

## ARISTOTLE ON LOVE AND FRIENDSHIP

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*Philia* is exceptional among ancient Greek value terms for the number of still unresolved, or at least intensely debated, questions that go to the heart of its very nature.<sup>1</sup> Does it mean “friendship”, as it is most commonly rendered in discussions of Aristotle, or rather “love”, as seems more appropriate in some contexts? Whether it is love, friendship, or something else, is it an emotion, a virtue, or a disposition? The same penumbra of ambiguity surrounds the related term *philos*, often rendered as “friend” but held by some to include kin and other relations, and even to refer chiefly to them. Thus, Elizabeth Belfiore affirms that “the noun *philos* surely has the same range as *philia*, and both refer primarily, if not exclusively, to relationships among close blood kin” (2000: 20). In respect to the affective character of *philia*, Michael Peachin (2001: 135 n. 2) describes “the standard modern view of Roman friendship” as one “that tends to reduce significantly the emotional aspect of the relationship among the Romans, and to make of it a rather pragmatic business”, and he holds the same to be true of Greek friendship or *philia*. Scholars at the other extreme maintain that ancient friendship was based essentially on affection. As Peachin remarks (*ibid.*, p. 7), “D. Konstan [1997] has recently argued against the majority opinion and has tried to inject more (modern-style?) emotion into ancient *amicitia*”. Some critics, in turn, have sought a compromise between the two positions, according to which ancient friendship involved both an affective component and the expectation of practical services. Renata Raccanelli (1998: 20), for example, comments: “Certainly, Konstan is right to observe that the common model of true friendship must grant major importance to sentiment... But it is nevertheless well not to ignore the role that notions of obligation, mutual exchange of gifts, and prestations also play within relations of friendship... The element of concrete and obligatory exchange seems inseparably bound up with friendship, which can not be identified with the mere affective dimension of the relationship”. Thus, in Plautus’ *Epidicus*, when Chaeribulus insists that he does not have the wherewithal to lend money to his age-mate Stratippocles (114–19), Stratippocles exclaims that “a friend is one who helps out in difficult circumstances, when there is need of cash” (113; cf. 116–17, Raccanelli pp. 164–66).

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is a much revised version of the talk I presented at the conference on “*Philia* in Aristotle’s Philosophy,” held at University of Louvain at Louvain-la-Neuve and at the University of Leuven jointly with the Société Philosophique de Louvain on 10–11 May 2004. It is hoped that this paper will subsequently be published in the proceedings of that conference, to be edited by Pierre Destrée. Fuller discussion of some of the issues raised here may be found in Konstan 2006.

One might well wonder how thoughtful and learned investigators can be at variance over so fundamental a matter as the emotive character of ancient friendship, not to mention the very meanings of the words *philia* and *philos*. There are, I think, various reasons why the problem of emotion in friendship has proved difficult to resolve. For one thing, the modern notion too lends itself to ambiguity and disagreement. Those who most insist on the pragmatic and formal quality of ancient friendship tend to contrast it with the emotive basis of friendship today. Yet we too expect friends to assist us in times of crisis, and this without contradicting the affective nature of the bond. The implicit logic is: “If you loved me as a friend, you would assist me in my time of need; since you do not, you are not a true friend”. Nothing prevents us from ascribing a similar view to Plautus’ Stratippocles. Doubtless, one can raise questions about the inference from affection to obligation, but the problem is no different for ancient than for modern friendship. The idea that *philia* was importantly different from modern friendship in respect to sentiment has also been motivated in large part by theoretical views about the nature of Greek and Roman society and the ancient concept of the self. The centrality of affect has been taken to be specific to the modern notion – some would say mirage – of an autonomous ego that relates spontaneously and freely to other selves, whereas the ancient self was constituted principally in and through ascribed relations, such as kinship and status, which carry with them prescribed codes of behavior.

