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978-1-107-49771-9 - Aristotle on Friendship: Being an Expanded Translation of the Nicomachean Ethics: Books VIII & IX

Geoffrey Percival

Excerpt

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1155a 3–5

ARISTOTLE ON FRIENDSHIP

THE NICOMACHEAN ETHICS

Book VIII

I

Our next business after this will be to discuss friendship. *We can give several good reasons why friendship should be included in our course on ethics: they fall under two main heads.*

(a) Friendship is a virtue, *as we saw in our discussion of the virtues of social life: or if this statement appears strange to those among us who do not usually understand by friendship a characteristic of an individual, we may perhaps say that it involves virtue, as it is a relation which can only exist between good people. In either case, to say so much implies that friendship is a noble thing—i.e. that it is worthy to be pursued as an end in itself.*

(b) Further, friendship is among the most indispensable requirements of life: *it is, in fact, valuable not only as an end, but as a necessary means to life.*

If we can produce facts to support these contentions, it will readily be seen that we shall do well to discuss friendship. We will take first those considerations which fall under (b): these again may conveniently be ranged in three divisions.

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2

1155 a 5–16

(i) *It is an observed fact that men find friendship indispensable in good fortune, in bad fortune, and at all periods of their life.*

In good fortune:—No one, if he were allowed to choose, would choose to live without friends, but in possession of all the other goods. In fact, it is commonly held that rich men, rulers, and potentates, who are commonly regarded as having the good things of life, need friends more than anyone else—for two reasons. What, men urge, is the use of such prosperity, if you take away the opportunity of beneficence, which is most commonly displayed towards friends, and meets with the greatest praise when displayed towards friends? *Without friends, they can neither practise their goodness, nor obtain recognition for it.* Or again, how can their prosperity be safeguarded and preserved, without friends? The greater it is, the more it is exposed to dangers—and the greater is the need of friends who will protect it.

In bad fortune:—In poverty, or any other misfortune, men think that their friends are their only resource.

And at all ages:—Friendship is an aid to the young, enabling them through the advice of those who are more experienced in life to avoid error; to the elderly, supplying them with service and supplementing their failing powers of action; and to those in their prime, assisting them to perform noble deeds—as the saying of Diomedes has it, ‘when twain together go’, they are better able not only, as Plato reminds us, to think, but also to act.

(ii) *Again, friendship is natural, so that it must be a means to the good for man which nature strives to realize: we will cite the two most commonly observed instances of natural*

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

1155 a 16–25

3

friendship. (α) Friendship seems to exist naturally both in parent for offspring and in offspring for parent (this fact, *which is commonly recognized*, holds true not only in the case of man but in the case of birds and the majority of animals as well). And (β) friendship seems to exist naturally between members of the same species: this is especially true in the case of mankind, and this is the reason why *in the case of mankind we actually have a special word ‘kindliness’¹ to designate this natural friendship—and ‘kindly’ is in fact used as a term of praise.* As further evidence of the existence of this form of natural friendship we may add the evidence of observation to that of language. We may see when on our travels how man belongs, *as it were*, to man, i.e. is a friend to him.

(iii) Again, it appears that it is friendship which holds cities together *by forming the bond between their members. It will follow that friendship merits discussion as a necessary means to the realization of the end for man, no less than justice, which ensures right conduct between the citizens: in fact, we can see at once that there must be some close connection between friendship and justice. Three considerations will illustrate this point.* (α) It appears that *this is why* lawgivers, *whose opinions are unfettered by ulterior motives, and whose choice is therefore highly significant, are seen to set more store by friendship than they do by justice. The facts are these:*—Concord, *which everyone knows to be essential to the maintenance of a constitution*, appears to be akin to friendship, and they aim at securing concord before

¹ *φιλανθρωπία*: the quality of ‘loving men’. There is no term *φιλιππος* to designate the love of horses for horses: but there is a term by which we designate the love of men for men.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

4

1155a 25–31

anything else, and at banishing *its opposite*, faction, before anything else. (Now faction is *clearly a form of enmity, which is the opposite of friendship: and this goes some way to prove our assertion of the relationship of friendship and concord.*) (β) Further, when men are friends, there is no need of justice *to make them refrain from injuring one another*: but even though they are just, they still need friendship *to make them come together in the first place.* (γ) Again, *acts of equity, which are the highest form of just actions, seem to most people to contain an element of friendship.*

So much for the considerations falling under (b). Let us see what reasons appear for regarding friendship as an end in itself. (a) Friendship is not only necessary as a means: it is also a noble thing—*nobility being the consummation of virtue. Three opinions, each of which is accepted at least by some persons, may be cited in support of this statement.*

(i) We commonly praise those who love their friends, *as though their action proceeded from a virtue.*

(ii) Also, the possession of many friends is commonly thought to be a noble thing.

