

Aristotle and Derrida on Friendship

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Jacques Derrida begins the first chapter of his book *The Politics of Friendship*¹ with a statement attributed to Aristotle by both Diogenes Laertes and the 16th Century French philosopher Michel de Montaigne. The statement is this:

“O my friends, there is no friend.”

Derrida points out the paradox and apparent contradiction in such an impossible declaration. Who is Aristotle talking to, given that he is addressing friends to inform them that there are none? How can the statement be taken seriously?

We might say that the paradox is a result of a bit of philosophical licence on Aristotle's part. Aristotle defines the friend as “another self”² and since it is logically impossible that the friend could actually be another self, then this is simply a bit of philosophical hyperbole that Aristotle engages in, but about which he is not serious. Yet the fact that Derrida has written three hundred pages of text on this subject suggests that this interpretation would be hard to sustain. As the title of his text suggests, Derrida approaches the question of friendship via an analogy with politics, specifically with republican democracy. This paper focuses on three aspects of that analogy.

Three Aspects of Derrida's Analogy between Friendship and Politics

Fraternity & Congeneric Connection

Derrida writes of the friend ‘regularly coming on stage’, with the features of the brother and spontaneously seeming to belong to a familial, fraternalist and thus androcentric configuration of politics. He asks the reader to consider “a friendship which goes beyond the proximity of the congeneric double”³—a friendship which goes beyond fraternity and yet brings with it the genetic connection of fraternity.

In fact, Aristotle offers a definition of friendship that does precisely what Derrida

suggests in going “beyond the proximity of the congeneric double.” Aristotle recommends a notion of friendship in which “a man’s (sic) best friend is the one who not only wishes him (sic) well, but wishes it for his (sic) own sake.”⁴ A man’s best friend is not motivated by considerations of utility or pleasure. Aristotle claims that the kind of motivation he has in mind is best demonstrated in a man’s attitude to himself. This leads him to propose the notion of the friend as another self so as to provide an explanation of the attraction between friends that does not seem to resort to utilitarian motives. Here Aristotle has gone beyond any appeal to fraternal love as a guarantee of friendship to appeal to self-love and self-interest. However, he does not acknowledge the difficulties associated with this view of the friend, especially given his equivocal views on the relationship between friendship and self-interest.

On the one hand, Aristotle claims that “... a man is his own best friend. Therefore he ought to love himself best.”⁵ He also states that a man’s best friends “... will wish for him the greatest goods possible for a human being [but] ... not all of these; because it is for himself that everyone most of all wishes what is good.”⁶ On the other hand, Aristotle acknowledged, at least in theory, that “... the good man acts from a fine motive ... and for the sake of a friend, and neglects his own interest.”⁷ He asserts that “it is true to say of the man of good character that he performs many actions for the sake of his friend and his country, and if necessary even dies for them,”⁸ and finally, he maintains that:

[T]he good man is ready to lose money on condition that his friends shall have more; for the friends gets money, but he himself gains fineness (of character), so he assigns himself the greater good. He behaves in the same way too with regard to political honours and positions; all these he will freely give up to his friend, because that is a fine and praiseworthy thing for him to do.⁹

These two apparently contradictory sets of claims led Aristotle to attempt to avoid the contradiction by distinguishing two senses of ‘self-love’.¹⁰ The first was equivalent to the pejorative sense of ‘self-interest’ and is used of those who assign the larger share of money, honours and pleasure to themselves, gratifying the irrational part of their soul. The second sense is used of the person who assigns himself what is most honourable and most truly good, gratifying the authoritative part of the soul. According to this second sense, a man could desire his own good above all and yet act for the good of his friend, believing that the honour that accrues to him in doing so is actually in his own best interest.

