

Olivia Standish

Professor Taylor

PL 204 – Classical Political Thought

12/09/2022

Discuss Aristotle's treatment of friendship. Why is this relevant to a discussion of human excellence and happiness?

Aristotle spends a long time on his discussion of friendship and its role in human virtues – two out of his ten books. Friendship and happiness are so delicately intertwined that there is much for Aristotle to discuss in order to explain the role of friendship and how to best utilize it to be happy and virtuous. One can discover a lot about a man's excellence from the types of friendship he holds, and only a happy man will have beneficial and equal friendships.

One of the most important points that Aristotle repeatedly discusses is the necessity of friendship. He directly relates this the most to human excellence and happiness out of all his thoughts on friendship. He even goes as far to say in his first paragraph on friendship that “without friends no one would choose to live” ¹. This is certainly a very strong stand to take, especially right from the outset. What Aristotle goes on to discuss is that friendships give a man happiness, be this from utility, pleasure, goodness or a mixture of all three. He treats friendship as a virtue itself and implies that one can determine the excellence of a man from his friendships. Aristotle believes that friendship is necessary, yes even to the self-sufficient man. Here he alludes to the views held by stoics, “it is said that those who are supremely happy and self-sufficient have no need of friends” ². Aristotle argues that the happy man

¹ Aristotle, “The Nicomachean Ethics”, 142

² Aristotle, “The Nicomachean Ethics”, 176

should receive all external goods – friends being “the greatest of all external goods”³. He believes that humans are not meant to live a solitary life, so friends are indeed a necessity to a happy life. The opposing view that the virtuous man does not *need* friends is suggesting that whilst friends are not necessary for the existence of man, they add to his life. For a man to be happy, he needs to be active and “by oneself it is not easy to be continually active”⁴. Additionally, if the good man makes the right kind of friendships, it can increase his virtuosity as his friends want the best for him, so help him to become a more excellent man, because he in turn will do the same.

Aristotle goes into great detail about the types of friendships that are beneficial, considering the type of man one is. He believes wicked men are incapable of forming true friendships built on love, as they only use other people for their own personal gain. Therefore, one can distinguish a man’s excellence based on the relationships he holds around him. The young will make and end friendships quickly, based mostly on the pleasure received from said friends “for they live under the guidance of emotion”⁵. This is to be accepted as the young man has not yet had the time or experiences to become a man, and so his feelings will change rapidly, even daily. This way of making friends would only become problematic if it does not change as the young man ages. Those who continue to be flighty on friendships are certainly not good friends. On the other hand, the elderly also do not make the best of friends, as in their old age they pursue friendships purely for the purpose of utility as they have become unable to do activities for themselves. Old people and sour people have the same issue of being thoroughly unpleasant in a friendship, and such the good man will not

³ Aristotle, “The Nicomachean Ethics”, 176

⁴ Aristotle, “The Nicomachean Ethics”, 177

⁵ Aristotle, “The Nicomachean Ethics”, 145

make friends with these people. Friendships of the good man are mutually useful, pleasant and good.

There are 3 main types of friendships that Aristotle outlines: friendships for utility, friendships for pleasure and friendships of the good. Useful friendships form and dissolve quickly, because “it existed only for the ends in question” ⁶. Friendships based on pleasure are closer to true friendship, as (ideally) both people find pleasure in each other’s company, but not for the good of the other but for what they find pleasant for themselves. This is the kind of friendship seen mostly in young people as they do not yet know what is good for themselves or good for others, and they confuse pleasure for goodness. Aristotle uses the adjective “perfect” ⁷ to describe the friendship between good men. In this friendship, the men are alike in their virtue, and as virtuous men, wish only good for the other. Friends who wish well for their friend for their friend’s sake are true friends, and this is the mark of a truly excellent man. A happy and excellent man will wish or help his friends to become more virtuous, as he openly wants what is best for them. Thus, when observing the friendships that men hold, one can determine the excellence of a man. As well, happiness comes from those relationships that Aristotle would describe as perfect friendship.

Equality is an interesting factor in friendships, and inequality may cause even perfect friendships to end. Inequality arises when one man in the friendship is superior to the other, and such can give more than the other. Aristotle believes that “more should be assigned to the good man” ⁸. But in an instance where two men start off in a perfect friendship, but one surpasses the other in virtues over time, the friendship may come to an end, as the inferior man no longer can give the superior man the same as during the beginning of the friendship.

⁶ Aristotle, “The Nicomachean Ethics”, 144

⁷ Aristotle, “The Nicomachean Ethics”, 145

⁸ Aristotle, “The Nicomachean Ethics”, 161

This is natural, and to be expected, as humans are not expected to remain unchanged for years at a time, especially the good man, who should be constantly improving. Friendships for the purpose of utility and pleasure are more likely to end than that of a true friendship, purely due to foundations of the friendship. Once friends in a utility friendship are no longer useful to each other, it is inevitable that the friendship will end as either man is not getting anything from the friendship. Similarly, when the pleasure between friends end, the friendship will dissolve as the purpose of the friendship no longer exists. A good man will know when a friendship should end as it no longer serves him, or his friend, and he should feel entitled to end it if it is no longer a good friendship. This means he can now move on to a better friendship with a more equal good man, where they both wish purely the best for each other.