Let us turn to the texts. Among our ancient sources, Aristotle’s detailed discussion of *philia* in Books 8 and 9 of the *Nicomachean Ethics* stands out, and has been exhaustively examined. His parallel treatment in the *Rhetoric*, however, has received less attention. In this treatise, Aristotle includes *philia* and *philein* – the verb that is cognate with *philia* and *philos* – in a discussion of the *pathê* or “emotions”, along with such passions as anger, fear, envy, and pity. He begins his analysis as follows (2.4, 1380b35-36): “Let us speak of those whom people *philein* [the third-person plural of the verb is used here] and whom they hate, and why, by first defining *philia* and *to philein*”. The latter expression, *to philein*, is a nominalized infinitive, produced by prefixing the definite article (to = “the”) to the infinitive form of the verb. About the verb *philein* there tends, curiously enough, to be relatively less disagreement than about its congeners *philia* and *philos*. *Philein* is commonly translated as “love”, “regard with affection”, “cherish”, or “like”; it sometimes carries the more concrete sense of “treat affectionately”, that is, “welcome”, but this is chiefly poetic. The nominalized or articular infinitive, in turn, is ordinarily translated as “loving”; its opposite, according to Aristotle, is *to misein* or “hating”.

Now, are *philia* and *to philein*, or “loving”, one thing or two? Aristotle continues (1380b36-81a1): “Let ‘loving’ [*to philein*] be wishing for someone the things that he deems good, for the sake of that person and not oneself, and the accomplishment of these things to the best of one’s ability”. Here, then, Aristotle defines not *philia* but *philein*. But before proceeding further, Aristotle pauses to offer a second definition (2.4, 1381a1-2): “A *philos* is one who loves [*ho philôn*: present participle] and is loved in return [*antiphiloumenos*]”, and he adds: “Those who believe that they are so dis-

posed toward one another believe that they are *philoï* [plural of *philos*]. *Philoï*, then, constitute a subset of those who love, namely, just those who both love and know or believe that their love is reciprocated. These are precisely what we would call “friends”, and I suggest that this definition is in the present context meant to correspond to the term *philia*.

In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle notes (8.2, 1155b27-34) that “in the case of affection [*philêsis*] for inanimate things, one does not speak of *philia*: for there is no reciprocal affection [*antiphilêsis*] nor the wish for their good... But they say that one must wish good things for a friend [*philos*] for his sake. They call those who wish good things in this way ‘well-disposed’ [*eunous*], if the same wish does not occur on the other person’s part as well. For they say that goodwill in people who experience it mutually [*en antipeponthosi*] is *philia*”. Aristotle then adds the further condition that each must know that the other is so disposed. Once again, Aristotle reserves the term *philia* for the reciprocal benevolence that is characteristic of friends or *philoï*. Accordingly, the term is not appropriately applied either to affection for inanimate objects, such as wine, or to people who do not like us in return. For the first, Aristotle coined the word *philêsis* or “affection”. In the case of a one-way fondness for another human being, Aristotle adopts the term *eunous*, “well-disposed” or “bearing goodwill”.<sup>2</sup> It differs from liking wine in that we do wish good things for the other’s sake, even if our sentiment is not reciprocated; but it is still not full-fledged *philia*, just because it is not mutual. As such, it corresponds precisely to *to philein* or “loving” as Aristotle defines it in the *Rhetoric*: “Let *to philein* be wishing for someone the things that he deems good, for the sake of that person and not oneself”.

Two points are clear from Aristotle’s definition of love. First, it is unequivocally and emphatically altruistic: one wishes and acts to realize good things for the other’s sake, in accord with what the other conceives of as good – reciprocally so in the case of friendship. In the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle affirms that a *philos* must share in the pleasure and pain of the other on account of the other and for no other reason. This is because, if the other has what is good, we ourselves will be pleased at this realization of our wish, and otherwise not (1381a3-7). For the same reason, *philoï* will have the same friends and enemies in common.

