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REVIEW ARTICLE

ARISTOTLE'S ESSAY ON FRIENDSHIP

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Aristotle's Essay on Friendship

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Abstract – Aristotle, in his essay on friendship intellectually considers the state of friendship in its ramifications right from the qualities of character and the conditions necessary for true friendship to the human problems related to it. The originality and universality of Aristotle's thoughts can be seen by a comparison of his view on friendship with those of his mentor Plato and with later writers such as Montaigne and Shakespeare and by the fact that his views are still relevant today.

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Aristotle rightly rates friendship as an important "virtue"² that is "most necessary with a view to living"³. In the course of his essay he discusses the different kinds of friendships and the merits and demerits of each. The first kind, according to Aristotle, is that of utility where friends love each other only for the benefit they can get from each other. Similar is the second kind of friendship – that contracted for the sake of pleasure. In this case friends 'love' each other only for the pleasure they give each other. But such friendships, according to Aristotle, are not permanent in nature since when the motive of friendship is done away the friendship too is dissolved. Shakespeare exemplifies this vividly in Second Part of King Henry IV where Prince Hal swiftly breaks off from his old friends when he no longer has any use for them.

Aristotle correctly points out that it is in such friendships based on selfish motives that complaints arise. In the friendship of utility dissatisfaction occurs because each may feel that he is not getting as much benefit as he deserves. Again, differences may also arise in friendships based on superiority for each expects to get more from the other. The man who is inferior or in need expects the friend to help him while powerful man feels it useless to help an inferior person from whom he cannot benefit. Yet again complaints may arise in the friendship between lovers. The lover complains that his excess of love is not met by love in return while the beloved too complains of the love not fulfilling his promises. Such incidents occur when the love loves the beloved for the sake of utility and they both do not possess the qualities expected of them. In short, every friendship formed for a selfish motive is prone to break up, while that formed for the love of character will endure.

The highest kind of friendship where there is no cause for complaint, according to Aristotle is between good people who love each other for their character and not for any benefit that might accrue from the other party, and share mutual goodwill and love for each other. This is a view that not only both Plato and Montaigne

but also the modern reader fully endorse. Plato, in addition to this emphasizes the educative value of living with a virtuous friend.

Aristotle goes on to discuss the various qualities of character necessary to form true friends. The most important virtue is goodness of character for that which is "good and pleasant is lovable and desirable" and good men will therefore be attracted to each other. Friendship involves mutual choices and goodmen will choose like-minded men for friends. Their friendship too lasts as long as they are good and since goodness is an enduring virtue, such a friendship is bound to be permanent. Plato also regards the virtuous friend as the greatest possible blessing.

Two other qualities conducive to good friendship are good temper and an enjoyment of companionship. Thus sour and elderly people do not easily form friends since they do not possess these qualities.

Again, only those who are capable of loving others can be true friends, since "loving is more the essence of friendship than being loved"⁵. This appears at first to contradict a later statement that Aristotle makes that only the person who loves himself most can also love others. Aristotle argues that a good man who is a love of self will perform noble acts for the sake of his friends or country and is seen willing to die for them thereby gaining for himself the honour that the esteems more than anything else on earth. Thus the good man will seek advantage in the form of honour and nobility for himself and will achieve it by benefiting others while the evil man who is a lover of self will try to achieve material gain at the cost of others.

Aristotle further discusses the conditions that are necessary for friendship to prevail. All friendships are formed by association with others and to be build a strong bond of friendship the association should be for a considerable period so that the parties can

know, trust and love each other. Plato too points out the impropriety of a hasty attachment since it takes time to test and trust the other party. Once the integrity of the other has been established it is characteristic of friends to live together for only those who enjoy doing the same things together and delight in each other's company can live together. Plato too commends the faithfulness of friends who live together and intend to pass their whole life in each other's company. Although this was an accepted practice in the 4th century B.C., it would appear highly impractical to the modern mind.