Aristotle has a brief but illuminating deliberation on loving and being loved in a friendship. Most men prefer being loved to loving as “being loved seems to be akin to being honored”⁹ and being honored is the highest desire to people. In other words, men want to be validated by people in a comparatively authoritative position as they are insecure in their own virtue and therefore need others to remind them of how good they are. This can be seen even in current society where often men in relationships cease to put in effort once they achieve the security and validation of a relationship. In contrast, the excellent man has the greatness of soul virtue in which they know their own value and don’t rely on others to confirm this. In this way, an excellent man can be more loving, as is the essence of friendship, without deconstructing the love he is receiving in return.

Aristotle spends some time talking about self-love, and its relationship to friendship love. This is unusual as we don’t see this in many other philosophers’ writing on ethics or human virtue. His main thought process is that if one cannot love themselves, they will be

⁹ Aristotle, “The Nicomachean Ethics”, 151

unable to love anyone else. Aristotle poses the query “whether we need friends more in adversity or prosperity”¹⁰. This links to self-love and the thin line between it and selfishness. If one need friends only in adversity, then surely those friends are being used and relied on to give only what is lacking. This seems certainly more like friendship for utility than friendship for the sake of friendship. So therefore, by this argument, having friends in both prosperity and adversity is more virtuous than only having friends when you need them in adversity.

Goodwill is the foundation of pure friendship. Aristotle argues that perfect friendships form from mutual wishing of goodwill. At the beginning this can be considered “inactive friendship”¹¹ as it is purely wishing goodwill on the other. As friendship develops, the friends will be active in giving goodwill and assisting their friend in receiving it. An excellent man has many good virtues and as such, will want only good things for his true friend rather than being jealous. In contrast, the wicked man is incapable of wishing goodwill onto others as he has no regard for anyone but himself. This stems from his inherent selfishness, so even if he seems to encourage goodwill in others, it will be purely for his own personal gain.

Aristotle interestingly discusses the number of friends, pointing out that a man with many friends must not be true friends with all of them, as true friendship is rare and takes time, effort and shared experiences to build. Additionally, true friends will have intimate interactions, and such is difficult with large numbers of people. This is a rare time during Aristotle’s discussion on friendship that we see a return of the moderation motif. A good man should “neither be friendless nor have an excessive number of friends”¹². It is often said that one becomes alike to the people one surrounds themselves with, and such, a good man’s virtue should be able to be seen in the number and quality of the friends he holds.

¹⁰ Aristotle, “The Nicomachean Ethics”, 176

¹¹ Aristotle, “The Nicomachean Ethics”, 170

¹² Aristotle, “The Nicomachean Ethics”, 179

Aristotle unusually equates friendship and justice during his discussion on friendship, making the point that the relationships amongst a community are similar to those relationships among friends. For example, “men address as friends their fellow voyagers and fellow soldiers, and so too those associated with them in any other kind of community”¹³ and thus rely on the value of friendship. They all share equal responsibility and good wishes for their comrades, similar to the wishing of goodwill shared amongst true friends. Certainly, there is also an aspect of ulterior motive, as when undertaking a voyage or battle, the success of the individual also ensures the success and safety of the entire community. But nonetheless, the outcome is the same of mutual goodwill. Thus, Aristotle is showing how important friendship or the ability to have friends is to be a functioning member in society. This ties together his entire discussion on friendship and the importance of it in every aspect of a man’s life. If a man is unable to make lasting, true friendships, he will be unable to work as part of a team towards a shared goal. Such, a man’s success and excellence heavily rely on his ability to make the right kind of relationships with people.

Constitutions rely on friendship and justice to effectively operate. There are 3 types of constitution: monarchy, aristocracy and “that which is based on a property qualification, which it seems appropriate to call timocracy”¹⁴. All these constitutional frameworks need moderation to avoid collapse. Monarchy can become tyranny, aristocracy devolves into oligarchy and timocracy becomes democracy. What prevents this from occurring is an odd form of friendship, in conjunction with justice. A king needs to do what is best for his subjects, not himself, and this is reminiscent of a friendly mutual goodwill. Aristocracy also relies on goodwill so that the distribution of wealth follows the “equity of what belongs to the city”¹⁵. Thus, the success of a city depends on the goodwill between the ruler(s) and the

¹³ Aristotle, “The Nicomachean Ethics”, 153

¹⁴ Aristotle, “The Nicomachean Ethics”, 154

¹⁵ Aristotle, “The Nicomachean Ethics”, 155

citizens. Goodwill is necessary in these instances to conserve a community that operates efficiently, and therefore friendship (although it takes a slightly different meaning) is imperative.

There are certain instances in which there is an inequality in superiority, yet friendship or something similar can be healthy and beneficial. Such examples of this are relationships with family members. A parent and child will never be equals, nor any family members with a large age gap. This is due to a difference in experiences. As previously mentioned, shared experiences are essential to the Aristotle perfect friendship. “The association of a father with his sons bears the form of monarchy, since the father cares for his children”¹⁶. A father and son will undoubtedly not experience the same situations at the same time and therefore there is a lasting imbalance which naturally becomes similar to monarchy. The wishing of goodwill needs to come from both parties to ensure a healthy and fulfilling relationship. A man with good relations to his family gives a good impression that he will be successful in making true friends, and so be a happy and successful man.

A man with the ability to make and keep true friends is a very useful indicator of his virtuosity. In every aspect of his life, friendliness and mutual goodwill is beneficial and can assist greatly in his success and happiness.

¹⁶ Aristotle, “The Nicomachean Ethics”, 155

Bibliography:

Aristotle, and David Ross. *The Nichomachean Ethics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.