



TWO CONCEPTIONS OF FRIENDSHIP: VIRTUE & VIRTUAL

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ABSTRACT

Human beings are by their very nature social creatures. The human soul is partly rational and partly emotional. Thus, interpersonal relationships or friendships play a significant role in the overall happiness and well-being of man. Let it be on a personal or professional sphere; friendship is one of the essential aspects of human life. Therefore, it is undoubtedly one of the essential virtues required for the Good Life. But with the rise of social media and other platforms the notion of friendship has undergone various changes and it also raises significant ethical issues like; are those online friendships genuine? Can we truly call our online friends our "real friends"? What are the elements responsible for a real friendship? From ancient times various philosophers have dealt the concept of friendship but the contribution of Aristotle is especially pivotal as he has given a systematic account of friendship in such a way that it harmoniously coincides with his overall philosophical system. His special treatment of virtue in his theory of friendship is particularly unique and very much original. This paper aims to explore the nature of friendship, its types and the two different conceptions of friendship with their practical relevance. By presenting a critical account of friendship the aim is to provide an idea regarding the form of friendship that can contribute to a healthy, happy and value driven society.

KEYWORDS: Aristotle, Friendship, Good life, Virtue, Well-being

1. INTRODUCTION

Man is a social animal at core. Thus, with food, clothing and shelter (the basic needs), people like to be accompanied by people with whom they are related by one bond or another. The good life is a shared life. From school to our workplace, the value of good friends cannot be overlooked. Societies and nations also rely upon friendships. Friends make our lives more enriching and help us becoming ideal human beings in society. In our good times they celebrate with us and at the moment of great distress they help us in gathering courage and dealing with the situation. According to the Cambridge Dictionary a friend is "a person who you know well and who you like a lot, but who is usually not a member of your family". This definition clearly shows that it is a very unique connection between two human beings that is based upon mutual caring, affection and self-effort.

The notion of friendship and its importance was immensely felt by philosophers from ancient times to the modern period. This might be the reason why it has been treated in so many modern philosophical texts such as Smith's "The theory of Moral Sentiments", Spinoza's "Ethics", Hobbes "The Citizen" and Locke's "An Essay Concerning Human Understanding". The contemporary philosophers have also discussed about friendship in their writings such as Kierkegaard in "Works of Love". This in fact, shows the philosophic significance of friendship, on account of which so many philosophers felt the need to include it in their literature. But in order to trace the systematic account of friendship we have to consider Aristotle's philosophical masterpiece *The Nicomachean Ethics*.

2. What is Friendship?

'Friendship' is a simple yet significant concept which is not just relevant in modern societies of 21st century, it was there in

ancient Greek societies as well. The Greeks had three words which are relevant in this regard viz- *Eros*, *Agape* and *Philia*. Out of these three *Agape* is a kind of love which was glorified by the Christian tradition. It means a kind of love that is truly unconditional and is holy. It represents God's love towards human beings as He loves His creatures unconditionally without expecting anything in returnⁱ. Thus, it can be seen that this kind of love is unresponsive to the antecedent value of the object but it is rather said to create value in its object. On the other hand, *Eros* and *Philia* are concepts that are generally understood to be responsive to the merits of their respective objects e.g., the attributes or properties of the beloved like beauty, goodness, intelligence etc. But it is important to mention an essential point here i.e., *Eros* involves passionate desire of an object which can be sexual (erotic) in nature whereas *Philia* is regarded as an affectionate or friendly feeling towards one's friends, family, colleagues at work or even one's nation at largeⁱⁱ. Therefore, *Philia* is more clearly relevant with regard to friendship.

Sometimes love and friendship gets mixed for a single concept. Therefore, it is important to draw a distinction between them. Love is generally understood as an evaluative attitude which is aimed at an individual as such, a kind of attitude that may or may not be reciprocated and we may or may not have an established relationship with that personⁱⁱⁱ. But friendship on the other hand is a kind of bond which is grounded in special concern of a certain kind a person has for another (as the person he or she is). So, here an established relationship is inevitable, because even though it is sensible to understand the idea of one-sided love, the idea of one-sided friendship just seems outright senseless^{iv}.