Yet, despite Aristotle’s claims, neither sense actually seems to allow that a person can care for his friend for that friend’s own sake and not for the sake of anything else. Aristotle’s statements seem to imply that we act either for the sake of narrow self-interest or for the sake of a broader notion of self-interest that demands action in accordance with ‘what is (morally) fine’. What Aristotle needs here is a distinction between those goods that are internal to friendship and those external to it. That

distinction would suggest that acting toward a friend out of either narrow or broad self-interest would be to experience or recognize only those goods external to friendship—be that pleasure, material reward or the satisfaction of having behaved in a morally fine way. However, Aristotle’s aim in characterizing the friend as another self was to guard against just this kind of interpretation of action out of friendship. He intended to ensure that genuine friendship could not be defined in terms of goods external to the relationship, that is in utilitarian terms.

Aristotle’s broader notion of self-interest—that which includes the good of one’s friend—could perhaps be redefined to be seen as action through which goods internal to the practice of friendship are realized. These goods are at least partially constitutive of the more comprehensive good that is the goal of all human activity, on Aristotle’s view. From this perspective, the pleasure, pride or satisfaction I feel in acting out of friendship becomes not a motive of the activity, but rather a kind of valuable by-product of it.

But as Derrida clearly understands, the goods internal to friendship bring with them their own challenges. These are challenges Aristotle does not address since he offers us a somewhat docile conception of friendship, which is partly explained by the exclusion of the feminine. Friendship for Aristotle was a relationship which occurred between men, specifically good men in virtue of their goodness. And as I have tried to show above, a second explanation of the docility of Aristotle’s conception of friendship lies in his failure to address the difficulties associated with defining the friend as another self.

Still, the appeal of a definition of the friend that suggests a congeneric connection persists. The friend may not be able to be regarded as another self, but the congeneric connection is preserved if the friend takes on the role of sibling, specifically that of the brother. As Montaigne wrote of his friendship with Etienne de La Boétie: “The name of brother is a truly fair one and full of love: that is why La Boétie and I made a brotherhood of our alliance.”¹¹ The notion of the friend as brother is one that attempts to capture the enigmatic fusion of souls that Montaigne¹² cherished as indicative of the most sovereign of friendships, while also laying claim to an irrevocable genetic connection. In this sense it is an impossible or at least a tenuous dream, since as Derrida puts it, “[friendship’s] stability is not given by nature, but is won.”¹³ The notion of the friend as brother aims at a relationship which is conditioned by both obligatory and unfailing filial piety and yet one which surpasses obligation to become voluntary commitment. It is as tenuous in friendship as it is in politics, since neither friends nor citizens measure up to Aristotelean promises for relationships built on intimate connection and like-mindedness.

Aristotle conceives of politics as the business of friends. He regarded the Greek *polis* as an arena of like-minded men related in citizenship by the bonds of friendship: these men “agree about their interests, adopt the same policy and put their common resolves into effect.”¹⁴ Aristotle’s conception of politics brings to mind ‘the familial, fraternalist and androcentric configuration of politics’ that Derrida asks us to consider.

The idea of citizens as friends and brothers suggests both equality of rights and intimacy. Derrida points out that democracy, for example, rarely presents itself without

the possibility of fraternization and that republican mottos in particular almost always associate freedom and equality with fraternity.¹⁵ The emphasis on intimacy is more problematic. Aristotle insists that friends must be few in number, so perhaps it is only the relatively small size of the Athenian *polis* that allows him to think of politics as the business of friends.¹⁶ We certainly cannot—but then, nor could Cicero. The practice of friendship during the political strife which characterized the Roman Republic—particularly in the last twenty years of free Roman institutions (70-50BC) prior to the dictatorships of the age of Caesar—undermined the ideals enshrined in Ancient Greek and Epicurean ideals of friendship. Cicero leads us to suspect that the ideal of friendship could only be maintained if it were insulated from the divisive realities of political life. When translated into the public realm it became a threat to political authority and was itself undermined.

Aristotle's idealization of friendship between good men as the basis of concord within the *polis* has two consequences. Firstly, it distorts any treatment of *philia* of a more personal kind. His account relies on the identity of conceptions of the Good, rather than bringing out the kind of emotional attachment which might encompass difference. Ultimately it fails to do justice to his own conviction that friendship is intrinsically valuable.

