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Aristotle and Friendship

Out of the 10 books of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle felt it necessary to focus two books on the topic of friendship, so it has an obvious significance to his philosophies and in turn an obvious significance within the life of an excellent person. Friendship is unique in the discussion of moral theory, because it is an everyday universal interaction. Consider the virtue of friendship in comparison to courage, where an average person may only be given the opportunity to be truly courageous once in their lifetime, being a good friend is an everyday occurrence. When it is framed like this is, it makes total sense why Aristotle would devote one-fifth of his magnum opus of moral theory to the question of what makes a good friendship. Morality are the rules we choose to utilize as best practice guidelines when it comes to dealing with other beings, so let us consider what Aristotle thinks makes a good friend and the potential critiques we can make on his assessments. In order to do this, we will first need to establish the basic structure of Aristotle's virtue theory and then dissect his definition of friendship and how it is necessary in the live of a virtuous person. Through the exploration of the Aristotle's definition of friendship and its relationship to justice, it will become clear that his reliance of the concept of worthless people is contradictory to many of his conclusions and ultimately proves that despite what he says everyone deserves a friendship of good.

Before we can understand Aristotle's arguments on friendship and how it relates to morality, we first must understand the goal of a moral life and what makes a virtuous person to Aristotle. This is established within the very first book of *Nicomachean Ethics* when Aristotle claims " Now we say what is worth pursuing for itself is more complete than what is worth

pursuing because of something else, and what is never desirable because of something else is more complete than those things that are desirable both for themselves and because of it; while what is complete without qualification is what is always desirable in itself and never because of something else. Happiness seems most of all to be like this; for this we always choose because of itself and never because of something else...the 'self-sufficient' we posit as being what in isolation makes life desirable and lacking in nothing" (I.7.1097a31-1097b21). The highest goal in life for a virtuous person is that of happiness, because it is a completely self-sufficient value in that humans seek it out for itself. Consider this in contrast to a value like security, which people seek out for the preservation of life rather than just the inherent value of being safe. From there the question becomes, how does one become happy? To give this question the answer it deserves according to this text, would require an entire additional paper, however, to sum it up Aristotle posits: a virtuous person is a happy person, because their actions are a reflection of their soul which creates peace and happiness. And according to Aristotle "Corresponding to each kind of constitution there is evidently a friendship, to the extent that there is also justice."

(VIII.11.1161a10-1161a11) So, what does it mean to be a virtuous friend according to Aristotle?

In order to answer the question of what is a virtuous friendship, Aristotle, as he does with many things, divides types of friendship into categories. There are friendships of utility, pleasure and good. He begins the discussion by addressing the difference between a friend, acquaintance and having general good will for people, which was interesting and necessary in order to define the subject at hand, but within this analysis will have a relatively minor impact. From there we begin to understand that none of these types of friendships are inherently bad. Aristotle has no problem with people making business partnerships or gaining pleasure because you know, we live our lives. However, virtue only comes from friendships of good because, "the friendship of

the good that is friendship most of all, as has been said many times; for being loveable and desirable seems to belong to what is good or pleasant without qualification, while for each person, being loveable and desirable seems to belong to what is good and pleasant for him- and good people are loveable and desirable for each other in both these ways.”

(VIII.6.1157b25-1157b29) This language about friendship is so interesting because it mirrors his statements about the nature of happiness, specifically claims of being self-sufficient/ lacking qualification. Truly, Aristotle has some beautiful things to say about the nature of friendship and the role it has to play in the life of a good person. But of course, not everyone is good according to Aristotle.

So, what do virtuous friendships for bad people look like to Aristotle? In order to answer this, he has the remarkable answer “the depraved seek others with whom to spend their days, but are in flight from themselves; for when on their own they are reminded of many odious things in the past and look forward to more of the same in the future... The bad person, then, does not appear to be disposed in a friendly fashion even towards himself, because he has nothing loveable about himself.” (IX.5.1166b15-1166b27) Friendship according to Aristotle is loving another as you love yourself, therefore bad people cannot love another the way they love themselves because they do not love themselves because they have nothing loveable about themselves. Its of course a powerful sentiment that gives a lot of insight into what someone who struggles with intimacy might be feeling, however it does not seem to be a productive approach to approaching morality and relationships with others for a few reasons that I will now address.

First and foremost, the entirety of Aristotle’s theories hinges upon the existence of worthless, bad or corrupt people. And for the time he was writing this it’s not terribly out of line to assume that he received very little pushback on this sentiment, especially because some of the

main components Aristotle identifies as a cause of worthlessness are disposition and habituation. Translating to, the position you were born into and the way you were raised are largely responsible for your capacity for virtue. Aristotle has impossibly high standards for what makes a good person, that require you just are one. He has essentially no hope for people attempting to become good. Since the full realization of virtue requires that you must not only act in a virtuous way, but also not even have unvirtuous thoughts, those who have not been properly habituated will never achieve goodness and in turn never be capable of having a friendship of good/ fulfilling relationship. The logic of some of the claims Aristotle makes about friendship is undeniable, however as Aristotle knows, the human soul exists beyond reason and love is often not rational and he additionally makes the problematic assumption about the permanent nature of moral ignorance, directly and unjustly applying it to the socially disenfranchised groups of slaves and women. His discussion of friendship, while insightful lacks compassion and debatably a true insight into human nature.

