Aporia vol. 11 no. 2–2001

Self-Referential Altruism in Aristotle's Philosophy of Friendship

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A long-neglected aspect of Aristotle's philosophy that has come under close analysis only in recent years is his theory of friendship. One question that is often asked with regard to friendship is whether it is altruistic or egoistic in nature.[1] Although in his *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle identifies many types of friendship, my discussion will focus exclusively on personal friendship. Thus, the study of Aristotle's philosophy of friendship leads us to an inquiry into the nature of personal friendship. However, tension is generated in this aspect of Aristotle's thought between his emphasis on achieving personal *eudaimonia* (happiness) and the importance he places on also helping others to do the same. This tension will be of significance in the answering the question: Does Aristotle's philosophy provide for an altruistic or egoistic view of friendship? I shall argue that personal friendship, in the Aristotelian sense, is a synthesis of both altruism and egoism known as self-referential altruism, which is a concern for others, but only for those who have some special connection to oneself.[2]

Aristotle distinguishes between three types of personal friendship: good friendship, friendship of utility, and friendship of pleasure. Friendship of utility, which exists only because the agents are useful to one another, and friendship of pleasure, which exists when the agents love one another only for their pleasant qualities, are both obvious forms of egoism, since friendships of these sorts thrive on egoistic motives, namely utility and pleasure seeking. However, in good personal friendships, the

[1] See Cooper 617–48; Burnette 430; Adkins 39, 42–43; Hardie 327–329; Irwin 393; Kahn 20–40; and Annas 1–18.

[2] As far as my research has indicated, the term "self-referential altruism" was first used by J.L. Mackie (84). Mackie has adopted the terminology from C.D. Broad.

friends supposedly love each other as ends in themselves and also love the happiness or goodness of another person as a desirable end in itself (*Nicomachean Ethics* IX.9.1170a3–16, hereafter cited as *NE*). Many scholars of Aristotle's philosophy of friendship hold that that good friendship, in this sense, is purely altruistic.[3]

Generally speaking, Aristotle believes that true personal friendship is by definition altruistic because it involves concern for the interests of others for their own sake. The phrase "for their own sake" means that we express concern for our friend's interests for the sake of our friend's happiness and not just our own. Moreover, "whenever we love our friend primarily for what he essentially is, rather than for his contingent and ephemeral qualities, we therefore do like him for his own sake rather than for ours" (Stern-Gillet 76). Aristotle offers his definition of friendship in the same way that he might define a friend, by saying, "To be friends, then, [people] must be mutually recognized as bearing goodwill and wishing well to each other" (*NE* VIII.2.1156a3–5). Schollmeier, in his book *Other Selves*, clarifies this definition by adding, "Friendship is essentially good will and good wishes, reciprocated and recognized, for the sake of the happiness of another person" (2).

Cooper attempts to argue that all friendships in Aristotle's philosophy are altruistic in nature. He claims that not only good friends, but also useful and pleasant friends, do what is good for the sake of the qualities of one another. Cooper argues that all forms of friendship are altruistically motivated because good friends bear good wishes for one another for the sake of their essential qualities, and useful and pleasant friends also bear good wishes for one another for the sake of their accidental qualities. Thus, Cooper here tries to show that although the qualities which the friends value may be different, they still do wish each other well for the other person's sake and not for their own.

Even so, I believe Cooper's argument fails on a number of grounds. Cooper eventually admits that useful and pleasant friends only love the accidental qualities of one another for their own good and pleasure, for these friendships dissolve if the friends no longer expect to benefit from one another (635–38). Furthermore, with respect to good friendships, Cooper concedes that there is an "admixture of self-seeking," although it is not as obvious as in the other two forms of friendship (640).[4] Here it seems

[3] See Cooper, Burnet, and Schollmeier as cited in footnotes 1 and 7.

[4] Iso note that I use the terms "good friendship" and "useful friendship" in place of Cooper's "character friendship" and "advantage friendship," respectively.

difficult to see how Cooper can hold a position such as his while still admitting there is a component of self-seeking even in good friendships, for this element of self-seeking does not square well with the notion that good friendship is a purely unselfish relationship.

Despite the self-regarding facet that exists in good friendships, Cooper seeks to argue that these friendships are not egoistic because the self-seeking aspect is not an essential condition of friendship. Here again, I believe that Cooper's argument fails to show that friendships are completely altruistic. He argues that self-seeking is not an essential condition of friendship, but yet seems to acknowledge that it exists in all types of friendship. In other words, self-seeking is non-essential yet is always present. I would argue that since self-seeking is always present it does little good to claim that it is not essential. Hence, for all practical purposes, it seems that this self-seeking aspect disqualifies even good friendships from being categorized as wholly altruistic in nature.

