DRST 004: Directed Studies Philosophy
Professor Michael Della Rocca

By submitting this essay, I attest that it is my own work, completed in accordance with University regulations. — Lukas Bacho

Perfect and Imperfect Friendships in Nicomachean Ethics

by Lukas Bacho ’25

In *Nicomachean Ethics,* Aristotle distinguishes three types of friendship: utility, pleasure, and virtue (1156a–b).[1] Utility friendship is the least perfect because the friends’ valuation of each other is wholly based on “some good which they get from each other” (1156a11–2). Pleasure friendship is better, for at least it entails appreciation of the other’s character; but this kind, too, is ultimately transactional, and thus “incidental” (1156a19). Virtue friendship is the most perfect, arising between good people who love and do good to one another “without qualification” (1156b13). Aristotle argues that most relationships that we term “friendship” are friendships only insofar as they are shadows of perfect friendship, based on utility, pleasure, or one in exchange for the other (1158b). While Aristotle’s account is thorough and remains insightful today, the realistic improbability of his perfect friendship invites speculation about the seeming self-centeredness of friendship in all its forms.

Let us begin by examining utility friendship. Aristotle defines this kind as arising between people for the purpose of material benefit (1156a). While he allows that both parties may be useful to each other, the unidirectional relationship between host and guest is a prime example of utility friendship (1156a31)—particularly in ancient Greece, where guests received not only hospitality and nourishment but also lavish gifts. In our contemporary world, we may think of a teenager texting his “friend” only when he wants a favor from her, even while

[1] The Bekker numbers cited throughout are based on the translation of the *Ethics* in the following edition:
Aristotle. *The Basic Works of Aristotle*. Edited by Richard McKeon, translated by C. D. C. Reeve, Modern Library Classics, 2001.

pretending to care how she is doing. Aristotle does see utility friendship as arising between young or middle-aged people "who pursue utility" (1156a27), though it is most pervasive among old people, who generally "pursue not the pleasant but the useful" (1156a26). The recognizable archetype of the curmudgeon helps concretize Aristotle's issue with utility friendship: even if elderly friends desire the best for each other, they tend not to "delight in each other" (1158a8). One wishes her utility friend well not because she delights in him, but because he benefits her. Because such friends are "lovers not of each other but of profit" (1157a16), bad people can be "good" friends in a strictly utilitarian sense, as countries might be "friendly" but actually aim to gain advantage over one another. The insight that utility friendship can flourish between bad actors is key to Aristotle's conclusion that utility friendship cannot be ideal.

Similarly, pleasure friendship devalues the character of the other in favor of what the other provides. The distinction between utility and pleasure friends is that while the former value "what is good for themselves" (1156a15–6), the latter value "what is pleasant to themselves" (1156a17). In Aristotle's conception, pleasure is less quantitative than utility, and as such is less "commercially minded" (1158a21). At least the mutual appreciation between pleasure friends is dependent on their unique personalities, even if their personalities serve as a means to the end of pleasure. Pleasure friendship is also more likely to be a two-way street, involving more "generosity" between parties than utility friendship does (1158a20). Therefore, pleasure friendship is superior to utility friendship. Aristotle's neatly contrasting example to the utility-driven elderly is the pleasure-driven young, who "live under the guidance of emotion, and pursue above all what is pleasant to themselves and what is immediately before them" (1156a33–4). Romantic love between young people aims at pleasure rather than love itself,

which is why it is so fleeting (1156b1–4). Pleasure friendship—like utility friendship—can feel genuine and even perfect from the inside, though it is not.

Yet the truest form of friendship is based on neither utility nor pleasure. Perfect friendship occurs between people who are "alike in virtue" (1156b7–8), for they wish each other well for the sake of wellness, and not so that each may continue to derive utility or pleasure from the other. Perfect friends cannot help being friends—they are friends "by reason of their own nature" (1156b10–1). Aristotle takes care to note that perfect friendship does not exclude pleasure or utility; in fact, it admits profound levels of both, but as byproducts rather than aims (1156b12–23). Such a friendship is primed for longevity, for while utility and pleasure grow and subside in relationships, virtue is "an enduring thing" (1156b13). A friendship based on like virtue is also equal by definition, in contrast to the host-guest and lover-beloved dynamics that threaten to emerge in utility and pleasure friendships. Therefore, perfect friendship fulfills the benefits of its lesser counterparts and then transcends them. All other "friendships" merely resemble perfect friendship; insofar as they mimic it successfully, they are friendships, but insofar as they fail, they are not (1158b1–11).

