

IS ARISTOTLE RIGHT ABOUT FRIENDSHIP?

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Abstract

This paper will evaluate whether Aristotle's discussion of friendship in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (references to Irwin translation, 1999) points towards a plausible account of friendship. We shall evaluate Whiting's claim (1991) that Aristotle provides us with a model of how friendship should be and is at its best, even if most friendships do not live up to this. Whiting's view centres on a view of friendship as grounded on mutual admiration of ethical character. Whilst there is appeal in the idea, stressed by Whiting, that friendship is grounded upon a kind of impersonal admiration, Aristotelian metaphysics restricts us to a single vision of the human good and prevents us from admiring different people in different ways. It will be argued that supplementation with a more pluralistic notion of human nature can help to bolster the account. Following Telfer (1970), it shall further be argued that the grounds of a friendship must be seen to include elements of a sharing of perspectives and not be limited to mutual admiration of character. Whilst Telfer's criticism does expose a blindspot in Aristotle, it will be argued that it is a criticism which an Aristotelian account can deal with.

Aristotle On Types of Friendship

Aristotle distinguishes three types of friendship in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, distinguished by what grounds the friendship:

1. Friendships based upon utility. Friends of this type "take pleasure in each other's company only in as far as they have hopes of advantage from it" (1156a30).

2. Friendship based upon pleasure. “Friendship between the young is thought to be grounded on pleasure, because the lives of the young are regulated by their feelings and their chief interest is in their own pleasure and the opportunity of the moment” (1156a30). Likewise we enjoy the company of witty people because we find their company pleasant.

3. Perfect friendship, which is based upon goodness. In this kind of friendship each friend wishes good for the other, as a fellow good person (1156b10). Each friend wishes for the others good not for their own sake but for the friend’s sake. Such friends are also pleasing and useful to one another because the conduct of good people is pleasing (1156b15).

It is worth noting that the way in which a friendship is grounded does not have to translate literally into how the friendship is expressed. If A’s friendship with B is grounded upon mutual advantage, it does not mean that A is only interested in B insofar as he can receive advantage from B. A might be genuinely concerned about all aspects of B’s life but this concern would evaporate if B were to cease to be of advantage to A, revealing the friendship to have been grounded upon advantage.¹ The difference between the three types of friendship lies in what exactly is valued in the friendship; with friendships based upon utility we value the advantage gained from dealing with the friend, with friendships based upon pleasure we value the pleasure gained from spending time with the friend and with perfect friendship we value the friend himself, for his own sake.² No doubt real friendships are a mixture of the three kinds but Aristotle takes the third kind to be most exemplary and closest to the core meaning of the greek term

¹ This point is made by Cooper (1977).

² Loving another for the advantage gained from them could be called loving them instrumentally (Price, 1989, p. 135).

‘philia’, which is translated as ‘friendship’.³

It is with perfect friendship, based upon goodness, that we are most concerned. In particular we shall need to understand and evaluate the claim that the love for this kind of friend takes the same form as self-love, to the extent that the friend is called ‘another self’:

Thus it is because the good man has these several feelings towards himself, and extends these several feelings to his friend and the same relation that he has towards himself (for a friend *is* another self), that friendship is regarded as one of the said feelings, and friends to whom these feelings apply. (1166a30)

The claim that a friend is another self can strike us as odd. All individuals are surely selves, whether friend or foe. Aristotle has something more specific in mind than this basic form of selfhood.

It is worth remembering that the purpose of Aristotle’s ethics is to understand what makes a man good.⁴ The sense of ‘self’ that Aristotle has in mind seems to be closely tied to a notion of character. This is character in the evaluative sense of good or bad character, though it is not exclusively moral.⁵ For the friendship is based upon each friend’s assessment of the other’s character:

Only the friendship of those who are good, and similar in their goodness, is perfect. For these people each alike wish good for the other *qua* good, and they are good in themselves. (1156b5)

³ The meaning of ‘philia’ was wider than ‘friendship’ but the core of philia, for Aristotle, seems also to be what he would have to call the core of friendship. For more on the core meaning of ‘philia’ (Fortenbaugh, 1975).