(iii) Again, some people¹—*we may call to mind the arguments of Plato's 'Lysis'*—think that it is the same people who are good men and friends: *this view would appear to make friendship and virtue co-extensive, and clearly implies that friendship is a noble thing.*

We can give good reasons, then, for including friendship in our course on ethics: and we shall not be the first to discuss friendship. In fact, it has been much discussed in the past:

¹ ἐνιοί.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

1155a 32–b 8

5

popular proverbs and the sayings of great men alike bear witness to the interest which it has aroused. We will cite a few of these: they will serve to show the lines along which previous thought on friendship has run, and so make clear to us some of the problems which we have to face.

More than a few matters concerning its nature are subjects of debate. *Two main propositions are put forward.* Some people define friendship as a kind of likeness, in the sense that like people are friends—hence come the proverbs ‘*God ever leads like to like*’, ‘*Jackdaw to jackdaw*’, and so on. Others take the opposite view: they *use Hesiod’s phrase*, and say that men who are alike are always ‘*potters*’ to one another. And on these very questions of *whether likeness or unlikeness forms the ground of attraction*, men search for an explanation that goes higher up *in the series of causes*, i.e. one that is grounded rather in the nature of the physical universe *than in the nature of man alone*. Euripides, for instance, *presupposing that it is desire which unites opposites in the realm of physics*, says that ‘*Earth yearneth for the rain*’ when dried up, ‘*And the majestic Heaven when filled with rain yearneth to fall to earth*’: and Heraclitus says that ‘*Opposition unites*’, and ‘*Discordant elements make the fairest harmony*’, and ‘*All things come to be through strife*’. The opposite view finds its supporters, notable among whom is Empedocles, who maintains that ‘*Like seeks after like*’—*assuming this, in fact, as though it were an ultimate principle, while to effect the junction of opposites an external force, ‘Love’, is necessary.*

Now these physical problems may be dismissed at

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[More information](#)

6

1155 b 8–16

once, for they are foreign to our present enquiry: *they belong to physics, and could only be discussed in the light of the subject-matter of physics*. Let us examine those problems which relate to human life, and involve the character and emotions of men: *these are the subject-matter proper to ethics*. Let us see, for instance, whether friendship can arise in all men without distinction, or whether it is true, *as the arguments of the 'Lysis' seem to show—the view, indeed, has frequently been put forward—that bad men cannot be friends*. Another problem which we must face is whether there is one species of friendship or several. *The solution which has been propounded by our Academic friends need not be binding on us*. Those who hold that there is only one species, on the ground that friendship admits of degree (*for one can admittedly be more or less friendly or dear to anyone*), have put their trust in an insufficient proof. *It is true that difference in degree cannot in itself constitute specific difference: but this does not mean, as they have taken it to mean, that it excludes specific difference*, for things which differ specifically do in fact admit of difference in degree. *Their argument, then, is not logically cogent: and the question remains open for discussion.*¹

¹ Om. εἴρηται...ἐμπροσθεν. The reference cannot be found elsewhere in the Ethics: and the remark may possibly be an insertion on the part of some person who noted that there was certainly no discussion of this question of 'difference in degree' in what follows.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

1155 b 17–22

II

Perhaps the truth about these problems *which relate to human life* will become clear if we ascertain the nature of *whatever it is that forms the object of attraction*—‘the lovable’.¹ *We shall, in fact, use the method ‘examination of inflected forms’, familiar to us from our logical studies: if the inflected form ‘lovable’ is found to be used in different senses with reference to different objects, it will follow that ‘to love’ and ‘friendship’ have these same differences.*

It is held (*we can use here without further enquiry the results of our previous examinations of the end of human action*) that it is not everything that is loved, but only that which is lovable: and that this is what is² either good, or pleasant, or useful. But it would seem that ‘useful’ means ‘that by which we obtain some good or pleasure’: so that the things lovable as ends will be the good and the pleasant.

