

Aristotle on Perfect Friendship

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In this paper I argue that Aristotle's conception of ideal or perfect friendship, friendship which is based on the love people of good character might have for each other *qua* good, is so moralised as to fail to capture our common understanding of the nature and importance of friendship. In particular, I argue that friendship itself indicates an important human good, but crucially a good that cannot, contrary to what Aristotle suggests, be wholly accommodated within our conception of the *morally* good life for human beings: Our attachment to our closest friends has a value that cannot necessarily be reconciled with our attempts to live a morally good life.

What is unproblematic is that Aristotle saw friendship as an essential element of the good or moral life for human beings — at least on that conception of the good life that Aristotle develops in the first nine books of the *Nicomachean Ethics*.¹ I will not examine or even comment on the tensions between that view (and hence the place of friendship in the good life) and what Aristotle goes on to say about the place of contemplation in the good life in book X of the NE. What does concern me in this paper is the suggestion — also obvious to many — that Aristotle's account of friendship, and specifically what he calls perfect friendship, makes that relationship not just important to the human good but so high minded — we might even say moralised — as to seem very counterintuitive. But in order to see the problem here we need an account of what Aristotle means by friendship.

First of all, friendship is a much broader class of relationships than what we would term that way. So, Aristotle would include under friendship not just close intimate relationships between people unrelated, but also family relationships (including it would seem those between husband and wife) and the relationships we make with (some) business or work companions that we might not naturally think of as friendship relations. Nevertheless, as Cooper² notes, Aristotle's conception of friendship

¹ Hereafter NE. All quotations are from the W. D. Ross translation as edited by J. O. Urmson in Barnes, 1984. I have followed the usual convention in referring to passages of Aristotle, which is to refer to the page numbers and column letters of the standard edition of the works of Aristotle edited by Bekker. These page numbers and column letters are repeated in all modern editions of Aristotle's works.

² Cooper, 1980.

is not so broad as to include any kind of mutual attraction between people. Rather, friendship for Aristotle at least requires that both parties develop (through actually doing things together) active ties to one another. Indeed, it is through an account of the nature of these ties that Aristotle characterised what he takes to be the three basic kinds of friendship: utility, pleasure and virtue (or character) friendships.

Aristotle tells us then that there are basically three things that are lovable and these are the good, the pleasant and the useful. These three things provide the grounds on which people love one another and consequently form friendships. Corresponding to these grounds we obtain three kinds of friendship where in each kind “those who love each other wish well to each other in that respect in which they love one another” (NE 1156a:8). Now of the three types of friendships only one, virtue or character friendship, which is based on the love people of good character might have for each other *qua* good, is ideal or perfect, while the other two “are only incidental; for it is not as being the man he is that he is loved but as providing some good or pleasure” (NE 1156a:17). So it seems that where we are loved as providing some good or pleasure, our friend will wish us well only in so far as we are (or remain) useful or pleasant to that person. Now it may be thought that this in itself is enough to show that Aristotle’s account of friendship is overly moralised, placing as it does the perfect or ideal form of friendship beyond the reach of most of us who are less than completely virtuous. For the rest of us, it would seem, our relationships with others will be doomed to be merely instrumental. We will never be cared for by others for our own sake, but only to the extent that we are useful or pleasant. But we need not interpret Aristotle that way (and as suggested in the above translation). Cooper, for example, has argued that while Aristotle holds that in the case of utility or pleasure friendships we wish another well *because* they are useful or pleasant, it does not follow that we do not wish such people well for their own sake. As Cooper says the important question here is “what does Aristotle mean by this because?”³ According to Cooper we need to understand this “because” causally: I come to wish well to my useful friend because he is useful to be with but that doesn’t mean that I only wish him well in order that I may be able to continue benefiting from him. Rather, in such cases a person “wishes well for his friend’s own sake, in consequence of recognising him as someone who regularly benefits him and has done so in the past”⁴ On this interpretation even though we are not virtuous we may still wish another well for their own sake. It is just that the grounds of friendship are somewhat truncated in these imperfect kinds of friendship because pleasantness or usefulness are not essential to whom we are; they depend upon contingency and good fortune which may easily change. While, of course, virtue or good character go to the essence of whom we are; they go to our living the life proper to beings such as ourselves.

³ Cooper, 1980:309.

⁴ Cooper, 1980:311.

