

A study on Aristotle's Philosophy of Friendship: Altruistic or Egoistic?

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摘要：本文透過亞里士多德的重要著作《尼各馬科倫理學》中的第八及第九兩卷研究他的友愛哲學。古希臘文中 *philia* 一詞一般被現代人翻譯作「友愛」，但其概念卻比現代的純朋友之間的友愛更為豐富和廣泛，涵蓋各式各樣的人際及倫理關係，體現為一種「位格之愛」(personal love)。亞里士多德的學說道出友愛是人類追求幸福生活的必要元素，而良好和崇高的友愛關係能為人揭示及發展自己的品德與善性。本文討論亞里士多德為友愛所界定的三種不同動機，旨在通過他學說中的「自愛」、「自足」及「另一個自我」等重要概念，探討他的友愛哲學究竟是「利他主義」還是「自我主義」。

The significance with which Aristotle places his discussion of *philia* in a work of ethics —*The Nicomachean Ethics*¹— immediately raises awareness that he associates this topic most closely with virtue, when in fact it may just as closely relate to politics, or even warrant a separate treatment on its own. The fact that Aristotle devotes one-fifth of the *EN* to his discussion of *philia* is indicative of the importance he places upon this most subtle and complex of human relations. It is the aim of this paper to conduct a brief study on Aristotle's philosophy of friendship with reference to the *EN*. I will start with a discussion of the concept of *philia*, and why it forms an indispensable part of our lives as humans. This will be followed by an introduction to the three types of friendship described by Aristotle in the *EN*. I will then explore the motives for friendship and try to determine to what extent it may be said to be altruistic or egoistic in its analysis.

The Greek term *φιλία* (*philia*) has no exact translation in English, but its closest connotation is 'friendship.' Unlike our modern day conception of the term, Aristotle's *philia* covers "many aspects of communal life including consanguine, conjugal, king-subject, fellow God-man relationship"² and so forth. Suzanne Stern-Gillet observes that *philos* (meaning 'friend') "can designate either the members of one's household, or those one 'loves'" or "those individuals who are linked by the bonds of guest friendship." She goes on to observe that

¹ Aristotle, *Etica Nicomachia*, trans. by David Ross, *Nicomachean Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1925). Hereinafter *EN*.

² Wang Tao, "A Comparative Study of St. Thomas Aquinas's and Paul Tillich's Ideas of Love: In the Perspective of Agape-Eros and Philia," *Logos & Pneuma Chinese Journal of Theology* 43, (2015): 125. See also *EN*, 1158b12-15; 1161b11-16; 1162a4-17.

philos used in the first sense "designates those individuals whom blood, law, or custom have made one's 'nearest and dearest'. The meaning of *philos* in the second sense is very close to that of the modern concept of friendship. In the third sense the word refers to the socially well-established custom of offering hospitality and protection to travelers of similar ranks and status."³

Julia Annas suggests that although the word "*philos*, unlike 'friend', has both an active and a passive sense,"⁴ "a proper analysis of the concept should begin with the 'mutual' sense,"⁵ so that in our discussion of friendship here, we will focus upon the situation where two persons feel a mutual liking for each other and where goodwill towards each other is reciprocated, as Aristotle points out that "to be friends, then, they must be mutually recognized as bearing goodwill and wishing well to each other."⁶ This is an important feature of friendship in its primary sense, which I will return to in my discussion below, but presently, I shall explore the reasons for friendship and give some arguments for its being a necessity in our lives.

According to Aristotle, friendship is essential to human living.⁷ Certainly in Book IX (most notably in chapter 9) of the *EN*, he argues that friendship is necessary for a happy life. It is not the purpose of

³ Suzanne Stern-Gillet, *Aristotle's Philosophy of Friendship* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), p. 6.

⁴ Julia Annas, "Plato and Aristotle on Friendship and Altruism," *Mind* 86, (1977): 532.

⁵ Annas, "Friendship and Altruism," 533.

⁶ *EN*, 1156a5.

⁷ *EN*, 1155a1-6.

this paper to delve into the theme of Aristotle's concept of happiness, but it is observed that Aristotle gives *philia* much importance as a virtue in his discussion about happiness. It may suffice to note here that Aristotle's idea of happiness takes on a hierarchical order. At the top of this hierarchy, Aristotle puts gods as the most perfectly happy, followed by humans, and lastly by lower animals. He also claims that the more contemplation a being has, the more perfectly happy he will be. Humans pursuing either the philosophical life or the political life will both place virtuous activity as the highest good. For "the philosophical life, contemplation is the topmost good, whereas in the political life moral activity is the ultimate end."⁸ What is important in the present discussion is that Aristotle's conception of happiness is closely associated with virtuous activities, and his view is that "an ethically virtuous person, because he has ethical virtues, needs friends."⁹

It follows that not only do humans need friends in order to be happy, but happy people, who possess ethical virtues, also need friends. Left to ourselves, we cannot accurately assess our own moral character; even less so are we able to lead a continuously interesting and enjoyable life.

