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Friendship Then and Now

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Abstract

In this paper, I will examine Aristotle's concept of friendship as found in his famous work *The Nichomachean Ethics,* and then explore its relevance to the present-day, by comparing it to the work done by social psychologist Stanley Milgram on "familiar strangers." I will also look at two works of popular culture, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's children's novel *The Little Prince,* and the television program "Seinfeld" to show how they support the view that Aristotle's writings are still good models for understanding how friendships are formed and maintained.

ARISTOTLE ON FRIENDSHIP

"The desire for friendship comes quickly. Friendship does not." –Aristotle

While he lived long ago, the ethical writings of the Ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle (384-322 BCE) still have relevance to the present day, particularly when we try to understand the meaning of "friendship." In Books VIII and IX of his work known as the *Nichomachean Ethics,* Aristotle categorizes three different types of friendship: friendships of utility, friendships of pleasure, and friendships of the good. Briefly, friendships of utility are those where people are on cordial terms primarily because each person benefits from the other in some way. Business partnerships, relationships among co-workers, and classmate connections are examples. Friendships of pleasure are those where individuals seek out each other's company because of the joy it brings them. Passionate love affairs, people associating with each other due to belonging to the same cultural or social organization, and fishing buddies fall into this category. Most important of all for Aristotle are friendships of the good. These are friendships based upon mutual respect, admiration for each other's virtues, and a strong desire to aid and assist the other person because one recognizes an essential goodness in that person.

The first two types of friendship are relatively fragile. When the purpose for which the relationship is formed somehow changes, then the friendships tend to end. For instance, if the business partnership is dissolved, or one takes another job, or one graduates from school, it is more than likely that no ties will be maintained with the former friend of utility. Likewise, once the love affair cools, or one takes up a new hobby, or gives up fishing, the friends of pleasure will go their own ways.

Friendships of the good (which are usually referred to as *best friends, genuine friends or authentic friendships*) are those which are the most important to Aristotle. They tend to be lifelong, are often formed in childhood or adolescence, and will exist so long as the friends continue to remain virtuous in each other's eyes. To have more than a handful of such friends of the good, Aristotle states, is indeed a fortunate thing. Such friendships of the good require time and intimacy; to truly know people's finest qualities you must have deep experiences with them, and close connections.

Aristotle writes*:* "No one would choose to live without friends, even if he had all other goods" (Aristotle 1962[350 B.C.E.]:214). But just *why* is this so, and more to the point why are there different types of friendship? These questions are central to Aristotle's overall conception of what constitutes a good life.

In his seminal work the *Nichomachean Ethics* (named in honor of his father and his son Nichomachus, both of whom shared this name), he famously delineates his theory of the three types of friendship. It is important to note that books VIII and IX of the ten book *Nichomachean Ethics* are part of the larger discussion of the nature of *eudaimonia,* a term which is often translated as "happiness" but which literally means "good soul." In this book as well as in other works Aristotle asked the fundamental questions: what does it mean to be a human being, and what are the various goals we have that bring out our best?

While usually translated from the ancient Greek as "happiness," a better translation of *eudaimonia* would be "self-fulfillment through personal excellence." For Aristotle, the good life consisted of developing one's natural abilities through the use of reason. A virtuous life is one where proper habits are formed that allow one to reach one's full potential. Some goals, such as the desire for wealth or the desire for public recognition, can propel us to action, but these are not what Aristotle considered our ultimate goal. Rather, they are a means to an end. The ultimate end or goal (*telos*) is *eudaimonia* or happiness. This is a happiness based upon self-fulfillment:

> For, the final and perfect good seems to be self-sufficiency. However, we define something as self-sufficient not by reference to the 'self' alone. We do not mean a man who lives his life in isolation, but a man who also lives with parents, children, a wife, and friends and fellow citizens generally, since man is by nature a social and political being (Aristotle 1962[350 B.C.E.]:15).

In the larger context of the *Nichomachean Ethics* Aristotle addresses what makes us human. We are, as the famous quote above points out, social and political beings. We cannot exist independently. Our very development as humans is contingent on the proper—or natural—support given to us by other human beings.

