

Toward Virtue: Moral Progress through Love, Just Attention, and Friendship*

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How are love and justice related? Iris Murdoch characterizes the former by drawing on the latter. *Love*, she maintains, is *just attention*, which in turn triggers acts of compassion. Arguably, for Murdoch, love is *the* most important moral activity. By engaging in love, she maintains, moral agents progress on their journey from appearances to reality. Through love, they overcome selfish leanings, acquire a clearer vision of the world and, importantly, other individuals, which in turn enables them to act increasingly well.

In what follows, I lay Murdoch's account of *love* alongside of Aristotle's notion of *philia*. Ultimately, I will argue that both Murdochian love and Aristotelian *philia* are crucial for enabling moral progress. I proceed as follows: First, I introduce Murdoch's view. I then propose a novel reading of an argument from Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* in order to explain what I shall call his necessity claim (NC): *philia* is necessary to a flourishing life.¹ Along the way, and in the end, I point out ways in which Murdoch's and Aristotle's accounts are mutually illuminating.

This project is doubly unusual. First, Murdoch's literary work and the extensive correspondence she bequeathed to posterity suggest that she valued friendships highly. Yet in her philosophical work the topic remains curiously absent. Looking at her work with a view to learning something about friendship is thus unusual. Second, Murdoch typically gets her bearings from Plato

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¹ I render "*philia*" as "friendship." Of course, there are contexts in which "*philia*" is more properly translated as "*love*." Generally, Aristotle's concept of *philia* is much broader than our notion of friendship, as it includes e.g. familial relationships and the relationship between spouses.

and Kant, yet Aristotle is almost never cited.² Contrasting Murdoch and Aristotle is thus not an obvious move, neither to an Aristotelian nor to a Murdochian.

Perhaps Murdoch's philosophical neglect of friendship and her appreciation of Plato are related. In the *Lysis*, Socrates is portrayed as entertaining the idea that good men cannot be friends. Good men are alike, the thought goes, so to one good man another good man has nothing to offer. There could not be anything valuable about the latter that the former did not already possess. As the good man is self-sufficient, he has no pressing need for friends.³ To be sure, since the *Lysis* is *aporetic*, it may not express Socrates' (or Plato's) considered view.⁴ Suppose, however, that Murdoch shares the idea Socrates floats. If so, this might partly explain why for her, friendship is not particularly interesting.⁵ If friendship is inessential to the virtuous – the moral hero whom the aspiring moral agent is to emulate – then maybe friendship is not essential to morality overall.

If my reading of NC is accurate, such a view is deeply mistaken. And while I am not suggesting that Murdoch actually endorsed such a view, I do want to suggest that regardless of Murdoch's position on the *Lysis*, laying her and Aristotle's accounts alongside of each other pays off for at least two reasons.

First, if we turn to NC with Murdoch's picture of the struggling moral agent in mind, we are primed to regard as the standard moral agent not some-

² Ian Hacking, in a review of Murdoch's *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, claims that generally, Aristotle seems to be absent in Murdoch's work. I. HACKING, "Plato's Friend. Review of *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*," *London Review of Books* 14, 24 (1992), 8–9. However, though admittedly scattered and few in number, in some places Murdoch *does* refer to Aristotle, even quite approvingly. See: I. MURDOCH, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (New York: Allen Lane, 1992), 99. Hacking is right in spirit since the number of such references is negligible compared to the huge number of references Murdoch makes to Plato.

³ Cf. PLATO, *Lysis*, 214e3–215c2.

⁴ It is worth noting that Aristotle, when discussing the matter of friendship, explicitly refers to, and then seems to oppose, the views expressed in the *Lysis*, which he may in fact have attributed to Plato. Whether Aristotle was right in doing so need not concern us here. For some related doubts and inconsistencies pertaining to the definition of friendship in the *Lysis* see J. ANNAS, "Plato and Aristotle on Friendship and Altruism," *Mind* 86, No. 344 (October 1977), 532–554.

⁵ Relatedly, the following, too, seems plausible. Had Murdoch chosen to explicitly place her notion of love in the tradition of the ancients, the notion to first suggest itself to her would likely have been Plato's *eros*, rather than Aristotle's *philia*. For an interesting account of Murdoch along these lines see M. HOPWOOD, *Love's Work: Eros and Moral Agency* (PhD dissertation, University of Chicago, ProQuest: 3627836). Incidentally, Murdoch *does* occasionally link her project of bringing out the moral importance of love to traditions of the past. However, she tends to do so only obliquely, e.g. when she claims that "we need a moral philosophy in which the concept of love, so rarely mentioned now by philosophers, can *once again* be made central." I. MURDOCH, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), 46 (Emphasis added).

one who is already fully virtuous, but rather someone who needs to improve herself such as to successively transform herself into someone who is increasingly virtuous.⁶ On my reading, doing this requires that she truly benefit others, which, as Aristotle repeatedly claims, is a very hard thing to do. Why is it hard? Murdoch's account of what just attention requires provides an answer.

Second, Murdoch, too, can benefit from Aristotle's account of friendship. According to my interpretation of *NC*, friendship is important as it provides opportunities for benefiting others – a crucial prerequisite for making moral progress. If this is true, then understanding *NC* may let us discover a lacuna in Murdoch's account. If friendship can fill it, this would suggest that she, too, would benefit from being more interested, philosophically, in friendship than she seems to be.

Why, then, should friendship be necessary to a flourishing life? Consider, first, the fully virtuous. According to Aristotle, human beings are social beings. Human life is properly lived in community with others. Benefiting others is part of the virtuous life and, hence, of the specific activity that Aristotle thinks happiness requires. If, however, happiness requires virtuous activity, which includes benefiting others, then the virtuous need people to do well by to keep manifesting such activity. If friendship provides opportunities to do so, then friendship would seem to benefit the virtuous. However, must the virtuous benefit friends? Can't she benefit others? Perhaps benefiting others is part and parcel of the kind of activity that, being virtuous, she naturally manifests, no matter who the target is. If so, this would constrain the interpretation of *NC* as follows: *NC* cannot state that for one's life to flourish one must have friends, throughout one's entire life.⁷ For if that were what *NC* states, then upon losing her last friend, the virtuous would stop to flourish, as she could no longer fully manifest virtuous activity. Maybe this just is what Aristotle thinks. But maybe there is another, much more important role that friendship plays – one that comes into view when we consider how it benefits the less virtuous.

⁶ This is not to say that Aristotle ignores that moral agents can and need to improve, and that for this having good friends is beneficial. He explicitly states that good friends can improve each other and that the company of the good yields the benefit of training excellence. ARISTOTLE, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1172a11–13; 1170a11–12. However, in laying out his account of true friendship, Aristotle tends to focus on the ideal case in which the parties involved are fully virtuous. This may partly explain why so far it has mostly escaped interpreters that Aristotle's *necessity claim* makes sense especially if we consider the role loving friends play in the life of the less virtuous. A rare exception is Elijah Millgram, whose reading of Aristotle has some similarities with the one I will present below. E. MILLGRAM, "Aristotle on Making Other Selves," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 17, 2 (1987), 361–376.

⁷ If so, then perhaps there is a sense in which Socrates in Plato's *Lysis* is right. The good man would lack something essential had he no one to benefit. Yet for him to lead a virtuous life may not require that any of these be *friends*.

