

Friendship in Aristotle. Its Anthropological Significance.

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Abstract

As is known, friendship has the greatest value for good life and happiness according to Aristotle. In fact, two complete books (VIII and IX) in the *Nic.Eth.* are devoted to friendship, which means that Aristotle paid much more argument and pages to friendship than to any other important ethical topic (happiness, justice, pleasure, etc.). Friendship is more than one ingredient among others in human good life. It is something necessary and noble (beautiful, καλόν), “it is a virtue or implies virtue”, it is the highest achievement of human sociability.

No doubt, φιλία has a meaning which is broader than the meaning of 'friendship' (or 'amitié', 'amistad', 'Freundschaft') since it can be applied to any kind of relationship and community based on affection (between parents and children, lovers, etc.). However, I'll only take into account the kind of relationship which we usually name *friendship*. And within this restricted framework of friendship I'll focus on two specific topics related to the Aristotelian conception of it.

1. In the first place, I'll consider *the notion itself of friendship*. We have to start —with Aristotle himself— by noting that 'friendship' (i.e., φιλία understood as friendship) has a very complex meaning and carries several nuances in its ordinary use, so that people often speak of different kinds of friendship. Aristotle assumes this situation and finally proposes three features in order to establish its basic and essential notion and meaning. Friendship is (a) a kind of *love* (b) which has to be *mutual*, reciprocated and (c) *acknowledged* and known to both friends. (Note that features (b) and (c) are not necessarily shared by ἔρως).

However, this “minimalist” definition of φιλία does not solve the problem concerning the plurality of meanings (equivocity?) of the notion of friendship, since φιλία is a kind of love, and *there are different kinds of love* according to their intentional motivation: we may love someone (1) because he is *good*, because of his excellence, but also (2) because he is *pleasant*, or (3) because he is *useful* for us. Only in the first case one loves his friend and wish the best things for him *for his sake, because of himself* (ἐκείνου ἕνεκα, καθ'αὐτόν). This is the “perfect friendship”.

This Aristotelian approach raises two interesting questions. The first of them refers to *the unity of the notion*. In the *Eud.Eth.* Aristotle states that the notion of friendship has the unity of τὰ πρὸς ἓν λεγόμενα, but he seems to forget and exclude this kind of logical unity in the *Nic.Eth.* I'll try to show that the unity finally acknowledged by Aristotle is “unity by similitude” (the unity of τὰ καθ'ὀμοιότητα λεγόμενα), and that this kind of unity is based on a strict logical linguistic mechanism. The second question refers to *the meaning of the “self”* in the notion of the perfect friendship: when Aristotle states that one has to love his friend and wish what is good for him *because of himself* (ἐκείνου ἕνεκα, καθ'αὐτόν), what does 'himself' properly mean? *What is the self* of human beings? In my opinion, loving one's friend “*for his very self*” means loving him because of his character, because of his virtues which are both the result and the source of his elections and way of life.

2. Taking all these remarks into account I'll confront three trends of criticism directed against the Aristotelian notion of friendship from “personalistic” philosophical stances. (1) According to the

first of them the Aristotelian view is strongly *naturalistic* (as opposed to “personalistic”) : loving someone because of his excellence would mean loving him as *an excellent example of the human kind*, not because of his personal value. To my mind, those who endorse such a criticism seem to forget that excellence and virtues are the result of our elections as rational and free agents. (2) The second criticism is linked to the first one. It emphasizes that in the last analysis friendship seems to aim at *universal values* instead of being directed to the valuable individuality of our friends. In addition to my answer to the first criticism we should remember that the Aristotelian friendship *does not go beyond the friends themselves* whose community becomes actualized by living together and sharing noble elections and activities. (3) Lastly, the third trend of criticism against the Aristotelian friendship stresses that it is actually based on an *egoistical, self-centered attitude*. No doubt, some Aristotelian passages may seem to support this view (cf., *EtNic.* VIII, 5,1157b32-36; IX, 9, 1170b7-8, etc.). Nevertheless, I think that a reasonable and appropriate understanding of these passages —and of the whole of his doctrine— should bring us to exclude the "egoistical" interpretation. As far as the good friendship is concerned we must take into account (a) that the good for both friends is necessarily the same and therefore each of them wish what is good for himself when wishing what is good for his friend, and (b) that seeking the good for the friend means seeking something which is good in itself, and therefore good for oneself. To my mind, the moral of the Aristotelian message is that only those who seek the best for themselves can seek the best for their friends.

NOTE: The Aristotelian texts and passages I am taking into account are those devoted to friendship, particularly *Nicomachean Ethics* VIII, 1-9 and IX, 3-8. In addition to these we may quote some specific passages like *Eud.Eth.* 1236a14-22.

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