If the only people we knew were our family members, then our roles in life would be quite limited, as would our opportunities for development. But remember that Aristotle's more complete definition of being human is that we are by nature social and political beings. *Polis* is the Greek term for "body of citizens" and relates to the fact that most of us live not just within a family structure but rather within a larger political system. The basic point here is that most of the people in such a system are strangers to each other. If they were all related then it would be clearer what roles they are to play (such as, for instance, when a monarch's firstborn is usually deemed to be the next in line to rule), but in most political systems there is more flexibility, and more opportunity for people to develop their talents in different ways. If in fact all people in a given society were friends, Aristotle points out, then there would be no need for laws, since we would naturally work out all of our differences. "When people are friends," he writes, "they have no need of justice, but when they are just, they need friendship in addition" (Aristotle 1962[350 B.C.E.]:215). Some utopian thinkers, such as the followers of the later Greek philosopher Epicurus, took this to mean that we should attempt to always live *only* among friends. But Aristotle is quite clear that this is not possible, for the basic reason that friendship requires commitment of time and a trusting relationship, and there are natural limits to how many such connections we can make.

STANLEY MILGRAM AND "FAMILIAR STRANGERS"

An interesting example of how friendship bonds are formed is the so-called "familiar strangers" experiment of the psychologist Stanley Milgram (1933-1984). Milgram is best known for his rather infamous "Obedience to Authority" experiments in the early 1960s in which participants thought they were administering electric shocks to learners who did not give correct answers to multiple choice questions. The purpose was to see how far these participants would go in administering pain (which unbeknownst to them was being simulated by those getting “shocked”) merely because they were told to do so by an authority figure, who they supposedly felt was really responsible. These are indeed troubling experiments for a host of ethical reasons.

But Milgram was a complex figure who came up with several other fascinating “thought experiments” which he then attempted to test. For instance, he and his students at the City University of New York tried to show how close two random people might be by determining the number of connections that they had with each other. This so-called “Small World” experiment was the basis of the famous “Six Degrees of Separation,” which claims that, at most, there are six people separating one from another. In popular culture this is best expressed by the “Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon” game, wherein one takes any actor from any time in history and shows how they are separated from appearing in a film with Kevin Bacon by, at most, six other actors.

But where Milgram most relates to Aristotle is through his so-called “Familiar Strangers” experiment. Milgram asked his students to perform a very simple experiment, so simple that at first many of them thought he was joking. Go up to someone you have seen many times but have never spoken to (such as someone you see walking the halls of the school all the time, or someone you see waiting every day for the same subway you take) and introduce yourself to that person. Then report your experience. Simple enough. But, as Milgram’s biographer Thomas Blass points out, it turned out not to be simple at all; in fact, for many of the students it was emotionally overpowering. For, once you have spoken to a such a "familiar stranger" you have formed a connection. They are no longer a stranger to you. You have each acknowledged each other's existence. And the next time you see them you cannot just politely ignore them, as you have in the past. You have to continue to make conversation, even if it is just a banal "nice weather we're having" comment.

Blass adds that "Milgram felt that the tendency not to interact with familiar strangers was a form of adaptation to the stimulus overload one experienced in the urban environment. These individuals are depersonalized and treated as part of the scenery, rather than as people with whom to engage" (Blass 2004:180). But, while these people remain strangers for the moment, there is always the chance that that situation can change. What made the experiment so uncomfortable is that it was a forced situation rather than a chosen one. Milgram himself makes a fascinating comment about the familiar stranger situation in the narration to his film *The City and the Self,* which Blass quotes from in his book:

> As the years go by, familiar strangers become harder to talk to. The barrier hardens. And we know—if we were to meet one of these strangers far from the station, say, when we were abroad, we would stop, shake hands, and acknowledge for the first time that we know each other (Blass 2004:181).

This nicely sums up the fact that most of us, even while being "friendly," are still shielding much about ourselves from others, even such basic information as our names, our family relations, where we work, and where we went to school. By sharing this information with others, we open ourselves up to their doing the same, at which point a relationship begins. That is also why it is easier to share such information, as well as much more personal information such as our political beliefs, our financial situations, and our sexual adventures, with perfect strangers we meet only once on a plane, train or boat. Since we are not likely to ever see them again, we are more willing to be open, knowing that no relationship is going to form from this. But as Milgram shows in his “Small World” experiment, it pays to be cautious: how can you be sure that stranger you are talking to about how much you hate your boss or how you are cheating on your spouse is not somehow connected, by just a degree or two of separation, from your boss or spouse?