We need each other because as individuals we are not sufficient—psychologically sufficient—to sustain our own lives. For a god things are different; the goodness of the divine activity of contemplation is continuously evident to a god, and he needs no other person or thing to enable him to

⁸ Richard Kraut, *Aristotle on the Human Good* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), pp. 45, 135.

⁹ Kraut, *Aristotle on the Human Good*, p. 135.

see this or reassure him that it is so: as Aristotle says in the *Eudemean Ethics*, god is his own good activity, but human good consists in relationship to others.¹⁰

It is thus through friendship that we interact with each other in society and gain better knowledge of self. Good relationships between individuals lead to a harmonious society, to stability and to happiness, which makes friendship an essential element to the political community. "Friendship also seems to hold the polis together, and lawgivers seem to be more seriously concerned with it than with justice. For concord seems to be something similar to friendship, and they strive most to attain concord and to drive out faction, its enemy."¹¹ Lorraine S. Pangle points out that "without the concord that comes from a common purpose and the faith in a common good, without the sympathetic interest in one's fellows that makes one want to treat them equitably and to pursue their good along with one's own, no political community can exist in Aristotle's views."¹² The argument for friendship is thus launched from two platforms, demonstrating that friendship is not only essential for the individual, but it is also beneficial to and promotes the proper and orderly functioning of the state.

Upon this account, friendship is good, desirable and also essential to human living. But how do two individuals relate to each other

¹⁰ John M. Cooper, "Friendship and the Good in Aristotle," *The Philosophical Review* 86 (1977): 311.

¹¹ *EN*, 1155a22-26.

¹² Pangle, *Aristotle and the Philosophy of Friendship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 17.

when they are said to be friends, and what is to be achieved with such relationships? Aristotle demonstrates that friendship can be born from a multitude of motivations, which he categorizes under three heads, involving advantage, pleasure and the desire for mental communion.¹³ These three objects of friendship, namely the useful, the pleasant and the good are not species of a single genus,¹⁴ but they are all types of friendship converging on a central case,¹⁵ “for all these uses of the term are related to one particular sort of friendship which is primary. [...] The primary is that of which the definition is implicit in the definition of all.”¹⁶ The central case is that upon which all three characteristics of useful, pleasant and the good converge (with mutual goodwill being reciprocated). Therefore even though we are not aiming at the same kind of thing in each case, the inferior kinds are nonetheless friendships by reason of their resemblance to the central case through having some of its attributes.

To give a summary of what is established so far: according to Aristotle, in order for people to be friends, the parties involved must feel reciprocal goodwill and wish good for each other with each other's knowledge, upon the basis of one of the three kinds of lovable qualities which form the types of friendship. These will now be described in further detail below.

¹³ Stern-Gillet, *Aristotle's Philosophy of Friendship*, p. 37.

¹⁴ Aristotle, *Eudemian Ethics*, trans. by J. Solomon, *The Complete Works of Aristotle* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991). Hereinafter *EE*, 1236a16.

¹⁵ Annas, “Friendship and Altruism,” 546.

¹⁶ Annas, “Friendship and Altruism,” 546.

The Three Kinds of Friendship

Aristotle divides friendship into three kinds, based upon the objects of our love, which he identifies as utility, pleasure and the good respectively. Friendship based upon utility is furthest from perfect, as each loves the other person for their usefulness. In other words, the object of love is not each other, but some extrinsic good each expects to obtain for themselves through their friendship with the other person.¹⁷ This type of friendship is easily dissolved and can be easily replaced because what is useful changes according to each person's varying needs. Any affection felt by the parties towards each other is incidental only. As a matter of fact, the parties do not even have to consider each other pleasant.¹⁸ Aristotle suggests that friendship of utility is mainly the object of old people, whose interest at that time of life is predominately what is useful over what is pleasant.¹⁹ Examples of this type of friendship can be found between a traditional Greek host and his guest, as described under Suzanne Stern-Gillet's third sense of *philos* mentioned above, or if we adopt a modern day example, it can be found between a resident at a building complex and the watchman who works there.