A necessary note to Aristotle's theories seems to be that they are simply classist, racist and sexist. Aristotle states "Each of the two parties both loves what is good for himself and reciprocates in equal measure in terms of wishing and of what is pleasant; for friendship is said to be equality." (VIII. 6.1158a1-1158a2) to then later claim "In all friendships involving superiority the loving should itself be proportionately distributed." (VIII.6.1153b24-b25) It's an obvious contradiction, friendship in its nature cannot be equality when one member is superior or worth more. He then continues to expand on the nature of friendship between a husband and wife, The community formed by a man and wife is clearly that of an aristocratic kind for the man rules on the basis of worth and in the spheres where a man should rule; those where it is fitting for a woman to rule he gives over to her." (VIII.11.1161b32-1161b35). Even if we were to over

look the inherent assumption of these claims that a man inherently has more worth than a woman and should therefore rule over the household, which I believe we would be amiss to do, Aristotle once again contradicts himself by establishing a type of friendship of good that he does not exist in equality. From there he continues to once again contradict himself stating. “there is no friendship towards inanimate things, nor justice either... a slave is an animate tool, and a tool an inanimate slave. In so far as he is a slave, then, one cannot be friends with him, but only in so far as he is a human being; for there seems to be a kind of justice that obtains for any human being in relation to anyone being able of sharing in law and taking part in agreements, and so there can be friendship too.” (VIII.12.1161b4-1161b8) Here, he’s established an understanding of the significance of human dignity in regard to the conversation about the relationship between friendship and justice, yet continues to allow for people to be worth less than others or to be outright worthless. A worthless person by nature deserves nothing, including justice. This conception is problematic in the way of how much room it leaves for injustice and inhuman treatment of the other.

Not only is this conception about the value and potential worthlessness about an individual problematic in the leeway given to the “superior,” but also because it is counterproductive in an individual’s search for morality. Feelings of self-loathing will only grow if permitted to. Language of absolutes when it comes to humans, as well as most other things, while convincing does not leave room for growth, creating closed minds and dangerous assumptions. Human beings learn through experience and suffering and to say that once someone is not properly habituated, they will not achieve goodness, disregards the value of these tools and will stall progress for individuals as well as society as a whole.

But, let us consider the potential value of idealism in order to achieve good. As previously stated, Aristotle does seem to recognize the potential injustice that comes from disregarding an individual as an inanimate object when he states “There is little, then, by way of friendship or of justice in tyrannies either, but more in democracies; for with those who are equals the things in common are many.” (VIII.12.1161b9-1161b11) So, these theories are not meant to justify the dehumanization of others, even though they can be, rather they ought to be used as a tool towards self-realization. It could be assumed that Aristotle establishes such intense and simply unachievable standards of goodness in order to ensure that none one can confidently, publicly and adequately claim that they are good. This perspective can be applied to but may be a reach for Aristotle because it mimics Christian ideology. In the way that Christians live in example the example of their messiah, they fully realize it is impossible to achieve the standard he has set, but continue striving for that excellence in order to land on some form of good.

Additionally, Aristotle’s philosophies exist to protect us from the possibility that bad people are dangerous. Not only in the sense of being physically dangerous, they are morally corrosive. In order to demonstrate an example of the moral corrosiveness of a bad person, I want us to consider the most morally corrupt and corrupting individual in all of Shakespeare’s cannon, Iago! The entirety of the plot of “Othello” consists of Iago, a completely self-loathing individual tricking traditionally virtuous people into friendship, which he capitalized upon in order to destroy their beauty and pull them down to his level of moral depravity. The conclusion of the play results in Iago effectively manipulating Othello into strangling his wife in their marital bed, the most morally depraved thing Iago can think of, topping even Othello’s morally questionable desire to kill the man he suspected of being responsible for his wife’s adultery. The play of Othello exists as the perfect demonstration of the danger that lies in befriending a bad person as

“what we are shown in the inner Iago is a bottomless, consuming passion that feeds on all life around it.” (Rosenberg) This bottomless pit is the temptation of our desires that can corrode the best of us.

However, regardless of how much we have to learn from Othello and Iago, they are fictional. These narratives cannot guide the way we interact with and treat people, because often the deepness of the pit of moral depravity is the result of a finely crafted tale that ignores other potential implications, such as the questions about Othello’s manipulation being the result of his own insecurities as a minority or the risk that comes from viewing your wife as your property and death being a suitable punishment for alleged adultery. Earlier, I posited that the fault in Aristotle’s logic lies in his conclusion that worthless people are not deserving of or incapable of having friendships of good, however, it may actually be the case that he has made a perfectly logical argument and rather the fault exists in his assumption that worthless people to exist. It seems that rather they are a narrative we tell ourselves in order to justify inhuman treatment.

This vernacular coming from such highly respected philosophies is absolutely dangerous. It is dangerous both on the individual scale as well as the societal. The assumption that we can know when a person is bad, is a despicable form of consequentialism as our hope for self-preservation justifies the means of dismissing the value of an individual. Aristotle’s philosophies about what it means to be a virtuous person, leave absolutely zero room for growth and progress. “It is not profitable for us at present to do moral philosophy; that should be laid aside at any rate until we have an adequate philosophy of psychology, in which we are conspicuously lacking.” (Anscombe) Within her first point of “Modern Moral Philosophy” Anscombe perfectly highlights what appears to be missing from Aristotle’s theories and how what we need to do in order to build upon them in the future. By disregarding the complex

psychology of human beings and the potentially debilitating effects of trauma or insecurities, in preference of the quite literally ancient philosophies of a person who existed in the most elite class of his time, we risk repeating the same mistakes of the past. It may be naïve, but I chose to believe that everyone is deserving of and capable of a friendship of good. To conclude that there is nothing loveable about a bad or lost person is a blatant disregard for the unknowable capacity for good and potential that may lie in any individual. Aristotle's conclusion that "from good men, good things come," (X.1.1172a13-1172a14) only begins the conversation about how we can achieve goodness, but by no means is the conclusion.

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