FORMING FRIENDSHIPS

For Aristotle, friendships, especially friendships of the good, do not come easily, and they must be cultivated over time. In such relationships, we reveal our innermost thoughts and aspirations to someone. The trust between such friends is unlimited, and thus should not ever be given lightly. You have to get to know the other person, and that cannot be rushed. Your judgement should be a rational one, not one made in haste due to expediency or pleasure:

> One cannot extend friendship to or be a friend of another person until each partner has impressed the other that he is worthy of affection, and until each has won the other’s confidence. Those who are quick to show the signs of friendship to one another are not really friends, though they wish to be; they are not true friends unless they are worthy of affection and know this to be so. The wish to be friends can come about quickly, but friendship cannot (Aristotle 1962[350 B.C.E.]: 220-221).

It takes time and effort. One of the best examples of this can be found in Antoine de Saint-Exupéry’s [SANT EX-*UP*-ERY] 1943 classic children’s book *The Little Prince.* A visitor from another planet comes upon a fox whom he wishes to befriend. But the fox tells him that he must first be tamed. “What does *tamed* mean?” the Little Prince asks. “It is something that’s been too often neglected,” the fox replies. “It means ‘to create ties’…” (Saint-Exupéry 1943/2000:59). When the little prince replies that he does not have time, the fox poignantly replies: “The only things you learn are the things you tame …People haven't time to learn anything. They buy things ready-made in stores. But since there are no stores where you can buy friends, people no longer have friends. If you want a friend, tame me!" (Saint-Exupéry 1943/2000:59-60). As the fox understands, real friendship comes slowly over time. If you tame me, the fox says, then I will be unique to you, and you will be unique to me. We will not just be another little boy and another little fox; we will be friends. The Little Prince understands and a beautiful friendship is formed.

ARE THERE A LIMITED NUMBER OF FRIENDSHIPS ONE CAN MAINTAIN?

Another important point with which Aristotle is in accord with Milgram is in regards to the view that we do not open up to all people because there are natural limits to the amount of time and effort we can put into cultivating such relationships. "To be friends with many people in the sense of perfect friendship is impossible," he writes, "just as it is impossible to be in love with many people at the same time" (Aristotle 1962[350 B.C.E.]:225).

Is there a natural limit to how many friends of the good one can have? Aristotle feels that this is definitely the case. If you have a handful of such relationships in your entire life, consider yourself fortunate. What might that number be?

> Perhaps it is the largest number with whom a man might be able to live together, for, as we noticed, living together is the surest indication of friendship; and it is quite obvious that it is impossible to live together with many people and divide oneself up among them. Furthermore, one's friends should also be the friends of one another, if they are all going to spend their days in each other's company; but it is an arduous task to have this be the case among a large number of people (Aristotle 1962[350 B.C.E.]:268).

Interestingly enough, some modern thinkers are giving independent verification to Aristotle's claims. The British psychologist Robin Dunbar's research shows that, no matter how many friendships of the good people may claim to have, that number is necessarily finite. According to Dunbar, “There is a limited amount of time and emotional capital we can distribute, so we only have five slots for the most intense type of relationship. People may say they have more than five but you can be pretty sure they are not high-quality friendships” (Murphy 2016). Five friends of the good is probably about all you can really have.

To call friends of the good “perfect” is not to imply that there are no dangers involved in forming such relationships, or no possibilities that they might end. While they are the strongest type, they are not invulnerable. For instance, there is always the danger that one may lose a friend due to death, or the friend’s moving away. This occurs in *The Little Prince*, when the title character says that it is time for him to return to his home planet. “‘Ah!’ the fox said. ‘I shall weep.’ ‘It’s your own fault,’ the little prince said. ‘I never wanted to do you any harm, but you insisted that I tame you…’” (Saint-Exupéry 1943/2000: 61). But the fox replies that it has been worth it, “because of the color of the wheat” which will always remind him of the little prince’s hair, and the friendship they once had.

MOVING FURNITURE: FRIENDSHIP IN POPULAR CULTURE

Originally aired from 1989 to 1998, *Seinfeld wa*s a television show that dealt with friendship in all three of Aristotle’s aspects. Not only did it address the ongoing relationships between four harried urbanites in 1990s New York, it also had a myriad of other characters who come into the four protagonists’ lives in varied and hilarious ways.