However, there can be questions regarding the distinction between romantic relationships based upon *Eros* and



friendships based upon *Philia* as both of them involve a sort of reciprocal love which is responsive to merit. Of course, the presence of sexual involvement in love (that friendship lacks) distinguishes love from friendship. But as L. Thomas (1989) still asks, is that sufficient to explain the real differences between them?^v N. K. Badhwar (2003) is convinced that it is sufficient to explain the difference as he claims that, the sexual involvement enters in to romantic love in part through a passion and longing for physical union, whereas friendship involves a desire for “psychological identification”^{vi}.

3. CARE & EMOTION IN FRIENDSHIP

Friendship as such requires some general virtues like intimacy, care, emotion etc. Taking intimacy in to consideration we reveal so much information about ourselves to our friends both personal and professional alike and this also goes the other way around. By this process people establish trust and commitment in a friendship and by effort this commitment becomes more established over time. Therefore, commitment follows from intimacy. The act of mutual caring is another fundamental pillar of friendship as friends care about each other ‘for their own sake’ and this is how affection is expressed in a friendship. The act of caring thus fundamentally sustains the bond. And lastly emotion is an outcome of our shared activities and past experiences with our friends which ultimately shapes and establishes our care, sympathy and affection towards our friends.

4. THE TRIPARTITE DIVISION OF FRIENDSHIP

Friendship has been a significant topic in two of Aristotle’s philosophical classics namely *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Eudemian Ethics*. In the *Nicomachean Ethics* itself Aristotle dedicates two of the ten books i.e., Book VIII and Book IX to the discussion of friendship. In *Eudemian Ethics* as well Aristotle devotes one of the four books to the discuss of the moral implications of friendship. Secondly, not only friendship, Aristotle’s broad corpus of works include some of the fundamental writings in natural sciences such as physics, biology etc and conventional philosophic works such as politics, ethics and metaphysics. The works of Aristotle are systematically categorized and profoundly presented. His account of friendship is no exception.

Taking it as an essential virtue, Aristotle holds friendship or *Philia* as a necessity of the good life and in this regard, Aristotle says: “It [friendship] is most essential for living. For nobody would choose to live without friends even if he had all the other goods”^{vii}. As a necessary feature of life friendship is also praised for the role it plays in attaining happiness. In the broad philosophical construct of Aristotle, happiness or *Eudaimonia* is defined as the *telos* or purpose of life. Good friendships are crucial in attaining this goal, as Aristotle concludes, “It would seem absurd, however, to award the happy person all the goods, without giving him friends; friends seem to be the greatest external good...hence, the happy person needs friends”^{viii}.

Aristotle has made special efforts to clarify the proper meaning of *Philia* or friendship. In this regard he writes: “To speak, then, of friendship in the primary sense only is to do violence to facts, and makes one assert paradoxes; but it is impossible for all

friendships to come under one definition”^{ix}. The “dual definition” or the paradox of friendship is acknowledged by Aristotle here as an activity and a virtue as well. So, he proceeds, “The only alternative left is that, in a sense there is only one friendship, the primary; but in a sense all kinds are friendship”^x. *Philia* thus, can be properly described as an activity and the virtue, but it should not be understood as a sufficient condition for the virtue.

Aristotle has given some general qualities of friendship before making classification of the kinds of friendship. The distinguishing feature of friendship is presence of reciprocal care and attention, or what Aristotle calls “goodwill”, as he writes, “If they are to be friends, then they must have goodwill to each other, wish goods and be aware of it”^{xi}. Reciprocity is essential as it forbids the possibility of friendship for people we admire and inanimate objects. This is also the reason why friendship is an ethical issue since it is restricted to humans only. Then Aristotle goes on to write, “To a friend, however, it is said, you must wish goods for his own sake”^{xii}. Wishing good “for his own sake” becomes an essential point in Aristotle’s theory.

Being the champion of classification, Aristotle categorizes and distinguishes between the desired objects of all friendships and treats them as means to create a tripartite distinction. Aristotle mentions, “For, it seems, not everything is loved, but only the lovable, and this is either good or pleasant or useful”^{xiii}. Therefore, we have the three kinds of friendship based on virtue, pleasure and utility respectively, with virtue friendship being on top, then follows friendship based on pleasure and at the bottom we have friendship grounded on utility.

