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ON PERFECT FRIENDSHIP:

An Outline and a Guide to Aristotle's Philosophy of Friendship

By Kristen Psaty
Honors Thesis
Philosophy Department
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For Megan
The one who brings
out the best in me.

To Kyle
My other self.

& to the **ΔΠΠΠ**

“This has always been a man's world,
and none of the reasons that have been
offered in explanation have seemed adequate.”

-Simone de Beauvoir

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ON PERFECT FRIENDSHIP:

An Outline and a Guide to Aristotle's Philosophy of Friendship

INTRODUCTION

My project to study friendship began when I noticed that it was included in the works of several philosophers I had studied throughout my time at Colby. A conspicuous feature in philosophy, in the works of major philosophers. A topic I first encountered with the ancients, friendship kept coming up in modern texts such as Smith's "The Theory of Moral Sentiments", Spinoza's "Ethics", Hobbes "The Citizen" and Locke's "An Essay Concerning Human Understanding" Later I found friendship in more contemporary writings such as Kierkegaard's "Works of Love." This brought me to wonder what the philosophic significance of friendship was, and why philosophers felt the need to include it in their writings. At that point I set out to find what a serious study of friendship could bring.

When I began my research, I was directed straight to Aristotle and I soon came to understand why. Aristotle makes friendship the topic of pointed consideration throughout two of his most influential works, *Eudemian Ethics* and *Nicomachean Ethics*. In fact, of the ten books of *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle dedicates two, or one-fifth of the text, solely to the discussion of friendship. *Eudemian Ethics*, as well, includes major discussions on the ethical implications of interpersonal relationships with one of the four books dedicated to friendship. Included as a virtue, Aristotle explains: "It [friendship] is most necessary for our life. For no one would choose to live without friends even if he had all the other goods."¹ More than an adornment for life, friendship is vital to our well-being.

¹ Aristotle, *NE*, trans Terence Irwin (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1999), 8.1.1155a5-6.

Besides friendship, Aristotle's larger corpus of works contain some of the first writings on physics, biology, and other natural sciences, as well as more conventionally philosophic works on ethics, politics and metaphysics. Aristotle's writings are characterized by his careful and methodical inquiry, as well as his habit of placing things into rigid categories and hierarchies. His discussion of friendship is no exception. Similar to works on biology and natural sciences, Aristotle devises a scheme of 'species' for friendship, placing them in a hierarchy of virtue and treating them with the same seriousness with which he addresses any of his other pursuits. The complex organization of friendship created certainly suggests that Aristotle lent careful consideration to the different types or strains of friendship, but also thoroughly addresses the activities of friendship including the dissolution of quarrels, friendships in families as well as friends in ill and good fortune.

In order to classify friendship, Aristotle differentiates between the objects of desire in life as a means to create a tripartite division. For Aristotle, friendship is separated into three different groups that correspond and naturally adhere to the three basic objects of love in life. Aristotle explains, "For, it seems, not everything is loved, but [only] the loveable, and this is either good or pleasant or useful."² Hence, the varieties of friendship: friendships of virtue who love the good, friendships of pleasure who seek what is pleasant, and friendships of utility who desire what is useful, are born.

Primary friendships (also referred to as complete, perfect or virtuous friendships), are the main concern of Aristotle's discussion, and are exceedingly rare, occurring only between individuals of exceptional virtue. The emphasis in these relationships is in the

² *Ibid.* 8.21155b18-20.

other friend, specifically the *good* or the *virtue* of the other. Thus the basis of the friendship, the glue that holds it together, is a mutual love of the good.

As a practical concern, Aristotle contends that our time, attention, and resources are too finite to allow for many virtuous friendships. As he reminds us, “the need of active loving... prevents one from being at the same time a friend to many; for one cannot be active towards many at the same time.”³ Active friendship requires an awareness and conscious consideration of the other. Restrictions on effort and energy prevent us from fully giving ourselves to many or cultivating perfect friendships with more than one individual. The intimacy required for perfect friendship cannot be taken too hastily. As Aristotle reminds us, “[To find out whether someone is really good], one must both have experience of him and be on familiar terms with him, which is extremely difficult.”⁴ Necessitating considerable time and attention, true friendship between many is a practical impossibility.

Beside the limits of active care and attention, there is a more fundamental lack of plurality underlying Aristotle’s philosophy of friendship. Even if three exceptionally virtuous and compatible people met, they could not form a perfect friendship in Aristotle’s model. As he specifies, “No one can have complete friendship for many people, just as no one can have an erotic passion for many at the same time; for [complete friendship, like erotic passion,] is like an excess, and an excess is naturally directed at a single individual.”⁵ This emphasis on emotion and sentiment, or love and goodwill, underlies the argument for exclusivity.

³ Aristotle, *Eudemian Ethics*, Trans. W. D. Ross, and J. A. Smith. *The Works of Aristotle Translated into English under the Editorship of J. A. Smith and W. D. Ross*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1910), 7.2.1238a8-10.

⁴ Aristotle, *NE*, 8.6.1158a14-16.

⁵ Aristotle, *NE*, 8.6.1158a12-13.

One of the clear requirements Aristotle makes for true friends is similarity. For example, friends must enjoy and receive pleasure from the same things in life. Aristotle writes, “Whatever someone [regards as] his being, or the end for which he chooses to be alive, that is the activity he wishes to pursue in his friend’s company.”⁶ Furthermore, Aristotle stipulates that close companions will act on their mutual interests by spending time together engaged in shared activity, “Hence some friends drink together, others play dice, while others do gymnastics and go hunting, or do philosophy.”⁷ Aristotle makes it clear that, “They spend their days together on whichever pursuits in life they like most for since they want to live with their friends, they share the actions in which they find their common life.”⁸ Mutual activities combined with a desire to do the same things add to the pleasantness of the friendship. More than that, shared activity reinforces the idea of similarity that is required for a perfect friendship. As Aristotle firmly sets down, “Equality and similarity, and above all the similarity of those who are similar in being virtuous, is friendship.”⁹ Repeatedly, Aristotle explicitly and directly reinforces this position. Equality of virtue, above any other property of similarity, is the necessary condition for complete friendship.

More than a *desirable* good, Aristotle defends the claim that friends are *needed*. Aristotle responds to the argument that a completely self sufficient person would not need friends, explaining, “your friend, since he is another yourself, supplies you with what your own efforts cannot supply.”¹⁰ Augmenting our own efforts, friendship provides

⁶ Aristotle, *NE*, 9.12.1172a1-2.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Aristotle, *NE*, 10.12.172a 1-6.

⁹ Aristotle, *NE*, 8.8.1159b2.

¹⁰ Aristotle, *NE*, 9.9.1169b6.

more than could be accomplished by ourselves. Thus, no one can escape the need for friendship. Besides the help and support derived from a friend, Aristotle makes the point, that it would be absurd to “make the blessed person solitary.”¹¹ Humans, Aristotle argues, are by nature social or ‘political animals’, preferring to live and interact with other people. “Hence,” Aristotle concludes, “the happy person needs friends.”¹² A requirement for happiness, friendship’s importance for Aristotle’s is developed.

As Aristotle describes, complete happiness is the ultimate goal of human life and can only be achieved through virtue. This is achieved when the irrational side of ourselves is harmonized with the rational side. Aristotle’s main purpose in the *Ethics* is to describe the ways in which the rational side comes to rule the irrational side. Through action, deliberation, and desire, Aristotle directs us to habituate ourselves to a state of excellence. The result is a list of character virtues that must be perfected including bravery, generosity, magnanimity, wit, truthfulness and friendship. Introduced toward the end of *Nicomachean Ethics*, after other virtues have been described, Aristotle goes into depth about the nature of friendship, explaining it as a crowning virtue that requires a mastery of other basic virtues. For Aristotle, friends have a uniquely intimate connection that not only builds character but also leads to happiness.

What does friendship mean today?

Throughout the centuries, Aristotle’s fixation on friendship has puzzled scholars and philosophers alike. Aristotle’s treatment of interpersonal relationships shatters the traditional image of the ivory-towered philosopher. In contrast to abstract analysis,

¹¹ *Ibid*, 9-10.

¹² *Ibid*, 19-20.

Aristotle's philosophy was based heavily in empirical, concrete experience. As a result, his methodology primarily dealt with mundane, everyday activity as experienced by non-philosophers and even had the habit of including and considering popular opinion and belief in his works. The humanist approach that characterizes his work highlights Aristotle's practical approach to human life, making his ideas particularly transferable when considered in relation to modern society.

In a contemporary filled with technology and high-speed travel, humans are exposed to difference and inequality at a rate higher than could have been experienced by Aristotle. True, Greek societies participated in exciting foreign trade networks, but even the universities and markets of Athens could not compare to the global society of today. Modeled from the ancient Greek city-states of his time, Aristotle's friendship necessarily contained "like and like," dictating similitude in virtue, activity, and emotion and even extending to wealth and gender. The stratified structure of the *polis* was such that individuals of differing classes had little, if any, reason to interact. In contrast to modern social organizations, especially Western "melting pot" societies, homogeneity has all but disappeared.

For the modern reader, then, the term "friendship" likely conjures drastically different images than it did for the ancient Greeks. The formation of friendship's today can now be easily broken down into a "friend request" on the popular social networking site, Facebook. Here, a number appears next to an individual's name on a webpage, recording the amount of 'friends' a person has acquired. For Aristotle, this type of networking, claiming to produce friends, would be appalling. In *Eudemian Ethics*, he tells us, "the man who has many friends has no friend," explicitly condemning those who

“seek and pray for many friends.”¹³ Instead, probation is necessary before making the claim that someone is a friend. Careful consideration of Aristotle’s philosophy of friendship in relation to modern societies proves to be instructive, both for the insights on human nature and on friendship that it provides. Looking at contemporary issues through Aristotle’s eyes is both surprising and revealing, forcing us to reconsider relationships we may take for granted as well as the accuracy of Aristotle’s conclusions.

Despite being seemingly antiquated, Aristotle’s philosophy of friendship is in many ways timeless. The writings on friendship are a bold attempt at understanding the significance of an inherently intimate experience. With keen and insightful observations, Aristotle’s discussion of friendship is startlingly relevant and applicable to the modern world. The changing face of the world, however, poses significant problems for the formation of perfect friendships. How can Aristotelian definitions of friendship be extracted from the city-states where they were born and applied to the changing and dynamic society of today? If Aristotle is right, that friendship hinges on the similarities between individuals, perhaps his definition of friendship is out of our reach. For millennia Aristotle’s works have guided Western society by breaking down the experiential world, but *Nicomachean Ethics* can also be used as a guide to help society improve interpersonal relationships.

¹³ Aristotle, *EE*, 7.12.1245b-20.

CHAPTER I. An Introduction to Aristotle on Friendship

The first, and ultimately the most challenging, task of the philosopher interested in understanding friendship is simply to define the necessary terms. Identifying and isolating the essence of friendship is more problematic than it first appears. Further, the development of a working definition of friendship requires a vigorous analysis of real relationships as well as the establishment of a theoretical frame from which to work. Understanding what is and what is not friendship consumes the thinker who addresses it. However, the paradox of friendship easily reveals itself. As Aristotle and others soon discover, however, being saturated in the particulars of friendship does not translate into a theoretical knowledge of the subject. Aristotle begins his treatise on friendship in the *Eudemian Ethics* with several vexing questions. “Friendship,” Aristotle ponders, “what it is and of what nature, who is a friend, and whether friendship has one or many senses (and if many, how many), and further, how should we treat a friend.”¹⁴ Like Aristotle, many philosophers and thinkers alike have pondered the meaning of friendship. The major philosophical test, then, comes in the endeavor to isolate the essential properties of a real, working friendship and the formula of actions and qualities that produce it.

Although Aristotle made the most extensive efforts to describe and understand friendship, he was not the first to write on the subject. A thorough analysis of Aristotle’s philosophy of friendship must begin with his predecessor and source of inspiration- Plato (427-347 B.C.)¹⁵. Aristotle (384-322 B.C.)¹⁶ was familiar with Plato’s works, quoting him directly and adopting many of his major themes. Friendship was no exclusion to the

¹⁴ Aristotle, *EE*, 7.1234b17-18.