One of the most memorable of these was the two-part episode called "The Boy Friend." In it, Jerry gets to meet his idol, New York Mets baseball player Keith Hernandez (who good-naturedly plays himself). Jerry is delighted when Keith wants to form a friendship. For Jerry, it is very much a friendship of pleasure, since just being around his idol gives him joy.

However, Jerry's neighbor and friend Kramer is *not* at all happy about this state of affairs since he is convinced that Hernandez spit on him and on Jerry's nemesis, Newman, after a Mets' game at Shea Stadium. To further complicate things (as is usual in a *Seinfeld* episode), Hernandez is attracted to Jerry's friend and former lover, Elaine, and asks her out. Jerry becomes jealous, and begins to wonder about the nature of his relationship with his newfound friend. Things become even *more* complicated, however, when, while Elaine is visiting him in his apartment, Jerry receives a phone call from Hernandez.

> ELAINE: Who was that?
> JERRY: That was Keith.
> ELAINE: What's going on?
> JERRY: He wants me to help him move.
> ELAINE: Help him move? Move what?
> JERRY: You know, *furniture*.
> ELAINE: So, what did you say?
> JERRY: I said yes, but I don't feel right about it. I mean I hardly know the guy. That's a big step in a relationship. The biggest. That's like going all the way.
> ELAINE: And you feel you're not really ready for…
> JERRY: Well we went out *one* time. Don't you think that's coming on a little too strong? (*Seinfeld* 1992).

While a very funny scene, it also expresses a genuine dilemma in any friendship relationship. The reciprocal nature of the friendship is now in question. While the basis of the friendship for Jerry was the pleasure he experienced in being in his idol's company (and the assumption that Hernandez must equally feel such pleasure in knowing Jerry), now he is beginning to feel like he is being taken advantage of. Perhaps, for Hernandez, Jerry is at best a friend of utility, one he can rely upon to do a task that no one eagerly wants to perform, moving heavy furniture. And no doubt Jerry is wondering whether or not Keith would be willing to do the same thing for him. Suddenly the pleasure aspect of the friendship is being called into question.

For Jerry, this request from Hernandez is asking too much of him. As is his wont, Kramer comes barging in to the apartment at that very moment and asks why Jerry seems so glum.

> [Kramer enters]
> KRAMER: What's going on?
> JERRY: Keith Hernandez just asked me to help him move.
> KRAMER: *What*? Well, you hardly know the guy…. What a nerve. You see, wasn't I right about this guy? Didn't I tell you? Now, you're not going to do it, are you?
> JERRY: … I said yes.
> KRAMER: YOU SAID YES!? Don't you have any pride or self-respect? I mean, how can you prostitute yourself like this? I mean what are you going to do? You're going to start driving him to the airport?
> JERRY: I'm NOT DRIVING HIM TO THE AIRPORT! …
> KRAMER: Yeah, yeah.
> JERRY: Hey Kramer do me a favor.
> KRAMER: What?
> JERRY: Don't mention it to anybody.
> KRAMER: I wish you never mentioned it to ME. [exits] (*Seinfeld* 1992).

This episode of *Seinfeld* brilliantly captures what for New Yorkers would actually be asking something even worse than helping someone to move heavy furniture: giving them a ride to the airport! At this point, Jerry realizes his friendship with Hernandez is a sham, and breaks it off. Later in the episode, Hernandez, in a brilliant parody of Oliver Stone’s film *JFK*—which starred Wayne Knight, the actor who plays Newman—proves to Kramer and Newman that he was in fact *not* the one who spit on them. They are so apologetic over their error that *they* then freely offer to help him move his furniture.

CONCLUSION

As with friendships of utility, friendships of pleasure are fragile and easily shattered. Because emotion is their basis, if they do come to an end it is likely that there will be pain involved, but it is usually fleeting. This type of friendship is more intimate than that of a friendship of utility, and the friends expose much more of themselves to each other. But ultimately, in Aristotle's view, the relationship remains on a rather superficial level and the friends do not truly enter into one another's deepest thoughts and aspirations. Thus, this too is an imperfect type of friendship.

In closing, it is important to note that I am not claiming by any means that everything Aristotle had to say was correct. Rather, I have been spelling out his views on friendship in part to see what they are, for they have been very influential, and also in part to set the stage for our further explorations. Still, it does seem that Aristotle's threefold concept is still relevant in trying to understand the nature of friendship in the present day.

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