Second, love is described not as a sentiment or feeling but as a settled intention. Here, Aristotle’s conception of *philia* and *to philein* differs in an important respect from modern definitions of “love”. The second edition of *Webster’s New International Dictionary* (1959), for example, defines “love” as “a feeling of strong personal attachment” and “ardent affection”. Elaine Hatfield and Richard Rapson, writing in the *Handbook of Emotions* (2000: 655), observe: “Companionate love... combines feelings of deep attachment, commitment, and intimacy”. The emphasis is on feeling, together with a notion of attachment and closeness. Aristotle, however, says nothing

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<sup>2</sup> This is not the sense of *eunous* and *eunoia*, of course, in *NE* 9.5, 1166b30-67a21, where Aristotle explicitly contrasts *eunoia* with *philia* and with *philêsis* (cf. *EE* 7, 1241a3-14). But here, in his definition of *philia* between *philoï*, Aristotle has not yet introduced these technical distinctions, and he reaches for a convenient term to express one-way *philia*.

about feelings but looks exclusively to intention,<sup>3</sup> an intention which, moreover, has as its object the well-being of the other.

Taken together, these two points allow Aristotle to escape, I think, the post-modern paradoxes about the possibility of altruism posed, for example, by Jacques Derrida, who observes (1997: 128, 131): “For there to be a gift, there must be no reciprocity, return, exchange, counter-gift, or debt. If the other *gives me back* or *owes me* or has to give me back what I give him or her, there will not have been a gift”; this is the ground of “the impossibility or double bind of the gift” (131). So too Pierre Bourdieu insists (1997: 231) “The major characteristic of the experience of the gift is, without doubt, its ambiguity. On the one hand, it is experienced (or intended) as a refusal of self-interest and egoistic calculation, and an exaltation of generosity – a gratuitous, unrequited gift. On the other hand, it never entirely excludes awareness of the logic of exchange or even confession of the repressed impulses or, intermittently, the denunciation of another, denied, truth of generous exchange – its constraining and costly character”. For Aristotle, we do not enhance the well-being of the other in order to receive benefits in return; but if the other fails to wish good things for us in turn, then there is no friendship. We may still love the other: Aristotle points to a mother’s love for an infant child as an instance of such *philia*; but since it is not reciprocal, it does not qualify as *philia* in the more restricted acceptance of friendship.

Aristotle explains that love results from the belief that a thing or person is *philêton*, that is, of the sort to elicit *philia*. As he puts it (*Nicomachean Ethics* 8.2, 1155b18-19): “Not everything is loved [passive form of *philein*], but just what is *philêton*, and this is the good or the pleasing or the useful” (since a thing is useful because it leads to what is good or pleasing, the three categories of *philêta* are reduced to two).<sup>4</sup> For Aristotle the nature of the other (or a belief about that nature) provides the reason why one loves, that is, why one wishes that good things accrue to the other; the several kinds of *philia* or mutual loving differ, accordingly, in respect not to this wish but rather to their eliciting causes. If *philia* that is based upon the good character of the other is more durable than that based on one that is pleasing, it does not alter the fact that it is *philia* only insofar as it is an altruistic (and reciprocal) desire for the well-being of the other.<sup>5</sup> In the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle identifies the character traits that inspire love in

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<sup>3</sup> In general, Aristotle treats the emotions in terms of cognitive states rather than as “qualia”, that is, the physical awareness of a feeling state that is ostensibly specific to each different emotion.

<sup>4</sup> These two (or three) classes of the *philêton* do not exhaust the reasons for feeling *philia* toward another; Aristotle treats kinship, for example, as an independent motive for *philia* (*Nicomachean Ethics* 8.12, 1161b16-24).

<sup>5</sup> Aristotle argues (*Nicomachean Ethics* 8.3, 1156b7-11) that *philia* is complete or best (*teleia*) in the case of those who feel *philia* for one another, and hence desire good things for one another, because they regard each other as good. For *philia* requires wishing good things for the other for the other’s sake, and people are good in themselves (*kath’hautous*), whereas they are useful or pleasant incidentally (*kata sumbebêkos*). This is something of a sleight of hand on Aristotle’s part. Goodness, unlike usefulness or affability, may be considered a qual-