¹⁵ Plato, “*Lysis, or Friendship*” in Philip Blosser and Marshall Carl Bradley, ed., *Friendship: Philosophic Reflections on a Perennial Concern* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1997), pp. 25.

¹⁶ Aristotle, *NE*, pp. xiii.

trend of intellectual sharing. Sprinkled into a variety of his writings, perfect friendship is featured as the main topic of Plato's dialogue *Lysis*. Here, Plato interrogates two young men who are known for having an especially close bond. Plato finds them at a "newly-erected palestra," or wrestling training center, where the dialogue is set.¹⁷ Through a line of questioning directed at the boys, Plato identifies the boy's participation in shared activity, as well as the exclusivity of their relationship as defining features of their relationship. Throughout *Lysis*, Plato highlights the similarities between the boys, creating a fraternal model of friendship that is based on the law of 'like to like'. Inquiring after the essence of friendship, Plato turns toward the "fathers and guides of wisdom," recounting to the boys, "God himself, they say, creates friends and draws them to one another; and this they express, if I am not mistaken, in the following words, 'God is ever drawing like towards like,' and so making them acquainted."¹⁸ Presented at the end of the dialogue, Socrates' exploration of similitude in friendship is never successfully resolved. Instead, it raises many of the major questions of friendship that will instruct many of Aristotle's pursuits.

Plato's work on friendship lays the foundation from which Aristotle and other philosophers will build upon. Throughout his treatises on friendship, Aristotle draws from wisdom gathered by Plato and in several instances even specifically cites him. For example, Aristotle prefaces book VII of *Eudemian Ethics* with a direct allusion to the principle of like to like introduced in *Lysis* explaining, "Many questions are raised about friendship.... for some think that like is friend to like, wence the saying 'how God ever

¹⁷ Philip Blosser, Intro *Lysis*, pp. 49.

¹⁸ Plato, *Lysis*, 213.

draws like to like'¹⁹ The themes and observations introduced by Plato, including fraternity, similarity, activity, and exclusivity prove to be timeless. Apt and insightful, the principles of friendship recognized by Plato retain their applicability and are later picked up by Aristotle, and further still by modern thinkers even thousands of years after they were written.

Although Plato may have lit the spark that brought friendship into philosophy, his insight into the subject cannot overshadow the care and attention given to it by Aristotle. For Aristotle, friendship was an integral component to virtue. Though Plato made allusions to the moral association between friendship and virtue, Aristotle is unique in that he is the first to secure the link between the two. Friendship and 'the Good' are central concepts not only for personal relationships, but also within Aristotle's entire system of ethics. Instead of one, thin dialogue on friendship, Aristotle contributes three entire books and countless other texts to a meticulous exploration and thoughtful analysis of the topic. Aristotle makes a concerted effort to pursue and pin down the subject, going to great pains not only to understand examples of friendship but also to formulate a concrete understanding of its elusive definition. Plato, however, has no qualms letting the subject slip out of his hands. After a great show of sophistry and circular reasoning that pursues the topic of friendship without coming to concrete conclusions, *Lysis* ends abruptly and without resolution when the bodyguards of the boys arrive at the wrestling center and insist that they return home.²⁰ Aristotle, on the other hand, does not conclude his study of friendship until he is satisfied with a conclusion.

¹⁹ Aristotle, *EE*, 7.1.1235a3-5.

²⁰ Plato, *Lysis*. 223.

Friendship as a Virtue

Aristotle's writings on friendship are not simply theories on interpersonal relationships, but are instead integral components to the moral schema he develops. On multiple occasions through the entire body of his works, Aristotle addresses the ethical value of friendship. Instrumental to happiness, Aristotle highlights that friendship's dual function as both indispensable and necessary to virtue as well and an adornment to life. Beginning book VIII of *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle observes, "Friendship is not only necessary, but also fine. For we praise lovers of friends, and having many friends seems to be a fine thing."²¹

As a virtue Aristotle reminds us that, "the same people are good and also friends."²² Important for the construct of morality, friendship also emerges as an indicator of virtue. Moreover, in relation ethics, also referred to simply as *justice*, Aristotle explains, "If people are friends, they have no need of justice, but if they are just they need friendship in addition; and the justice that seems to be most just seems to belong to friendship."²³ Seen as more than a desired association, Aristotle validates the belief that the value of friendship extends beyond fraternal bonds and social prescriptions to take its place in the realm of ethics. As necessary feature of life, friendship also derives value from the role it plays in happiness. Holding special weight in Aristotle's broader philosophical construct happiness is defined as the purpose of human life. Crucial to attaining that goal is the formation of good friendships. As Aristotle concludes, "It would seem absurd, however, to award the happy person all the goods,

²¹ Aristotle, *NE*, 8.1.1155a28-29.

²² *Ibid.* 30-32.

²³ *Ibid.* 28-30.

without giving him friends; friends seem to be the greatest external good...hence the happy person needs friends.”²⁴ Ultimately, Aristotle contends that through the bonds of friendship, happiness and virtue are attained.

Defining Friendship

In creating the basis for examination, Aristotle forms loose definitions of friendship before pursuing serious details. Much of his inquiry into friendship is conducted in a negative examination of the subject. Aristotle pares down the elements of human relation until he can isolate and identify the absolute properties that adhere to friendship, frequently identifying what cannot be friendship as he goes. A crucial aspect that must be kept in consideration when approaching Aristotle’s definition of friendship is in the dual meaning he ascribes. As Paul Schollmeier points out, “Actually, Aristotle defines friendship twice: explicitly as an activity and implicitly as a virtue.”²⁵ Therefore, there is a twofold conception that must be kept in consideration when approaching the subject and includes the qualities or features of friendship as well as the essential properties that constitute friendship in its higher form. As Schollmeier observes, “These two definitions complement one another quite nicely, and their complementarity yields insight into how this conception of friendship fits into his theory of ethics.”²⁶ In order to fully understand the depth and significance of friendship to Aristotle it is necessary to place it in the context of his larger ethical model. However, before we can totally grasp the large-scale significance of friendship, we first must understand its nature and details.

²⁴ Aristotle, *NE*, 9.9.1169b9-11.

²⁵ Paul Schollmeier, *Other Selves: Aristotle on Personal and Political Friendship*, (Albany : State University of New York Press, 1994), pp. 35.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

In his examination of friendship, Aristotle derives a system of categories that ultimately evolve into a taxonomy of value. Although he creates a working definition with important stipulations for the relationship between friends, Aristotle uses the word “friendship” in a haphazard and often ambiguous manner. Many of the misunderstandings concerning its use can be resolved by acknowledging the translation of the Greek term *philia* (φίλος), or friendship. Suzanne Stern Gillet raises the issue of accurately translating Aristotle explaining that, “In ancient Greek usage that concept of *philia* (*friendship*) thus encompasses a wide and diverse field of personal and social relationships compared to which the extension of the modern concept of friendship is bound to appear very restricted.”²⁷ The word “friendship” is used to describe a variety of different relationships including family members, citizens, business associates as well as the more conventional companions we consider “friends” today. In his taxonomy of friendship, Aristotle makes special effort to clarify his meaning in order to more vividly and accurately depict his vision of perfect friendship. Approaching Aristotle’s texts with the right expectations is important for thoroughly understanding the content and meaning of his words. Translation discrepancies aside, Aristotle’s philosophy of friendship frequently deviates from what we anticipate because it contains views and interpretations that step outside of our normal conceptions.

However, Aristotle does himself make special effort to clarify his use of the term “*philia*.” He writes: “To speak, then, of friendship in the primary sense only is to do violence to facts, and makes one assert paradoxes; but it is impossible for all friendships

²⁷ Suzanne Stern-Gillet, *Aristotle’s Philosophy of Friendship*. (Albany: Albany: SUNY pr, 1995), pp. 7.

to come under one definition.”²⁸ Here, Aristotle acknowledges the “dual definition” or paradox of friendship as both an activity and as a virtue. He continues, “The only alternative left is that in a sense there is only one friendship, the primary; but in a sense all kinds are friendship...”²⁹ *Philia* can then be accurately used to describe the activity and the virtue, but it would be a severe presumption to assume the activity was a sufficient condition for the virtue. Instead, the, best (or primary form of friendship that Aristotle later identifies) which embodies the virtue *and* activity shades the other varieties. Explicating this perfect form of friendship, or virtuous friendship, becomes Aristotle’s main interest. In the taxonomy of relation he devises, the varieties of friendship are derived from the ultimate form, so that any relationship that falls into the order of friendship does so only to the extent that it emulates the perfect type.

Before dividing friendship into categories Aristotle acknowledges several universal qualities of friendship. The major feature that distinguishes friendship is presence of reciprocal care and attention, or “goodwill” as Aristotle calls it. As he explains, “If they are to be friends, then they must have goodwill to each other, wish goods and be aware of it.”³⁰ The need for an awareness of reciprocity is an important stipulation as it eliminates the possibility of friendship for people we simply admire or with inanimate objects. This is a point he directly addresses, “For it would presumably be ridiculous to wish good things to wine; the most you wish is its preservation so that you can have it.”³¹ This is also why friendship is an ethical issue since it is specifically restricted to *human* action. Instead he explains, “To a friend, however, it is said, you

²⁸ Aristotle, *EE*, 7.2.1236b-23-24.

²⁹ *Ibid.* 24-26.

³⁰ Aristotle, *NE*, 8.2.1556a 3-6.

³¹ Aristotle, *NE*, 8.2.1155b 29-31.

must wish goods for his own sake.”³² Wishing goods “for his own sake” comes to be an important stipulation when reconciled with the need for self-love and self-gratification. The balance between the self and the other is one that Aristotle later struggles to equalize as he fine-tunes his theory.

Beyond the presence of reciprocated goodwill, Aristotle creates serious types of friendship that instruct his examination and the conclusions he reaches. First, Aristotle classifies and differentiates between desired objects of a friendship and uses them as a means to create a tripartite division. Friendship is then divided into species that naturally adhere to the three basic objects of desire in life. Aristotle explains, “For, it seems, not everything is loved, but [only] the loveable, and this is either good or pleasant or useful.”³³ Hence, the varieties of friendship: virtue, pleasure, and utility, are born. These varieties are scaled into a corresponding hierarchy, with virtuous friendships at the top followed by friendships of pleasure and then friendships of utility at the bottom.

Friendship of Utility

The first category of friendship Aristotle defines in depth is friendship of utility. As Aristotle writes, “Of these the friendship based on usefulness is of course that of the majority.”³⁴ Grounded in personal benefit, friendship flirts with the partnership. Friends of utility comprise the majority of relationships in society, resembling colleagues or associates. For example, Aristotle cites business associates or political alliances as good examples of this type of association. Friendships of utility cater to the individual desires

³² *Ibid.* 31-32.

³³ *Ibid.* 18-20.

³⁴ Aristotle, *EE*, 7.21236a32-34.

or personal interests of each partner. Therefore, expected gain drives the association.

Throughout his description of these instrumental friendships, Aristotle makes several observations and ultimate judgments that weaken their value. A fundamental flaw Aristotle points out is that friendships of utility do and always will serve only as a strictly as only a means rather than any end in and of itself. Strict “usefulness” is not valuable, but only insofar as it is useful for some end. Aristotle explains, “It seems that the useful is the source of some good or some pleasure; hence the good and the pleasant are loveable ends.”³⁵ The good and the pleasant are uncovered as the only truly loveable ends. Utility, then, is excluded as a source of good, but is only instrumental insofar as it leads to the good or the pleasant. Aristotle finds fault with friendships of utility for not fully embodying the virtues of friendship. For example, Aristotle tells us friendships of utility do not always have the “kindly feelings” for one another, or mutual goodwill, as present in the other types of friendships. Another major flaw Aristotle finds in friendships of utility is their tendency towards impermanence. As he explains, “Those who are friends for utility dissolve the friendship as soon as the advantage is removed; for they were never friends of each other, but of what was expedient for them.”³⁶ As a result, the individual friend becomes secondary to the expected gain. Before he even presents the two other species of friendship, it is apparent that friendships of utility are less valuable than friendships of virtue or friendships of pleasure.