Still, there is another sense in which Aristotle's conception of friendship may seem to be counter intuitive and even overly moralised. For even granting Cooper's point that in all three types of friendship we may wish a friend well for their own sake, it remains true of Aristotle's account of friendship that in any friendship we, as one might say, always retain an eye on our own good or, perhaps with character friendship, on *the* good. So even though friendships of the lesser kind are not purely instrumental, all three kinds of friendship remain conditional on the presence of certain valuable qualities in our friends. This becomes clear when Aristotle considers the conditions under which we may break off a friendship:

Another question that arises is whether friendships should or should not be broken off when the other party does not remain the same. Perhaps we may say that there is nothing strange in breaking off a friendship based on utility or pleasure, when our friends no longer have these attributes. For it was of these attributes that we were the friends; and when these have failed it is reasonable to love no longer (NE 1165b:1–4).

So as Cooper says in the case of a businessman's utility friendship with a customer, "[s]o long as the general context of profitability remains, the well-wishing can proceed unchecked".⁵ Presumably though, should this context change so that the customer is no longer a source of profit, then the friendship will end. But now I think that we, or perhaps many of us, would take it as a defining feature of a friendship even in such a context that the well-wishing (the friendship) should survive beyond the financial exchange. That, I think many would say, shows that this was in fact a real friendship (however we may wish to construe friendship). This is not to deny that such friendships may arise out of some mutually beneficial exchange but to say that such exchanges do not entirely determine even such friendships. But for Aristotle the qualities of another for which we love them (utility, pleasure or goodness) are the entire basis of the relevant friendships, should these qualities be removed "it is reasonable to love no longer".

Let me stress that I am not now suggesting that it is unreasonable in such situations to love no more, but merely that as a matter of fact this is not what always happens. There is, I will suggest, something else in virtue of which friendships may survive the kind of change that Aristotle envisages, and this indicates a feature of friendship that Aristotle either did not consider or dismissed. The element of friendship that I have in mind here may be characterised as simply *a life shared*. So, we value our friends not only because we recognise in them something useful, pleasant or even good, but because our lives and our experiences are intertwined. It is not then sufficient to characterise friendship merely to say that friends wish each other well for their own sake out of recognition of certain qualities they possess, for what is also true is that we are *attached* to our friends. By "attachment" here I mean that there is a bond between friends the severing of which in itself will come at a certain cost quite independently of any loss of anything beneficial, pleasant or good.

⁵ Cooper, 1980:314.

Of course, Aristotle was aware in a sense of the importance of time spent together for friendships — at least in the case of the best kind of friendship. As he says:

[S]uch friendships require time and familiarity; as the proverb says, men cannot know each other till they have “eaten salt together”; nor can they admit each other to friendship or be friends till each has been found lovable and been trusted by each (NE 1156: b26–30).

Though even here it seems time spent with another is simply important for recognising a (potential) friend’s goodness and not simply as time, and a life, shared. What is more this also implies somewhat counterintuitively that all this time “eating salt together” was not time spent with a friend, not at least until the other was recognised as good and hence a possible character friend.

This in fact brings out an aspect of friendship for us that I think Aristotle would have to deny: that for us friends are not necessarily or always consciously chosen. This seems true of all three types of friendship as Aristotle describes them. So imagine our businessman deciding to quit his business. He may discover after a time that he misses certain of his customers. The general context of profitability has gone, still he may say “I really miss Fred”. Indeed this may be the first time he is conscious that Fred was more than just another customer. His sense of loss (of attachment that is, or may be about to be, severed) may reveal that they have shared something more than business.

Perhaps though things will be different in the case of character friends — those whom are most properly called friends — for what they share is virtuous activity; that is, they share more than business or pleasure (or some combination thereof), they share a distinctive kind of life. In fact in the example above of the businessman and his customer we might say that simply because these two share something more than business their friendship must be something more than a utility-friendship, that it has become something akin to a character-friendship. What character-friends share of course is not just a limited range of activities determined by some specific context of profitability or pleasure but the whole range of activities that characterise the life of virtue. One argument Aristotle in fact gives for claiming that friendship is partially constitutive of the good or flourishing human life is then as follows:

Further, men think that the happy man ought to live pleasantly. Now if he were solitary, life would be hard for him; for by oneself it is not easy to be continuously active; but with others and towards others it is easier. With others therefore his activity will be more continuous, being in itself pleasant, as it ought to be for the man who is blessed; for a good man qua good delights in excellent actions and is vexed by vicious ones, as a musical man enjoys beautiful tunes but is pained at bad ones (NE 1170a:4–10).