The second kind of friendship is based upon pleasure, and is formed between people who find each other pleasant to themselves. This is closer to the perfect friendship, though it still shares certain

¹⁷ *EN*, 1156a10-19.

¹⁸ *EN*, 1156a27.

¹⁹ *EN*, 1156a26.

characteristics of the friendship of utility in that it is transient in nature, and is prone to be easily formed and quite as easily dissolved according to one's whims and the pleasure one seeks, which invariably changes with age and time. Notwithstanding this, the parties to friendships of pleasure can develop genuine warmth and affection towards each other and cherish the other person's company for as long as the feeling lasts.²⁰ This is possible for the parties involved, as pleasure is enhanced through sharing. "The presence of the friend is cherished as an end in itself, even if the friend's complete good is not actively sought as an end in itself."²¹ Aristotle points out that friendships formed between young people are usually of this type, for they are directed by their emotion and aim at living to maximize pleasure.

Based on the above, we can say that friendships of utility are generally aimed at personal material gain and external advantage whereas friendships of pleasure are sought to create personal sensual pleasures. The predominant purpose of both of these friendships is to seek what is good for one's own self. The third and most perfect kind of friendship, however, based upon virtue and the good, is said to seek the good of the friend himself, and loves the friend for his own sake. Aristotle considers that "those who wish well to their friends for their sake are most truly friends [...] and such a friendship is as might be expected permanent, since there meet in it all the qualities that friends should have."²² Aristotle also introduces the concept of the friend as

²⁰ EN, 1156a31-b6.

²¹ Pangle, *Aristotle and the Philosophy of Friendship*, p. 40.

²² EN, 1156b13-17.

being like a "second self," so that in friendships of virtue the good which a person wishes for himself he will likewise wish for his friend. He will take an active and keen interest in his friend's being, and "this will be realized in their living together and sharing in discussion and thought; for this is what living together would seem to mean in the case of man."²³

There has been much discussion regarding what Aristotle means by friends being *allos autos* (ἄλλος αὐτός) "other selves" to each other. Aristotle himself clarifies at the outset that "none the less a friend means, as it were, a separate self."²⁴ The difficulty with the phrase seems partly to be in the attempt to reconcile the desirability in keeping and respecting the friend's "otherness" and unique individuality with the claim that likeness between people form the basis of virtuous friendships.²⁵ Suzanne Stern-Gillet takes the view that the issue is tied in with the importance Aristotle places upon self-sufficiency as being morally ideal:

Since Aristotle viewed self-sufficiency as greatly desirable, he needed to argue that the good of friendship, which prima facie, increases the virtuous person's dependence upon others, is in fact compatible with self-sufficiency. Clearly, the description of virtuous friends as other selves to each other is invoked partly to counteract the conclusion that friendship increases the virtuous person's dependence upon

²³ EN, 1170b10-14.

²⁴ EE, 1245a34-35.

²⁵ EN, 1158b5-6.

external factors. If accepted, the “other self” premiss would contribute to keeping *eudaimonia* (happiness, well-being) within the virtuous person’s reach by internalizing what initially appears to be the irreducible alterity of the friend.²⁶

This seems to me a plausible analysis of the concept, and I agree with the view that there is in fact no real conflict, as self-sufficiency here refers to the noetic conception of self. To be self-sufficient is, according to Aristotle, to fully realize one’s essence or nature. A self-sufficient person is not, as Socrates in the *Lysis* claims, one who is not in want of anything,²⁷ but is one who, having realized one’s nature, is in a state of harmony or balance with oneself from within. Such a person will still be in need of friends, and being morally virtuous, is most capable of offering and forming the best friendships. More importantly, he will need friends because he will want to exercise his ethical virtues and his friends who are like his “other-selves” will help him achieve his goals.²⁸

Another characteristic said of friendship of the good is that it is aimed at the good of the other person for the sake of that other person. At its extreme, it entails self-sacrifice. This certainly appears to be altruistic in nature, but we cannot ignore the possible egoistic aspects of *philia* either. Surely we can understand it to be a part of human motivation to have one’s own interests or welfare as the end of any

²⁶ Stern-Gillet, *Aristotle’s Philosophy of Friendship*, pp. 14-15.

²⁷ Plato, *Lysis*, 215a6-e1.

²⁸ Kraut, *Aristotle on the Human Good*, p. 135.

affection we may feel towards another, as to love a person may be due primarily to our viewing them as a source of something we want and think worth having. In Plato’s *Lysis*, Socrates suggests that the ultimate good we love is only our own good.²⁹ One cannot ignore the obvious paradox these conflicting concepts present.