Friendship of Pleasure

Next, Aristotle delves into the details of friendships of pleasure. Characterized by individuals who seek and expect satisfaction from one another, this species of friendship

³⁵ Aristotle, *NE*, 8.2.1155b19-21.

³⁶ Aristotle, *NE*, 8.4.1157a15-17.

is found most frequently in the young who “are sensitive to pleasure.”³⁷ Aristotle elaborates, explaining:

The cause of friendship between young people seems to be pleasure. For their lives are guided by their feelings, and they pursue above all what is pleasant for themselves and what is at hand.³⁸

Aristotle points out the self-centered nature of friendships for pleasure, since they pursue what is “pleasant for themselves.” Though our preferences may appear stable, Aristotle interjects with concerns about the inherently ephemeral nature of friendship. After a discussion on the benefits of pleasure in friendship Aristotle acknowledges, “But as they grow up [what they find] pleasant changes too. Hence they are quick to become friends, and quick to stop; for their friendship shifts with [what they find] pleasant, and the change in such pleasure is quick.”³⁹ As a result, these friendships are particularly unsteady, since they are subject to the whims of desire and the evolution of what one finds pleasing at different times in life. Though it is loveable, pleasure does not support a solid friendship.

Still, Aristotle acknowledges that the love of pleasure is a legitimate component of friendship. In his view, pleasure is not to be shunned, but instead, should be embraced as a part of the good life. Loving and being loved involve a level of gratification, and therefore so too do all types of friendship. The contentment or happiness that is derived from friendship is not a superfluous by-product, but an indication that a true bond exists. Since a friendship that was miserable would not sustain, what is pleasurable or loveable becomes a necessary condition for friendship. Aristotle acknowledges pleasure in

³⁷ Aristotle, *EE*, 7.2.1236a36-39.

³⁸ Aristotle, *NE*, 8.3.1156a32-34.

³⁹ *Ibid*, 35-37.

friendship observing that:

Older people and sour people do not appear to be prone to friendship. For there is little pleasure to be found in them, and on one can spend his days with what is painful or not pleasant, since nature appears to avoid above all what is painful and to aim at what is pleasant. (8.5.1157b15-18.)

Playing on our natural inclination towards what makes us contented, Aristotle also makes room in friendships for what is pleasing. More so than utility, love of pleasure is indispensable within friendship.

Friendships of pleasure can, however, be seen to go to extremes. In its aim towards immediate gratification, friendships of pleasure often develop a misguided emphasis that strays away from the good in the other and toward a love of pleasure. Pursuing the whims of desire, pleasure seekers do not take the necessary time and care to properly appraise the object of their rapture. Instead of a real relationship, the illusion of friendship is created. Beyond the excessive and unstable nature of friendships of pleasure, Aristotle also criticizes the individual friends themselves. “Base people,” he observes, “will be friends for pleasure or utility, since they are similar in that way.”⁴⁰ Drawing from Plato, Aristotle applies the principle of “like to like” to friendships of pleasure. Seeking only pleasure for themselves, Aristotle discredits friends of pleasure. “Good people,” Aristotle writes, “will be friends because of themselves, since they are friends insofar as they are good. These, then, are friends without qualification; the others are friends coincidentally and by being similar to these.”⁴¹ As with friendships of utility, Aristotle ultimately finds reason to subvert friendships of pleasure below the complete friendship he next identifies and explores.

⁴⁰ Aristotle, *NE*, 8.4.1157b1-2.

⁴¹ Aristotle, *NE*, 8.4.1157a37-40.

Perfect Friendship

The major focus of his treatise on friendship, Aristotle goes to great lengths to identify and define perfect friendship, as both an activity and a virtue. The third, and ultimate form of friendship arises between those who, “love and wish goods to each other [only] insofar as they love each other.”⁴² Primary friendships (also referred to as complete, perfect or virtuous friendships) are exceedingly rare, occurring only between individuals of exceptional virtue. The emphasis in these relationships is in the other friend, specifically the *good* or the *virtue* of the other. Being virtuous individuals themselves, each friend is able to find the right amount of pleasure in the right aspects of the other. As one Aristotelian scholar explains, “The attitude of some *philoï* [friends] toward each other is different from what we might expect. In the best kind of friendship one virtuous person admires the other’s objective merits, his virtuous CHARACTER.”⁴³ Thus the actions of each friend reflect the love of virtue in the other. Likewise, the basis of these friendships, or the glue that holds them together, is the mutual love of the good each friend possesses.

Aristotle discusses a major objection to the outline of the virtuous friendship presented thus far. He inquires; “If the possessor of virtue is happy, why should he need a friend?”⁴⁴ Aristotle directly challenges the assumption that friendship is necessary to the good life. He counters his own concern with an argument that highlights the qualities of a virtuous friendship, reminding us that these types of friendship are neither strictly

⁴² Aristotle, *NE* 8.3.1156a9-10.

⁴³ Aristotle, *NE*, pp. 330.

⁴⁴ Aristotle, *EE*, 7.12.1244b4-5

pleasant nor useful and then must have some other intrinsic value. As he explains, “But surely this makes it all the clearer that the friend is not for use or help, but that the friend through virtue is the only friend. For when we need nothing, then we all seek others to share our enjoyment, those whom we may benefit rather than those who will benefit us.”⁴⁵ Void of the selfish gains that accompany lesser forms of friendship, perfect friendship is wrapped up in a concern for the other and a love of virtue.

Perfect Friendship- as an Activity

In his description of perfect friendship, Aristotle leaves important clues as to what perfect friendship would look like as a concrete phenomenon. Aristotle cites several specific material requirements for that are necessary within a complete friendship. Among the preconditions is the stipulation that both friends be male. The possibility of perfect friendship between women is never even considered. As Aristotle explains, “man rather than woman, and gifted rather than the ungifted” are fit for the cultivation of the virtue, making perfect friendship an impossibility for women.⁴⁶ The only mention of mixed gender relationships is in the discussion on friendship between unequals where Aristotle likens the friendship of a man and a woman to a ruler and a subject, pointing out that these friendships rest on superiority.⁴⁷ Beside gender requirements, Aristotle leaves clues as to the maturity of the ideal friend. Certainly, friendships formed between boys would likely be based on pleasure, while a companionship formed between older men would be unpleasant and difficult to generate. Therefore, it is presumable that the best

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* 17-21

⁴⁶ Aristotle, *EE*, 7.2.127a37-38.

⁴⁷ Aristotle, *NE*, 8.7.1158b12-14.

friendships would exist between young and middle aged men. Friends involved in a perfect friendship would also have to meet several demographic requirements. For example, slaves, representing the bottom tier of society, would not meet the necessary requirements for friendship. Instead, Aristotle alludes to a basic level of wealth and education to ensure the requisite cultivation of virtue. As is discussed in later chapters, wealth plays an important role in the cultivation of certain virtues such as magnanimity. Drawing again from Plato, Aristotle explains, “That is why we need to have had the appropriate upbringing - right from early youth, as Plato says- to make us find enjoyment or pain in the right things; for this is the correct education.”⁴⁸ A perfect friendship then, would necessitate these basic material conditions in order to be viable.

Other special features of perfect friendship are necessary in order to make the relationship so exceptional. One of the explicit requirements Aristotle makes for true friends is similarity. For example, friends must enjoy and receive pleasure from the same things in life Aristotle writes, “Whatever someone regards as his being, or the end for which he chooses to be alive, that is the activity he wishes to pursue in his friend’s company.”⁴⁹ Furthermore, Aristotle stipulates that close companions will act on their mutual interests by spending time together engaged in shared activity, “Hence some friends drink together, others play dice, while others do gymnastics and go hunting, or do philosophy.”⁵⁰ Aristotle makes it clear that, “They spend their days together on whichever pursuits in life they like most for since they want to live with their friends,

⁴⁸ Aristotle, *NE*, 2.3.1140a11-13.

⁴⁹ Aristotle, *NE*, 9.12.1172a1-2.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

they share the actions in which they find their common life.⁵¹ Mutual activities and a desire to do the same things add to the pleasantness of the friendship. Moreover, shared activity reinforces the idea of similarity and dedication required for a perfect friendship.

A true friend would be dedicated not just to the friendship, but also to the other friend. Aristotle elucidates a level of emotional similitude in virtuous friends “For the friend wants, if possible, not merely to feel pain along with his friend, but to feel the same pain, e.g. to feel thirsty when he is thirsty, if that were possible, and if not then to feel the pain as like as possible.”⁵² Perfect friends do not just spend their time in one another’s company, but seek to experience life together. He continues, “The same words are applicable to joy, which, if felt for no other reason than that the other feels joy, is a sign of friendship.”⁵³ Therefore, the similarity of true friends extends to emotions and feelings.

Aristotle is quick to warn us not to confuse our similarities or emotions for true friendship. Signs of like-mindedness do not translate to complete compatibility. A true friendship takes time. “A friend,” writes Aristotle, “is not to be had without a trial nor in a single day.”⁵⁴ He explains, “For men are like wines and meats; the pleasantness of them shows itself quickly, but if it continues longer it is unpleasant and not sweet, and so it is with men.”⁵⁵ Instead, he suggests making a trial of the friend in order to know how he thinks and whether the seeds of true friendship exist. Men who do not take the appropriate steps before jumping into a friendship “are easily made enemies” and will be

⁵¹ Aristotle, *NE*, 10.12.1172a1-6.

⁵² Aristotle, *EE*, 7.6.1240a36-40.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Aristotle, *EE*, 7.2.1238a1-2.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.* 22-25.

persuaded “whenever those who try to break up the friendship produce evidence.”⁵⁶

Perfect friendship is more durable. Real friendship, as Aristotle explains, “seems to be something stable, and this alone is stable, ...there is no stable friendship without confidence, but confidence needs time.”⁵⁷ By laying out a working image of friendship, the path is cleared for the theoretical and moral conclusions Aristotle finds. The major stipulation Aristotle repeatedly references is the equality in virtue. More than participation in shared activity, Aristotle puts forward similarity of virtue and equality of friends. An ideal that drives and sustains the best of friendships, Aristotle applies the ancient idea that ‘like is to like’ to character. More than an adornment, Aristotle argues that friendship is necessary to a complete and fulfilling life. “Hence,” he declares, “the happy person needs friends.”⁵⁸ Thorough his quest to understand perfect friendship, Aristotle draws important moral conclusions that support the superiority of complete friendships. Seemingly unattainable for the “many”, the ideal of perfect friendship nonetheless plays a critical role in human happiness.

⁵⁶ Aristotle, *EE*, 7.2.1238a25-27.

⁵⁷ Aristotle, *EE*, 7.2.1237b11-12.

⁵⁸ Aristotle, *NE*, 9.9.1169b9-10.

CHAPTER II. Confronting Aristotle: Puzzles About Friendship

Introduction

Although he puts forth a relatively straightforward and unambiguous model of friendship, many of Aristotle's ideas provoke curiosity, raising a variety of questions and several unique interpretive puzzles. Exploring these topics lends a deeper understanding not only to the overarching schematics of Aristotle's framework, but also to the practical aspects of friendship as it fits into our lives. It is of special interest to modern readers of Aristotle on friendship to consider the timelessness of many of the observations and points he presents. As Aristotelian scholar Suzanne Stern-Gillet observes, "To receive enlightenment and instruction from Aristotle's disquisitions on friendship, we must first appreciate how striking they are and how deeply they challenge some of our modern notions."⁵⁹ "Receiving enlightenment" from Aristotle is not as easy as it may appear. As Stern acknowledges, Aristotle's "down-to-earth" treatment of friendship, "is in fact both profound and contentious."⁶⁰ A thorough examination of Aristotle's writing on *philia* presents several practical questions that merit special attention. Confronting the most challenging and perplexing of these puzzles is the task of this chapter.