⁴ In the course of his discussion, Aristotle has concluded that the excellence of a man is the excellence of his best or highest part and the rational part is identified with the individual again in relation to friendship - “for he does it on account of the intellectual part of him, which is held to be the self of the individual” (1166a15). So it could be argued that the ‘self’ here is the rational part. But this is controversial as some a number of scholars take the rational part to be limited to theoretical wisdom and not moral choice. Price plausibly remarks that Aristotle identifies a part of the soul (theoretical or moral) with the true self

It is both the goodness and the similarity of the friends' respective moral characters that draws them together. Each friend may have technical skills and so on but this is not relevant to the friendship.⁶

The way in which self-love relates to love of a friend is explained at 1166a. Here Aristotle lists the criteria by which 'people define a friend' (1166a1):

1. A wishes for and effects the good of B, for B's sake.
2. A wishes for the existence and preservation of B.
3. A spends all or much of his time with B.
4. A chooses the same things as B.
5. A shares B's joys and sorrows.

Where A is a good man, all of the above hold where A is substituted for B i.e. the good man is a friend to himself (1166a35). He makes prudent choices, enjoys his life, is happy to spend time alone in contemplation, he is happy with the choices that he makes and experiences his joys and sorrows fully and with control.

Where A is a bad man, A cannot be said to be a friend to himself (1166b5). He does not always act in his own interest, he sometimes regrets his own existence due to his inner conflicts, he is not comfortable spending time alone, he is inconsistent in his choices and has little control over his emotions.

This makes some sense of how it can be that, where A and B are both good men, A stands to B as A stands to himself. Each of the same conditions of friendship is fulfilled in each

honorifically, depending upon context (Price, 1989, p. 107).

⁵ Aristotle discusses wit, for example, in the context of character virtues.

case. Moreover, it can be argued that the motive is the same. We are motivated to befriend ourselves because we each see ourselves as good people. The bad man is not able to be lovable, not even to himself, because of his wickedness.⁷ The bad man that is aware of his wickedness is not motivated to be his own friend and even despises his own existence (1166b10).

Anybody who loves themselves or another must perceive the object of this love as good. This ties to the Aristotelian understanding of ‘goodwill’, which is a key element of friendship. All friends feel goodwill toward one another, and this consists in an approval of their ends. To approve somebody’s ends is to approve of their choices and actions and if I approve of somebody’s choices and actions then I must think them good.⁸ In the inferior kinds of friendship, both friends think the other to be good but this is not what grounds the friendship (the friendship is grounded on advantage or pleasure). But in a perfect friendship the mutual perception of goodness is both the grounds of the friendship and part of how the friendship is expressed (and Aristotle thinks that both friends know this to be the nature of the friendship – 1156a reads “These people, then, apparently have goodwill to each other but how could we call them friends, given that they are unaware of their attitude to each other?”).

Goodwill, we are told “seems to be the beginning of friendship, just as the pleasure at seeing a person is the beginning of falling in love” (1167a5). Goodwill is a necessary condition for friendship, but it is not sufficient:

⁶ At least not if it is a perfect friendship.

⁷ Although Aristotle is aware of our ability to deceive ourselves about our own wickedness (1166b1).

⁸ Notice that from what was said above the bad man does not approve of his own choices and actions.

Similarly people cannot be friends unless they first come to feel goodwill, although feeling goodwill does not make them friends, because they only wish for the good of those for whom they feel goodwill; they would not actively help them or take any trouble for their sake. (1167a5)

So it is only that we ought to feel goodwill towards good people. As Whiting says, goodwill ‘is not yet character friendship, but it is the prerequisite: it is the kind of approval of the character and ends of another that--with reciprocal experience, time and intimacy--can become character-friendship’ (1991, p. 20). To put this in Aristotle’s terms, the development of a friendship requires “time and intimacy; for as the saying goes, you cannot get to know each other until you have eaten the proverbial quantity of salt together” (1156b25).

When the individuals in a perfect friendship come to identify with one another’s aims they can then begin to undertake joint ventures and build an intimacy which will become friendship. When A acts in a way that realises B’s ends then A’s action contributes to the eudaimonia of B. In this way A and B can bring about and share in one another’s good and this is how goodwill develops into perfect friendship (Price, 1989, p. 125).