Aristotle rightly insist that to maintain the probability of friendship there should be an equal degree of reciprocity and "equal return in goodwill and pleasantness"⁶ and usefulness. However, it is difficult to agree with Aristotle's advice as to the manner in which an equalization be brought about when there is friendship between unequals as between father and son, an elder and a young person or between a ruler and subject. Aristotle suggests that then the lesser should give more love to the elder for "the love should be in proportion to the merit of the parties"⁷. However, I think this would rather bring about a sense of inequality if there were not equal reciprocity of love. Montaigne, I think, is nearer the truth in his insistence that there should be an equal degree of reciprocity of love between friends.

Further, Aristotle again rightly believes that one cannot have more than one true friend since the degree of love and intimacy shared with one true friend is not possible with others. In this regard both Plato and Montaigne also hold the same view.

Aristotle points about the necessity of goodwill and concord in friendship, though in itself neither is identical with friendship. Both are inactive friendly feelings that one may even feel for strangers but when prolonged reach the point of intimacy and become friendship.

Again, the demands of justice too increase with the intensity of the friendship. For instance there is a difference in the injustice of an act of a father towards his son and a fellow citizen towards another. The injustice is increased by being exhibited towards those who are friends in a fuller sense - for instance it is a more terrible thing to defraud or comrade then a fellow citizen.

Since equality, concord, goodwill and justice are all necessary for perfect friendship to prevail, therefore, it is more likely to exist in democracy than in tyranny. Plato too proves by examples that true friendships have existed only in democracy and not in autocracy.

Another important aspect of friendship that Aristotle discusses is the different people with whom friendship can be formed. He believes that friendship can exist between parent and child and the relation then would be that of an inferior to "something good and superior".

Such a friendship possesses pleasantness and utility more than that of strangers since life is lived more in common. Montaigne however, disagrees for he does not believe that a perfect friendship can exist between father and son since by the very nature of the relationship they cannot share their in most thoughts and neither can the son administer reproof or advice to the father as is a friend's prerogative.

Again, Aristotle also approves of the friendship between brothers since they are born of the same parents, have been brought up and educated in the same manner, love each other from their birth, are akin in character and the test of time too has been applied fully and satisfactorily. Aristotle does not take into consideration the possibility of brothers being contrary in their dispositions as Shakespeare frequently shows in his plays. For example in Hamlet the good king is killed by his evil brother Clandius as also in As You Like It where the good Duke is driven away from his kingdom by his evil brother Frederick. Montaigne posits the other extreme view of the impossibility of brothers being perfect friends by the relation being a forced one rather than one of choice.

Aristotle further considers the friendship of man and wife and sees it as natural since "man is naturally inclined to form couples"⁹. Both utility and pleasure is to be found in this kind of friendship and if both the parties are good then the relation may also be based on virtue. Plato regards love of woman as base. Montaigne too does not believe that women possess the high virtue required of true friends.

Finally, Aristotle considers the friendship between lovers which he believes is perfect only if based on the love of each other's character, but he doubts that it can exist, since the love loves his beloved for his physical beauty and the beloved for the attentions paid to him. When the bloom of youth has passed then the friendship ceases because the lover no longer gets pleasure at the sight of the beloved and the beloved too feels neglected and this gives rise to a mutual distrust. Unlike Aristotle, Plato believes that true friendship can exist between lovers but basis it necessarily in the virtue of both. However, Montaigne, like Aristotle does not believe in the friendship of lovers since their love ends with the satiety of their physical desires.

Finally Aristotle points out the universality of the need for good friends to share one's joys and sorrows, to help one in the hour of need and to give pleasure at all times so that life may be worth living.

It is to Aristotle's credit that though he wrote more than 2,000 years ago yet most of his views on friendship hold good to this day.

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4. Shakespeare, William. The Complete Works of William Shakespeare. New York: The Hamlyn Publishing Group LN., 1958.

NOTES

1. Aristotle, The Nicomachean Ethics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980) Chaps VII & IX.
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3. Ibid., P. 192
4. Ibid., P. 200
5. Ibid., P. 205
6. Ibid., P. 200
7. Ibid., P. 204
8. Ibid., P. 213
9. Ibid., P. 214

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