On my reading, the following suggestion is crucial: NC states an enabling condition. In short, the idea is that the moral agent needs friends in order to *become* virtuous. Maybe to the fully virtuous benefiting others comes naturally. Not so, however, to the less than fully virtuous. Truly benefiting others is hard. The necessity of friendship, I suggest, rests on the fact that benefiting friends, while still hard, is easier than benefiting mere acquaintances or strangers. Moreover, friends are particularly valuable to us because through them, and the ways they respond, as friends, to our attempts to truly and sincerely benefit them, we can obtain a specific kind of self-knowledge – knowledge concerning the moral standing of our own actions. Plausibly, such knowledge is crucial to the success of the ordinary, less virtuous agent's attempts to improve herself.

If that line of thought is convincing, Murdoch's account of moral progress as an increase in the moral agent's ability to attend to others justly ought to be complemented in such a way as to accommodate NC, by integrating the idea just mentioned, viz. that friendship serves to provide the less virtuous with an important kind of self-knowledge that moral progress requires. For Murdoch, friendship should be important as it enables the moral agent to acquire something that is otherwise hard to come by – feedback concerning whether or not her vision is what the aspiring moral agent needs it to become: the just, unselfish, and realistic vision of love.

I. Iris Murdoch and Love as Just Attention

Again, Murdoch has no account of friendship. Indeed, having read her philosophical work, one may suspect that for her, moral progress is rather solitary and private an endeavor, which in the long run may lead to eccentricity.⁸ With respect to moral concepts, she claims, moral progress involves “a deepening process, at any rate an altering and complicating process.”⁹ Moreover, and tellingly, Murdoch characterizes the movement of our understanding as it deepens and grows as “a movement onward into increasing privacy.” One's image of courage at forty differs from that which one had at twenty, she claims, emphasizing that applying moral concepts is something we do in the context of particular acts of attention.¹⁰ Word-utterances are historical occasions and

⁸ Murdoch links the idea of a good man to someone who, though “he must know certain things about his surroundings, most obviously the existence of other people and their claims,” may well be “infinitely eccentric”, I. MURDOCH, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 59. I think that in this particular context, ‘eccentric’ must be glossed positively as *not prone to center one's attention exclusively on oneself*, i. e. as a character feature that results from successful attempts to unself, to become less selfish.

⁹ I. MURDOCH, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 29.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 28.

accounting for how we use moral terms on such occasions requires more than a reference to crude public rules. Something else must enter the equation: how we assess the situations we face. This depends, as we shall see, on who we are and on what we can, accordingly, see.

Moral progress, according to Murdoch, is not just a matter of gaining a better understanding of what moral concepts mean and how they are interconnected. Rather, it is also a matter of getting better at applying such concepts, which in turn improves the agent's ability to act well. Certainly, acting well is partly a matter of in fact acting in accordance with what, given the way one conceptualizes one's situation, seems best to one. Murdoch does not worry too much about this. She likes to talk about the Good as a magnetic center to which we, qua being human, are naturally drawn. Relatedly, she claims that true vision occasions right conduct, and thus endorses what Kieran Setiya calls *hyper-internalism*, i. e. the claim that if the fact that p is a reason for A to ϕ , and A knows that p , A is moved to ϕ in proportion to its strength as a reason.¹¹ Indeed, she may endorse an even stronger claim, viz. that the agent is internally motivated to act on to what *seems* best to her. If so, she thinks not only that true vision, and hence vision of what is, in fact, good, occasions right conduct, but also that not-so-true-vision, i. e. vision that may be blurred for all sorts of reasons, also occasions something – to wit: conduct that while not-so-right, seems best to the agent.¹²

If this is right, then Murdoch thinks that we always act in accordance with what *seems* best to us. At any rate, more important for the issue of moral progress is that according to her, our conceptualization of our situation may be off, our perspective on the world skewed, and our grasp of which options for acting are available and what the actions we do see would *be*, or *achieve*, deficient. Accordingly, moral progress, the improvement of one's ability to act well, crucially hinges on the ability to *attend* to situations in a way that is realistic, i. e. sensitive to the characters and moral outlooks of the individuals one interacts with, different from us as they may be.

Acquiring a clear vision of others, Murdoch holds, attending to them justly, is extremely difficult. There is always the risk that surreptitiously selfish motifs, quite possibly opaque to the agent, cloud her vision, so that her conception of what would be the best thing to do in the situation at hand fails to be properly attuned to what is, in fact, the case. Moral progress then requires both

¹¹ K. SETIYA, "Murdoch on the Sovereignty of Good," *Philosopher's Imprint* 13, 9 (2013), 7f; see also: J. BROACKES, *Iris Murdoch, Philosopher: A Collection of Essays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 11.

¹² If that is correct then there are obvious connections between Murdoch's conception and Aristotle's claim that we always act under the guise of the good. ARISTOTLE, *De Anima*, 433a28–29. However, exploring these connections, as well as closely related questions pertaining to the possibility of *akrasia*, remains beyond the purview of this paper.

that one curb the influence of “the anxious avaricious tentacles of the self” and that one broaden one’s moral outlook such as to encompass and integrate in it the outlooks of others, different though they might be.¹³ These are two sides of one coin, for if acting well requires that we truly see others for who they are, being able to do so in turn involves a continuous battle against what to Murdoch is the worst enemy in moral life: the fat relentless ego.¹⁴ Again, the idea is that the ego, if left to its own devices, blurs our vision, blunts our moral imagination, and replaces clear vision with selfish fantasy. Fighting that enemy involves counteracting the idiosyncratic ways it may affect our vision. Relatedly, it involves keeping a watchful eye on the ways one conceptualizes the world, including, crucially, other individuals and one’s options for acting toward them. Are we doing them justice? Do we really see them? These, to Murdoch, are important moral questions.

Returning to the initial suspicion, this task seems not just difficult, but also a very private one. The “(daily, hourly, minutely) attempted purification of consciousness” appears as the crucial moral activity, as a precondition of improving the quality of one’s attention to others.¹⁵ And such activity, since it is – like the conscious attempt to reevaluate another person’s character more justly – peculiarly one’s own, “may well be an activity which can only be performed privately.”¹⁶

Note, however, that it is unclear how to achieve such purification. Part of the problem is this: If purification requires that we better understand ourselves and our motives, trying to gain such understanding by looking at the self would, from a Murdochian perspective, be ill-advised. Doing so would be dangerously tempting in that we would, in trying to scrutinize the self, run the risk of being bedazzled by it and subsequently be lured into indulging in selfish fantasies.¹⁷ Purification of consciousness in order to cleanse our vision is thus difficult. Not only is it difficult to see others for who they really are, it is perhaps even more difficult to see ourselves for who we really are. Individuals are complex entities, and nothing guarantees that introspection is a reliable guide to help us uncover the unconscious motifs driving our actions.

I shall revisit this issue. For now, let us return to the supposition that acting well requires that we attend to others justly. What does this involve? Arguably, in assessing situations morally we evaluatively characterize those with whom we interact. This activity in turn affects which options for acting toward them we see, how we rank such options, even whether we so much as consider them.

¹³ I. MURDOCH, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 103.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 52.

¹⁵ I. MURDOCH, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 293.

¹⁶ I. MURDOCH, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 23.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 31: “the self is such a dazzling object that if one looks there one may see nothing else.”