Whiting’s Defence of ‘Impersonal Friendship’

Whiting, in ‘Impersonal Friends’, is interested in Aristotle because Aristotle presents a model whereby the reasons for self-benefiting action and other-benefiting action can be seen to reside only in the goodness of the action. On the Aristotelian model, we each pursue a good life (consisting in good actions) and as part of this we pursue the good of our friends because they are also good. The Aristotelian model therefore undercuts modern concerns about how to fit altruism into our model of ethical reasoning as the

Aristotelian account begins from a perspective of impersonal ethical assessment, whereas some modern accounts attempt to begin from a position of personal self-interest. The Aristotelian model also lets us account for the preferential treatment that we bestow on our friends (as against our treatment of strangers), without resorting to the brute (and indirectly egocentric) reason that they are our friends. Instead Aristotle lets us say that we treat our friends preferentially because they have good characters and do good things. Of course once a friendship is in place then this might give rise to personal reasons to treat a friend preferentially simply because they are a friend, but the grounds of the friendship would remain impersonal.

Whiting's point in 'Impersonal Friends' is ethical so she tends to talk as though the only attributes by which we judge our friends are ethical attributes. Whiting seems to think that our regard for our own ethical attributes is most important to our self-image and hence most important to how we should judge our friends (since we judge others and ourselves in the same way). But Whiting is aware that the Aristotelian conception of virtue is wider than just ethical attributes so presumably our assessment of our friends is not intended to be limited to the ethical.

The key appeal of the Aristotelian approach for Whiting is that what grounds a perfect Aristotelian friendship is an impersonal admiration of the goodness of the friend and that I assess myself in the same impersonal way. That this admiration is impersonal does not necessarily mean that there is no affection in the relationship, just that the affection is not relevant to the grounds of the friendship.⁹ However, the impersonal nature of the grounding of the friendship does suggest another problem. If what grounds the friendship is the character traits that the friend exhibits, then do we really admire the friend as a

⁹ Aristotle does not comment on this himself.

particular individual or do we simply admire the character-type that the friend instantiates?

Does Impersonal Friendship reduce the particular Friend to a Type?

Vlastos accuses Aristotle (1981, p. 33) of failing to see love as love for the particular individual, rather than an instantiation of a character-type or bundle of qualities:

[Aristotle's] intuition takes him as far as seeing that (a) disinterested affection for the person we love.., must be built into love at its best, but not as far as sorting this out from (b) appreciation of the excellences instantiated by that person.

But Whiting does not think that this is a problem (1991, p. 14):

Aristotle did not distinguish disinterested affection for a person from the appreciation of her excellences because he took the appreciation of her excellences as such (and not as instruments for one's own benefit) to constitute disinterested affection for her. But I am less confident than Vlastos that this is a flaw. And that is partly because I am less confident than Vlastos that this requires Aristotle to ignore the way in which the objects of our love are themselves subjects.

Whiting turns Vlastos's criticism around and argues that it is a strength that Aristotle thinks we appreciate others in the same way that we appreciate ourselves. From Whiting's perspective, it is not that we 'reduce' the friend to a type but that we judge the friend on the same key criteria (primarily ethical) which we judge ourselves and it is for our character attributes that we "would want to be loved and appreciated". But is Whiting correct to think that we judge ourselves only on the attributes of our characters?

Price on Finding the Particular in Aristotle's Account

If we admire the friend as 'another self' then the key question is what do we mean by

‘self’? For Whiting, the true self is to be identified with our character attributes. Price argues that we can make better sense of Aristotle if we see the ‘self’ in play in the phrase ‘another self’ as the self as realised in actions. This sense of ‘self’ still has a focus on character, since we read an individual’s character from their actions. As Price puts it (1989, p. 130):

...the other’s ‘self’ with which one identifies may not be unique in character (if it were, that might be a bar to the identification); but it is realised in a series of choices and actions over time that do identify him, and many of which one shares with him in a common life which is a complex particular not transferable to any other partner. Hence one’s friends contribute to one’s *eudaimonia* as individuals, not merely as types.

So on the Aristotelian model friends may contribute to one’s *eudaimonia* as individuals, but we *admire* our friends as types and not as individuals.¹⁰ The friend must be admired as a type, since it is only as a type that the friend is like us in their goodness. This suggests a pair of questions - can two friends not both be good and yet not be alike? Further, are individuals not unique even in their characters i.e. are our characters not types which only we instantiate?

Aristotle’s Metaphysics and Pluralism – Can Two Friends both be good and not alike?