Secondly, it allows Aristotle to deny the possibility of conflict within the *polis* arising from the existence of potentially rival conceptions of the Good. Good citizens of the *polis*—in virtue of their goodness—will necessarily agree. Conflict will necessarily be the result of flaws in character, of falling short of the virtue of fraternity.¹⁷ Registering this kind of (Aristotlean) bottom line on the friend and on friends seems to amount to a kind of recoil from friendship, on Derrida's view.¹⁸ It reflects the passivity and complacency of what have been called "steady-state" models of human affection that take no account of the need for the toleration of difference or the acceptance of change in friendship.¹⁹ As Cicero so clearly demonstrates, friendship between citizens may well be completely undermined by the pressure of political differences.

The idealization of citizens as friends and of friends as second selves in the work of Aristotle, and also Montaigne, has a sour note. Both philosophers take the life out of friendship—while at the same time taking no account of the possibility of the death of friendship. These traditional philosophical interpretations of friendship both idealize and totalize friendship; and this is not simply because of the valorization of male friendship and the double exclusion of the feminine that makes both friendship between women and heterosexual friendship impossible. It is also explained by the failure to take account of difference. The friend in traditional philosophical literature becomes an impossible ideal—a reflection of oneself and perhaps even of one's own narcissism—but never a threat, never a challenge, never a genuine other.

Emphasis on friends and fellow citizens as brothers implies equality. Derrida refers to Freud and to the idea that brothers dream of the demise of patriarchy, of the death of the father and the demise of his authority; they are prepared to conspire to be rid of the father.²⁰ United in their opposition to the authority of the father, brothers identify with

one another. But as Derrida points out, this ignores the reality of difference. In fact, Montaigne's ideal of friendship has been criticised as "not only unrealistic, but finally less idealistic than a view that acknowledges and affirms the separate identities of friends."²¹ The importance of the recognition of difference and of the separate identities of friends leads Derrida to ask whether traditional idealized conceptions of friendship are simply another form of belief in ourselves. He suggests that the nostalgia of the sentence "O my friends, there is no friend" reveals that "we wish to believe in the other because we want, in vain, to believe in ourselves."²²

Is friendship simply an attempt to hide from the reality of our separation from others, from our own vulnerability? We might well ask why the self-sufficient Aristotelean good man needs friends. The illusion of the comfort of another self or a brother in the face of his own vulnerability would be a lame and contradictory good for the self-fulfilled man to covet. The idealized conception of friendship which Aristotle offers us in fact takes for granted that there are goods internal to friendship that we would not want to deny any person; but it does not acknowledge the vulnerability that inevitably accompanies those goods.

Aristotle's failure to take account of difference allows him to develop an idealized conception of friendship which incorporates two different models of friendship. The first is a public and political model dependent on the notion of a homogenous community of citizen-friends; and the second is a somewhat distorted and apolitical private model that emphasizes the inherent value of friendship. Aristotle's emphasis on that public or civic model of friendship and his association between politics and friendship allows Derrida to take up the analogy and to use it to offer some insights into the nature of friendship.

Derrida asks whether the two models really are different, antagonistic or incompatible structures. He suggests that friendship as a public, manifest and political relationship and friendship as a private, invisible and apolitical relationship in fact imply one another. It is the concept of fraternity which straddles the two models on Derrida's view. On the one hand fraternal friendship appears alien to the public realm, but on the other hand traditional philosophical discourse has tied the friend-brother to virtue, to justice, and to moral and political reason. The relationship—developed in private—to the singularity and heterogeneity of the other qua other involves the law and thus his universality and homogeneity, i.e., his public life as citizen.²³

Private and apolitical friendship presents us with the singularity and heterogeneity of the other. We recognize her difference from us and it is our recognition of this fundamental separation between ourselves and our friend that provides the context within which a relationship of intimacy and trust can develop; as Blanchot puts it "that which separates [us from the other] becomes relation."²⁴ The public and political model of friendship reminds us that our "relation to the singularity of the other also passes through the universality of law."²⁵ While the private conception of friendship demands the recognition of difference between friends, the public conception demands mutual respect under the law despite the vulnerability entailed in any recognition of difference.