In contrast to the view that Aristotelian friendship is altruistic, there are also those who have held that it is purely egoistic.[5] Adkins is one such proponent who advocates the egoistic position (39, 42–43). Adkins claims that all types of Aristotelian friendships are "equally selfish" because friends, whether acting for either the sake of essential qualities or accidental qualities of one another, do so in order to obtain what is good and pleasant for themselves (39). In support of this claim, Adkins makes mention of Aristotle's argument that persons involved in good friendships love what is good and pleasant both absolutely and for themselves (*NE* VIII.3.1156b12–23). Here Adkins asserts that a good friend does indeed love what is good and pleasant absolutely but that what is good and pleasant absolutely is coincidentally what is good and pleasant for himself (39).

However, Adkins' theory is subject to objections that show that a totally egoistic view of good friendship fails as an alternative to the altruistic position. Stern-Gillet, most notably, points out that "goods as can properly be described as good unconditionally cannot be the objects of an individual's egoistic desires" (69). A desire can only reasonably be deemed selfish if one's obtaining what is desired excludes others from obtaining it. Yet in the case of what is good unconditionally, one's having an excess of such goods does not result in a lack of these same goods for anyone else. Therefore, the desire to obtain from a friendship what is good unconditionally even for one's own sake does not necessarily mean that such a desire is selfish. Even if it is granted that good friends seek primarily their

[5] See Adkins, Hardie, Annas, Kahn, and Irwin as cited in footnote 1.

own good, whether the object of desire in such a friendship even qualifies as an "object of competition" is open to doubt (Stern-Gillet 70).

There are further arguments against a purely egoistic conception of friendship in Aristotle's philosophy of friendship. Good friendship is not categorically egoistic because the agents are concerned with the happiness of their friends for their friends' sake. An egoistic eudaimonist holds that the only goal of an agent is to further his own good, but clearly there is more to good friendship than this particular goal. Also, in *Nicomachean Ethics* I.2, Aristotle says that realizing the chief good for a state is greater than realizing it for an individual (1094b7–11). This indicates the possibility and moral goodness of an agent who self-consciously chooses as a fundamental goal something other than making his life as good as possible, and Aristotle does not find such an action unreasonable. Even though it may be argued that this might help the agent to achieve a broader goal, and thus, indirectly, still make his life as good as it can be, this at least shows that Aristotle is not entirely concerned with agents who solely consider their own personal *eudaimonia*.[6]

Moreover, the egoistic eudaimonist holds that our ultimate goal should be our own *eudaimonia* and that we should aim at some other goal if and only if it is a means to, or constituent of, our *eudaimonia*. I agree that in many places, especially *Nicomachean Ethics* I, Aristotle is undeniably thinking about an agent who is aiming at his own *eudaimonia*. Then again, Aristotle does not say that "the final goal of all my practical thinking should be my own *eudaimonia*" (McKerlie 87). In other words, it is not the case that I am constantly planning out how I will go about bringing happiness only to myself.

This examination of friendship from the egoistic perspective has shown that friendship in Aristotle's philosophy is not entirely egoistic in nature. The possibility for altruistic action and motivation is clear in Aristotle's conception of friendly relationships. Thus, it has been shown that neither an entirely altruistic nor egoistic approach to Aristotle's philosophy of friendship allows for an accurate representation of the nature of friendship. In order to circumvent the false dichotomy of altruism vs. egoism, we must give recognition to the notion that altruism and egoism need not be two mutually exclusive modes of friendship. Friendships undoubtedly provide opportunities for altruistic action, yet at the same time one must not neglect the fundamental aim of realizing personal *eudaimonia*. Perhaps the best approach to Aristotle's philosophy of friendship is to view

[6] See McKerlie 85–101.

friendship as a form of self-referential altruism, which is a class of altruism in which the agent is indeed concerned for the interests of his friends, but this concern also involves a particular reference to his own interests. The synthesis of altruism and egoism can be effected by understanding that the desire I may feel to help and advance the interests of others is frequently limited to people who are closely associated with me.

To begin, Aristotle argues that the characteristics that define a friendship also define a person's relation to himself. What are these characteristics? The most explicit enumeration of these characteristics is found in *Nicomachean Ethics* IX.4: wishing and doing what is good for the sake of a friend, wishing the friend to exist for the friend's sake, living with the friend, having the same tastes, and rejoicing and grieving in sympathy with the joys and sorrows of the friend (1166a3–8). Aristotle then links these traits to the relationship that one has to himself by saying, "Friendly relations with one's neighbors, and the marks by which friendship are defined, seem to have proceeded from a man's relation to himself" (*NE* IX.4.1166a1–2). A simple interpretation of this is that to treat someone as a friend is to treat that person as you would treat yourself. Yet, on a deeper level, it is indeed interesting that Aristotle connects friendship with self-concern. The fact that friendship with oneself is the origin of friendship with another is the first hint given by Aristotle that there may be a mixture of egoism and altruism even in good friendship.