For the remainder of this paper, I will explore these two competing and contradictory concepts and attempt to draw a conclusion, if not about the complex nature of friendship itself, at least about Aristotle’s idea of it. Firstly, I find that the interpretation which Julia Annas applied to the two terms to be helpful and wish to adopt the same: Egoism is taken to be “the doctrine that an agent has no reason for acting unless it can be shown to be in his interests in some way, and altruism to be the doctrine that at least on some occasions the interests of another person can be reason for his acting, without reference to his own interests.”³⁰ Her study of the terms egoistic and altruistic are “without any implication of selfishness versus selflessness,” which seems to construe the terms in such a way as to avoid addressing either of the two extremes. Some support for this interpretation is found from Richard Kraut, who believes that pure egoism is incompatible with Aristotle’s idea of the perfect friendship. He is of the opinion that “when one acts for the sake of another, one is not benefiting him merely as a means to some further goal. Instead, one is taking the good of that person as

²⁹ Pangle, *Aristotle and the Philosophy of Friendship*, p. 23.

³⁰ Annas, “Friendship and Altruism,” 535.

something that by itself provides a reason for action. And pure egoism forbids this.”³¹

Upon this premise, I shall consider how and to what extent friendship of the good is egoistic in nature, and based upon our interpretation above, it is to determine whether people hold their own good as an essential composite element of their motives for actions in virtue friendship. To begin with, I will consider Aristotle’s concept of self-love. Aristotle claims that self-love is a proper emotion, as he asserts that “one is a friend to oneself most of all”³² and “the good person must be a self-lover.”³³ *Prima facie*, these statements seem to point towards an egoistic interpretation of friendship, since it implies that a good person ought to act in his own interests out of self-love. In Book IX chapter 4 of the *EN*, Aristotle provides us with five defining features of friendship and adds that these proceed from a man’s relation to himself³⁴ (I adopt Richard Kraut’s simplified and more comprehensive presentation for ease of discussion):

In any friendship between two different people X and Y:

- (1) X wishes good for Y, for the sake of Y.
- (2) X wishes Y to be alive, for the sake of Y.
- (3) X spends time with Y.

³¹ Kraut, *Aristotle on the Human Good*, pp. 78-79.

³² *EN*, 1168b9-10.

³³ *EN*, 1169a11-12.

³⁴ *EN*, 1166a1-10.

(4) X makes the same choices as Y.

(5) X has the same pains and pleasures as Y.

Aristotle then argues that these statements also hold true when X and Y are the same person, and that person is virtuous.³⁵

I agree with Richard Kraut’s interpretations of Aristotle’s meaning in that what is being demonstrated here is that in all of the above statements, it can be said to relate most closely to oneself primarily. If X and Y are the same person, for instance, then it is logical that he can know and relate to his own pains and pleasures better than anyone else’s. When Aristotle states that these five elements of friendship proceed from a person’s relation to himself, it simply means that a person can experience or fulfill these qualities most completely with regard to himself. Aristotle’s intention is not to establish a hierarchical order with the words “proceed from” and claiming self-love as the higher good over friendship between two people. “His point is simply that the five marks of friendship are most fully substantiated by the attitude virtuous individuals have towards themselves.”³⁶ This does not support the egoistic theory which holds that one should seek to maximize one’s own good or to place it before others. As already mentioned, Aristotle believes that virtuous activity correlates intimately with happiness, and to achieve happiness (*eudaimonia*) is the ultimate end a person should

³⁵ Kraut, *Aristotle on the Human Good*, p. 131.

³⁶ Kraut, *Aristotle on the Human Good*, p. 132.

always aim at. However, this does not preclude the happiness of others as the goal of one's own actions.

We can of course envisage a multitude of scenarios where an action undertaken is beneficial both to oneself and to someone else, in which case two separate and independent motives for action arise. It is not easy to determine in such cases, perhaps even for the agent himself, which motive provided the cause for action, since both ends are beneficial and will produce desirable good. Considered under the light of what has been discussed so far, the virtuous person's aim is at achieving happiness, whether it be one's own or that of another. Can it be possible then, at least on some occasions, the good and happiness which an agent aims at is that of another person, without reference to his own interests? It is possible to argue that Aristotle provided the concept of friends being other selves as a premise to this very idea.