Before beginning a wholehearted consideration of friendship, we must first take a moment to acknowledge the craft Aristotle engages in. In the preface of his writing, he exhorts us to remember that, "we do not look for the same degree of exactness in all areas, but the degree that accords with a given subject matter and is proper to a given line

⁵⁹ Suzanne Stern-Gillet, *Aristotle's Philosophy of Friendship*, (Albany: Albany: SUNY pr, 1995) pp 11.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

of inquiry.⁶¹ In other words, we should not expect a degree of precision that does not correspond the subject matter. Instead, we must content ourselves with the level of exactitude allotted to a field of inquiry. As Aristotle says, “In each case we should try to find them [principles] out by means suited to their nature, and work hard to define them rightly.”⁶² In the case of friendship, we must seek only the level of understanding that is possible. In all areas, Aristotle reminds us to seek “the [proper degree of exactness] so that digressions do not overwhelm our main task.”⁶³ In our exploration of friendship we must tailor our expectations with the aim of answering the questions at hand

Friendship and Justice

One of the most puzzling associations Aristotle puts forward is the connection between friendship and justice. As he defines it, justice is, “a complete virtue to the highest degree because it is the complete exercise of complete virtue.”⁶⁴ Presented at the beginning of his treatise, justice in friendship provides a unique interpretive opportunity. He explains, “It [justice] is the complete exercise because the person who has justice is able to exercise virtue in relation to another, not only in what concerns himself; for many are able to exercise virtue in their own concerns, but unable in what relates to another.”⁶⁵ The connection between friendship and justice is critical to larger construct of virtue, and ultimately leads to important conclusions about character and the value of friendship.

⁶¹ Aristotle, *NE*, 1.7.1098a29-30.

⁶² Aristotle, *NE*, 1.7.1098b5-5.

⁶³ Aristotle, *NE*, 1.7.1098a38-40.

⁶⁴ Aristotle, *NE*, 5.3.1129b31-32.

⁶⁵ Aristotle, *NE*, 5.3.1129b32-35.

Aristotle makes several allusions to the notion that there is a direct correlation between having friends and the merit or worthiness of the individual. Aristotle explores justice as a central theme of Book VII of *Eudemian Ethics* as a means to better understand friendship. He introduces his agenda with the observation that, “all say that justice and injustice are specially exhibited towards friends; the same man seems both good and a friend.”⁶⁶ Aristotle makes it clear that one who has friends can be presumed also to be good. In modern societies, we still find examples of this same type of reasoning. Character references, for example, give people who don’t know us the assurance that we are likeable. Further questions of the exact relationship between friendship and character deserve continued attention.

Does having friends make you a good person?

Aristotle’s definition of justice, or “complete virtue to the highest degree,” relies on external parties, since the person who has justice must be capable of exercising it in the most difficult situations or in relation to another. Friendship becomes the forum for the exhibition of this type of virtue. As Aristotle explains, “If one wishes to act without injustice, it is enough to make friends, for friends do not act unjustly.”⁶⁷ It is evident that Aristotle seeks to create an absolute principle for the relationship between justice and friendship, that friends do not and cannot act unjustly. As a result, the principle of justice, or virtue in the highest degree, comes to adhere directly to friendship. Aristotle continues, “But neither will men act unjustly if they are just; therefore justice and

⁶⁶ Aristotle, *EE*, 7.1.1234b.26.

⁶⁷ Aristotle, *EE*, 7.1.1234b26-27.

friendship are either the same or not far different.”⁶⁸ Here the value and power Aristotle ascribes to friendship becomes clear. As Lorraine Smith Pangle observes, “The goodness shown in noble friendship seems higher than justice, not only because its object is so worthy but because it is entirely dependant on one’s own character and choice and is not defined and compelled by law.”⁶⁹ While Aristotle mentions the lawfulness of following the rules of society, he asserts that this is not comparable to the complete justice of free choice. Driven by the ability to know and decide what is right and wrong, justice of free choice requires an active cultivation of virtue. Clearly, this is the justice of friendship.

The special value attributed to friendship is evident in the intermingling of virtue and activity. Justice *is* friendship, and friendship *is* justice, or else they somehow directly depend on each other. Aristotle reinforces this connection, noting, “If people are friends, they have no need of justice, but if they are just they need friendship in addition.”⁷⁰ As supreme as justice may be, it requires friendship in order to exist. In fact, as Aristotle explains, the best form of justice, “seems to belong to friendship.”⁷¹ Not only do individual friends benefit from their interaction with one another, but friendship itself is elevated to something virtuous by means of justice. It has been established that ‘fine’ people are necessary ingredients for perfect friendships, but what deserves further consideration is whether or not having friends actually makes you a better person.

⁶⁸ Aristotle, *EE*, 7.1.1234b27-31.

⁶⁹ Lorraine Smith Pangle, *Aristotle and the Philosophy of Friendship* (New York: Cambridge UP, 2002.) pp 7.

⁷⁰ Aristotle, *NE*, 8.1.155a26-28.

⁷¹ Aristotle, *NE*, 8.1.155a29.

In order to fully answer the question of whether character is dependent on friendship, it is necessary to explore Aristotle's account of the good. From his earliest writings, Aristotle has synthesized the basic assumptions of society in order to come up with his own answers to life's questions. In his model, Aristotle concludes that the function or purpose of man lies in the cultivation of a certain kind of life that, as any student of philosophy will recall, is an "activity of the soul in accord with reason."⁷² In developing a system of ethics, Aristotle takes this premise about human function a bit further. "And so the human good," he concludes, "proves to be activity of the soul in accord with virtue, and indeed with the best and most complete virtue, if there are more virtues than one."⁷³ Man's design enables his soul to act in accordance with reason, but in order to achieve human good he must act in a way that his soul harmonizes with what is most virtuous.

This emphasis on character in ethics was a field pioneered by Aristotle and is often referred to as virtue ethics. In this system a person is assessed by the total sum of goodness he or she possesses. The virtuous person is one who aims at fine and right action.⁷⁴ An individual's virtue is further tailored to fit him or her exactly, in relation to his particular disposition or the range of his capabilities. For example, a naturally bold man cannot automatically be considered brave. Instead he must strive for the "golden mean" of action between the two extremes of bad habits. In this case, cowardice and brashness would be the polar examples of unchecked vice. Other areas where a mean must be achieved include temperance, wit, magnanimity and generosity. Friendship is

⁷² Aristotle, *NE*, 1.7.1098a.7-8.

⁷³ Aristotle, *NE*, 1.7.1098a16-20.

⁷⁴ Aristotle, *NE*, pp. 353.

also included in this list of virtues, but includes a more complex formula for attainment since it requires a combination of the other virtues and goods.

Aristotle's stipulation that man's activity is "of the soul" may also require a more thorough explanation. In his description of "the goods," Aristotle carves out a tri-partite division of the substance of man's life that is scaled into a hierarchy very similar to his model of friendship. The three types of goods include external goods, goods of the soul, and goods of the body. Goods of the soul, or the actions and activities of the soul, "are the goods most fully and more than [the] others," which Aristotle acknowledges as, "a right and ancient belief, accepted by philosophers."⁷⁵ Below these goods are external goods, which include those factors that affect our lives, such as how we look or the family we are born into, but nonetheless are mere accidental qualities of us. The lowest grade are the goods of the body and include properties such as good health. Though they receive less emphasis than goods of the soul, Aristotle acknowledges that, "Nonetheless, happiness evidently also needs external goods to be added, as we said, since we cannot, or cannot easily do fine actions if we lack the resources."⁷⁶ Though goods of the soul reign supreme, they are not sufficient alone for virtue.

Friendship's position on the scale of goods is critical to understanding its impact on character. A deprivation of certain external goods such as, "good birth, good children, beauty," "mars our blessedness." In Aristotle's words, "We do not all together have the character of happiness if we look utterly repulsive or are ill-born, solitary, or

⁷⁵ Aristotle, *NE*, 1.8.1098b17-18.

⁷⁶ Aristotle, *NE*, 1.8.1099a30-32.

childless...”⁷⁷ He continues, “we have it even less, presumably if our children or friends are totally bad, or were good but have died.”⁷⁸ Here, Aristotle cites friendship as an example of an external or accidental good. He acknowledges that having “totally bad” children or good friends that have died is sometimes beyond individual control. In the scheme of goods, friendship must be included as an external good, or an accidental quality, one that adorns life but that in many ways is the product of the circumstances we are born into.

While the formation of friendships behoves a certain level of virtue and character, the absence of friends does not directly translate to poor character. To some extent, having friends is accidental. Aristotle acknowledges the situatedness of life and the fact that we don’t always have control over the facts of our life. According to Aristotle, if you have true friends, you can rightly assume you are a good person. But if you don’t, you could be of a base nature or simply unlucky. Not having friends does not mean we are bad, but does having them mean we are good? If we follow Aristotle’s reasoning, we must be good and upright in order to build a strong and perfect friendship. But to what degree does our involvement in friendships reinforce our virtue or make us better?

This brings us to the heart of our inquiry on friendship and character, whether having friends makes us better people. For Aristotle, the answer would be a resounding ‘yes’. Not only are friends attracted to the virtue of their counterparts, but they also emulate the virtuous qualities in one another. Aristotle might even conclude that friends

⁷⁷ Aristotle, *NE*, 1.8.1099b2-5.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.* 5-6.

inspire one another. Taking pleasure in what is good and right, it is only logical that a perfect pair would promote virtue. A requisite expectation of a true friend is the obligation to keep the other from doing bad. Aristotle insists that, “if a friend is really to be your friend, he must not only be good absolutely, but also good for you.”⁷⁹ For Aristotle, being a positive influence is the major responsibility of friends. He points out, “It is proper to good people to avoid error themselves and not to permit it in their friends.”⁸⁰ A friend, functioning as a second self, provides an effective check on our thoughts and actions. As Aristotle continues, “Further, good people’s life together allows the cultivation of virtue.”⁸¹ Together, friends not only effectively stop the spread of vice, but also foster the development of virtue.

Equality and Friendship

In contrast to the focus of justice in friendship that defines much of Book VII of *Eudemian Ethics*, Aristotle shifts his focus to equality in Books VIII and IV of *Nicomachean Ethics*. Aristotle’s equality of friendship poses several problems, especially for modern readers, as the types of equality are laid out and measured. As a prerequisite for all types of Aristotelian friendship, likeness becomes imperative to the cultivation of friendship. Even the lesser forms, including friendships of pleasure and friendships of utility, rest on likeness and similarity between individuals. Aristotle asserts that individuals gain and receive pleasure and utility in equal proportion.⁸² Further, these friends must derive equal satisfaction or benefit from the same things.

⁷⁹ Stern-Gillet, pp 75.

⁸⁰ Aristotle, *NE*, 9.9.1170a11.

⁸¹ *Ibid.* 12-13.

⁸² Aristotle, *NE*, 8.6.1158b1-2.

Friendships of virtue are also derived from equality, but the equality of perfect friends is more complicated than it might appear. In discussing friendship between unequals Aristotle elucidates the proportionality of friendship. He tells us “friendship is equality primarily in quantity and secondarily in worth.”⁸³ Rather than being absolutely good, the virtuous friend must be absolutely equal to the other.

In her book *Aristotle and the Philosophy of Friendship*, Lorraine Smith Pangle analyzes the picture of equality in friendships presented by Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. She explains, “In [chapter] 8.14, Aristotle examines more closely the balance sheets of unequal friendships and sheds more light on the question of just what is required to make one satisfied with a friendship.”⁸⁴ In Pangle’s reading, “[Aristotle] says that the one in a friendship who is the greater benefactor thinks that his superiority entitles him to more, and that a friendship ceases to be a friendship at all and becomes a public service of charity if a man does not get out of it any fair return.”⁸⁵ This imbalance leads to a dissatisfaction and ultimate failure of the friendship.⁸⁶ Aristotle reinforces this position, stating, “This is clear if friends come to be separated by some wide gap in virtue, vice, wealth or something else; for then they are friends no more.”⁸⁷ Rather than simply sharing an equality of virtue, Aristotle’s perfect friends must be of comparable value and status.

The inclusion of affluence in the equation of friendship is problematic, especially in a modern reading of the text. Aristotle devotes considerable attention to wealth, which

⁸³ Aristotle, *NE*, 8.7.1158b32-33.

⁸⁴ Pangle, pp. 129.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ Aristotle, *NE*, 8.7.1158b32-33.

he explicitly defines as, “anything whose worth is measured by money.”⁸⁸ Wealth plays a considerable role in the development of generosity and is an integral part in the formation of the virtues magnanimity and magnificence. Concerned with great things, the “magnificent person’s expenditures are large and fitting.”⁸⁹ In Aristotle’s view, the resources held by an individual correspond to success and ultimately the individual’s capacity for cultivating virtue. As he explains, “That is why a poor person could not be magnificent as he lacks the means for large and fitting expenditures.”⁹⁰ The poor and the wealthy are not only in different socioeconomic divisions, but in different classes of virtue as well.