Aristotle’s thought is that two perfect friends are always alike in goodness, and, on a common reading of Aristotle’s remarks about the human *ergon* (‘function’) in book I of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, this means that the friends share a set of attributes which make them excellent examples of the type ‘human being’. What makes you or I good (and deserving of admiration) is the same thing which makes any member of the species good

¹⁰ We might also feel affection for friends as individuals but affection, for Aristotle, is less important than admiration. Aristotle sees friendship as a fundamentally rational practice, grounded upon a perception of admirable qualities in the friend. Affection turns goodwill into friendship but it simply comes with time and shared experience and is not itself rational.

i.e. exhibiting the essential qualities that are most exemplary for the species.

It is worth repeating that Aristotle's focus on goodness is not exclusively ethical in the way that we understand the term 'ethical'. We might be tempted to follow a Whiting-type thought that Aristotle has in mind a universalist conception of ethics and that Aristotle's insistence on judging one another only as human beings is really an insistence on judging one another ethically. As we have seen, Aristotle's notion of goodness is much wider than our conception. Further, Aristotle's guiding thought on friendship is that two friends' admiration of one another is driven by shared values and a shared vision of how to live. This thought itself is not rigidly unitarian and if we modify 'shared vision of how to live' to 'shared vision of a community' then the thought can easily become pluralistic. Aristotle's Unitarianism comes not from his guiding thought on friendship but from his metaphysics.

Aristotelian metaphysics can allow that attributes can be essential for different purposes. But in perfect friendship the love will be for the friend qua human being, so this should be a single set of attributes. Thus the Aristotelian self can be multifaceted but not as it figures in perfect friendship. In order to modify Aristotle to allow a pluralist conception of friendship, we would have to expand the Aristotelian conception of 'human nature' to include something like McDowell's notion of 'second nature' (1998). On McDowell's understanding, our second nature is the set of traits and capabilities that we acquire as a result of being initiated into a first-language and into a culture. Acquiring a second nature brings with it the ability to respond to reasons and act rationally. From a McDowellian perspective therefore, there is no monolithic concept of what it is to be human. Rather, we each become human in different ways in accordance with our community and our particular experience. What we admire in one another will depend upon our particular

values, and our ability to find one another admirable will be constrained by the horizons set by our respective second natures.

Are Individuals Not Unique in Their Characters?

Aristotle's species-based line of thought puts him at odds with writers influenced by a Romantic tradition who wish to tie an individual's most authentic self to the attributes which make that individual unique. Within this tradition we can find the intuition that what we admire in a friend is what is unique about them cashed out in an even stronger way. According to Nietzsche, a man's particular style and charm are his own and this originates from a uniqueness which goes below the level of rational selfhood.¹¹ The suggestion in Nietzsche is that what we admire in our friend is not just qualities which only the friend *happens* to exhibit, but qualities (or perhaps a subtle interplay of qualities) which can only ever be exhibited by that individual.

The idea of properties which inhere only in one individual is not alien to Aristotelian metaphysics but such properties cannot be essential properties and must only be accidental properties. The reason for this thinking is clear – if a property belongs only to a particular then it has nothing to do with the particular's type, and a particular's essential properties are the properties which make it an example of a type. In the context of our discussion about friendship and selfhood, this means that any properties which are unique to an individual are not properties of the individual *qua* human and therefore these properties should not be relevant to our admiration of the friend.

Whiting thinks that Aristotle's approach here is fundamentally correct, arguing that we should each want to be seen in terms that are multiply-instantiable and therefore

¹¹ Nietzsche says that the Self creates an empirically-manifest soul, how it does so being an interpretative problem (Leiter, 2001; Nehamas, 2001). Leiter (2001) takes biological differences to be the sub-rational

Aristotelian types in the true sense. She remarks that ‘few if any of us aspire to be loved qua product of the particular sperm and egg from which we descend’ and that ‘*uniqueness, insofar as it rests on such accidental differences, is morally irrelevant*’.

Whiting’s point that we should love individuals as types is of merit. To love something simply as a brute particular and not in virtue of its features would be more akin to obsession than love. But it is only Aristotelian metaphysics which is preventing us from saying that there could be attributes which only a particular individual instantiates. The thought that a person’s character is unique to them is a natural one, not just a hang-up from Romanticism. If we step away from the Aristotelian metaphysics then we can accommodate the natural intuition about individual character.