More than a modern reader may like, Aristotle's taxonomy of friendship draws attention to the ulterior motives that drive most human relationships, however subconsciously. Even our most perfect-seeming friendships are not immune to the strains that our desires for utility and pleasure impose on them. However, a troubling question follows: is friendship *ever* for the sake of a good beyond the personal good? Aristotle himself proclaims that "all friendship is for the sake of good or of pleasure" (1156b19–20), capturing the vague distinction between aspiration toward good for one's own sake and aspiration toward good for *its* sake. One wonders how much pleasure and utility a perfect friendship can admit without devolving into a friendship based on

one or both of those ends. It is easy to imagine a friendship between equally virtuous people growing so pleasurable that they become totally codependent on each other for happiness, compromising mutual well-wishing. This conundrum is even more puzzling given Aristotle's focus on self-love later in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, which seems at odds with his characterization of perfect friendship as selfless. He remarks that to be harmonious with others, one must be harmonious with oneself (1166a1–3), meaning that one "wishes for himself what is good and what seems so…for his own sake" (1166a14–6). The good person's friend is "another self" (1166a31), for he loves her *as* he loves himself, and thus he must love himself in order to love her. Not only is self-love primary; insofar as one's friend is another self, friendship is actually a form of self-love. Aristotle's intertwining of self-love and perfect friendship invites the criticism that all friendship is self-centered—especially that between virtuous people, who are most adept at self-love.

Aristotle begins to address his apparent self-contradiction by commenting on the debate as to "whether a man should love himself most, or some one else" (1168a27–8). In his time, those who hoarded wealth, status, and base pleasures were pejoratively called "self-lovers"; Aristotle agrees that they exemplify the dominant form of self-love and deserve reproach (1168a–b). However, there is a truer form of self-love that entails striving "toward what is noble" for its own sake (1169a8), which ends up rewarding its practitioner with virtue, "the greatest of goods" (1169a11). While bad self-lovers harm themselves and others, good self-lovers benefit both (1169a12–4). Of course, acknowledging the personal benefits of noble action is a slippery slope, reintroducing the possibility of ulterior motive. But Aristotle does not suggest that virtuous behavior is easy. Perfect friendships are "infrequent" because the virtuous people who experience it are few (1156b24), and even they cannot be true friends to many people

(1158a10–17). Such people are able to simultaneously love themselves for their own sake, love another for her own sake, and love good for its own sake without muddling two or all of the three. Cultivating a friendship of intense utility and pleasure without letting those qualities master one's intentions is not for the faint of heart. So perhaps our suspicion that all friendships are self-oriented only further supports Aristotle's claim about the rarity of the kind based on virtue. In an imperfect world, why should we expect to readily conjure examples of perfect friendship? Among Aristotle's most profound insights is that "a wish for friendship may arise quickly, but friendship does not" (1156b31–2). Here, a new understanding of Aristotle's view emerges: while utility and pleasure friendships are common phenomena meriting examination, perfect friendship is an elusive ideal meriting aspiration.

We first tried to understand Aristotle's three types of friendship as a hierarchy with utility friendship at the bottom, pleasure friendship in the middle, and perfect—i.e., virtue-based—friendship at the top. His account is provocatively attentive to the selfish undercurrents of most human relationships—so attentive, in fact, that we may wonder whether the perfect friendship he describes is possible at all. There seems to be a contradiction between the good person's virtuous self-love and her selfless disposition toward others. But in recognizing Aristotle's perfect friendship as an ideal rather than simply one of three categories that classify friendships in the world, we may better appreciate its insight. His focus, then, is not hierarchical classification so much as the imitative relation of real-world friendships to the form of perfect friendship. Yet for all his grim observations about human nature, Aristotle also offers hope. His promise that ideal friendship "requires time and familiarity" suggests that all perfect bonds begin in imperfection (1156b25–6). People must have "eaten salt together" (1156b27)—i.e., endured hardships—to be true friends. Seen in this light, even our most

satisfying utility and pleasure friendships are mere preparations for the perfect friendship yet to come.