If our evaluative characterizations of others are important to what actions we consider, then how well-adjusted to reality our actions are depends on them, on who and what we take others and their individual motivations to be, and on whether in doing so we truly see them. When Murdoch claims that acting well requires that we attend justly to those with whom we interact, she tasks us with doing justice to them in how we picture them, their intentions, and their perspectives, which may well differ from ours. Doing justice to others is to see them realistically; we need to see them for who they really are – not through a veil distorted by our private fantasies and desires. This may require that we take into account that their outlooks, too, might be clouded in ways that makes them unable to see us and our intentions and what we take to be the best course of action. To see them lovingly and with compassion is to try to imagine what good they can see and what, accordingly, drives their actions. We must appreciate, in how we picture others, that there may be morally relevant aspects of the situation they simply cannot see, being who and circumstanced as they are.¹⁸ Love, according to Murdoch, is just attention, it is knowledge of the individual, and “the extremely difficult realization that something other than oneself is real.”¹⁹ Moreover, “[w]hen we try perfectly to love what is imperfect,”

our love goes to its object *via* the Good to be thus purified and made unselfish and just. The mother loving the retarded child or loving the tiresome elderly relation. Love is the general name of the quality of attachment and it is capable of infinite degradation and is the source of our greatest errors; but when it is even partially refined it is the energy and passion of the soul in its search for Good, the force that joins us to Good and joins us to the world through Good.²⁰

Love thus modifies what to Murdoch is the primary moral activity – attending to others – by turning it into an activity that is just and selfless. One’s ability to see others well is a function of one’s ability to look at them lovingly. Note that seeing and imagining the moral outlook of another justly significantly differs from imagining what oneself would do if placed in their shoes. Again, individuals differ. It takes moral effort to see others, to perceive their actions as directed at the Good they see and seek to manifest. One need not, perhaps often will not, endorse the vision of the Good one imagines others as embracing. Yet one’s actions toward others will be different, certainly better attuned to them, possibly more compassionate, if what guides them is accurately taken into account.

¹⁸ Conversely, humility and modesty require that we make room for the possibility that they can see morally relevant aspects of the situation that we fail to appreciate. Making the serious effort to imagine what things may look like from the perspective of others can thus be an exercise that is morally instructive.

¹⁹ I. MURDOCH, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 28; I. MURDOCH, “The Sublime and the Good,” *The Chicago Review* 13, 3 (Autumn 1959), 42–55.

²⁰ I. MURDOCH, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 103.

To illustrate, let us consider an example, taking a cue from Aristotle, who makes the following observation:

[A]nyone can get angry – that is easy – or give or spend money; but to do this to the right person, to the right extent, at the right time, with the right aim, and in the right way, *that* is not for everyone, nor is it easy; that is why goodness is both rare and laudable and noble.²¹

This passage resonates well with Murdoch's view. Morality is not just a matter of following rules, it is a matter of applying them appropriately, which in turn requires that we attend to the situation justly. To illustrate, suppose someone behaves angrily toward me, unexpectedly. Suppose, further, that her behavior results from transference: in part, it responds to something someone did to her in the past – someone, say, who is, acts, or simply looks similar to me, which triggers, in her, an emotional response.²² Now, unless I consider the possibility that her actions result from transference, acting well toward her may be difficult. Acting in accordance with reality will require that, instead of automatically assuming that her angry behavior is fully directed at me, I consider that her actions are at least partly directed at someone from her past, and that she realizes neither the intensity of her reaction nor the fact that it is inappropriate. I should refrain from unreflectively taking offense and from responding accordingly, by reciprocating anger, say. Indeed, much has probably been gained if my response, rather than anger, is surprise about her emotional outburst, a willingness to refrain from taking her actions personally, and an impartial curiosity pertaining to why she may have acted the way she did.

Such a response involves an exercise of the ability to unself. Part of seeing that other people are real is realizing that not everything they do is about us. Someone's angry behavior toward me may, but need not result from something I did; it may betoken past trauma, it may have nothing to do with me whatsoever. Even if the person does respond to something I did, she may fail to do justice to who I am. She may fail to see me properly, in a vision blurred by anger or trauma, say.

²¹ ARISTOTLE, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1109a26–29.

²² Murdoch claims that a working philosophical psychology should at least attempt to connect modern psychological terminology with a terminology concerned with virtue. I take it that part of what the example I discuss in what follows suggests is that Murdoch's notion of the self, her talk of attempting to unself and see other people for what they are (a virtuous act of freedom and love) can neatly be connected with modern psychological terminology, such as, for instance, the notion of transference. I do not, in this paper, elaborate on Murdoch's understanding of moral freedom, but for the relation between freedom and virtue note the following claim: “[I]f many of our important beliefs are and have to be products of a willed attention, then realism about the world is seen to require qualities of character (virtues) other than a professedly neutral and simple ability for detached thought. [...] Moral freedom, if it is to be defined at all, cannot, it seems to me, be defined without a reference to virtue.” I. MURDOCH, *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature*, ed. P. CONRADI (New York: Allen Lane, 1999), 201.

A self-centered person, *A*, if faced with the angry person, *B*, might blame *B* for her actions. *A* might reciprocate anger and proceed by pointing out, especially to *A*'s and *B*'s mutual friends, the inappropriateness of *B*'s actions. *A* might draw energy from perceiving and characterizing himself as having been maltreated, reap support, garner positive attention, gain popularity at the expense of *B*'s consolation through encouraging words, satisfaction through his friends' sympathetic indignation, and so forth. Feeling thus encouraged in his unfavorable judgment about *B*, *A* might feel increasingly good about himself. After all, *B* misbehaved, not *A*. None of this, note, requires *A* to ever really pay attention to *B*. In effect, in the story that *A* tells his friends, and believes, *B* merely serves as a place-holder for the irrational and the contingent, a random cause for what *A* takes to be the undeserved misfortunes through which he pictures himself as bravely persevering. *B*, in other words, is just another extra in the most interesting story *A* is able to see – a story featuring first and foremost one main protagonist: *A*.

Here, thus, is one way of acting that to *A* remains invisible: *A* could explicitly assume responsibility for the transparency of his own actions toward *B*, by reporting his surprise about *B*'s behavior, say, by clarifying the intention that guided *A*'s actions, perhaps by apologizing for having created what, apparently, to *B* was an anger-provoking situation. For *A* to assume responsibility might enable *B* to get a different, maybe clearer perspective on the situation and create an opportunity for both to pay closer attention to it, and see each other more clearly. This could enable the parties involved to respond, in their actions, to each other, not to the skewed image each may harbor of the other. In contrast to simply letting the mechanisms of *B*'s transference and *A*'s indignation take their course, such behavior might make it more likely for the tense situation to be defused.

Inter alia, this suggests that the selfish *A*'s behavior can partly be characterized in terms of shirking responsibility. No doubt, for countless things that happen to us we are in no way responsible. Yet sometimes, assuming responsibility, even where it seems unnecessary, can drastically improve interpersonal interactions and provide opportunities for progress. Had *A* not been preoccupied with blaming his angry interlocutor, thus shirking responsibility for both what happened and how things unfolded thereafter, he might have gathered what about his own actions triggered *B*'s angry response, which might in turn have enabled *A* to learn something about himself. Sometimes, thus, shirking responsibility may be the easier way out, whereas assuming it, trying to improve the situation by considering ways one might have helped create it, may be a more difficult, but better response.

Love is difficult, says Murdoch, because unselfing is difficult. Human beings are stupendously creative in characterizing things in ways that serve the ego. Seeing clearly requires that we realize that sometimes – typically, even – our

own actions and how other people act toward us partly result from individual fantasies. Moral facts are not open to all. They may be hiding in plain sight, but whether or not we see them, whether we attend to them, depends on us. If we take an interest in the complex motifs of others, try to be transparent about our own intentions even in the face of manifestly untoward or abrasive behavior, are open to the possibility that our own actions, too, may spring from unconscious, surreptitiously selfish motifs, and that actions of others may aim at the Good in ways we fail to see, this changes how we look at them. Love, attending to others justly, is a central moral activity, as it determines what options for action we see and what we think acting well requires.