We might ask, though, why continuous activity is easier when shared with others? While Aristotle does not (to my knowledge at least) say, a number of things may suggest themselves. Cooper suggests three possible reasons for thinking that activities shared with others may be more continuous. First they provide an “immediate

and continuous sense that what one finds interesting and worthwhile is so". Second, that activities shared "enhance one's attachment to and interest in one's own personal activities by putting them within the context of a broader group activity". Third, that shared activities "expand the scope of one's activity" by enabling one to share indirectly in the activities of other members of the group.⁶ And now we may say that the reason why it is so important to share activities specifically with character-friends is that it is only in the case of intimate relationships with such people that we can be confident that another shares with us (if we are virtuous) the character for, and commitment to, the kind of virtuous activity that we want to engage in more continuously.

Once again, however, what seems at bottom to matter here is not essentially that we share activities and a life with another, but that we are able to live more completely a certain kind of life, the life of moral and intellectual virtue. Again, this may seem to us a highly moralised account of the value of friendship. For it makes the activities that friends share important only in so far as they have a specific point (to make virtuous activity more continuous). But this does not seem to capture the value that sharing a life can have in and of itself, independently of the content of the life we are thereby sharing. To illustrate the point here, consider an ordinary kind of example. I spend hours with my friend Ian in the pub engaged in what may seem from the outside a somewhat pointless activity, indeed the activity may even be causing me long term harm. But I may still value this time spent together with my friend even though nothing, or at least nothing external to this relationship, comes of it.

It is possible of course to argue that even in the kind of context just envisaged friends are pursuing together their own conception of the human good. Perhaps the conversation is not so pointless; perhaps such conversations can be construed as a kind of virtuous activity, perhaps involving the exercise and development of certain capacities for insight and reflection into one's own life and human nature. Of course, from inside this relationship the conversation and time spent together is not pointless; it matters quite a lot to me that I am able to spend this time with my friend Ian. What I do not, or may not, have however is a conception of this activity as valuable independently of the value I place on this relationship or my attachment to Ian. And even on the most charitable interpretation of Aristotle it must surely remain true that for him such friends will have, as I have said, an eye on the good that seems to my mind at least incompatible with the kind of morally uncritical involvement with (at least) one's closest friends.

Perhaps, though, it should not be so surprising that this kind of morally uncritical involvement with another should not have figured in Aristotle's account of friendship; he is after all in the NE concerned with the way in which friendship contributes to the human good. In the context of such an account it of course seems necessary that friendship should be entirely subject to Aristotle's conception of the human good. And of course the thought I have just introduced points to the dangers that certain close

⁶ Cooper, 1980:328–9.

friendships may bring for our attempts to achieve that good. For if one may in the context of friendship lose sight, through one's involvement with and attachment to one's closest friends, of the life of moral and intellectual virtue, then it may be that friendship itself may pose, as Cocking and Kennett have argued,⁷ a kind of moral danger to us.

Consider then the possibility of a friend, whom was good but has gone bad. What are we to do about this situation should we find ourselves in it? Well, here is Aristotle's view on the matter:

But if one accepts another man as good, and he becomes bad and is seen to do so, must one still love him? Surely it is not possible, since not everything can be loved, but only what is good. ... Must the friendship, then, be forthwith broken off? Or is it not so in all cases, but only when one's friends are incurable in their wickedness? If they are capable of being reformed one should rather come to the assistance of their character or their property, inasmuch as this is better and more characteristic of friendship. But a man who breaks off such a friendship would seem to be doing nothing strange; for it was not a man of this sort that he was a friend; when his friend has changed, therefore, and he is unable to save him, he gives him up (NE 1165b:13–23).

In one way, all this sounds perfectly reasonable: we do sometimes have to give up our friends when they have changed out of all recognition. Still, there seems to be a telling reluctance even on Aristotle's part to accept his own conclusion. Now here one might simply want to say that where we cannot give up a friend fallen into wickedness we are simply being irrational and that we are even turning our back on not just our good but *the* good. Now if the human good just is (is exhausted by) something like the life of moral and intellectual virtue, then this would indeed be irrational. However, it may be argued that friendship itself indicates an important human good, but crucially a good that cannot be wholly accommodated within our conception of the *morally* good life for human beings. And indeed this is what I have been suggesting: our attachment to our closest friends has a value that cannot necessarily be reconciled with our attempts to live a morally good life.