One objection to my claim is that Aristotle is not trying to connect friendship with self-concern because he translates the language appropriate to friendship to speak of self-concern, instead of using the language of self-concern to speak of friendship. This analysis of the ordering of Aristotle's comparison also leads some to believe that self-concern and friendship independently have the same characteristics and are not involved with each other in any deeper sense (McKerlie 90–91). However, the fact that one's friendship is best understood in terms of his relationship with himself cannot be avoided by any interpretation of the text. Friendship is only truly understood in reference to self-concern, since it is friendship with oneself that prepares and equips one with the necessary skills to engage in friendship with others.

Another key to understanding the role that self-concern plays in friendship is found in a remark made in passing in which Aristotle says, "Therefore . . . each of these characteristics belongs to the good man in relation, and he is related to his friend as to himself (for his friend is *another self*)" (*NE* IX.4.1166a29–31, emphasis added). What exactly Aristotle means by the term "another self" is a question deserving of its own lengthy analysis, yet the scope of our examination will only allow for a brief explanation. Another self appears to be an embodiment of our happiness in a

locally and temporally distinct individual. A self is happiness and virtue embodied in someone who befriends, and another self is the same activity and virtue embodied in someone who is befriended (Schollmeier 62). Our friendships with ourselves and with others therefore appear likely to have the same motive. The concept of another self helps us to see that friendship, according to Aristotle, is inextricably rooted in our conception of ourselves.

Another reason for believing that good friendship represents a hybrid of egoism and altruism is that Aristotle believes that a person needs friends to achieve *eudaimonia*. Aristotle contests the notion that some people are so happy and self-sufficient that they have no need of friends. In IX.9 he offers several arguments aimed at proving the necessity of friendship. For example, one is more noble in helping friends than in helping strangers, and having friends provides us with more opportunities to help others (*NE* IX.9.1169b13–14). With friends one can sustain the stimulus for achievement and being in the company of other virtuous people can help improve one's own life (*NE* IX.9.1170a4–13). In short, a person will have a better life if he has friends.

Also important in the realization that having friends will help further our happiness is the belief that virtuous acts will always make the agent's life stand better with respect to *eudaimonia*. Acting as a friend and having friends are themselves virtuous acts and therefore always lead to some increase in personal *eudaimonia*. Viewed as a virtuous act, friendship will then always be a self-beneficial relationship. McKerlie notes, "Chapter 8 shows that Aristotle himself refuses to admit that someone might end up worse off in terms of *eudaimonia* by acting virtuously" (92). It may here be objected that an act such as the giving of one's own life for the life of a friend will not serve to further one's own happiness, since Aristotle believes that *eudaimonia* requires a complete life (*NE* I.7, 8, 9). Also, the good man does not always assign himself the largest portion of goods and he refrains from doing so in order that his friends may more fully enjoy them. Nevertheless, even in the occasion of self-sacrifice, Aristotle believes that by laying down one's own life for the sake of a friend the hero gains a "great prize" (*NE* IX.8.1169a18–26).[7] Furthermore, even though the good man may not assign himself the lion's share of wealth, honor, and pleasure, he still assigns himself the greatest share of noble action. Aristotle declares, "In all actions, therefore, that men are praised for, the good man is seen to

[7] What exactly this great prize turns out to be is left unanswered by Aristotle, yet it is safe to assume that it will serve to further the *eudaimonia* of the one who has sacrificed his life.

assign himself the greater share of what is noble" (*NE* IX.8.1169a35036). Thus, it can be seen that by acting virtuously the agent will always make his life stand better with respect to *eudaimonia*. It then follows that friendship, as a virtuous act, will also bring about this same end. In light of this observation, we can see how Aristotle's claim that friendship is a crucial constituent of personal *eudaimonia* reflects a self-referential aspect of camaraderie. Although a friend may not manifestly act for his own interests, the result will always, or at least very often, enhance his own life with respect to happiness.

Lastly, perhaps the best evidence that the altruism in Aristotle's philosophy of friendship incorporates specific reference to oneself is his assertion that the degree of our concern for a person depends on the nature of our relationship with that person. This point can be seen by Aristotle's claim that a person for whom a good man has the highest degree of concern is himself, since he is obviously most closely related to himself. A careful reading of IX.8 will yield the conclusion that one will love oneself most. In the Aristotelian sense, "loving requires familiarity" and therefore it is easiest to fulfill this requirement within oneself (Hadreas 393–401). A resulting implication that can be drawn here is that we should care about our close friends *almost* as much as we care about ourselves. This point is exemplified in Aristotle's discussion of why one does not wish one's friend to become a god. We do wish for our friend to have great goods, yet Aristotle adds, "But perhaps not *all* the greatest goods; for it is for himself most of all that each man wishes what is good" (*NE* VIII.7.1159a12–13)