4.1 Friendship of Utility

The first type of friendship is based on the ground of utility in which people become friends with each other for their mutual usefulness. These relationships are most common among elders. My mechanic is my friend since it benefits me when my bike is in the mechanic’s shop and I am his friend because he also wants my business. Similarly, my classmate is my friend since I learn more precisely when we study together. Aristotle points out these kinds of friendships do not last long and ultimately the friendship ends when any possible use of the other person is gone.

4.2 Friendship of Pleasure

The second kind of friendship is grounded on pleasure where individuals mutually seek pleasure or satisfaction from one another. This kind of friendship is majorly found among youth or youngsters. But Aristotle mentions that this kind of friendship is also short lived as the things that please the youngsters do change with time. Aristotle also points out that, “Also the young are apt to fall in love, for erotic friendship is for the most part swayed by the feelings and based on pleasure. This is also the reason why youngsters can fall in and out of friendship rapidly”^{xiv}.

In the above two kinds of friendship a friend is only treated as a “means to an end” rather than “an end in himself” and the agent is always self-centred in both these kinds of friendship. Therefore, Aristotle calls the above two kinds of friendship accidental, and holds that, virtue friendship or the friendship of the good is the perfect or real form of friendship, that is most preferable out of all other forms of friendship^{xv}.



4.3 Perfect Friendship or Friendship of virtue

The third or the ultimate form of friendship is grounded on goodness of character or virtue. Instead of utility or pleasure this type of friendship is based on mutual appreciation of the virtues that the friend holds dear. It's the people themselves and the qualities that they represent supplies the incentive for the friends to be in each other's lives. Aristotle considers this as the true form or perfect friendship, "For these people each alike wish good for the other *qua* good, and they are good in themselves. And it is those who desire the good of their friends for their friends' sake that are most truly friends, because each loves the other for what he is, and not for any incidental quality"^{xvi}. As this kind of friendship is grounded on goodness which is an enduring quality, it lasts longer than any other form of friendship. It is permanent, says Aristotle. Aristotle adds further that, the beauty of virtuous friendship is that, it already includes utility and pleasure within it. Thus, he mentions,

Also, each party is good both *absolutely* and *for his friend*, since the good are both good absolutely and useful to each other. Similarly, they please one another too; for the good are pleasing absolutely and to each other; because everyone is pleased with his own conduct and conduct that resembles it, and the conduct of good men is the same or similar^{xvii}.

But unlike the selfish gains attached with lower forms of friendship, perfect friendship is wrapped up in a concern for the other and appreciation of a person's character^{xviii}.

Goodness of character and intention is utmost emphasized by Aristotle because a virtuous person can be a virtuous friend and two virtuous friends ultimately help each other in the process of realizing their full potentialities.

5. MODERN FRIENDSHIPS AND THE ERA OF SOCIAL MEDIA

After the scientific revolution and the evolution of science and technology in the 21st century communication barriers between people have disappeared to an extent that, we can be friends with people throughout the globe instantly^{xix}. The meaning of friendship has been updated as well. So, friendship today can mean a simple number or a friend request showing in someone's social media profile e.g., Facebook, Instagram, Myspace etc^{xx} ^{xxi}. People can chat, call and even see someone in their homes by means of smartphones, computers etc, thanks to the powers of the internet and convenient technology. But concerns on privacy, hacking and potentially tempting opportunity for service providers to use our personal information from these sites for business purposes show that the pitfalls of these virtual sorts of friendships are no less^{xxii}. As per the data revealed by Statista.com social media is an effective platform for friendship and billions of people are using these platforms for many reasons in which friendship is a significant one. Thus, it is essential at this point to ask the question: whether these virtual friendships can be called 'genuine' or even 'friendship' at all, in the true sense of the term?^{xxiii}