To emphasize, the moral activity of attending cannot be captured in terms of publicly available rules. Knowing rules is one thing, knowing when and how to apply them another. The latter requires attention.²³ Consider another example: “help the poor and needy.” Perhaps we are tempted to explicate this rule by way of listing a number of publicly observable actions. However, which of these is appropriate depends on the context. To see how to truly help someone stricken with poverty and homelessness, say, we need to pay attention. Only then may we find out whether to help him is to provide money, food, or, perhaps most difficultly, to sit down with him, and, seeing past his ragged and dirty clothes, address the person who hides behind the misfortunes he is wearing on his sleeves – in other words, to refrain from seeing him as a cliché and instead acknowledge his dignity as an individual human being. Again, what we can or should do will depend on the context provided by who we are, and what, based on the quality of our attention, we are able to see.

II. Aristotle’s Necessity Claim

It is high time to change gears and look at NC. According to it, friendship is necessary for a good and happy life, for “without friends no one would choose to live, though he had all other goods.”²⁴ In the *Nicomachean Ethics* (hereafter EN) IX.9, Aristotle offers a deeply puzzling argument for this claim. I will argue that considering it in the light of a passage in EN IX.7 yields a reading of the argument that reveals the importance of friendship: it helps the less virtuous make moral progress.

²³ On a different reading, one only truly knows a rule if one knows how and when to properly apply it. Either way, what matters is that knowing how or when to apply it is at least in part a matter of attending justly to one’s circumstances.

²⁴ ARISTOTLE, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1155a4–5.

Friendship²⁵, to Aristotle, is the mutual and mutually recognized relation of goodwill triggered by what, in the beloved, appears good, pleasant, or useful to the lover.²⁶ This yields three kinds of friendship: utility-based, pleasure-based, and goodness-based. In what follows, I presuppose the following three claims:

1) NC concerns goodness-based, true, or character friendship.²⁷ To Aristotle, the other kinds are derivative,²⁸ merely similar²⁹ to the former, and, crucially, the blessed man does not need them.³⁰

²⁵ As indicated above (see note 1), there are well-known difficulties surrounding the translation of the term 'φιλία.' One might, for instance, suspect that the word figuring in the definition of friendship, εὐνοεῖν – typically rendered as 'exhibiting goodwill,' 'wishing well,' or 'exhibiting benevolence' – does not legitimize the translations 'lover' and 'beloved' for the parties involved. And yet, φιλία, though often rendered as 'friendship,' as it can refer to the relation between friends (φίλοι), is also sometimes translated as 'love,' for instance when referring to the relation between husband and wife, or between parents and their children. Moreover, cognate words like, e.g., φιλήτοζ are standardly translated as 'object of love.' By employing the terms 'lover' and 'beloved,' and 'friend' for the non-directional term to refer to the parties involved in a friendship, I roughly follow Jennifer Whiting's suggestion and in any case do not intend to prejudicate the issue. J. WHITING, "The Nicomachean Account of Philia," in *The Blackwell Guide to Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*, ed. R. KRAUT (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 276–304.

²⁶ ARISTOTLE, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1156a2–5. The mutuality condition rules out cases of merely unilateral and unrequited affection, the mutual recognition condition cases of mutual affection in which the parties are unaware of the affection harbored by the respective other. Instead of arguing for it, Aristotle asks how one could call people friends who do not know about their mutual affection – a rhetorical device that drives home the point.

²⁷ See e.g. ARISTOTLE, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1156b8ff., 1157b25. The word used is τελεία, meaning 'perfect,' 'fully constituted.'

²⁸ This is why it has become common to talk of character friendships under the heading of primary friendship. See e.g. M. BISS, "Aristotle on Friendship and Self-Knowledge: The Friend Beyond the Mirror," *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 28, No. 2 (April 2011), 125–140. Biss exclusively focuses on character friendships between adult individuals who are fully virtuous, claiming that this serves to avoid confusion between problems involved in knowing one's goodness and issues related to becoming good. However, I think that it is unpropitious to exclusively focus on the fully virtuous. In order to fully understand NC, I contend, it is essential to understand the role of friendship in becoming virtuous. Consequently, it is paramount to explicitly accommodate that primary friendship can also hold between the less than fully virtuous.

²⁹ See ARISTOTLE, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1157a25–33 and 1156b35–1157a3. Character friendships yield both pleasure and utility, since by nature, the good is pleasant and useful. Utility-based and pleasure-based friendships yield utility or pleasure, respectively, but only incidentally. Still, since each is similar to true friendship in one dimension, the common practice of calling them kinds of friendship can be explained. In *Nicomachean Ethics* 1157a33–36, Aristotle suggests that there may also be rare cases in which utility-based friendships and pleasure-based friendships incidentally combine. Such cases would have to bear an even stronger resemblance to cases of primary friendship, given that in them, similarity can be attributed with respect to both dimensions. What makes a friendship primary is thus not merely that it yields both pleasure and utility. Rather, a primary friendship yields both utility and pleasure in a specific way: rather than some incidental feature of the friend, what triggers the friendship, as well as the utility and pleasure it yields, lies in the (perceived) nature of the friends' characters.

³⁰ ARISTOTLE, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1169b22–28.

2) Friendship (any kind) is based on perceived goodness. One's vision can be blurred and one can take oneself to enjoy a certain type of friendship with another, while at the same time, from the perspective of the alleged friend, the relation looks quite different.³¹

3) Character friendships are not just for the fully virtuous. The less virtuous, too, can contract them as long as they perceive some good in their friend's character.³²

NC thus does not say that in any life worth choosing one both is virtuous and has virtuous friends but, more plausibly, that a life totally devoid of friendship based on perceived goodness in at least some respect is not choice-worthy.³³

Recall that to Aristotle, man, *qua* political animal, is by nature sociable.³⁴ Consequently, the ideal human life cannot be that of the solitary sage.³⁵ Does

³¹ See ARISTOTLE, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1165b4–12; also J. M. COOPER, "Aristotle on the Forms of Friendship," *The Review of Metaphysics* 30, No. 4 (1977), 619–648. See also ARISTOTLE, *Rhetoric*, 1381a2–3, where the attribution of friendship is explicitly tied to the beliefs of the parties involved: οἴονται δὲ φίλοι εἶναι οἱ οὕτως ἔχειν οἰόμενοι πρὸς ἀλλήλους. David Konstan translates this as "Those who believe that they are so disposed toward one another believe that they are philoi," where what the parties involved exhibit is τὸ φιλεῖν, the wanting for the beloved what one thinks good [or what he thinks good], for the beloved's sake and not for one's own. David Konstan, "Aristotle on Love and Friendship," *ΣΧΟΛΗ*, 2, 2 (2008), <http://www.nsu.ru/classics/schole/2/2-2-konstan.pdf>, accessed 2 January 2015. Importantly, both the parenthetical and the non-parenthetical readings leave room for error on the part of the alleged friends.

³² So also COOPER, "Aristotle on the Forms of Friendship," 626–629. See also T. BREWER, "Virtues We Can Share: Friendship and Aristotelian Ethical Theory," *Ethics* 115, 4 (July 2005), 721–758. Brewer rightly points out that the claim that true friendship could only occur between fully virtuous people makes it unintelligible how Aristotle could hold, as he does, that such friendship can arise between people unequal in virtue and how such friendships could be important schools of virtue. I agree with the latter point emphatically.