For modern readers, the idea that people feel more comfortable with individuals of a similar background and comparable outlook is a reasonable one, but the integration of income into friendship seems absurd. We may accept the social constructs of racial or class-based cliques, but to enshrine them as a principle might make readers uncomfortable. Aristotle reinforces his position with the example of a king, “since far inferior people do not expect to be their friends.”⁹¹ True, we may not *expect* to be friends with powerful political leaders today, but the suggestion that such a friendship is impossible is an altogether different claim. To illuminate the extent to which equality is necessary between virtuous friends, it is important to consider his account of failed friendships.

⁸⁸ Aristotle, *NE*, 4.1.1119b27.

⁸⁹ Aristotle, *NE*, 4.2.1122b4.

⁹⁰ Aristotle, *NE*, 5.2.1122b26-27.

⁹¹ Aristotle, *NE*, 8.7.1159a1-2.

Dissolutions of Friendship

As instructive as the features of friendship are, the missing qualities that are exposed through a negative examination can be equally useful to our study. As Aristotle found, the inner mechanics of friendships are revealed through an examination of their abandonment. In fact, he dedicates an entire chapter to the topic. Cementing the bond between perfect friends, it is not surprising that the lack of virtue would also justify the termination of a friendship. Acknowledging the very real and often painful experience of losing a friend, Aristotle provides a critical analysis and an ethical critique to failed friendship.

From Aristotle's discussion of the different species of friendships, it is apparent that he reserves respect for the most enduring forms. In his view, individual friends who themselves are of a weak or unpredictable character cannot provide the stable foundation needed to construct a strong, working friendship. Each individual must maintain a level of goodness in order to continue loving and being loved by the other. Aristotle explains, "The bad is not loveable, and must not be loved; for we ought neither to love the bad nor to become similar to a base person, and we have said that similar is friend to similar."⁹² In Aristotle's opinion, we should restrict our affections to those individuals who are similar to us in virtue.

As Aristotle later elucidates, we must similarly abandon individuals who cease to embody the good or loveable qualities. Not only are we to depart from those who decrease in virtue, but we must also let friendships go when a gap opens because one increases in virtue. Aristotle writes: "But if one friend stayed the same and the other

⁹² Aristotle, *NE*, 9.3.1165b15-17.

became more decent and far excelled his friend in virtue, should the better person still treat the other as a friend? Surely he cannot.”⁹³ By authorizing the termination of friendships of unequal virtue, he reinforces his position on equality. He writes, “Still the friend who dissolves the friendship seems to be doing nothing absurd. For he was not the friend of a person of this sort; hence, if the friend has altered, and he cannot save him, he leaves him.”⁹⁴ Through this discussion of dissolutions of friendship, Aristotle introduces the necessity of loyalty between friends.

Though he permits us to abandon relationships that are not fruitful, Aristotle obliges us to try to save a friend. Aristotle poses the question, “Should the friendship be dissolved at once [as soon as the friend becomes bad]?”⁹⁵ He responds to his own query, “Surely not with every sort of person, but only with an incurably vicious person.”⁹⁶ The responsibility of friendship, previously discussed as the commitment to “avoid error in themselves and not to permit it in their friends,” prevents us from quickly abandoning another. As he declares, “If someone can be set right, we should try harder to rescue his character than his property, insofar as character is both better and more proper to friendship.”⁹⁷ Essentially, each friend is given the duty to ensure that the equality of virtue is maintained. Upholding their own virtue and protecting the virtue of the other, true friends are sheltered from dissolution.

While Aristotle stresses the importance of virtue in friendship, he still leaves several questions of equality unanswered. While he admits that character, rather than

⁹³ *Ibid.* 22-25.

⁹⁴ Aristotle, *NE*, 9.3.1165b22-23.

⁹⁵ Aristotle, *NE*, 9.4.1165b16-17.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.* 17-18.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.* 18-21.

property is, “better and more proper to friendship,” he still leaves socioeconomic equality wedged into the requirements for perfect friendship. He acknowledges that wealth is an insufficient measure of character explaining, “Some friends wrong one another; they love rather the things than the possessor of them; and so they love the persons as much as they choose wine because it is pleasant, or wealth because it is useful; for wealth is more useful than its owner.”⁹⁸ Aristotle describes this as problematic since, “the owner is indignant, as if the other had preferred his wealth to him as to something inferior,” and also because the other friend “now look[s] to find in him a good man, when before they looked for one pleasant or useful.”⁹⁹ Despite the problems Aristotle finds with using wealth as a means for assessing value, he acknowledges elsewhere that certain types of friendships based on civic and legal association are, “dissolved by a money-payment (for it measures equality in money),”¹⁰⁰ hence the proverb “a fixed wage for a friend.”¹⁰¹ Though he makes attempts to take class out of his definition, the equality of wealth between perfect friends is established.

Equality of Virtue

Though the place of money within friendship remains unclear, the role of virtue within friendship is unambiguous. Equal virtue is the glue that binds true friends together. As Aristotle explains, perfect friendship must be based on proportionality of virtue. He acknowledges that, “we cannot, or cannot easily, do fine actions if we lack the

⁹⁸ Aristotle, *EE*, 7.2.1244a31-33.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.* 34-36.

¹⁰⁰ Aristotle, *EE*, 7.10.1242b7.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.* 34.

resources,” but attempts to place this discussion within the context of virtue.¹⁰² In other words, Aristotle makes the claim that though external goods are significant factors in our lives, they can only derive their significance from their impact on character development. As Aristotle asserts, “Equality and similarity, and above all the similarity of those who are similar in being virtuous, is friendship.”¹⁰³ Repeatedly, Aristotle explicitly and directly reinforces this position. Equality of virtue, above any other property of similarity, is the necessary condition for complete friendship.

Another Self

Beyond his description of the balance virtue, Aristotle introduces another a unique and metaphysically baffling description of the similarity between perfect friends. In several instances, Aristotle uses the term “*alloi autoi*” (•λλοι α•το•) or “other selves” in reference to pairs of perfect friends. In this special version of equality, Aristotle likens the friend to “another yourself,” at times equating the bodies and at other times the souls of two separate individuals as one. As he writes, “Further we say about friendship such things as that friendship is equality, and true friends a single soul.”¹⁰⁴ The philosophical significance of “other selves” is one that is far from novel for Aristotle, as he stresses the coalescing of friends throughout his writings. The *Eudemian Ethics*, for example, includes a passage that highlights this theme. As Aristotle describes, “For the friend wants, if possible, not merely to feel pain along with his friend, but to feel the same pain, e.g. to feel thirsty when he is thirsty, if that were possible, and if not, then to feel a pain

¹⁰² Aristotle, *NE*, 1.8.1099a30-31.

¹⁰³ Aristotle, *NE*, 8.8.1159b2.

¹⁰⁴ Aristotle, *EE*, 7.6.1240b1-2.

as like as possible.”¹⁰⁵ Here Aristotle makes it clear that similitude in personhood and virtue are no longer sufficient for the formation of perfect friendship. Instead, shared sentiment and experience are also required. As the picture of perfect friendship emerges, it is increasingly one of likeness and reflection to the extent that two friends become indistinguishable.

As Suzanne Gillet Stern explains, the concept of “other selves” directly corresponds to the literal meaning of the words. As she argues, the interpretation of *alloi autoi* as separate individuals, or ‘the other *qua* self,’ is an exegesis that “cannot be seriously entertained.”¹⁰⁶ Offering evidence of friendship from pre-Classical Greek literature, the *Iliad* in particular, Stern successfully buttresses Aristotle’s position to support the literal veracity of his claim. Similar to Aristotle’s description of ‘the same spirit’, are phrases used by Homer including, “having one spirit” (*hena thumon echontes*) and “having the same spirit” (*ison thumon echontes*).¹⁰⁷ Achilles and Patroclus, the story’s heroic pair, embody these features, as well as many other described by Aristotle. For example, Achilles describes his relationship to Patroclus as “another self” in his lamentations over his friend’s death who he, “proclaims to have regarded his friend as *ison emēi kephalēi* (‘as myself’, literally ‘equal to my head’).”¹⁰⁸ Stern also offers metaphors used by Homer that convey the total semblance of the friends. For example, when Patroclus dressed for battle in Achilles’ suit of armor he found that it fit him perfectly and that Achilles’ spears, too, were well adapted to his hands.¹⁰⁹ As Stern

¹⁰⁵ Aristotle, *EE*, 7.6.1240a37-39.

¹⁰⁶ Stern-Gillet, pp. 12.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.* pp. 16.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

demonstrates, Aristotle's claim of *alloi autoi*, or other selves, must be considered seriously in order to accurately interpret the significance of equality within friendship.

Uniting two friends so tightly has important philosophical implications for Aristotle's ideas of selfhood and perfect friendship. The claim that true friends must become one raises major questions for the application of friendship. If one friend is literally an extension of another, is there any room for uniqueness? How far must we merge with our friends?

The sketch of perfect friendship presented by Aristotle thus far is one that emphasizes the ideals. The building blocks for perfect friendship, virtue between friends must be included in equal measure. As a result, individual friends promote their own virtue, bettering their character and perfecting justice through friendship. However, the discussion on equality and similarity presented thus far raises another set of puzzles that merit attention including a special consideration of the features, as well as the limitations, of perfect friendship. If the friend is our "other self," it is necessary to understand where the "other" begins and the "self" ends. The degree to which we should identify with the friend, as well as the extent to which we must forfeit our own identity in the process are among the concerns that accompany Aristotle's philosophy of friendship. Arriving at the exact relation between friends is a task that presents itself for further exploration in order to complete the emerging image of perfect friendship.

Exclusivity

An important point of consideration regarding the implication of Aristotle's "other self" analogy is the primacy Aristotle puts on exclusivity. In describing complete

friendship, Aristotle is explicit in his demand that there can only be *one* in addition to oneself.

As a practical concern, Aristotle contends that our time, attention, and resources are too finite to allow for many serious friendships. According to his definition, friendship “consists more in loving; and people who love their friends are praised; hence it would seem, loving is the virtue of friends.”¹¹⁰ A continuous level of love, or care and upkeep, is required to maintain true friendships. As he reminds us, “the need of active loving... prevents one from being at the same time a friend to many; for one cannot be active towards many at the same time.”¹¹¹ Active friendship requires an awareness of and conscious consideration of the other. Restrictions on effort and energy prevent us from fully giving ourselves to many. For this reason, we are not capable of cultivating serious friendships with more than one individual. The intimacy required for perfect friendship cannot be taken too hastily. As Aristotle reminds us, “[To find out whether someone is really good], one must both have experience of him and be on familiar terms with him, which is extremely difficult.”¹¹² Necessitating considerable time and attention, true friendship between many is a practical impossibility.

Beside the limits of active care and attention, there is a more fundamental lack of plurality that underlies Aristotle’s friendship. Even if three exceptionally virtuous and compatible people met, they could not form a perfect friendship in Aristotle’s model. As he specifies, “No one can have complete friendship for many people, just as no one can have an erotic passion for many at the same time; for [complete friendship, like erotic

¹¹⁰ Aristotle. *NE*. 8.8.1159a35-36.

¹¹¹ Aristotle. *EE*. 7.2.1238a8-10.

¹¹² Aristotle. *NE*. 8.6.1158a14-16.

passion,] is like an excess, and an excess is naturally directed at a single individual.”¹¹³

This emphasis on emotion and sentiment, or love and goodwill, underlies the argument for exclusivity. A necessary component for perfect friendship, exclusivity corresponds to the sentiments mutual respect, care, and attention.

