleasure from the other, who gets utility from the first), although this type of relationship may be quite unstable. Aristotle also restricts the amount of well-wishing and well-doing that can occur in the relationship. In a CB friendship friends admire each other's character and wish their virtue to increase; however, one would not wish his friend so well that his virtue increased to the level of his becoming a god. Since gods and men cannot be friends the way Aristotle means, too much active interest would effectively dissolve their friendship. Not to be mistaken as jealousy, this restriction on active interest seems to reflect our actual attitude toward friendships.

It seems, then, that Aristotle's distinction of the three main kinds of friendship is justified, albeit sometimes rough around the edges. This is not atypical of the *NE*; in I.7, he makes clear that, since ethics is a practical science, we need "not look for precision in all things alike, but in each class of things such precision as accords with the subject-matter, and so much as is appropriate to the inquiry."[12] Although we would like to know more about his distinction, the explanation he provides is sufficient to proceed with his theory of friendship.

The second part to Aristotle's explanation—mostly located in *NE* IX—is a set of arguments for why friendship is an essential component of the good life. Aristotle argues for this in four different ways, which, I believe, amount to a comprehensive treatment of the question.

First, Aristotle considers friends to be a type of external goods[13]—indeed, the greatest external goods possible. External goods are necessary to the good life because they are preconditions or instruments for virtuous action. (For example, one can only exercise sexual temperance if he is physically attractive enough to be sexually desirable.) And if, as he implies, friends are greater than, say, good fortune or divine intervention, then no further discussion is

necessary. He argues this point in two ways. First, "it seems strange, when one assigns all good things to the happy man, not to assign friends, who are thought the greatest of external goods."[14] His point is better taken rhetorically than logically, because he is arguing from the *endoxa*; logically: if friends are thought to be the greatest external goods, then they are greater than good fortune (i.e. they are the greatest external goods). He also argues in the same thread that we need friends in both fortune and adversity: in adversity, to confer benefits on us, and in fortune, to share our blessings with other people. And if we need friends in good fortune, then having friends is an essential part of the good life.

The first claim is unsupported: if I have all other external goods but friends, and I live virtuously, it seems possible that I can be happy without friends. His second claim is more substantial: if we have good fortune, then we can exercise the virtue of liberality by conferring benefits on friends. And we can't "opt out" of exercising that virtue if it is available, because that would not be choosing the good life (since a better life is available). Friends can also help us through adversity: if we can't perform virtuous acts, we can at least share in theirs and contemplate them. This is a stronger case for needing friends as part of the good life.

Second, Aristotle believes that friendship is itself an excellence or virtue: it is the excellence of living well with others. Since "man is a political creature and one whose nature is to live with others,"[15] then the excellence of this activity is living well with others. And since "plainly it is better to spend [one's] days with friends and good men than with strangers or any chance persons,"[16] it follows that it is an excellence of man to live well with friends.

This argument—Aristotle's strongest of the four—also necessitates the possession of friends in the good life. If man's nature is indeed to live with others, then it would seem

impossible to live the good life without friends. It would actually be going against our nature, and that (obviously) precludes the possibility of living excellently.

Third, he argues as follows that friends allow for a state of continuous happiness[17]:

1. P. Happiness is an activity.
2. P. The good man's activity is virtuous.
3. P. A thing's being one's own makes it pleasant.
4. P. We can contemplate our neighbors and their actions better than ourselves and our own (by way of having a more objective view of them).
5. P. Actions of virtuous men are pleasant to good men (because friends share in their friends' actions).
6. C. Then we can contemplate and share in virtuous activity at the same time, and almost all the time.
7. C. Then our happiness can be continuous.

Aristotle believes that friends are 'other selves' and that we share in their activity. In this way, we can constantly be either contemplating virtuous activity or participating in it, or both.

This leads to a great amount of happiness and makes friends highly desirable in the good life, but it does not necessitate having friends. It seems plausible that I can spend a great deal of time doing virtuous acts myself and contemplating them, and I would be quite happy in this way. This argument would work if Aristotle had defined the good life as a state of continuous happiness, but this is not the case.

Finally, he argues that "the happy man ought to live pleasantly."[18] That is, if friends are pleasant to us, and if we ought to live the good life, then it ought to be pleasant to us, and therefore we ought to have friends. This argument does not support the claim that friends are essential, but rather that they are only highly desirable.

The first two arguments support Aristotle's thesis that friends are essential, but the second only serve to convince us that they are desirable. As such, we might read this section as rather a set of arguments for a weaker claim—why we ought to have friends—rather than the stronger claim of necessity. However, Aristotle does not describe the good life as the "best

possible life for an individual;" it is rather that life which is most desirable—the highest human good. On this interpretation, it is possible understand Aristotle's two arguments for great desirability as arguments for necessity.

It is important to note two things. First, Aristotle argues that there is a natural limit to the number of friends one can have.[19] The limit makes sense, because plainly one reaches a point where he can no longer maintain strong friendships with so many people. Second, Aristotle claims in the same paragraph (and without argument) that love "tends to be a sort of excess friendship, and that can only be felt towards one person." The lack of an argument raises plenty of questions about this claim, of which I have no room for discussion here.

It would seem, then, that Aristotle's model of friendship is a good one, at least for the purposes of his study of ethics. It is consistent with the rest of the *NE*, and it does not try to define any hard and fast rules about friendship. The flexibility and (somewhat) open-endedness of this account is what makes it applicable to the many different types of friendship situations. Or, at the very least, it provides a strong starting-ground for further discussion of friendship.

---

[1] *Rhetoric*: 1380b35-81a2, and 1381b33-34; *NE*: 1156a3-5
[2] *Rhetoric*: 1380b35-81a2
[3] 1156b11-12
[4] 1156b25-26
[5] 1095a6-10
[6] 1156b13-14
[7] Cooper, John. Reason and Emotion, Ch. 14: *Aristotle on the Forms of Friendship.* pp.320-331
[8] 1157a15-16
[9] 1165b32-36
[10] 1156a32-33
[11] Kurt Vonnegut also writes about a type of social bond stronger than acquaintanceship but weaker than friendship. This bond, from experience, seems really to exist; however, Aristotle makes no mention of weaker degrees of friendship in the *NE*.
[12] 1098a26-29
[13] 1169b3-21
[14] 1169b8-10
[15] 1169b17-18
[16] 1169b19-21
[17] 1169b29-70a3
[18] 1170a4-6
[19] 1170b20-71a21