Political Crime

The recognition of difference between friends could allow us to interpret the axiom “O my friends, there is no friend” as a complaint.²⁶ The expectation my friend and I have of friendship may differ so that we may not live up to one another’s expectations, either on occasion or perhaps all too often. We might fail to respect friendship’s possibilities, or prevent it from becoming what it could be. Our friendship may or may not survive our accusations, disappointment, resentment or injury. Derrida argues that the notion of political crime can be seen as ushering in—albeit inadequately—the preliminary discourse to friendship in that it provides us with the language of grievance in the face of challenges to friendship. Crimes against politics and against the possibility of politics bring with them a vocabulary of grievance which includes terms such as “damage, blame, prejudice, injustice or injury, but also accusation, resentment... the call for punishment... a wrong to be righted, a violence to be repaired.”²⁷ Derrida suggests that this is a vocabulary that could be employed by an aggrieved friend, since in both politics and friendship, allies and friends can become enemies.

His argument is that to be capable of friendship we must be able to honour in the friend the enemy he can become. This is precisely what the motto of democratic republicanism (Liberty, Equality and Fraternity) suggests we must do in the realm of politics. Being able to honour in the friend (or in the fellow-citizen) the enemy he can become is a sign of freedom—a freedom that Nietzsche tells us tyrants and slaves cannot know, since they are neither ‘equal’ nor ‘free’ enough for either friendship or enmity. Nietzsche goes so far as to tell us that we must honour former friendships; perhaps because they are a confirmation of the respect for freedom he argues must persist at the heart of the relationship.²⁸

Such respect for freedom allows the potential for enmity that is reflected in the axiom, “O my friends, there is no friend.” It ensures that we do not take friendship to be another form of belief in ourselves or an attempt to hide from our own vulnerability.

Simulacra

A third aspect of Derrida’s analogy between friendship and politics is his claim that both friendship and democracy develop from the simulacra of friendship and democracy. These simulacra are illusions, but on Derrida’s view they are illusions that can become true. He takes as his examples of simulacra politeness and modesty, beginning with modesty. Derrida argues, following Kant, that modesty has the virtue of saving the other, man or woman, from being used as a means to one’s own ends.²⁹ Since modesty is “self-constraint which conceals passion,” he claims that modesty is eminently moral and

fundamentally egalitarian because it creates a distance between the sexes which prevents either sex from degrading the other as a mere instrument of its own pleasure. As Derrida puts it, “[o]wing to modesty the two sexes are equal before the law,” and later “[t]he modest woman is a brother for man.”³⁰ Modesty may well be a moral subterfuge, but it serves the purpose of getting the woman to participate in universal fraternity or humanity. So the simulacrum or pretense of modesty becomes truth in the form of the concept of fraternity.

Derrida quotes Kant to illustrate the same process occurring as the genuine affection requisite of friendship develops from politeness:

Politeness... is an appearance of affability which instils affection. Bowing and scraping (compliments) and all courtly gallantry, together with the warmest verbal assurance of friendship, are not always completely truthful. ‘My dear friends’, says Aristotle, ‘there is no friend’. But these demonstrations of politeness do not deceive because everyone knows how they should be taken, especially because signs of well-wishing and respect, though originally empty, gradually lead to genuine dispositions of the soul.³¹

As Derrida notes, Kant concedes that deceptive appearance is not that bad and is not always inadvisable.³² It is, after all, part of what we do in child rearing. We encourage children to be polite, to show respect in the hope that they do actually develop an appropriate and genuine respect for others. What begins in untruth ends up by making what was untrue, true. Derrida’s comments suggest that politeness (one of the trappings of friendship) can develop into genuine respect and affection, providing one condition of friendship; just as modesty can equalize the relationship between the sexes to develop into fraternity, providing one condition of republican democracy.

