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## Friendship in Aristotelian Virtue Ethics

### **I. Introduction**

Ancient Greek philosopher, Aristotle, believed that friendships were one of the most crucial elements for living a good human life. Friends are those people who guide us to better ourselves and achieve all that we can. They help us live more virtuously and allow us to progress to achieving human flourishing. I agree with all of the points that Aristotle makes on the importance of friendship, except how loosely he applies the term. His theory uses the word “friendship” to define almost any relationship, no matter how small, which I would not consider to be true friendships. However, his distinction between Pleasure Friendships, Utility Friendships, and Good Friendships does help to rectify this somewhat, though I still do not believe that they can all be fully identified as “friendships.” I will argue that a Good Friendship is the only term that can truly be considered a friendship because the other two forms lack far too many elements of Aristotle’s definition of friendship to be considered as such.

### **II. Background**

Aristotle’s virtue ethics are centered around the objective of achieving “Eudaimonia”, or human flourishing. This flourishing is, “the highest end, and all subordinate goals... are sought because they promote well-being” (Kraut, Section 2). It is ultimately achieved by completing worthwhile activities that are done well. Our virtues, or character traits (which are our dispositions), help us to do these activities well and therefore help us to achieve Eudaimonia. They help us to organize our social lives in a rational manner and harmonize our actions so we can all flourish together. Aristotle states that friendship is necessary for a good human life; “For

no one would choose to live without friends even if he had all the other goods” (Aristotle, p. 25). With our friends, we can do worthwhile activities that can bring us closer to achieving Eudaimonia. A friend is someone who we share reciprocated goodwill with (Aristotle, p. 121). It is this definition that I do not believe applies to all of the types of friendships that Aristotle discusses.

### **III. Main Points**

In Book VIII of his, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle presents three forms of friendship; Pleasure Friendship, Utility Friendship, and Good Friendship. It is the former two types that I do not think should be classified as forms of friendship. He maintains that both are deficient as friendships whereas a “Good Friendship” is complete; however, I believe that they are so lacking in the reciprocation of goodwill as to not qualify them as friendships at all. Both forms are extremely fragile and are vulnerable to the thing that the friendship is about, meaning that they are founded on an advantage that created the relationship in the first place. Pleasure friendships arise because you enjoy something about a person whether it is that they are witty and make you laugh, encouraging and support you, or that they possess some other arbitrary characteristic. Utility friendships allow you to gain something by being friends with a person, such as a friend who gives you rides in his car. For both, once the advantage the friendship brings you is gone, the friendship is over. That being said, neither can truly be considered to be friendships because both friends cannot possibly wish each other genuine goodwill if they are only seeking benefits for themselves out of the friendship. The friends are seeking to advance their own personal gain or enjoyment through the other person rather than wanting the other person to succeed or progress in some way as a true friend would. A true friend receives goodwill from the other

person only because they wish the other goodwill in turn, not because they are selfishly seeking it for themselves; they want the other person to benefit before them self.

I agree more with the definition that C.S. Lewis outlines in his book, *The Four Loves*; “The Friends will still be doing something together, but something more inward, less widely shared and less easily defined” (Lewis, p.98). Friendship is more than a relationship, it is composed of something unique that is shared by two or more people and that initial shared idea is just the foundation for a stronger bond that builds. Pleasure and Utility Friendships are nothing more than what Lewis refers to as “Companionships.” Though friendships can grow from companionships, companionships lack the shared interest that separates friends from everyone else in the world. Companionship arises from those interactions that take place on a much more basic level. People are connected by some shared activity, such as getting rides from one person, and do not share an interest on a deeper level. Aristotle’s extensive application of the word friendship is the one point where I most disagree with him on his argument about its importance. When referring to the Pleasure and Utility forms of friendship, the word “Companionship” should be used in place of friendship because it is a more fitting descriptor of what those types of relationships are based upon: interactions that lack a deeper interest.

Aside from his misapplication of the definition of friendship, I do agree with the connection that Aristotle draws between friendship and achieving Eudaimonia. The third form of friendship that he identifies, the “Good Friendship,” is a true friendship because each friend wishes the other good for their own sake and not because of any advantage that it might bring them. This is the form of friendship that allows each person involved to grow as a person and move closer to human flourishing. You love someone for their character, for who they are, and want to be there to help them continue to grow. They are the person who knows the most about

you and because they want you to have goodwill, they are the best equipped to help you gain it. As friends, you share a common goal or belief and want to work to achieve it; you agree that the best kind of life is a virtuous one. By helping them better themselves and become more virtuous, you are putting them in a better position to help you. They want the same in turn for you, and by assisting them in gaining virtue, they can help you to rise to the same level and further your progress towards Eudaimonia. Loving a friend means that you are in turn loving yourself because you are inadvertently gaining more virtue by helping them to gain their own, but you do it for them and not for the purpose of bettering yourself. A good friend can only help you to live a better life when they want to help you gain what is best for you. They are a constant supporter as we work towards Eudaimonia and anyone who can help us achieve that is extremely beneficial to living a good life. The worthwhile activities we do well with them are what allow us to gain virtue and flourish.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

The reasoning behind Aristotle's connection between friendship and living a good human life is both sound and consistent with his virtue ethical theory. Though he defines the term "friendship", much too loosely, those arguments that he makes regarding "Good Friendships" are consistent with his theory and are compelling.

## **V. Bibliography**

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