If one regards it as simply a fact that altruism is possible, one could well argue that no proof is required. Aristotle certainly regards it as simply a fact to be taken for granted that people can in fact come to like others and regard their interests as they do their own [...] it is just a fact of human nature and as such requires no philosophical defence.³⁷

Up to this point, the question is perhaps answered to the effect that acts of friendship can at least, for some of the time, be aimed at benefiting another for that person's sake without any benefit to oneself. Book IX, chapter 4 of the *EN* seems to support the case that altruism is

³⁷ Annas, "Friendship and Altruism," 543.

possible. The case whether at its highest and most perfect, friendship can entail self-sacrifice is a much more difficult proposition to address. Aristotle does not give any direct clues to his views on this question in the *EN*, but it is worthwhile to consider whether he thinks a person can and should act for the sake of another's good when doing so is against his own interest or contrary to his own good.

A good man will avoid that species of inner division that consists in choosing what seems best for oneself and then regretting that one did not sacrifice one's own good for a higher cause, or alternatively, making difficult sacrifices, and then envying and being angry towards those who benefit from such sacrifices while pursuing their own pleasure and comfort. The wise man will not be torn between the seemingly noble and the seemingly good, for he grasps with all his soul the truth that the truly noble and the truly good are one and the same.³⁸

If the truly noble and truly good is one and the same end, and its fulfillment through one's actions happens to bring about the happiness of another to the detriment of oneself, then theoretically, a good man can choose this higher good though it entails self-sacrifice. This may appear to be in conflict with our understanding of Aristotle's view of human nature being centered upon self-love and self-interest, but in a situation where an ethically virtuous act of friendship purely for the sake of the friend out-weighs such considerations, I do not put it beyond the capability of mankind to make just such a sacrifice for another. Besides:

³⁸ Pangle, *Aristotle and the Philosophy of Friendship*, p. 144.

The straightforward claim that an ethics of virtue is egoistic [...] is straightforwardly mistaken. For what are to be developed are the virtues, and these are, for example, justice, courage and the like. Some of them have a direct connection with the good of others, for example, justice. All of them involve having at least the disposition to do the right thing, where the right thing to do is established independently of the agent's own interest. An ethics of virtue is therefore at most formally self-centered or egoistic: its content can be fully as other-regarding as that of other systems of ethics.³⁹

If we agree with Aristotle that friendship is a virtue, then the logical conclusion to be reached is that, self-sacrifice for the sake of a friend so loved is indeed possible. This would be human love at its richest and highest, though the situation will be rare as Aristotle himself contends that friendships of the virtuous are few and far between.⁴⁰ In Book VIII chapter 4, Aristotle says that "it is natural that such friendships should be infrequent; for such men are rare."

Conclusion

According to Aristotle, friendship is valued, and rightly so, because it is only through the intimate friendship we form with others that we can come to learn about ourselves and to lead a life that can be regarded as worthy of living. The friend as another self is like a mirror

³⁹ Julia Annas, *The Morality of Happiness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 127.

⁴⁰ *EN*, 1170b20-1171a20.

to us and offers ample guidance for our own behaviour, providing us with the context for contemplation as regards the "flourishing life" we each aim to live. In loving and valuing a friend for his own sake we also become capable of loving and valuing ourselves. These psychological benefits of friendship, according to John M. Cooper's interpretation of Aristotle, "are not available to human beings unless one takes up the altruistic attitudes towards others which on his theory are essential to friendship."⁴¹ Ultimately and taken to its core, "the love of friendship becomes a fundamental movement within each and every human conduct of love and provides the personal dimension for love so that the love for both the self and others [...] can be sustained by the characteristics of a person furnished by *philia*."⁴²

By this study of Aristotle's *EN*, I hope to have made the case that friendship is a virtue necessary to human living. I have explored how friends are needed for our happiness, and that being able to relate to others as friends is an indispensable part of living within a society. Personally, I have found this feature of human relations to be at once complex, rich, beautiful and subtle. Though in a philosophical study of friendship the aim is to seek out the common features, nonetheless it is important to bear in mind that, after all, friendship between individuals is unique, and the claim that friendship "has not other model than itself, and can be compared only with itself", can be extended to each

⁴¹ Cooper, "Friendship and the Good in Aristotle, 313.

⁴² Wang, "A Comparative Study of St. Thomas Aquinas's and Paul Tillich's Ideas of Love: In the Perspective of Agape-Eros and Philia," 125.

and every primary Aristotelian friendship.”⁴³ It is my finding and belief that, at its most perfect, friendship entails self-sacrifice and can have for its purpose the good of others. Friendship at its highest creates esteem between individuals, and works as a bridge between moral virtues and the highest life of philosophy.

⁴³ Stern-Gillet, *Aristotle's Philosophy of Friendship*, p. 177. The reference was made based upon the claim of Montaigne regarding his friendship with Etienne de la Boetie.