Derrida claims that the becoming truth of the simulacra, the development of friendship and politics from their simulacra, demands that we leave childhood behind—at some loss to ourselves.³³ This suggests that once an enculturated mode of behaviour such as politeness loses any sense of pretense and becomes ‘a genuine disposition of the soul’—an indication of genuine respect and affection—we begin to face a risk. As long as politeness is simply an ‘appearance of affability’ we have little emotional investment in those to whom our demonstrations are addressed. But once politeness becomes genuine respect and develops into friendship, we are forced to a recognition of our vulnerability before the other.

Disanalogy

Before moving on to the conclusion of the paper and in the light of the analogies drawn between friendship and politics, it is worth identifying one disanalogy between

these concepts since it has some impact on the call to respect the freedom of the other in friendship. The examples discussed above, politeness and modesty, also point to what would appear to be a disanalogy between friendship and politics. There is in friendship, although not obviously in politics, a certain indirection that is perhaps more usually associated with artistic enterprises than with the activity of friends.³⁴ It is what Kant would have called “purposiveness without purpose”:

...beautiful art is a mode of representation which is purposive for itself and which, although devoid of [definite] purpose, yet furthers the culture of the mental powers in reference to social communication.³⁵

In any genuinely creative endeavour we act purposefully, recognizing a contribution to the culture of the mental powers, but without any particular purpose. An artist paints purposefully, deliberately but she cannot aim to produce a masterpiece. She cannot know whether the work will be exceptional or not. She has to dispense with any purely instrumental approach to her work. Similarly in friendship, I can engage in activity with you, adopt certain attitudes or dispositions toward you, and attempt to fulfil some of the requirements of friendship. For example, I can show concern and liking for you. I can be responsive (polite) to, and open to being affected by your interests, your concerns, and your ways of seeing the world. I can be prepared to respect your separateness and independence from me and to recognize the limits of my understanding of you. But I cannot do these things or adopt these attitudes with the definite purpose of making you my friend. You are just as likely to retreat from my overtures if I begin our interaction by asking you to be my friend or informing you that it is my intention to make a friend of you.

Derrida argues that friendship must be predicated upon freedom, in the sense that we must recognize and respect in the friend the enemy she could one day become. But the indirection that I am suggesting is inherent in friendship illustrates a different dimension of the appeal to freedom. Certainly we cannot guarantee the durability of a friendship, but nor can friendship be coerced. It cannot have a particular purpose in the sense of being an instrument of my desire. Friends must engage purposefully but without purpose and see what happens—much like the artist does in producing a work of art.

Of the three components of the republican motto: freedom, equality and fraternity, it is fraternity that connects the singularity and heterogeneity of Aristotle’s private model of friendship with the universality and homogeneity of his public and political model of friendship. The three aspects of the analogy Derrida draws between friendship and politics combine to undermine any uncomplicated idealization of friendship and to emphasise the fragility of friendship.

Firstly, they draw attention to our vulnerability in friendship and to the risks we face in the relationship. The security and comfort of the friend as brother—predicated on his sameness and his filial love—is undermined by his difference from us. Within the political realm the same dilemma confronts us; we must deal both with the ‘brother

friend' and the 'brother enemy' in the process of fraternization.³⁶ Secondly, the friend's difference from us brings the potential for conflict, grievance and complaint and thus the possibility of the crime against friendship and its demise. Finally the development of friendship from its simulacra demands that we leave behind the egocentricity of childhood to genuinely respond to the other and to the fragile hope that we can bridge the distance between us. In friendship as in politics this requires that we recognize and respect our separation from the other and our vulnerability before her. It is respect for the freedom of the other that helps us to understand our difference from our friend and to honour in our friend the enemy she could become. Doing so imposes distance between friends, but to quote from Blanchot at greater length, this distance creates a separation from which relation develops:

Friendship, this relation without dependence, without episode, into which, however, the utter simplicity of life enters, implies the recognition of a common strangeness... the movement of understanding in which, speaking to us, they reserve, even in the greatest familiarity, an infinite distance, this fundamental separation from out of which that which separates becomes relation.³⁷

The achievement of friendship is the development of the relation despite its fragility, despite our 'fundamental separation' from the other and the potential for enmity. To be able to honour in the friend the enemy he can become might well require giving something which we have never ourselves received. It may require being prepared to tolerate difference, to allow for change or to accept conflict. Friendship is a relation which demands sacrifice. The balance between identity and difference upon which it depends is never simply given and the tension between these two concepts must be continually worked out via our generosity, courage, sensitivity, perceptiveness, and honesty. Nietzsche, who dismissed the possibility of noble friendships among women, goes so far as to say that even men are only capable of comradeship.³⁸ Noble friendship requires knowing how to give, not just to the friend but also to the enemy and man is not yet generous enough. Nietzsche's view is that to be friends we must be friends *qua* possible enemies. As Derrida puts it "friendship to come continues to mean, for Zarathustra: freedom, equality and fraternity. The fragile, unstable and recent motto... of a republic."³⁹

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Notes

1. Jacques Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*, trans. George Collins (London: Verso, 1997).
2. Aristotle, *The Ethics of Aristotle: The Nichomachean Ethics*, trans. J.A.K. Thomson (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1955), book 9, 1169a23-b11.
3. Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship* viii.
4. Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics*, book 9, 1168a18-b7
5. Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics*, book 9, 1168b7-32.
6. Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics*, book 9, 1159a9-32.
7. Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics*, book 9, 1168a18-b7.
8. Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics*, book 9, 1168b32-1169a23.
9. Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics*, book 9, 1169a23-b11.
10. Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics*, book 9, 1168b7-32.
11. Michel de Montaigne, "On Friendship," *The Complete Works of Montaigne*, trans. D.M.Frame (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1948) 220.
12. Montaigne used the language of religious ecstasy to describe his friendship with Etienne de La Boétie: "... our souls mingle and blend with each other so completely that they efface the seam that joined them, and cannot find it again." On La Boétie's death, he wrote: "I was already so formed and accustomed to being a second self everywhere that only half of me seems alive now." Montaigne, "On Friendship" 139.
13. Derrida, *The politics of Friendship* 23.
14. Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics*, book 9, 1168a18-b64.
15. Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship* viii.
16. The ideal of the *polis* as a community of friends was vitiated by the restriction of citizenship to a minority of inhabitants of the state, by the practice of slavery, by the rigid sexual division of labour and by the rejection of the family as an institutional framework of socialization. The ideal was maintained only by the exclusion of those who would threaten its cohesion.
17. This is a point which Derrida makes in *The Politics of Friendship* 273, and one that Alasdair MacIntyre also makes in *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (London: Duckworth, 1981) 147.
18. Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship* 282.
19. Boyd Tonkin, "Right Approaches; Sources of the New Conservatism," Proceedings of the Conference *Confronting the Crisis: War, Politics and Culture in the Eighties* (Essex, England, July, 1983) 1-14.
20. Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship* 279 and 290.
21. Ronald Sharp, *Friendship and Literature: Spirit and Form* (Durham: Duke UP, 1986) 90.
22. Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship* 281.
23. Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship* 277ff.
24. Maurice Blanchot, *L'Amitié* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971) 328-329.
25. Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship* 276.
26. Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship* ix.
27. Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship* ix.
28. Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship* 281ff.
29. Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship* 273-275
30. Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship* 274.
31. Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship* 274.
32. Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship* 273.
33. Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship* 275.
34. Ronald Sharp has compared friendship and art on the grounds that both are characterized by indirection. Sharp, *Friendship and Literature* 81.

35. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. J.H. Bernard (New York: Hafner, 1951) § 42, 144.
36. Derrida uses these terms in *The Politics of Friendship* 106.
37. Blanchot, *L'Amitié* 329-329.
38. Quoted in Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship* 281ff.
39. Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship* 284.

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