Just as sentiments direct and guide our friendships, they are also an important point of convergence. Emotion does not escape Aristotle’s standard of equality, as he remarks, “For friends seem to agree in feeling, and those who agree in feeling seem to be friends. Friendly agreement is not about all things, but only about things that may be done by those in agreement and what relates to the their common life.”¹¹⁴ Not only do real friends build a singular life together, they also share the same feelings about their commonality. Aristotle reinforces the unity of friendship in action, enumerating the features of perfect friendship to include, “wishing the existence above all of the friend, living with him, [and] sharing his joy and his grief, unity of soul with the friend, the impossibility of even living without one another, and dying together are characteristic of a single individual.”¹¹⁵ Here, unity in action and in sentiment quickly lead to a shared numerical identity or “single soul.” Though Aristotle brings friends to the brink of uniformity, he draws back and lends special consideration to the question of how we should relate to a friend in instances when our priorities clash. He acknowledges a form of separateness between friends and addresses the extent to which we must balance between the needs of the friend with our own. Complicating the singular identity of friends in the discussion of “other selves,” Aristotle introduces the notion of self-love.

¹¹³ *Ibid.* 12-13.

¹¹⁴ Aristotle, *EE*, 7.6.1241a15-18.

¹¹⁵ Aristotle, *EE*, 7.6.1240b10.

Self-Love- Friendship with self

In addition to friendship with another, Aristotle introduces the importance of friendship with oneself. As Aristotle grapples with his own model of friendship, he comes to the realization that, “The defining features of friendship, would seem to be derived from features of friendship towards oneself.”¹¹⁶ As Stern observes, “the priority of love of self over that of others is rooted in definitional considerations as well as in moral psychology.”¹¹⁷ In other words, our relationships with others are ultimately derived from our relation to ourselves. In many ways Aristotle sees perfect friendship corresponding to the mode of self-love. Psychologically, we consider the well-being of ourselves as equally important to the other. For example, classify our treatment of the other in analogous terms used to describe relation with self such as, “furthering,” “betterment,” and “preservation.” The feelings of care and concern we experience for the other stem from the ways we treat our own well-being.

Aristotle reinforces this interpretation of the connection of self and other throughout his own writing. In describing the relationship between the individual and the friend, he writes:

All of the proverbs agree with this too, speaking, for instance, of ‘one soul’, ‘what friends have in common’, ‘equality is friendship’, and the ‘knee is closer than the shin’. For all these are true most of all in someone’s relations with himself, since one is a friend to himself most of all. Hence he should also love himself most of all. (9.7.1168b7-10.)

In addition to seeking what is good for our friend, we must also seek it in ourselves.

Aristotle’s prescription that we should be friends to ourselves most of all is startling when

¹¹⁶ Aristotle, *NE*, 9.4.1166a1.

¹¹⁷ Stern-Gillet, pp.100.

considered in opposition to his previous claims of “one soul” or singular identity and the notion of exclusivity.

Second “Self”

In answer to the question of how we should relate to our friends, Aristotle orders perfect friends to find the balance between selfishness, or a consuming personal concern, and an excessive passion for the other. The mean Aristotle suggests is a symmetry of sentiment, prescribing that we love the other in the same way that we love ourselves. Beyond the initial condition that we love and care for the other, Aristotle indicates that we must also love and care for ourselves in the same way. Though he concedes there is a wrong version of self-love, one that is most close to vanity and greed, he identifies a corresponding virtuous form. “In everything praiseworthy,” he explains, “the excellent person awards more of the fine to himself. In this way, then, we must be self-lovers.”¹¹⁸ Adding a new dimension to the understanding of friendship, the argument for self-love presents a new paradox. Redefining self-love as the basis for love of the other, Aristotle lays down a seemingly conflicting outline that places a self-seeking concern, or one “that awards more of the fine to himself” at the forefront. Aristotle embraces selfishness while simultaneously attempting to deny egoism. This refutes many of the conclusions Aristotle draws about friendship in other places. For example, one definition he gives elsewhere explains, “For a friend is taken to be someone who wishes and does goods or apparent goods to his friends for the friend’s own sake; or one who wishes the friend to be and to

¹¹⁸ Aristotle, *NE*, 9.9.1169b35-38.

live for the friend's own sake."¹¹⁹ This is complicated by the easy and absolute superiority Aristotle gives to self-love.

Though the introduction of self-love complicates assumptions about friendships and the claim of "other selves," Aristotle would remind us not to confuse friendship with sentiment. As previously discussed, Aristotle champions for an equality or convergence of emotion. In other words, we should feel the same way about the common features of life with another, and further harbor the same sentiments for one another, but in friendship, we are friends to ourselves most of all. Though we may seek to merge with our "other self," we may do so only insofar as we do not lose ourselves. The feature of self-love requires that we distinguish our own needs in order to properly cultivate self-love. In this way we must also maintain an awareness of our own worthiness and virtue.

Although desiring and wishing good for the other is necessary, we do not do so in an equal measure to our own self-interest. Though Aristotle posits equality as the basis of friendship, the treatment of self-love and material conditions suggest otherwise. True equality would demand a proportional level of care instead of the lopsided view of love in friendship that Aristotle suggests. More problematic still is the biased position of virtue in friendship. Favoring the well-bred and the wealthy, the ability to cultivate virtue is not equal for all. These questions on virtue and equality require further exploration in the next chapter, "Claiming Friendship." Though Aristotle does not resolve all of the puzzles that arise from his analysis, he does leave us with a general impression of what the perfect friend would look like.

¹¹⁹ Aristotle, *NE*, 9.4.1166a3-5.

The Ideal Friend

From his lengthy description of friendship, spanning three entire books, and featured in many other parts of his writings, an image of the perfect friend begins to emerge. Certainly the individual would be virtuous and especially just, having mastered many of the character virtues. Being rational enough to tame the irrational passions, the individual friend would necessarily be male. Taking pleasure in the right things in the right amount, the friend would be habituated to love the good and seek what was fine. Being the best type of individual, the friend would likely have had an ideal upbringing with the right education in order to be directed toward the good. The ideal friend would also be strictly exclusive, restricting care and attention for only a select individual who would also have to meet certain criteria. This person would have a deep interest in the well-being of the other, and feel the same way about the friend as they felt about themselves. The similarities between the friends would include a range of similarity such as coming from the same background, enjoying the same activities and even a possible physical semblance. Finally, the ideal friend would likely be engaged in the world, useful, instrumental, pleasant. In the next chapter we will explore the viability of this picture both in antiquity and today.

CHAPTER III. Claiming Friendship

Prescriptive and Descriptive Issues

Aristotle's subject matter and his efforts to uncover the nature of friendship raise several interpretive puzzles. The philosophers who have adopted the intellectual pursuit of friendship have quickly found the difficulties involved in defining and understanding a concept in which they are simultaneously objectifying and embedded. More than just an abstract theoretical design, the conclusions drawn on friendship, virtue and equality have important practical implications.

An examination of Aristotle's writings on friendship simultaneously brings philosophical awareness of the topic while also raising practical anxieties about the application of friendship in the world. In order to consider seriously the merits of perfect friendship, as it is included in Aristotle's picture of happiness and virtue, it is necessary for the modern reader to claim the theory as a formula for real friendship. This process of assimilating Aristotle's claims necessitates a level of hermeneutic merging between Aristotle's world and our own. Tracing the development of friendship in philosophy and the thinkers who used Aristotle's ideas brings new insight into the pursuit of real and perfect friendships. No matter how thorough Aristotle's instruction may be, his words have no effect if they do not encourage us to move and to act.

Can Perfect Friendship Exist?

The puzzles that arise from Aristotle's outline of friendship evoke the larger quandaries that hide in the shadows of his words. Analyses of themes and semantic details only dance around the underlying question that presents itself in the mind of any scholar who studies Aristotle's philosophy of friendship. Can a perfect friendship really exist? Such a lofty description of human relations certainly arouses skepticism and suspicion when its existence as a concrete phenomenon is considered. If it does exist, we may ask, what does it really look like and where do we find it? Throughout the *Ethics* Aristotle gives us a recipe for what he sees as true friendship but never attempts to find or create it himself. In the absence of an example to emulate we have no proof that the directions laid out by Aristotle are more than just ideals. The pragmatic consequences of a chimerical perfection are dire. In the case that perfect friendship cannot be replicated, virtue is turned on its head. Happiness, too, becomes disoriented and unobtainable in a world without true friendship. Aristotle sketches the ultimate blue print of friendship, but whether or not it stands as more than an unobtainable goal when put to the test in the world is a question left unanswered. Surely the obvious course of action is now to draw our focus to real, grounded friendship.

The nature of Aristotle's writing and his method of investigation illustrates that he had considered the viability of his theories. An empiricist by nature, Aristotle was drawn to the observable facts of the world. Frequently citing popular opinion and other external claims, practicality is built into his philosophical system. The presentation of his findings, however, transforms his observations of the world into something more motivational and directive. Aristotle's system of classification and hierarchy is entrenched with deeper

meaning. What *exists*, what is *good*, and what is *best* are obvious and easily identifiable within his “description” of the world. Aristotle’s simple presentation of fact, along with what he sees as ideal, is enough to stimulate our desire. The notion of perfect friendship, for example, arouses our interest and attracts us toward the ideal, even though Aristotle never directly tells us this is what he wants. As the themes of his writing come to light, it is apparent that Aristotle’s model of friendship is laced with subtle instruction. Though he sticks to descriptive writings, or accounts of what friendship is like, he raises a multitude of prescriptive questions concerning what one ought to do.

Aristotle’s basic position on friendship deviates from what we might expect of a philosopher. For example, he makes it very clear from the start that the solitary life is not the best life. We might assume that a philosopher would tell us otherwise, that a life of independent reflection is superior to one that is tied up with the fluctuations of others. It is further surprising that a philosopher would present a construct of virtue that rests so firmly upon others or the cultivation of what was loveable within ourselves. As Lorraine Smith Pangle reminds us, “Friendship was a great subject of stories and of philosophical reflection in classical antiquity. Friendship was associated in the popular mind with courage, with republicanism, and with the spirited resistance to injustice and tyranny.”¹²⁰ This fact further calls to mind classical Greek writers and poets who “celebrated the stories of such famous pairs of friends as Heracles and Iolaus, Theseus and Pirithous, and Orestes and Pylades” and also held special festivals to honor other pairs such as Harmodius and Aristogeiton.¹²¹ In this context, it is helpful to view Aristotle not strictly within the ranks of academic philosophers of which he would later become such a fixture,

¹²⁰ Pangle, pp. 1.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*

but instead as one among the many of his contemporaries who devoted time and skill to the exaltation of such seemingly perfect pairs.

Timeless though they may be, popular examples of Classical Greek friendship exacerbate the difficulties of our quest to find real instances of perfect friendship. Aristotle's works, which make direct mention of several of the previously mentioned pairs such as Harmodius and Aristogeiton, do little to reinforce the existence of perfect friendship among mere mortals.¹²² The epic examples from antiquity, not the citizen of the *polis*, served as fodder for the development of Aristotle's perfect friendship. As a result, many of the Greek myths serve to and reflect Aristotle's ideals concerning perfect friendship. One such example of the correspondence between Aristotle's friendship and popular mythology can be found in the pair Damon and Phintias, whose story was recorded by Aristotle's student, Aristonexus. Greek tradition recounts that while Phintias was living under the rule of an unjust and tyrannical leader, Dionysius, he put together a plan to unseat the despot. After he was discovered, Phintias was quickly sentenced to death. Before his execution took place, Phintias requested to have the chance to return home to set his affairs in order. In exchange, his devoted friend Damon offered to, "stand as a pledge of his safe return."¹²³ The ruler Dionysius consented and true to his word Phintias returned just in time to receive his punishment. In the end, the tyrant ruler was, "so moved by the friend's mutual constancy that he commuted the sentence and begged to be accepted as a third in their friendship."¹²⁴ Though this story does an effective job highlighting the values a friendship should embody, it is a mirage. Damon and Phintias,

¹²² Lorraine Smith Pangle, *Aristotle and the Philosophy of Friendship* (New York: Cambridge UP, 2002), pp. 1.

¹²³ *Ibid.*

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

like the other venerated pairs exalted in antiquity, are born in the minds of men. Mythology, like transcendent theories or abstract proposals, does not necessarily prove attainable under the forces of the concrete world. Most people are never asked to die for their friend, nor are they found in circumstances that involve the justice of a lonely ruler. In the absence of such extreme conditions, we must wonder, are too the fundamental features of our friendships deficient?

