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Aristotle’s True Friendship as the Highest Good

Friendship is a concept that is often taken at face value, and not given any deeper thought. If one were asked who their friends are, it would not be a difficult question to answer, but if one were asked why they considered their friends as friends, or who their best friend is, it may become a more difficult question to answer. In *Nicomachean Ethics*, translated by Martin Oswald, Aristotle addresses these and various other questions about friendship. In particular, he comes up with a definition for what a perfect friendship would look like and when it would occur, the main conclusion being that it occurs between good people. Aristotle also talks about what can be defined as good. He says that the ultimate good, is something that is desirable in and of itself, with no other reasons, and it is also the aim of every action. These two facts taken together create an interesting reading of Aristotle’s description of friendship. When examined closely, many aspects of the so-called true friendship, such as the motives behind it, are similar to what he describes as the ultimate good, and when taken in the context of a good person, they are almost the same.

To understand why a friendship between good men can be viewed as the highest form of a relationship, it is necessary to first consider friendship’s role in human life. One of the very first things that Aristotle claims about friendship is that “it is . . . most indispensable for life. No one would choose to live without friends, even if he had all other goods” (1155a – 5), which establishes the importance of friendship to Aristotle. His main support for the importance of friendship, is that there is that no point to prosperity if it cannot be shared with one’s friends, “[f]or what good would their prosperity do them if it did not provide them with the opportunity for good works?” (1155a – 7). From this reasoning, several observations can be made. To begin, Aristotle considers prosperity without virtue to be useless, therefore any relationship based on pleasure is not one that can be truly good, as discussed later. From this, it is evident that the end of material prosperity is to be able to perform good deeds, especially to one’s friends, using it. So, friendship is something universally desired, and also necessary to live well. These are both traits that Aristotle ascribes to living well, so it can be seen that the good, to which all things tend, and perfect friendship are very closely related in this sense. On the other hand, Aristotle describes two other forms of friendship Aristotle describes which do not fit this description. These are friendships for pleasure and for use.

These forms of friendship have several flaws, which is why Aristotle argues that they cannot come close to a true friendship, but it is also why they cannot come close to a perfect relationship between people. The basis of Aristotle’s argument is that “when the useful is the basis of affection, men love because of the good they get out of it, and when pleasure is the basis, for the pleasure they get out of it. In other words, the friend is not loved because he is a friend, but because he is useful or pleasant” (1156a – 15), which speaks to both what he defines true friendship to be, as well as where other types of friendships fail. The motivation behind a true friendship is goodwill from both friends to the other. Because according to Aristotle, when one loves someone for who they are, that is to say good, the friendship will last as long as both stay good, which is a long time since “goodness or virtue is a thing that lasts” (1156b – 13). The counterexample to this is that friendships of use and pleasure can be easily dissolved. As they are based on pleasure or use, they will not last any longer than that pleasure or use. Wit, good looks and material benefits, for example, can all disappear.

Furthermore, a friendship between good people encompasses both other types. On this topic, Aristotle does not have much to say, perhaps because it follows from definitions he has already made, but he says that “those who are good, i.e., good without qualification, are also beneficial to one another. In the same double sense, they are also pleasant to one another: for good men are pleasant both in an unqualified sense and to one another, since each finds pleasure in his own proper actions and in actions like them, and the actions of good men are identical with or similar to one another” (1156b – 14) which makes many aspects of his true friendship much clearer. From this argument, it is easy to see why Aristotle considers a friendship between good people the most perfect kind of friendship. Since it contains both possible motivations which he provides for a friendship, it is naturally superiors in that sense. Also, it shows that the other two forms are friendship are not necessarily bad. It is fine for a friendship to be useful or pleasant, but they should not be the main focus of the friendship, for in a virtuous friendship they come as a result of the friendship itself. Perhaps the most important part of Aristotle’s definition of true friendship is that “[t]hose who wish for their friends’ good for their friends’ sake are friends in the truest sense” (1156b - 9-10). The clear prioritization of goodwill is what sets apart this true friendship, and makes it obvious why it occurs between good people.

If true friendship is akin to both virtue and necessary to live well, the question follows whether it can occur only between good people. Aristotle answers this question most precisely while dealing with another topic. In book nine, chapter 4, Aristotle describes self-love to be the basis of a true friend, an interesting offshoot from his previous descriptions. In order to do this, he creates a list of characteristics of a true friend and then shows that a good person possesses all of them inwardly. Roughly restated, a true friend, does good for the sake of doing good, wishes well towards their friend for their friend’s sake, spends time with their friend, shares their interests, and shares joy and sorrow with their friend. This is where the intrinsic value of what Aristotle claims to be the truest form of friendship appears. The idea that the basis of a true friendship is self-love extended to another good person is very appealing. It ties the concept in with many other aspects associated with goodness, thus furthering the connections between the good and true friendship. After this, Aristotle explains why a wicked people could not be good friends by these characteristics, for example, “bad people do not find joy in one another, unless they see some material advantage coming to them” (1157a – 15), and other arguments that boil down essentially to the fact that they cannot love themselves. This too appeals to what one intuitively sees as a good friend. The fact that a wicked person could not possibly meet these standards reaffirms their standing as a good basis to judge true friendship upon. It also makes it clear that a true friendship could not exist between a good person and a bad person.