Telfer and Personal Perspectives

Telfer makes an interesting challenge to philosophical accounts of friendship when she suggests (1970) that part of the grounding of a friendship might be a similar style of thought or mode of thinking. She makes the excellent point that we generally regard friendships as grounded, but we have difficulty explaining just what the grounding is. Friendships tend to be at least partly founded on subtle aspects of our personalities and how they interact which we find it difficult to put into words. The suggestion is that our friendships might not be grounded on our personalities per se so much as how our personalities interact. This is a peculiar problem for Whiting since Whiting thinks of the grounds of friendship entirely in terms of admiration for essential attributes, cashed out as moral qualities.

Telfer’s suggestion that philosophical accounts of friendship tend to miss the subtleties of how real friendships are grounded might be one that an Aristotelian account can

accommodate. Telfer argues that we need to be able to see the grounds of a friendship as just as subtle as what allows two jazz musicians to jam well together. By talking exclusively in terms of the character attributes of the friends, we have risked neglecting the importance of their perspectives and values.

It can be argued that if two individuals share values then this will come out in their actions and so in their characters as read from their actions. Whilst Aristotle tends to talk about individual character, Aristotle's guiding thought on friendship appears to be that two friends' admiration of one another is driven by shared values and a shared vision of how to live. We could instead talk of friends sharing values and vision and credibly call our account Aristotelian. If we move over to talking about values and perspectives then we can acknowledge William James's thought that "a man's vision is the great fact about him" (1909, p. 14). We can say that a friendship is grounded upon a shared vision of how to live and two friends connect insofar as they share perspectives on life and living.

It might be objected that we will struggle to accommodate the importance of perspectives insofar as those perspectives are seen to be personal. Here I mean 'personal' in the sense to contrast with Whiting's sense of 'impersonal'. Whilst Whiting does not fully explain her meaning, the sense seems to be that 'impersonal' is opposed to the egoistic, where the egoistic involves arbitrary personal preference or taste (i.e. anything not moral or evaluative in the wider sense). Something which Whiting seems to overlook is that it is impossible to entirely separate moral choice from preference. Representative democracy is founded upon just this reality – whilst we would all like our officials to simply do the right thing, in reality there is too much disagreement about what concerns are morally relevant and what to do about them with some disputes coming down to preference.¹²

¹² Example questions that could be called either moral or matters of preference might be 'Does this area

Likewise fondness for a particular piece of art might sometimes be described as a judgement and sometimes as a simple preference. This oversight in Whiting is also a blindspot in Aristotle, who tends to assume that there is a single best course of action available in all situations.¹³

The point that might seem to threaten us is the point that some of the perspectives which might ground a friendship could be in part preferential rather than purely evaluative. A friendship grounded on shared preferences might be said to be less deep than a friendship grounded on shared values – a man’s vision may be the great fact about him but his preferences are not particularly great. So long as the distinction between values and preferences is understood then it does not need to be made explicit here. If we want a philosophical account of the distinction between preferences and values then this can be given separately. So long as we believe that the distinction is a real one then we can believe that there is a sense in which ‘impersonal’ friendships might be said to be deeper than ‘preferential’ friendships.

Conclusion

Two key changes have been made here to Aristotle’s account of friendship. First, Aristotle’s notion of human nature has been replaced with a McDowell-inspired notion of ‘second nature’ in order to allow for a more pluralistic notion of how human beings can be good. Whilst this might on the surface seem like a significant modification, Aristotle’s metaphysics (which drives his unitarian conception of human nature) is only in the

require its own mayor?’, ‘Should we use this budget on planting more trees or providing more recycle bins?’ or ‘Should we name the new roads after local citizens?’

¹³ Most relevant here are his examples in his discussions of particular virtues as exhibited as means between two vices in books III, IV and V.

background of his discussion and is not explicitly raised in his discussion of friendship in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. By departing from Aristotle's metaphysics we are also able to say that individual characters can be unique to the individuals that instantiate them. The second modification was to acknowledge the importance of a shared vision or perspective to the grounding of a friendship. As has been pointed out, the idea of an individual vision is closely tied to the idea of an individual character and this is a fact which seems to be in the background of Aristotle's own discussion. The resulting account retains the key elements of the Aristotelian account (the notion of goodwill, the characterisation of types of friendship and the idea that a friendship is grounded on an impersonal admiration) and so deserves to be called 'Aristotelian'.

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