The popularity of classical Greek heroes, as well as the power and import Aristotle lends to perfect friendship, still raises the inevitable question of whether or not such exemplified friends can really exist. Considering the contributions of other scholars who have studied friendship like Cicero, Montaigne, and Derrida, is significant in understanding how to traverse the space between theory and application. These other philosophers have picked up Aristotle's writings with the same task of defining and understanding friendship. They, too, have struggled to bridge the gaps between theory and practice within the philosophy of friendship. Confronting the hard problem of friendship, philosophers have struggled to reconcile the friends that we are with the type that we should be.

Drawing from Aristotle, Cicero is one of the most notable thinkers to adopt the project of describing the ethical importance of friendship. Writing only three centuries after Aristotle, Cicero is frequently cited as one of the major contributors to the philosophy of friendship with his work, *Laelius De Amicitia*, or *Laelius on Friendship*, (set in 129 BC, written in 44 BC).¹²⁵ Concerned with a particular specimen of perfect friendship, Cicero builds from an empirical base similar to the one used by Aristotle.

¹²⁵ Cicero. *De senectute, De Amicitia, De Divinatione*. William Armistead Falconer. (London: William Heinmann Ltd, 1927) pp. 104.

More in line with Plato, however, Cicero writes in dialogue form. Written as a conversation between Laelius, his son Gaius and his son-in-law Quintus, the dialogue is staged so that the younger men are eager to accept the wisdom of their father. Deviating from Aristotle in a variety of important and unique ways, Cicero preserves the approach used by Plato in *Lysis* and many of the themes developed in the *Ethics* to strengthen Aristotle's theory of friendship.

Continuity With Aristotle

Though produced in a different time and a different literary format, *De Amicitia* shows strong continuity with Aristotle's *Ethics*. Cicero revives and preserves many of the seeds of Aristotle's thought while making important strides in the task to find a possible model for perfect friendship. For example, Cicero includes many of the same stipulations for perfect friendship, including the requirement that relationship develop slowly. Cicero's main character, Laelius, warns his sons, "neither to enlist your love too quickly nor to fix it on unworthy men."¹²⁶ Like Aristotle, Cicero cautions against the ephemeral and praises the timeless. Also echoing the *Ethics*, Cicero's main character Laelius instructs his sons on the importance of true friendship for the formation of the good life. Laelius asserts, "nature, loving nothing solitary, always strives for some sort of support, and man's best support is a very dear friend."¹²⁷ Using a hypothetical proposition to make his point, Laelius explains:

If a man should ascend alone into heaven and behold clearly the structure of the universe and the beauty of the stars, there would be no pleasure for

¹²⁶ Cicero, *De Amicitia*, xxi.79.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.* xxiii.88.

him in the awe-inspiring sight, which would have filled him with delight if he had had someone to whom he could describe what he had seen. (101)

In line with the critical function Aristotle gives friendship for achieving happiness and the good life, Cicero also acknowledges the necessity of friendship and the merits that accompany it.

Beyond the value ascribed to friendship, *De Amicitia* also gives special insight into the nature of individual friends. Similar to Aristotle's man of virtue, Cicero's description of complete friendship occurs between 'faultless men of wisdom.' As Laelius exhorts his sons, "Virtue, my dear Gaius Fannius, and you, my dear Quintus Mucius, Virtue, I say, both creates the bond of friendship and preserves it."¹²⁸ Laelius further explains the necessity of virtue in friendship through a metaphor that draws the formation and foundation of friendship together. Once more, in elegant prose, Laelius explains:

For in Virtue is complete harmony, in her is permanence, in her is fidelity; and when she has raised her head and shown her own light and has seen and recognized the same light in another, she moves towards it and in turn receives its beams; (xxvii.100)

Focusing on the Virtue within two individuals, Cicero also includes the emotional aspect of friendship described by Aristotle. Laelius continues, "as a result love or friendship leaps into the flame; for both words are derived from a word meaning 'to love'.¹²⁹ The same connection between love and friendship first established by Aristotle, who wrote that "loving was the virtue of friends," is continued by Cicero. A study of *De Amicitia* is important not only for reinforcing the themes Aristotle introduces, but also for better understanding the content of them.

¹²⁸ Cicero, *De Amicitia*, xxvii.100.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*

Despite the numerous similarities between the *Ethics* and *De Amicitia*, there are important differences between the texts that clarify friendship's existence in the real world. Aristotle's consideration of the "opinions of many" is countered by Cicero's attempt at an intimate glimpse into the friendship of Laelius and his recently deceased companion, Scipio. Written in dialogue form and from a first person account, Cicero is able to include the practical details of friendship, providing important clues as to its existence. For example, Laelius recounts some of the everyday features that characterized his relation to Scipio including "agreement in public questions; in it, counsel in private business, and in it, too, a leisure of unalloyed delight."¹³⁰ Where Aristotle emphasizes the systematic analysis of many friendships, Cicero devotes his attention to elucidation of just one conceivable relationship between two men.

On the surface, Cicero's writings on friendship appear to be descriptive, but they develop clear rules and prescriptions more so than the works of his forbearers. In contrast with Aristotle's subtle directives toward perfect friendship are Cicero's brazen exhortations about how one should act towards a friend. Within the dialogue, Laelius offers up hard and fast decrees about friendship with declarations such as, "Let this law be established in friendship: neither ask dishonorable things, nor do them if asked."¹³¹ Rules like these distill friendship into easy-to-follow and easy-to remember steps. Other declarations give the reader insight into how to go about achieving perfect friendship. Laelius articulates his views on friendship, proclaiming "Moreover, the right course is to choose for a friend one who is frank, sociable, and sympathetic..."¹³² By delivering direct

¹³⁰ Cicero, *De Amicitia*, xxvii.103.

¹³¹ *Ibid.* xi.40.

¹³² *Ibid.* xvii.65.

prescriptions for what the reader should do, Cicero offers a picture of friendship that is seemingly attainable.

Ultimately, Cicero creates a more humanistic view of friendship than was previously developed. More than a foil for understanding Aristotle, *De Amicitia* can be seen as a step towards the spanning the gap between virtue and theory. In contrast to Aristotle's rigid hierarchy of worth and equality, Cicero presents a more complex model of action. In Laelius' words, "As, therefore, in friendship, those who are superior should lower themselves, so, in a measure, should they lift up their inferiors."¹³³ Instead of static levels of equality, Cicero creates space for individual growth. In his template friendship, even the best kinds, aren't based on rigid similarity. Instead, a measure of balance is needed. Negating the restrictive view of equality within friendship as presented by Aristotle, Laelius proclaims, "But it is of the utmost importance in friendship that superior and inferior should stand on an equality."¹³⁴ Laelius' describes this principle conferring that his companion Scipio "desired that he might be the cause of enhancing the dignity of all his friends."¹³⁵ Instead of an insurmountable limitation or barrier for friendships, inequality is an acceptable feature of relationships. Taking it further, Cicero makes the principle of 'give-and-take in equality' a guideline for others. Laelius declares, "And this course every man should adopt and imitate, so that if he is endowed with any superiority in virtue, intellect, or fortune he may impart it to his relatives and share it with his next of kin..."¹³⁶ Class, education and wealth falls away. The result of Cicero's compromise on equality is the creation of a more down-to-earth

¹³³ Cicero, *De Amicitia*, xx.72.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.* xix.70.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

model that is not only an attempt at understanding friendship, but also an effort towards achieving it. What Plato grasped at in *Lysis*, Aristotle tried to build and construct in the *Ethics*. Cicero adds to the tradition by building off the work of his predecessors and refashioning the model of perfect friendship into something that is concrete and attainable.

Building on the edifice constructed thus far is Michel de Montaigne (1533-1591)¹³⁷, French essayist and philosopher. Once described as “the most learned man who ever wrote a book,”¹³⁸ Montaigne lends his expertise to the development of a new and humanistic picture of friendship. Using the microanalysis format developed by Plato and Cicero, Montaigne takes the commitment to practicality one step farther by narrating *his* personal experience with friendship. Similar to Cicero’s Laelius, who speaks about the deceased Scipio, Montaigne, moved by the death of his companion Etienne de La Boetie, devotes himself to fully understanding the powerful bond that existed between them. In his famous description of his friendship, Montaigne concedes, “If you press me to tell why I loved him, I feel that this cannot be expressed, except by answering: Because it was he, because it was I.”¹³⁹ A major development in the philosophy of friendship, Montaigne’s attempt to prove perfect friendship through his own insight and testimony is a bold assertion of its existence.

Quoting Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero, and also drawing from the pairs of antiquity previously discussed including Harmodius and Aristogen and Achilles and Patroclus, it is not surprising that Montaigne arrives at many of the same formulaic requirements for

¹³⁷ Michel de Montaigne, “Montaigne, *Of Friendship*,” in Philip Blosser and Marshall Carl Bradley, ed., *Friendship: Philosophic Reflections on a Perennial Concern* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1997), pp. 153.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

¹³⁹ Montaigne, *Of Friendship*, pp. 157.

friendship that his predecessors identified. For example, Montaigne praises the unity of perfect friends acknowledging “Aristotle’s very apt definition” of one soul in two bodies.¹⁴⁰ As he explains, “For this perfect friendship I speak of is indivisible: each one gives himself so wholly to his friend that he has nothing left to distribute elsewhere;” adding, “on the contrary, he is sorry that he is not double, triple or quadruple, and that he has not several souls and several wills, to confer them all on this one subject.”¹⁴¹ Conforming to the precedent set by philosophers of friendship before him, Montaigne insists on rigid exclusivity and total unity between perfect friends. Similar to Aristotle and others, Montaigne differentiates between types of friendship, identifying and exalting the virtuous variety. Exhorting us not to confuse “common friendships” for the perfect form, Montaigne cautions, “You must walk in those other friendships bridle in hand, with prudence and precaution.”¹⁴² True friendships on the other hand, deserve complete devotion and full trust. Identifying many of the same components of friendship, Montaigne repeats and reinforces many of the conclusions derived by his forerunners.

However, Montaigne’s philosophical approach has an original and unique emphasis. As others before him have done, Montaigne develops his own, very special version of equality. More overtly than any of his predecessors, Montaigne includes gender equality as an explicit stipulation for perfect friendship. From the description of his own relationship, Montaigne gives insight into his masculine vision of friendship. As he explains, “Truly the name brother is a beautiful name and full of affection and for that

¹⁴⁰ Montaigne, *Of Friendship*, pp. 160.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴² Montaigne, *Of Friendship*, pp.159.

reason we made our alliance a brotherhood.”¹⁴³ Montaigne takes this impression and directs his attention outward towards friendships in general, observing:

As for comparing with it affection for women, though this is born of our choice, we cannot do it, nor can we put it in this class. Its fire, I confess, is more active, more scorching and more intense. But it is an impetuous and fickle flame, wavering and variable, a fever flame, subject to fits and lulls, that holds us only by one corner. (155)

Under the pretense that what is ephemeral and inconsistent is secondary, Montaigne uses the rationale that women’s wavering nature is the justification for her exclusion from perfect friendships. Furthermore, “holding us only by one corner” Montaigne alludes to the weakness of bonds with women. As an aside he continues:

Besides, to tell the truth, the ordinary capacity of women is inadequate for that communion and fellowship which is the nurse of this sacred bond; nor does the soul seem firm enough to endure the strain of so tight and durable a knot. (156)

Apart from the possibility of true friendships between men and women, Montaigne suggests that perfect friendship involving a woman is implausible since they lack the fundamental capability for such relationships, adding that it was commonly believed by ancient philosophers. While stipulations for equality in wealth, class, and virtue remain in the background, gender emerges as a determining feature of perfect friendship.

Between Montaigne’s model and those that have been put forth thus far, there is considerable continuity in theme and presentation. Equality, virtue, exclusivity, similitude and other features have reoccurred as necessary to perfect friendship. Considering the feasibility of what has been presented thus far, whether or not the ideals of stable and equal fraternity can really manifest in society, is as crucial as understanding the content of the ideas themselves. If these philosophers: Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, and

¹⁴³ Montaigne, *Of Friendship*, pp. 155.