³³ On the face of it, Kraut seems to concur when he claims that Aristotle's arguments "are intended to show that any happy person, because he possesses the ethical virtues, needs friends" and "does not confine himself to the far narrower thesis that those who are perfectly happy need friends." R. KRAUT, *Aristotle on the Human Good* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 35. However, the dialectical situation in which Kraut makes this claim is rather different from the one at hand. What Kraut has in mind are Aristotle's arguments in *Nicomachean Ethics* X.7–8 – arguments to the effect that the philosophical life, which aims at a life of contemplation, is happier than the political life, which aims at moral activity. In making his suggestion, Kraut seeks to rule out an interpretation according to which all Aristotle's arguments could be intended to show is that philosophers need friends, *qua* philosophers. Instead, Kraut thinks, correctly, that not merely philosophers (i. e. the perfectly happy) need friends but also those who live a political life, since both possess the ethical virtues. I think that we can attribute to Aristotle a stronger version of the necessity claim. Kraut limits the scope of the necessity thesis to those who are, if not perfectly happy, at least very happy, or likely happy, i. e. to those who already possess the ethical virtues. I think that the necessity claim is even more plausible if taken to also apply to those who are still on their way to become – and as such to some extent fail to be – fully virtuous.

³⁴ ARISTOTLE, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1097b8–11, 1169b16–21; ARISTOTLE, *Politics*, 1253a3–4, 1253a27–30; reg. husband and wife: ARISTOTLE, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1162a16–19.

³⁵ It fits well, as Maher remarks, that Aristotle, in book X, qualifies his claim about the ideal contemplative life as "most self-sufficient" and that we should make ourselves immortal

the need for friendship betray a deficiency³⁶ that besets even the life of the virtuous? What is this deficiency and how can friendship remedy it?³⁷

Aristotle himself lists a number of reasons why friendship is beneficial.³⁸ Most importantly, Aristotle holds that all other goods are useless without the opportunity of beneficence, which is chiefly and most laudably exercised toward friends.³⁹ This is further discussed in EN IX.9.⁴⁰ There, the following argument emerges:⁴¹

- (1) Happiness is an activity that comes into being and is not present at the start.
- (2) Two qualities make activities virtuous and pleasant in themselves:
 - a. they are activities of good men, and
 - b. they are peculiarly one's own.
- (3) We can contemplate our neighbors and their actions better than ourselves and our own actions.
- (4) The blessed man chooses to contemplate actions that have the two qualities mentioned in (2).
- (5) Actions of the good man's friend have both qualities mentioned in (2).
- (6) The blessed man needs good men who are friends.

The argument is puzzling in several respects. For one, how do (1)–(5) collaborate to jointly yield (6)? Moreover, (5) is extremely puzzling. For in what sense

“as far as we can.” D. P. MAHER, “Contemplative Friendship in Nicomachean Ethics,” *The Review of Metaphysics* 65, 4 (2012), 767; ARISTOTLE, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1177b33.

³⁶ See, e.g. J. ANNAS, “Plato and Aristotle on Friendship and Altruism”; P. AUBENQUE, “On Friendship in Aristotle,” trans. C. WARD and A. MARTIN, *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 97 (1998), 23–28. First published in French as an appendix to Pierre Aubenque, *La Prudence chez Aristote* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1963); D. P. MAHER, “Contemplative Friendship in Nicomachean Ethics.”

³⁷ The first question is, I think, misleading. Aristotle's claim is not that a man whose life is already flourishing needs friends. This would suggest that such a life would be deficient, which *ex hypothesi* cannot be true of the flourishing life. Instead, Aristotle's claim must be construed as setting up a necessary condition for it to be the case that a man's life can flourish. In a similar spirit, Cooper claims: “When Aristotle asks, then, whether a flourishing person needs friends, he is inquiring whether the having of friends is a necessary constituent of a flourishing life – not whether friends are needed as a means of improving a life that was already flourishing.” J. M. COOPER, “Friendship and the Good in Aristotle,” *The Philosophical Review* 86, 3 (1977), 291. Cooper's claim is ambiguous between the idea that a virtuous man must already have friends and the idea that in order for a life to be, or rather: *become* a virtuous one, friends must figure in it. As indicated earlier, I emphasize the latter idea, not the former, as what makes *NC* particularly interesting.

³⁸ ARISTOTLE, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1155a4–28.

³⁹ ARISTOTLE, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1155a7.

⁴⁰ ARISTOTLE, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1169b8 ff. Aristotle prefaces the argument by reaffirming the claim that the good man needs people to do well by, since acting that way, particularly toward friends, is characteristic of the good man and of nobility. This corroborates my claim that the general benefit of friendship is that it provides opportunities for benefiting others.

⁴¹ ARISTOTLE, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1169b29–1170a3.

are the actions of good friends not only activities of good men, but peculiarly one's own?⁴²

What unlocks the argument, I suggest, is a passage from EN IX.7. In it, Aristotle asks why benefactors are thought to feel love and friendship more for their beneficiaries than *vice versa*, even if their beneficiaries are not, and might never be, useful to them. His answer draws on a comparison of the relation between benefactor and beneficiary with that between the artist and her work:⁴³ What the benefactor has treated well is her handiwork in the same sense in which a poem is the handiwork of a poet (and his efforts). Existence, Aristotle argues, is something to be chosen and loved. Moreover, we exist by virtue of activity, i. e. by living and acting. Since handiwork in a sense is the producer in activity, one loves one's handiwork. It actualizes what one is in potentiality. Aristotle proceeds to make the following comments:

(C1) Men love more what they have won by labor and in contrast to being treated well, treating others well is a laborious task.

(C2) Mothers are fonder of their children than fathers since the former, in bringing their children into the world, endure more pain than the latter – the mothers' task involves labor, and they know better that the children are their own.⁴⁴ This last point seems to apply to benefactors, too.⁴⁵

⁴² The Greek word translated as 'one's own' or 'peculiarly one's own' is οἰκεῖος. Now, οἰκεῖος, as attributed to persons, can mean, among other things: 'of the same family or kin.' However, it is also commonly rendered in the sense of ἴδιος, meaning: 'one's own.' The former reading has the benefit of making the oddity go away. However, I think that it is the latter reading that unlocks the passage and is philosophically more interesting. Note also that in the case in which the good man is his own best friend, the problem disappears. (After all, this is precisely the point of the preceding discussion in IX.8: to affirm the view that one should be a lover of the self, construed as being someone who gratifies the most authoritative and noble element in oneself.) However, that cannot be what Aristotle had in mind. For we are then still stuck with the problem expressed in (3), viz. that contemplating ourselves is harder than contemplating others.

⁴³ For the following see ARISTOTLE, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1167b18–1168a27. In that passage, Aristotle also mention the relation between a father and his children, but since the point of mentioning it is the same as in the case of the artist, I suppress talk about it.

⁴⁴ The word used here is αὐτῶν ((of) her own).

⁴⁵ There is one more comment that I skip: Love is like activity while being loved like passivity, so that loving and its concomitants are attributes of those who are the more active. Happiness, according to premise (1) of our argument, is an activity, an activity that requires excellence. We can read (C1) as alluding to an earlier remark from book VIII.8 (ARISTOTLE, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1159a13–b1), where Aristotle states that the excellence of friendship seems to lie in loving, rather than in being loved. To the extent that engaging in friendship is itself a virtuous activity, it would thus be insofar as the agent loves that friendship may yield happiness. (The modality is important since there need be no necessary connection between virtue and happiness. Although the practical virtuous life is conceptually and characteristically *eudaimon*, it remains a life open to contingency, a life that can be affected by accidents. See A. O. RORTY, "The Place of Contemplation in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*," in *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics*, ed. A. O. RORTY (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1980), 377–394, esp. 385.