others, such as justness and moderation. Such people will not seek their own advantage unfairly, and hence are likely to wish good things for us; if we favor justice, we in turn will be similarly disposed toward them, and that is what it is to love. In general, Aristotle adds, we are inclined to love those who are agreeable and not quarrelsome, as well as toward those whom we admire and those by whom we wish to be admired. Clearly, we may in these cases love another without that love being reciprocated; we will be *philoï*, however, only in the case that the love is mutual. Aristotle also affirms that people love (*philein*) those who have treated them well, or who, they believe, wish to do so, and also those who love the ones they love (1381a11-14), and adds that we love those who hate the same people we do, or are hated by the same people (1381a15-17). The reason is that in these cases, the same things will appear good and bad to both parties, so that they will desire the same things as good, and this is what it is to be a *philos*. Aristotle has apparently ignored the condition that the desire be for the other's sake, and not one's own: the mere fact that two people regard the same things as good does not guarantee that they will desire these things for each other. But Aristotle is not defining love here, but rather identifying the reasons why one loves: the awareness that we share the same idea of what is good and bad with others disposes us to wish good things for their sakes.

Most often in the two treatises under consideration, Aristotle employs the term *philia* to designate the reciprocal affection between friends, but he occasionally uses it in the simple sense of love, irrespective of mutuality. In this, he is in conformity with ordinary Greek usage, which did not employ two distinct terms for what we call "love" and "friendship", but left the precise sense to be inferred from the context (Latin, which had available *amor* and *amicitia*, was more precise in this respect). A problem arises, however, concerning the status of *philia* between *philoï* as an emotion or *pathos*. For if, in order to be a *philos*, it is necessary not only to love another but that the other love in return, then *philia* does not depend solely on one's own love. The *philia* between *philoï* has, as it were, two distinct loci. To put it differently, the *philia* that obtains between *philoï* seems to have the character of a relationship. Does the idea of a relationship, then, enter into Aristotle's conception of the mutual *philia* between *philoï*? Martha Nussbaum has addressed this question most directly; she writes (2001: 473-74): "love, while an emotion, is also a *relationship*. I may feel love for someone, or be in love with someone, and that love is itself an emotion...; but there is another sense in which love is present only if there is a mutual relationship... Aristotle... does, however, hold that love – or at least *philia* – is not merely an emotion. Although it involves emotion, it also has requirements that go beyond the emotional... In other words, the term 'love' is used equivocally, to name both an emotion and a more complex form of life". Nussbaum goes on to indicate how love might be conditioned by the mutuality condition attaching to friendship: we must not imagine, she writes, "that

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ity of character independent of the effect it produces on the other; but it does not follow that one who feels *philia* for another because that person is useful or pleasant desires what is good for the other only incidentally (at 8.3, 1156a6-10, Aristotle states plainly that all three types of *philêsis* and *philia* involve a desire for the other's good for the other's sake).

the emotions involved in love are unaffected by the presence or absence of a reciprocal relationship of the sort Aristotle depicts". Specifically, the knowledge that another loves me may affect that quality of my love toward him or her; we recall that, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle insists that each *philos* must be cognizant of *eunoia* or affection on the part of the other. Apart from one's knowledge of the other's love, Nussbaum continues, "lovers will have emotions toward their relationship itself, and the activities it involves. Thus we cannot even understand the emotional aspects of love fully without seeing how it is frequently related to interactions and exchanges of the sort Aristotle is thinking about" (474). Aristotle, however, never suggests that *philo*i in some sense love their relationship itself. The mutual love that obtains between *philo*i may be better described as a state of affairs, consisting simply in the fact that each party loves (that is, *philein*) the other.

Philia, then, has two uses. In one sense, it coincides with *philein* and refers to an altruistic wish for the good of the other; in another, it names the state of affairs that obtains between *philo*i, which requires that each *philos* have the corresponding wish for the other. If one of the parties fails to have this desire, or does not act to provide good things for the other to the extent possible, it convicts him or her of a lack of *philia* in the sense of loving, and hence the state of affairs that depends on reciprocal love – *philia* in the sense of friendship – ceases to exist.

In sum, love and friendship in Aristotle are best understood not as entailing obligations or as based on kinship, but as an altruistic desire which, when reciprocated, results in a state of affairs that Aristotle, and Greeks in general, called *philia*.

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