In keeping with this line of thought, loyalty to family is more important than loyalty to a close friend, since the closeness of the relation is greater. Aristotle seems to take very seriously our familial obligations and would regard the mistreating of a parent as a serious wrong (McKerlie 100). In a situation where an individual must choose between helping his father and helping someone who has done him a great favor in the past, Aristotle concludes that the individual should act on behalf of his father (if he cannot help them both) (*NE* IX.2.1164b27–1165a2). Additionally, even in relationships with family members, the love that we show maintains a special connection to ourselves. For instance, Aristotle often refers to maternal love as an example of unselfish devotion, yet he also notes that the mother loves a child more than the father because of her more direct knowledge that the child is her own (*NE* IX.7.1168a24–27). Hence, as Kahn states, Aristotle "emphasizes the egoistic or self-regarding component even in the paradigm case of unselfish love" (22). Also, parents are said to "love their children as being a part of themselves" (*NE* VIII.12.1161b18). These points show that family members warrant a higher degree of loyalty because

of the closeness of these persons to oneself, and that even in familial love a connection to self-love is present.

From the above examples it becomes evident that we should care more about those closest to us and less about those whom we do not know as well, an insight which provides further justification for viewing Aristotle's philosophy of friendship as a version of self-referential altruism. The consideration of a few more points will assist in further establishing this case. Up to this point, we have made two significant observations: (1) in the most important sense, a person naturally loves himself most while still expressing concern for the interests of others, and (2) the loyalty and love shown to a family member should supersede our loyalty to even close friends. A third observation can now be made with regard to our actions towards friends and strangers: just as an agent will show preference to himself and to family, so he will behave altruistically towards his friends instead of to all strangers. In defending his conviction that a happy man still has need of friends, Aristotle asserts that it is noble to help others, yet "it is nobler to do well by friends than by strangers" (*NE* IX.9.1169b13–14). Concerning this kind of good will directed only towards friends, Charles Kahn explains:

> In classical times at any rate, the Greeks seem to have had no inkling of a notion of brotherly love that could extend to all humanity. The nearest approximation is the Socratic doctrine that one should never harm one's enemies. But even Socrates does not suggest one should love them. Just as humility is not a Greek virtue, so general benevolence (understood as loving one's neighbors as oneself) is not a Greek moral ideal. (20)

Another limitation that Aristotle imposes upon personal friendship is the idea that there is a fixed number of friends that one can have. In *Nicomachean Ethics* IX.10, Aristotle seeks to answer the question of whether one should have as many friends as possible. He there reasons that one should not have an excess of friends or loved ones since "one cannot live with many people and divide oneself among them," and it is "actually impossible to be a great friend to many people" (*NE* IX.10.1171a2–9). In addition to this, the friends that one does have must be virtuous persons, for only good persons can be loved in themselves, and good friendship can only bond equals in virtue (Stern-Gillet 76). This limitation reflects another self-regarding aspect of friendship: one presumably cannot benefit from friendship with wicked, akratic, or irrational people, because seeking to become virtuous is a primary goal and "a certain training in virtue arises also from the company of the good" (*NE* IX.9.1170a11–12).

To conclude our discussion, it has been shown that Aristotle's philosophy of friendship is a version of self-referential altruism. Friendship is capable of producing altruistic concern for others, but this concern also contains elements of self-love. Our conscious desire to help others for their own sake represents the altruistic component of friendship, but at the same time the egoistic component is manifested by the fact that this desire is often limited to people who are closely associated with us. The limiting of our altruistic concern to the circle of close family and friends does not, by itself, make Aristotle an egoistic eudaimonist, and it serves to show that the love one shows to others through altruistic acts has some connection to oneself (however great or small that connection may be).

This kind of self-referential altruism can also be defined as "a concern for the welfare of friends, relations, and personal associates, but not for all and sundry" (Kahn 20). I have argued that neither the wholly egoistic view nor the wholly altruistic view of friendship in Aristotle's philosophy gives an adequate description of these relationships, for both approaches neglect important considerations that are significant in our relations with others. The self-referential aspect of friendship is apparent because (1) friendship is first understood in terms of one's relation to himself, (2) having friends contributes to personal *eudaimonia*, and (3) the degree of our concern for others depends on the closeness of our relationship with them. This kind of friendship succeeds in synthesizing elements of both egoism and altruism. Perhaps this reference to oneself, even in good friendship, manifests an egoistic tendency intrinsic to human moral psychology. Altruism, in the Aristotelian sense, is therefore limited to what Hume called particular as opposed to general benevolence (Kahn 20). At any rate, human experience in the arena of friendship repeatedly confirms that "if a friend is really to be your friend, he must not only be good absolutely, but also *good for you*" (*EE* 1238a3–4, emphasis added).

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