Note that part of what is expressed in (C1) is the idea that treating others well – where to treat them well is to benefit them truly in the dimension of virtue – is a laborious task. From a perspective informed by Murdoch's work, this should ring very familiar. People differ, and even if it is true that the virtuous are alike, the same is certainly not true for the less virtuous, who can differ, e. g. in how they fail to be virtuous, in all sorts of ways. Recall that according to Murdoch, to truly benefit others we need to see them for who they really are, different though they may be from us, which in turn requires just attention. Moreover, it may require compassion. After all, what is, or seems, good to *A* may not be, or seem, good to *B*. For *A* to truly benefit *B* may go against what *A* takes to be good for *B* (if *A* is mistaken), or against what *B* takes to be good for herself.⁴⁶ Love, Murdoch says, is knowledge of the individual. Similarly, Aristotle holds that treating another in a way that truly benefits them requires that one know them well. Now, if the less virtuous are more likely to differ from one another, then they will find it more difficult to benefit others, for it will be more difficult for them to see others as the different individuals they are. Perhaps the fully virtuous is exceptional in this regard. Perhaps she always does what is right and, as such, what truly benefits others. However that may be, for the rest of us, our attempts to benefit others are risky.⁴⁷ Nevertheless, while still laborious, such attempts are more likely to succeed if they are directed at those we know best: our friends.

Let us move on to the second element of (C1), i. e. that men love more what they have won by labor. This, according to Aristotle, can be explained *via* the comparison with the artist. What she has won by labor – her work – owes its existence to her, particularly its existence *as* the particular thing it has, through her activity, come to be. Dependence corresponds with effort: the

This line of thinking renders some support to the idea that friendship is necessary even for the fully virtuous because bestowing benefits on friends is an essential part of virtuous activity. However, this is not forced, as it might be that it is not engaging in *friendship per se* that is virtuous, but rather engaging in its characteristic activity: benefiting others. Now, the fully virtuous does that naturally, and may even have the ability to truly benefit people who are not her *friends*. The less virtuous, however, may not. If so, then she must practice that ability by continually trying to truly benefit those whom she knows best: her friends.

⁴⁶ Even if *A* knew what would be good for *B*, for *A* to treat *B* well and compassionately might require *A* to act in a way that responds to what *B* can see. It might e. g. require of *A* to try and make *B* see that what to *B* seems good is not in fact good for her, rather than, say, to paternalistically force *B* to do what *A* knows would be best for *B* to do. There are of course cases in which forcing *B* to do what *A* knows is in fact *B*'s best option is, for *A*, the best thing to do. One example would be the case of a person who prevents a friend from committing suicide or the case of parents who prevent their child from poking with a fork in an electrical outlet. That said, even forcing someone to do something can be done compassionately.

⁴⁷ That our honest attempts to benefit others can fail, sometimes tragically, is the point of Murdoch's claim already cited above, i. e. that love is capable of infinite degradation and is the source of our greatest errors.

more labor she invests, the more her work becomes her potentiality actualized. It reflects, in what it has come to be, her activity, and thus becomes, in this peculiar sense, her own.⁴⁸

Again, benefiting others is both noble and hard to do. Doing noble things yields its own delights.⁴⁹ If, arguably, benefiting others is the point of friendship, and if benefiting others is virtuous, then benefiting others is pleasant by itself. Most pleasant, Aristotle says, is that which depends on activity.⁵⁰ For present purposes, however, the following is crucial: the lover delights in the beloved since the latter is to the lover what the handiwork is to the artist. The more the lover tries to benefit the beloved, the more the latter actualizes the lover's potentiality, in what she has come to be and in how she acts. In this peculiar sense, the beloved and her actions are an effect of, reflect, or, in a peculiar sense, are the benefactor's own.⁵¹

⁴⁸ The same point can be made by drawing on the comparison with the parent. The more work parents invest in educating and shaping their child's character, the more it will show, in its actions, the influence of the parental activity, indeed manifest the parental potentiality in its own activity and, as such, as every parent will confirm, become even more recognizably their own.

⁴⁹ This is because doing noble things is in and by itself pleasant. Moreover, the memory of something done that was noble is delightful, too. *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1168a10–18.

⁵⁰ ARISTOTLE, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1168a10–18.

⁵¹ My argument is similar to a line of thought that has been offered by Richard Kraut. With reference to *Nicomachean Ethics* 1112b27–8, Kraut claims that our friends' doings are our own when they accomplish, if asked, our goals for us. More pertinently, he suggests that "a friend is someone whose character I have helped shape, over the course of our long association. For this reason, there is a sense in which "the starting point" of whatever he does, when he expresses his character, is in me. What he does in in a way my doing as well, because his actions flow from the character that I influenced. Although the virtuous actions of a friend are not activities of one's soul, they are, in an extended sense, one's own actions." R. KRAUT, *Aristotle on the Human Good*, 143. I am sympathetic to this interpretation. More particularly, I take it that his suggestion that one's own activities shape the friend's character, which Kraut offers here without providing textual evidence, is properly vindicated by the analogy with the artist that I have been pointing to. (In an earlier publication, however, Kraut acknowledges the passage. R. KRAUT, "The Importance of Love in Aristotle's Ethics," *Philosophy Research Archives* 1 (1975), 300–322, esp. 306.) Yet there is an important difference between my view and that suggested by Kraut: He does not see the link to the issue I am primarily concerned with here, i. e. the benefit of having friends for the less than fully virtuous. Another Aristotelian claim that can be rendered nicely in terms of the view Kraut and I share is Aristotle's claim that nobler even than actually to perform a noble act may be to abstain from performing it, so that one's friend might perform it. ARISTOTLE, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1169a32–34. Keeping in mind the analogy with the artist, we can see how allowing the friend to perform a noble deed may not merely be nobler, but also a paradigm case of the friend's manifesting the benefactor's potentiality in activity. Moreover, the benefactor, in abstaining from performing the noble act, is indeed "the starting point", i. e. the (mediated) cause of the friend's performing it. The noble act may, in this sense, and somewhat paradoxically, still be said to be the benefactor's own. Note that not performing the noble act, in such a case, must be at least as pleasant as performing the noble deed by oneself would have been. In fact, not performing it here yields the additional pleasure resulting from the fact that in deferring the noble deed to one's friend, by affording him the opportunity for doing something good, one has performed an additional noble deed, which, as Aristotle would have it, must be in and by itself pleasant.

In (C2), Aristotle claims that mothers know better that their children are their own. How does this point also apply to the benefactor? The first half can be explained by reference to (C1). Mothers work harder than fathers to bring their child into the world and thus, given (C1), love their children more. Likewise, the lover works hard to treat the beloved well, and thus loves her even more. But the analogy extends even further. The mother, having labored hard to bring the child into existence, knows the child as her own. Likewise, the lover, having worked hard to treat the beloved well, knows her well. What completes the analogy is the idea that she recognizes her beloved's existence as a good person, and her beloved's noble acts, as in part resulting from her own actions. Like the artist recognizes her own potentiality in her handiwork, the lover recognizes, in the beloved's character and actions, what is indeed her own.

With this in hand, let us revisit the curious argument from EN IX.9. Premise (1) states that happiness is an activity and is not present at the start. Partly, this simply echoes Aristotle's definition of happiness as an activity of the soul in accordance with complete excellence.⁵² The second part of the premise, however, is interesting, as it suggests that the relevant activity is one the improving virtuous person needs to subsequently acquire. But this raises a question: How can she improve herself? Arguably, self-improvement requires a specific kind of self-knowledge. One cannot reasonably hope that one could improve oneself blindly. Rather, one needs to get a sense of where one stands, morally. In other words, moral progress plausibly requires, *inter alia*, that one learn whether one's actions do indeed accord with excellence.