Montaigne are correct, where and how do we go about finding friendship in the modern world? The struggle to bridge the gap between theory and application is one that requires us to refocus our lens as we allow our vision to encompass all that has been put forth thus far, including that which has been described in depth by Aristotle and touched upon by other scholars, as well as what we know of friendship in our own lives.

Aristotle's model, in particular deserves special consideration due to the prominent position of friendship in virtue, happiness and the good life. Claiming perfect friendship for ourselves requires us to confront Aristotle with complete seriousness. Too long have the ideas of Greek antiquity remained as separate objects to be considered and then returned to their place on the shelf. In order to consider friendship seriously and to merge theory with application, we must put aside prejudices of outmoded and stale prejudices of patriarchal societies. Instead we must consider the words on perfect friendship as if they were spoken today. Only then can we benefit from the praxis of the philosophy in our own lives. By merging the guiding ideals of friendship with popular or more contemporary voices, we can finally conjure a modern picture of friendship, in turn, validating virtue theory and demonstrating that Aristotle's conception of the good life is indeed possible. If we take the theories of Aristotle and direct our gaze inward, toward our own society, we may find true friendship in the most unlikely places.

Perhaps one of the most startling examples that accredits the timelessness of Aristotle's philosophy of friendship is found in contemporary pop-culture. The slang term "Bromance," coined by America's youth, is a startlingly close replica of complete friendship. According to the popular reference website, urbandictionary.com, which

features popular definitions that are created and voted on by the public to represent and catalogue slang terms used in American culture, bromance is defined as follows:

1.Bromance: Describes the complicated love and affection shared by two straight males. 1. A non-sexual relationship between two men that are unusually close.

Noun: "Dude, those two guys spend so much time together. They are having quite the *bromance*."

Verb: "Andy has been treating Victor to every meal and cover charge for a month now. It's obvious that he is trying to *bromance* him."¹⁴⁴

From the onset, bromance appeals to the basic principles of Aristotelian perfect friendship. Characterized by a deep affection and close bond, “bros” or members of a bromance, embody many of the features identified in the theoretical model of friendship. As the provenance explains, “Bromance” is a portmanteau of the two words “brother” and “romance.” Harkening to Montaigne’s brotherhood and Cicero’s *amor, philia* starts to come to life as bromance. A study of the origin confirms this claim:

Origin. Originally coined by author/editor Dave Carnie in “Big Brother Magazine.” Big Brother was a sort of R rated skateboarding/skate culture magazine that was eventually purchased by Larry Flynt's Hustler conglomerate and consequently taken out of circulation due to unsatisfactory sales performance. Carnie used the word on several occasions to describe relationships between skate-buddies who spent a lot of time together and/or shared hotel rooms on every tour/skate road trip. (<http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=bromance>)

Bromance is a vestige of the special type of friendship that drew Aristotle to his obsession with friendship. Used in popular music and films, the acceptance of the term testifies to its existence as a real and experienced phenomenon.

Modern examples of bromance, which the urbandictionary definition describes, are surprisingly similar to many of Aristotle’s descriptions of friendship in the

¹⁴⁴ Urbandictionary.com, “Bromance.” <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=bromance> (March 29, 2010).

Nicomachean Ethics and *Eudemian Ethics*. As Aristotle stipulated earlier, it is clear that perfect friends “spend their days together on whichever pursuits in life they like most for since they want to live with their friends, they share the actions in which they find their common life.”¹⁴⁵ Bromance successful fits many of the stipulations made by Aristotle including shared activity and cohabitation. As Aristotle observes, “Hence some friends drink together, others play dice, while others do gymnastics and go hunting, or do philosophy.” Skateboarding could easily be imagined on a modern Aristotle’s list of shared activities. More than spending time together, bros increase the good in one another enhancing each other’s potential and adding to the quality of their lives. As Aristotle explains, “it is thought that the happy person must live pleasantly. But the solitary person’s life is hard, since it is not easy for him to be continuously active all by himself; but in relation to others and in their company it is easier. Hence his activity will be more continuous. It is also pleasant in itself, as it must be in the blessedly happy person’s case.”¹⁴⁶ Relying on one another for company and inspiration, bros are able to achieve a higher level skating expertise than would be possible alone. Spending time together in whatever pursuit they like best, perfect friends like bros, enhance one another’s lives.

Using several of the same points support bromance as Aristotelian friendship, Michael W. Austin make the case that running partners are another example of perfect friends. Returning to the central theme of virtue as an “activity of the soul in accordance with virtue,” brings the emphasis back to *activity*. Using Nietzsche’s words, Austin

¹⁴⁵ Aristotle, *NE*, 10.12.172a 1-6.

¹⁴⁶ Aristotle, *NE*, 9.9.1170a5-8.

reminds his readers “exhaustion is the shortest way to equality and fraternity.”¹⁴⁷ In his view, running partners are precisely the types of comrades that Aristotle would have had in mind as perfect friends. Running partners help one another to be good and to live good lives by meeting challenges together and making joint decisions. In Austin’s view, running partners embody Aristotle’s ideals of respecting and trusting someone else’s rationale and perception of the world. As Austin explains, “To be a good runner, one must practice. And to be a good person, one must practice the virtues.”¹⁴⁸ As Bromance and this example highlight, there are vestiges of Aristotelian friendship in modern society.

Though the views presented thus far suggest that there is evidence of Aristotle’s model of friendship in the world, there is still an important question left for equality in friendship. As the progression of philosophers has shown, there has been an evolution in equality within friendship. Aristotle himself eliminated the need for equality in affection with his clause on self-love that dominated love for the other. Cicero stripped requirements for wealth and status away from perfect friendship with his theory on balance that allows for friendships between unequals. As he prescribes, “those who are superior should lower themselves, so, in a measure, should they lift up their inferiors.”¹⁴⁹ Montaigne, whose version of equality was also unique, preserved many of the same principles that were established before him. Though descriptively unoriginal, Montaigne did bring attention to one of the last forms of inequality found in friendship, namely the prejudice against women. As the modern example of Bromance highlights, there is still a

¹⁴⁷ Michael Austin, “Chasing Happiness” from *Running and the Philosophy of Friendship: A Marathon for the Mind*, ed. Michael Austin (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing), pp.17.

¹⁴⁸ Austin, pp. 17.

¹⁴⁹ Cicero, *De Amicitia*, xix.72.

bias against the validity of females in friendship. I argue that this is not a result of a justified lack of capacity or inability of women to form meaningful friendships, but instead a legacy of male-dominated thinking that has preserved the lack of attention to friendship with and between women. Just as a Bromance does not necessitate a requisite level of education or wealth, both of which were important fixtures for Aristotle's model of friendship, so too must perfect friendship shed the prescription on gender requirements.

Derrida on Gender

Approaching friendship from a totally new and fresh perspective, Jacques Derrida, 20th century Western philosopher, analyzes friendship from a historical and theoretical perspective that compliments the micro perspectives used thus far by the philosophers we have encountered. Taken in connection with these views, Derrida's perspective complements and enhances the vision presented thus far. Simultaneously presenting an original model and deconstructing much of the old view on friendship, Derrida attacks gender inequality. As he describes:

That which a macroscopic view is able to align, from afar and from high above, is a certain desert. Not a woman in sight. An inhabited desert, to be sure, and absolutely full absolute desert, some might even say a desert teeming with people. Yes, but, men, men, and more men, over centuries of war, and costumes, hats, uniforms, *soutanes*, warriors, colonels, generals, partisans, strategists, politicians, professors, political theoreticians, theologians. In vain would you look for a figure of a woman, a feminine silhouette, and the slightest allusion to sexual difference.¹⁵⁰

¹⁵⁰ Jacques Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, trans. George Collins (London: Verso, 1997) pp. 156.

In the desert Derrida describes, men are so immersed in the overwhelming sexual homogeneity of the horizon, that they are incapable of even recognizing difference. As Derrida continues, “Sisters, if there are any, are species of the genus brother.” Unaware of their ignorance, men in this social, intellectual and cultural context are unable to see beyond their self-imposed boundaries. Derrida asks:

What could, then, be massively evident in this immense, modern and ageless procession, in this theory of the political working its way in the middle of the desert, what strikes us in this philosophy of merciless war, in this staging of ‘physical’ killing, in this implacable logic of absolute hostility... what,”¹⁵¹ he asks, “should be massively evident but goes as unnoticed as the absence itself, what disappears in becoming indiscernible in the middle of the desert, is the woman or the sister. Not even a mirage. Nothing. Desert and absolute silence, it would seem. (156)

Just as the desert with no female authority or presence, the lack of women in philosophy and in friendship creates a view that is one-sided and extreme.

In his ultimate deconstruction of fraternal authority Derrida removes gender restrictions for friendship. The analysis that he proposes highlights woman’s absence from friendship and draws the conclusion that “sexual difference should “play no part.”¹⁵² In his final analysis, Derrida explains, “It is a matter of saying what is: the subject of the political is genderless; moreover, it has always been, in fact and as such, a man, a group of men determining his or their enemy and determined to ‘physically kill him’, as you have just explained. I never do anything but diagnose.”¹⁵³ Without women, friendship becomes fraternity, which grows to become political and dangerously one-sided. Working from a “macroscopic view,” Derrida is able to bridge the gap between

¹⁵¹ Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, pp. 156.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*

¹⁵³ Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, pp. 158.

theory and application, men and women, virtue and activity. Derrida's final diagnosis, that friendship is genderless, is the last stipulation for masculine equality that is dismantled. The only form that remains is equality of virtue.

CONCLUSION

Perfect Friendship and Timelessness

As we have seen, familiar descriptions and accounts of perfect friendship have appeared and reappeared throughout the ages. Moreover, there has been a constant and steady recognition of the value that these relationships have. The themes and ideas within Aristotle's philosophy of friendship are a timeless source of wisdom, invaluable for understanding the nature of perfect friendship. Whether or not all of the conclusions he draws are completely valid or not, Aristotle's writings provoke interest on the subject matter and provide a solid foundation from which to draw. However, whether by oversight, or on purpose, Aristotle does not give us explicit step by step directions to get to the perfect friendship he describes. As a result, we must look to other thinkers in the history of the philosophy of friendship to gain a concrete image of friendship. Cicero is helpful in this regard, acting as a translator by taking Aristotle's ideas and reframing them in a formulaic model of explicit steps and decrees. Cicero's model of friendship is similarly interested in perfect pairs, but emerges as strikingly more forgiving and humanistic image. Montaigne maintains and reinforces the ideas of his predecessors with an emphasis on gender in friendship. As the definition of equality unfolds, Derrida strikes the barrier against women and condemns her exclusion. Abandoning restrictions on wealth, class and gender, a new version of friendship is created. The updated picture maintains the importance of similarity, the final, modern version of perfect friendship necessitates virtue as the measure of equality.

Part of living an examined life means seriously assessing and confronting the features of the world, including the interpersonal relationships we may take for granted. Taking the

claims of Aristotle seriously has mixed affects on the real friendships in our lives. On one hand, Aristotle's description urges us toward the ideal. Seriously cultivating the features of perfect friendship are not simply exercises in virtue, but as Aristotle would say, necessary measures for happiness and fulfillment. However, the desire for such a perfect and satisfying union likely makes the real relationships appear shallow and pale. Unfortunately one of the only means for isolating perfect friendship is an awareness of all the other relationships that are flawed and inferior. Though this awareness of ubiquitous imperfection may leave us disappointed, it is a further testament to the value and true *perfection* of friendships built on virtue.

Future Study

Though the model of perfect friendship has undergone important revisions in the past, there is still room for further exploration. The assumption of "like to like" is one that has driven perfect friendship, but has not been seriously challenged. Further studies on diversity in friendship are the necessary course of action for future scholars. In a world that is increasingly defined by diversity the way to friendships based on difference are called for. Similarly, the law of exclusivity is another principle that must be approached and challenged. Exclusive friendships are a double-edged sword, linking some of us together while at the same time portioning us apart. The solution that appears is a theme that is embedded deeply in Aristotle's writing. As he observes, "Members of the same species and human beings most of all, have a natural friendship for each other;

that is why we praise friends of humanity.”¹⁵⁴ Perhaps the new order of perfect friendship will not be defined by a love for the other, but all.

¹⁵⁴ Aristotle, *NE*, 8.1.1155a21-23.

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