But this bald statement might be misleading. In view of the difficulties in which previous thinkers have become involved, owing to their mistaken ideas on the good, we shall do well to remind ourselves of the distinctions which our previous examinations of this subject have brought to light. We need do no more than simply resume the argument: it is familiar to us all.

Do men, then, feel attraction toward (= desire, love) the Good (*i.e. what is good absolutely*) or what is good for

¹ τὸ φιλητόν. The word is a verbal adjective formed from the verb φιλέω.

² <τὸ> Richards.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

8

1155 b 22–28

them? These sometimes clash: and this is true also of the pleasant—that which is absolutely and in itself pleasant may not be pleasant to a particular person. (It will be observed that in our present discussion the substitution of ‘pleasant’ for ‘good’ would not injure our argument.) It seems, then,¹ that every man loves what is good for him: that is to say, that while without qualification the good is lovable, relatively to any particular person that which is good for him is lovable to him. But in fact, as we all know, each man loves not what is really good for him, but what appears to him to be good for him. Whereas in the case of a good man, that which is good absolutely is not only good for him, but appears to him to be so, the rest of mankind merely love what appears to them to be good for them; which may or may not be so, and which furthermore may or may not be absolutely good. But this distinction of the real and apparent good will make no difference to our argument: we shall understand by ‘lovable’ ‘that which appears to be so to the person in question’.

To resume:—There are, then, three grounds on which men ‘love’: the good, the useful, and the pleasant. But though we can infer at once from this that there will be three different kinds of affection,² the affection is not in itself sufficient to constitute friendship: we may now proceed further to establish the nature of friendship by examining certain marks which are assumed in the speech of everyday life as characteristic of friendship.

Now the affection felt for inanimate objects is not called friendship: and as our study is confined to human

¹ δὴ Bywater, Rm.² φιλῆσις.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

1155 b 28–1156 a 3

9

friendship, it may be dismissed at once from our argument. We may, however, deduce from the negative fact the characteristics which are considered necessary, in addition to affection, for friendship. The characteristics which it lacks are three in number.

(a) There is not in it any reciprocation of affection, nor

(b) any wishing of good to the object. *People are certainly called ‘lovers of wine’, but perhaps we may say that it would be absurd to wish wine well—if a man does it at all, he wishes the wine to keep well, so that he can have it himself. We can see that his well-wishing is really directed not to the wine, but to himself: whereas men say that we should wish well to a friend for the friend’s sake, and this disinterestedness is constantly assumed as a criterion of true friendship. Now those who wish well to others in this way are merely called well-disposed,¹ if the other does not return the well-wishing, ‘reciprocal goodwill’ being the definition of friendship which we may therefore assume that those who use this language would accept. Ought we to accept this as a complete definition, or should we add the characteristic*

(c) ‘Known to both parties’? ‘*Reciprocal goodwill*’ does not seem to cover all the facts: many people are well-disposed to persons whom they have never seen, but whom they believe to be good or useful: and one of these might well have the same feelings toward the first man. Here, then, we have people who are well-disposed to one another: but we could hardly call them

¹ εὔνοι.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

10

1156 a 3–10

friends, since they are not aware of their mutual regard. *Our definition of friendship, rough as it may be, must exclude such cases as this; so we will complete it by the stipulation that both parties must be aware of one another's feelings.*

We therefore conclude that in order to be friends men must be well-disposed to one another—that is, they must (a) (b) wish one another well: they must (c) both be aware of this: and the motive of their well-wishing must be one of those mentioned above as constituting the possible grounds of affection.

These things, however—the good, the useful, and the pleasant—differ from one another specifically: it follows that the affections to which each of them gives rise also differ specifically; and that the friendships made up of these affections differ specifically as well. *We can now answer the question asked in the previous chapter concerning the species of friendship.*

There are, therefore, three species of friendship, corresponding in number to the 'lovable'. *It is the difference of the 'lovable' which provides us with the specific differences which distinguish them: the three distinguishing marks which together make up our definition of friendship are present in each species.* Answering to each lovable there is (a) reciprocal affection which (c) is known to both parties: while those who love one another, inasmuch as they do love one another, (b) wish one another well.