Arguably, a life is choice-worthy due to its potential for happiness. And if happiness is a matter of manifesting a certain activity that is, as premise (1) reminds us, not congenital, a life worth choosing must provide resources for improving oneself, for becoming virtuous and thus, possibly, happy. Virtuous activities, premise (2) states, are activities of good men and peculiarly one's own. Now, if only we had a way to determine whether or not, or to what extent, our actions are, in fact, virtuous, this would allow us to see where we stand and, possibly, how to improve and perhaps even, given time and effort, a way to develop the stable habit of acting virtuously. Again, virtuous actions are pleasant in themselves. Accordingly, one might think that the moral status of one's actions could be determined introspectively, that we could track virtue by looking for actions that are pleasant. This strategy, however, is barely promising. The pleasure of any given action might result from the satisfaction of selfish motifs, overt ones or, worse, unconscious ones opaque even to the agent. Recall Murdoch's dictum about the self: it is such a bedazzling object that if we begin to look there, we might be misled, bedazzled, and ultimately prevented from looking anywhere else. She, too, thinks that the moral status of

⁵² ARISTOTLE, *Nicomachean Ethics*, I.13 1102a5–6.

one's actions is hard to discern and more likely than not opaque to the agent. The strategy she suggests, as seen above, is to purify our consciousness. But how this is to be done remains an open question.

Premise (3) states that we can contemplate neighbors and their actions better than ourselves and our own. It seems, thus, that Aristotle agrees with Murdoch, for (3) further supports the suspicion that introspection is an unreliable guide to the moral status of our pleasant actions. Arguably, this holds especially with respect to the less virtuous. The upshot is that felt pleasure is a bad indicator for virtue, as the presence of the former might well be due to the surreptitious work of the avaricious anxious tentacles of the self.

Premise (4) states that the blessed chooses to contemplate good actions that have both qualities mentioned in (2). This commends an ideal. It serves to render, to the aspiring moral agent, the following moral advice: If you want to improve, contemplate good actions. Learn and grow, morally, by looking at what is just and good.⁵³ However, by (3), we cannot heed this advice by introspectively contemplating our own actions. Instead, we are to contemplate actions of others. But if so, then we again face our original puzzle: How can the good actions that we are to contemplate both be actions of others and yet qualify as peculiarly our own, which is what premise (4) demands? And how is it that our friends' actions meet these criteria, as premise (5) suggests?

This is where the comparison with the artist pays off. Just like the art work can reflect the artist's potentiality in actuality, our friends' reactions to our attempts at benefiting them can reveal, in how our actions affect them, the status of our actions. Moreover, to the extent that their actions result from the continuous shaping of their character that our actions toward them bring about, there is a sense in which their good actions may originate in us, and in this peculiar sense qualify as our own. The moral status of our actions becomes visible in how our friends benefit from them and, relatedly, in how they respond. Thus, a good friend may be considered another self, as she reveals the effects and the moral status of our own activities, by reflecting, in her actions, our activities and potentiality. In this peculiar sense, her actions are our own, which is just what premise (5) states.

⁵³ Again, Murdoch concurs. She thinks that objects of attentions are sources of energy and that there are good modes of attention and good objects of attention, which in turn serve as sources of good energy. See: I. MURDOCH, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 55; *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 301. Relatedly, she claims that "our ability to act well 'when the time comes' depends partly, perhaps largely, upon the quality of our habitual objects of attention." Accordingly, she (approvingly) cites St. Paul, Philippians 4.8.: "Whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report, if there be any virtue, if there be any praise, think on these things." See: I. MURDOCH, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 55, 56; *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 301. Arguably, thus, Murdoch, too, would suggest that considering good and noble actions is morally beneficial.

This, finally, explains Aristotle's contention that we need good friends (6). Let us go over the argument one more time: Happiness is our overarching goal. Since the activity it requires is not congenial, we need to improve ourselves so as to increasingly exhibit it. In order to do so, we need to acquire self-knowledge of a specific kind: We need to find out about the moral status of our actions. Only if we possess such knowledge can we hope to improve ourselves. Introspection is unreliable and cannot yield such knowledge. However, help *is* available if we focus on the good actions of our friends. For as our friends, they reflect our potentiality in actuality, and thus can reveal the moral status of our actions. Friends, this is the upshot of the argument, provide an indispensable testing ground for what we intend to be virtuous actions. Only in them can we see our own character at work and recognize the moral status of our efforts.⁵⁴

With this interpretation of the argument of EN IX.9 in hand, we see why, and in what sense, friends, according to Aristotle, are necessary. I have been stressing throughout that this holds particularly with respect to the less virtuous. I have argued that the benefit of friendship is that it offers opportunities for truly benefiting others, which is something the less virtuous requires in order to gain the kind of self-knowledge that self-improvement requires; something, moreover, that only friends, i. e. people they know well, can provide.

But what about the fully virtuous? Does she, too, need that kind of self-knowledge? If not, why not? To this, it can be responded that if she does, then she should be able to obtain it by benefiting others. Perhaps those others need not be friends. The less virtuous finds doing this much more difficult and thus needs friends, as it is more likely that she will succeed in benefiting those she knows well. However, one can argue that to the extent that the virtuous needs such self-knowledge as well, it is not clear that she should encounter the same difficulties as the less virtuous when it comes to using introspection as a guide to the moral status of her actions. Arguably, the fully virtuous has a

⁵⁴ It is important to keep in mind that contracting a true friendship with another is open to everyone as long as they perceive at least *some* good in the beloved. Given that one's vision may be blurred, such perception may of course be deceptive, both with respect to what is, in fact, good (as opposed to pleasant or useful) and with respect to what the conception of the good is that guides the other's actions. However, our continuous activity toward the other will let us see what the other is like, let us see what we are like, what in fact guides them and us, to what extent our and their activities are virtuous, and help both the respective other and ourselves become more virtuous and improve up to a point where what may have started out as, say, a pleasure-based friendship or as a deceptive character friendship turns into a non-deceptive one. It fits well with this that Aristotle explicitly allows that the kind of friendship one engages in with another can change due to increased familiarity. Cf. ARISTOTLE, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1156b33–1157a15.

vision of others and herself that is untainted by favor and passion. If anyone, *she* should be able to obtain the relevant self-knowledge *solo*, as it were.

Bestowing benefits on others might still be a necessary part of what is required for the virtuous to sustain her virtuous activity. However, the virtuous might be able to do well by a wider range of people, not just by friends. We need not decide on the issue. Yet note that even if the virtuous does not need friends, this does not undermine the necessity claim. Again, given that happiness requires virtuous activity, which is not congenital, every life that has a chance of becoming a happy life is a life in which friendship must, at some point, figure. Accordingly, a life can only have the chance to flourish, and thus be choice-worthy, if it is not devoid of friendship. Perhaps, friendship is not necessary to *sustain* the virtuous in her virtuous activity. But it is necessary for her to get there. Self-improvement involves trying to act increasingly well and to subsequently evaluate and possibly readjust one's actions in response to how they affect the beloved's character and actions. Self-improvement essentially requires friends. Without them, the less virtuous lacks the resources to improve herself such as to increasingly exhibit the activity happiness requires.