Similarly, a true friendship cannot exist between unequals, but before examining this, the definition of an unequal relationship must be established. Wisdom, virtue, status, wealth and more can all be ways in which people are unequal. According to Aristotle, these situations are can all be different, and thus behave differently, but they all have in common “the superiority of one of the partners over the other” (1158b – 12). Moreover, Aristotle claims that many such relationships are friendships in the same sense that ones of use or pleasure are; while it bears a resemblance to true friendship, it fails in certain aspects. Following this argument, it is clear that equality is a necessary aspect for true friendship, but the equality Aristotle describes is different than the traditional sense. Equality is often thought of as equal treatment of all people, “[b]ut the term ‘equal’ apparently does not have the same meaning in friendship as it does in matters of justice. In matters of justice, the equal is primarily proportionate to merit, and its quantitative sense (i.e., strict equality,) is secondary; in friendship, on the other hand, the quantitative meaning (of strict equality) is primary and the sense of equality proportionate to merit is secondary” (1158b – 30) which has a few implications. Here, equality based on merit means a people being equal socially, while the quantitative sense takes into account how the people are alike. This makes the argument that friendship requires equality a more realistic claim. It does not seem fitting that societal status would limit a true friendship. On the other hand, it can play a role to some degree, as in a father son relationship, which is inherently unequal. Not only is the similarity between friends a large factor in friendship for Aristotle, it is necessary.

One of Aristotle’s more obvious, but nonetheless important, arguments is that similar people naturally attract one another. As discussed earlier, friendship is something that is universally desired, but not everyone can be friends with one another, for “it is impossible for men to spend their time together unless they are pleasant <in one another’s eyes> and find joy in the same things. It is this quality which seems typical of comradeship” (1157b – 24). At first, this seems like a trivial statement, since it comes naturally to most people, but it is interesting to consider in terms of a true friendship. The key concept to keep in mind is that good people will find one another pleasant according to Aristotle. They take pleasure in the same things which all virtuous people do, and will wish each other well for the other’s sake, that is to say, a virtuous friendship will come about naturally between virtuous people. In this sense, since good people come together to form a true virtuous friendship, and the both prosper in a virtuous sense from true friendship, it is both a source and product of virtue.

With all of these aspects of a true friendship in mind, the argument for true friendship as something that is inherently good becomes clear. According to Aristotle, there is a clear good to which all things tend, that is to say, the end goal of everything is to achieve this good. Also, something that is called good is something that achieves its purpose fully. For example, a musician’s goal is to play beautifully, and a good musician is one who achieves that. However, the end goal does not necessarily lie within the action or result, music is not played simply to play music. It could be played to entertain, or to try and make monetary gains, or some other purpose. “If there exists an end in the realm of action which we desire for its own sake, . . . this end will be the good, that is, the highest good” (1094a - 20), and while true friendship is obviously not exactly such an end, it comes very close to fitting the description. While a true friendship has benefits that one may desire, such as proof against slander, it is important to remember that a true friendship is between good people. This means that they desire one another’s company simply because they find it pleasant, and the benefits of pleasure and use come as unintended consequences of its existence. This description also does not fit in the context of a non-virtuous person wanting a true friendship. While good people want a friendship, which will be inherently good, for its own sake, any other person who wants to have such a friendship may not want it for its own sake. Their desire could easily stem from other desires, such as wanting to appear virtuous to others, but this does not mean they could not want a true friendship for its own sake. So, it seems reasonable to claim that a true friendship is the highest good, for good people.

Aristotle’s strict definition of what a true friendship is, and of the good people who can maintain such a friendship coincide in and interesting manner. Whether or not Aristotle intended this parallel between his definitions, the similarities are evident. Even in the broader sense, both of them have virtue at their core, and seem unattainable to the average person. This is also where the definitions have their biggest catch. It is difficult to accept such lofty characteristics to be the highest good or true friendship. Aristotle acknowledges other forms of friendship, but he takes due diligence in demonstrating all of their faults in comparison to the true friendship. When all of his suggestions are taken for the sake of argument, his writing all but presents true friendship as the highest good which he starts *Nicomachean Ethics* off with.