5.1 Motive, Intention and challenges in Modern friendships

Friendships in social media has its own set of advantages like easy access, less effort, convenience, instant psychological gratification etc. But it is also important to check the downside of such friendships. The most significant risk in such friendship

is anonymity. In order to understand how it is so, we have to mention three sorts of friendships in social media viz: (I) from offline to online, (II) from online to offline and (III) solely online^{xxiv}. The first is an already existing offline friendship that migrates to the internet over time. There is no question of anonymity here. The second is an online friendship in any social media that later evolves in to an offline friendship by means of real time interaction, mutually reciprocal activities and self-effort. In this friendship the anonymity turns in to familiarity over time. But the concern lies in the third kind of friendship that is initiated and sustained solely in a social media platform. Since, this sort of friendship starts and stops in the platform itself, it never proceeds from anonymity^{xxv}. This in turn becomes very problematic as both parties in such friendships are unaware about each other's motives, intentions or even their real nature (which are the fundamental specimens of a good friendship). In real time interaction people are most likely to act unfiltered and naturally revealing their real nature consisting of their good traits as well as bad ones. But people online are less likely to reveal their unattractive traits as nobody likes to appear bad in front of people consciously. Thus, naturally there arises questions regarding the genuineness of such friendships.

In a recent paper O. O. Badejo and N. Okorie (2021) have showed the ethical issues of such friendships by putting forth three arguments namely:

- Shared history and experience
- Friendship as a vehicle for moral and character development, self-examination and moral improvement
- Self-understanding and the realization of human flourishing^{xxvi}

The first point emphasizes that genuine friendship as a phenomenon gets its foundation from past shared experiences, present company and future expectations. Friendship becomes solid through these interconnected timeline and it is an outcome of shared history and experience taking place in space and time. Similar experiences in life does not only help people in understanding each other but it also reinforces the relationship. In other words, understanding the past helps us in shaping present and future. Seixas Peter calls it "historical consciousness"^{xxvii}, a feature only found in genuine friendships. Friendships on social media not only lack these experiences, they are also highly unstable as there's always a possibility that they may stop talking to you at any moment. So, there's no question of shared history or experiences in friendships solely sustained by social media.

The second point maintains that a healthy and genuine friendship is based upon people's character as people influence each other through their behaviour, habit etc. Thus, a real and genuine friendship is based upon mutual admiration of each other's character. People develop ideal qualities from their friends that they lack and this process helps people for their self-examination and moral improvement. But friendships in social media fail in this regard as there are no opportunities for physical contact, observation etc. Thus, watching, observing and making trials are out of the question here^{xxviii}.

The last point emphasizes the significant contribution of friends for our self-exploration, self-understanding and effortless flourishing. It is exactly as Aristotle believed that everything in this universe has a telos or purpose and it is only by fulfilling its purpose the thing or being can flourish in the



society. Self-realization is also a social process as understanding the self requires understanding others. Thus, our friends help us in realizing our inner potential and actualizing them. A real friend should contribute in your flourishing. But it is not possible in social media friendships as it lacks a spontaneous and real time commitment which is the foundation of a genuine friendship. Even though intimacy is achieved to some degree in such social media friendships, it still cannot be compared to those of real friendships and the depth and commitment those friends have towards each other's character.

6. CONCLUSION

To conclude our discussion, we can note here that, the friendships that we form by means of these social media platforms no matter how genuine they seem cannot meet the standards of true friendship which can help the individual in gaining self-knowledge, self-exploration, consequently leading to the overall formation of a virtuous character and effortless

flourishing which is mostly lacking in today's society. This does not mean that friendship formed in these platforms are outright bad, it can be really useful even though instrumentally e.g., the friend you met online can be your real friend after you meet him outside face to face and you can participate in shared activities consequently developing shared history and experiences.

The Good Life is indeed social. The kind of people we keep company with do shape the sort of character we form and the quality of life we lead. Hence, it is rightly said "you are the product of your surroundings". Life is too short to waste on lower kinds of friendships. From the above discussion we can safely conclude that, even though real friendship requires time and effort and intention etc when they do blossom, they do so with appreciation, trust and mutual admiration of each other's character. On a longer run these friendships help us in understanding our purpose and self-worth, ultimately contributing towards our effortless flourishing and bringing together some of the sweeter joys that life has to offer.

ENDNOTES

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