According to Aristotle, the mutual well-wishing characteristic of friendship triggers mutual beneficent actions, which bring out a final vital aspect of friendship that resonates well with Murdoch's thought. It is not merely the fact that we know them well that is morally relevant to our improvement, as that fact makes it more likely for us succeed in our continuous attempts to benefit them. That they know us well is equally important. For who would be better suited than friends to reflect, in responding to our attempts to do well by them, not merely the benefit we actually bestow, but also the good intentions that guided our actions? Our friends differ from us, yet they may know us well enough to see, love, and nourish the good in us. Knowing us well, seeing us with the loving, just, and compassionate gaze of a true friend, may allow them to imagine the good we aim at when acting toward them, or others, even if unsuccessfully. As the recipients of our sustained attempts to truly benefit them they will realize when we fail, perhaps sometimes why. Yet if knowing us well allows them to imagine our good intention, they may explicitly praise the good we sought to achieve, or compassionately and lovingly point out to us respects in which, had we seen more clearly, we could have done better.⁵⁵ Thus, in responding to us, they may imagine, and provide us with, a just and

⁵⁵ As I have suggested above, improving matters can sometimes be a matter of taking, rather than shirking, responsibility. Arguably, when it comes to accepting part of the responsibility when actions of others that seem to be directed at us do not succeed in benefiting us, our willingness to do so is much higher if the relevant others are friends. Thus, the willingness to accept responsibility, not only for what happened but also for how things may further unfold is likely part of a true friend's response.

compassionate picture of ourselves that is crucial to our moral progress and that we could hardly hope to obtain otherwise.⁵⁶

III. Closing Remarks

Let me take stock. I said we would benefit from laying alongside of each other Murdoch's account of love as just attention and Aristotle's claim that friendship is necessary for a flourishing life. I claimed that when turning to Aristotle's account, it would help to have in mind Murdoch's account and her focus on the developing moral agent. Indeed, as I have argued, what unlocks an interesting reading of the argument why friendship is necessary is not a focus on the extraordinary moral agent, the fully virtuous. Perhaps the argument is not, or not primarily, about her, which becomes apparent once we properly appreciate that in the very first premise, happiness is characterized as an activity that comes into being and is not there from the start. A crucial aspect of the

⁵⁶ This fits well with Aristotle's claim at the very end of book IX that the friendship of good men is such that the parties involved are thought to become better too by their activities and by improving each other. ARISTOTLE, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1172a11–13. I think that what the Murdoch-inspired reading I suggest indicates is that one activity characteristic of character friendships is a kind of focused contemplation of the other's actions. More specifically, this contemplation is such that both friends try to see and respond to the respective other as acting under the guise of the good. A similar view is suggested in T. BREWER, "Virtues We Can Share," 724. Brewer bases his interpretation on the use of *theorin* in *Nicomachean Ethics* 1170a2–4. On the matter of contemplative friendship, see also D. P. MAHER, "Contemplative Friendship in Nicomachean Ethics." Incidentally, taking seriously the picture I am suggesting may provide resources for understanding why the relation between parents and their children is properly called a case of friendship based on the good, and even the relation between two wicked friends. In contrast, John Tutuska, for instance, argues that cases such as familial friendship and friendship between the wicked go beyond pleasure and utility but do not involve virtue. They are cases, he thinks, of true friendship not based on the good. J. TUTUSKA, "Friendship and Virtue: A Fruitful Tension in Aristotle's Account of Philia," *Journal of Value Inquiry* 44, 3 (2013), 351–363; similarly, Terence Irwin in T. IRWIN, *Aristotle's First Principles* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 398. Yet I think we need to keep in mind the numerous ways our perspective on others and on ourselves can be distorted. The wicked, for instance, may indeed think that he is good, and that he is in a true friendship with someone whom he perceives to have what he mistakenly thinks are good qualities. His conception of what is in fact good, his conception of himself, of his friend, and of friendship in general may be seriously flawed. But if he does indeed take himself to perceive some good in the other, if he does therefore wish him well, and seek to benefit him, why not say that is true friendship? What about family members and long-time pleasure-friends? Certainly they get to know each other incredibly well by spending a life together. As such, they may acquire an increasingly better sense of who the respective others really are. They may come to know each other so well that they begin to see each other under the guise of the good. Seeing the other's actions as guided by good intentions, however misguided these may be, may trigger a love for the other which is based on the good we perceive them as trying to achieve, even if possibly without much success.

importance of friendship is revealed only once we focus on the ordinary, less virtuous agent, and ask what it is *she* needs in order to improve.

Note that Murdoch's account motivates why what the less virtuous needs are friends. For if we cannot see ourselves clearly, but need to contemplate noble actions, then if anyone at all, it is arguably our friends that we know well enough to be able to see them more clearly, and do justice to them in the way we characterize them, their actions, and their intentions. As friends, we are not only in a unique position to benefit them, but also in a good position to see the effects of our attempts reflected in what our friends do and who they subsequently come to be. Friends, in turn, can benefit us by giving us feedback, through their actions, reactions, and conversations, thereby revealing the moral status of our attempts to benefit them (and others), and, perhaps, ways and reasons why we may have failed. They provide a picture of ourselves, an indirect vision in which surreptitiously selfish aspects of our character may become visible to us and thus something we can address.

It is this latter aspect that serves to show a way to answer a question I raised when considering Murdoch's own account: If self-reflection is such an unreliable guide – indeed, generates a temptation to lose oneself in the scrutiny of the bedazzling self – how are we to purify our vision? To this question, Aristotle's account of friendship provides an answer: by way of benefiting our friends, by attending to the ways our attempts shape them, their actions, and thus reflect our actions, and, finally, by humbly accepting the ways in which they might seek to benefit us, including whatever feedback on our actions that they may be willing to share. Here is how Murdoch, in *Metaphysics as Guide to Morals*, her last grand contribution to the philosophical conversation, characterizes the ideal agent:

The good (better) man is liberated from selfish fantasy, *can see himself as others see him*, imagine the needs of other people, love unselfishly, lucidly envisage and desire what is truly valuable. This is the ideal picture.⁵⁷

For our purposes, the highlighted part is especially telling. *The good man can see himself as others see him*. How can he get there? Again, to this question, my reading of *NC* provides a promising answer.

The resulting picture is one on which moral progress requires not just one, but two kinds of love: the Murdochian kind – love as just attention – and the love characteristic of Aristotelian friendship. Both are necessary. We cannot succeed in truly benefiting others unless we succeed in attending to them justly, and see them for who they are. And we cannot get better at seeing them for who they are unless we attempt, to the best of our ability, to benefit them – an attempt that will most likely succeed when directed at our friends. If things

⁵⁷ I. MURDOCH, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 300. Emphasis added.

go well (as, of course, they need not) honing and investing in our friendships may yield an increase in our quality of attention. This in turn may enable us to see our friends, and perhaps others, even clearer, which again increases our ability to truly benefit them, and to act more virtuously.⁵⁸

Acquiring a clear and loving vision is difficult. So is learning how to act well and virtuously. Both are moral tasks of the highest order. For the moral agent to succeed in them is for her to learn how to do justice to others. One way of doing that is by way of picturing them realistically, lovingly, and with compassion. Another way is by responding lovingly to the good we see in them, by trying to act in ways that truly benefit them, thus fostering and amplifying the good to which we, *qua* humans, are naturally drawn. Accordingly, on this account, love and justice are not merely intimately connected. Rather, they play the vital role of being that which ultimately drives moral progress. As such, they lie at the very heart of morality itself.

⁵⁸ It should be noted that benefiting others, on this account, should not be construed as a purely selfish endeavor. On such a construal, friends would merely serve as virtue-training wheels (thanks to Josh Duclos for this fitting expression) as means to the agent's personal happiness. Importantly, however, virtue, and thus perhaps happiness, can only be achieved via truly benefiting others for their own sakes. If on this account, thus, the road to individual happiness is traveled through honest and genuinely well-meaning attempts to benefit others, I fail to see why the account should be properly characterized as selfish, even if part of the motivation for benefiting others may stem from one's pursuit of happiness.