The issue just raised about the relationship between friendship and morality is, it must be conceded, a large and contentious one. So there are, for instance, contemporary thinkers who would defend what I am calling here the kind of moralised conception of friendship that we see in Aristotle. But if we are prepared to accept that friendship is an important human value that may conflict with our attempt to live the moral life then it will not be simply irrational to turn our back on the good rather than turning our back on a friend. Indeed it may be argued that this choice is in the end the more plausibly human choice to make; a choice that acknowledges the place attachment to others plays in a recognisably human life. On this point consider Orwell's thoughts on Gandhi that Cocking and Kennett refer to:

⁷ Cocking and Kennett, 2000. In this paper Cocking and Kennett defend the following two claims, "first, that in some cases where we are led morally astray by virtue of a relationship that makes its own claims on us, the relationship in question is properly called friendship; second, that relationships of this kind are valuable in their own right" (p. 297).

Close friendships, Gandhi says, are dangerous, because “friends react to one another” and through loyalty to a friend one can be led into wrong-doing. This is unquestionably true. ... The essence of being human is that one does not seek perfection, that one *is* sometimes willing to commit sins for the sake of loyalty, ... that one is prepared in the end to be defeated and broken up by life, which is the inevitable price of fastening one’s love upon other human individuals.⁸

I have suggested that while friendship may not always be compatible with our attempt to live the moral life, it may involve an important and independently identifiable human value. The passage just quoted hints at what that value might be. For the value of *loyalty* is not limited or exhausted by its relation to furthering the moral life, however we may conceive of that. Of course this opens up the possibility that the demands of loyalty may conflict with the demands of the moral life. But in order to understand that conflict we need to understand the specific value or significance of *loyalty to one’s friends*.⁹

A further feature of friendship, and one that also poses problems for Aristotle, is that here our love is directed, or as Orwell says “fastened”, on particular unique individuals. It is then to these unique individuals that we recognise loyalty. So it does not really capture the nature or importance of this loyalty to say as Aristotle does in justifying our giving up a friend turned to wickedness that “it was not a man of this sort that he was a friend”. For it was not merely as a person of any given *sort* that one was a friend but a unique individual human being: Fred, or John or Nancy. The demand of loyalty we feel towards our closest friends cannot simply be renounced or silenced by the fact that such a friend is no longer the sort of person he or she was or that their life is no longer directed towards the pursuit of the good. Indeed, loyalty to a friend means nothing, is nothing, if it cannot continue to hold us when other reasons we might have for sticking to our friends, including the pursuit of utility pleasure or even the good, have failed. This is not to say that loyalty requires us to stick to our friends no matter what. It may be that a friend has become so wicked that the bond of loyalty must be breached. But what is true, I think, is that even in such cases where we do find it necessary to give up a friend, our desertion is still a kind of failure, more precisely, even in such a case we may reasonably feel that we have failed *them*.

To illustrate the above point, consider the film, *The Third Man*; specifically, consider the central relationships between Harry Lime and his friend Holly Martins and his lover Anna. Harry, who had asked Holly to Vienna, has had to fake his own death before Holly arrives to prevent being caught by the international police for his involvement in stolen penicillin racket. The racket involving watered down penicillin has caused terrible suffering and death to many people — including many children. Both Holly and Anna are brought to see the true nature of their friend and lover but

⁸ Orwell, 1949:495.

⁹ Of course, there are other kinds of loyalty including loyalty to country, to a specific social/political cause, or even to one’s profession.

their responses to Harry's immorality are importantly different. While they both, despite Harry's callous indifference to the suffering he has caused, retain a love for and loyalty to Harry, Holly is prepared in the end to give up his friend, specifically to betray him to the police, while Anna remains loyal to Harry and refuses to be implicated in Holly's act of betrayal. Now Harry is truly a very bad man, and we can well understand Holly's decision here. But equally I think, and this is my point, we can understand Anna's continued loyalty to Harry. Holly, we may say, has done the right thing, but still he has betrayed a friend. And Anna's final contempt for Holly in the wonderful last scene of the movie where she walks past Holly on her way from Harry's (real) grave without even acknowledging him records the fact that betrayal of a friend even here can be deeply, and properly, shaming. Here the distinct and genuine claims of loyalty and the moral life (at least as we would understand it) cannot be reconciled. That we can understand Anna's contempt for Holly, that we can recognise this as a reasonable or appropriate response to Holly's act of betrayal, shows that loyalty has a value or significance that cannot always be accommodated within our conception of the moral life.

The account of friendship that I have sketched — and specifically of the kind of value that is internal to it — is obviously contentious. The important question though is not whether some friendships are immoral but whether they are truly friendships. If one could be a friend, a friend moreover of the best kind, to Harry Lime to the very end, then Aristotle's account of friendship must be flawed. For such a friendship must be incompatible with the connection Aristotle insists upon between friendship and his conception of human good.

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