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The Necessary and Sufficient Conditions for Friendship

In *The Nichomachean Ethics*, Aristotle distinguishes between three kinds of friendship: friendship of pleasure, of utility, and of virtue. Of these three, he claims that friendship based on virtue is the truest or most complete form. Thus, to learn what true friendship is in Aristotle's view, one must first learn how he defined virtue, since the former is dependent on the latter. In this essay I will argue that what Aristotle says about friendship is true, however, his ethical framework ultimately falls short of accounting for why this is true. Something more is needed. I will then offer a possible solution that might better explain why virtuous friendship is the most complete. And finally, I will attempt to deal with some possible objections to this solution.

II. The Most Rational Friendship

Since Aristotle's definition of true friendship is dependent on his definition of virtue, it is best to begin with a brief overview of what he said about virtue. Aristotle's ethical framework is an "end" based framework. He claimed that for every action there is some end or goal in mind which he called the good. Accordingly, there is a hierarchy of ends, with most ends falling under the umbrella of higher master ends or higher goods. For example, marksmanship can be an art in itself, but it can also be a means to military strategy. In turn, military strategy is a means to victory; victory is a means to national security, and so forth. However, Aristotle claimed that not everything can be a means to an end because that would require an infinite

regress of ends, which would make our actions meaningless and futile. So, he posits the existence of an end, "which we desire for its own sake, an end which determines all our other desires" (qtd. in Johnson 2007 p.62). This end would be the final end and also the Supreme Good at which all our actions and choices aim. Aristotle believes the supreme good is happiness, but to leave it at that would be, as he puts it, "trite." He takes it further and claims the best way to define the highest good is to ascertain the "proper function" of humankind. He asks:

Are we then to suppose that, while the carpenter and the shoemaker have definite functions or businesses belonging to them, man as such has none, and is not designed by nature to fulfill any function? Must we not rather assume that, just as the eye, the hand, the foot and each of the various members of the body manifestly has a certain function of its own, so a human being also has a certain function over and above all the functions of his particular members? What then precisely can this function be? (p.12, Book I, vii, 11)

Aristotle reasons that the proper function of humankind cannot be simply to exist, since that is no different from plants. Nor can it be merely sensory perception or impulse because that is no different than animals. He concludes that the proper function of humankind is the "active exercise of the rational faculty" (p.13, Book I, vii, 13). Reason is what sets us apart from all other living things. It is our characteristic activity. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* defines Aristotle's position on virtue as,

...the state that makes a human being good and makes him perform his function well. His function (his *ergon* or characteristic activity), Aristotle says,...is rational activity, so when we perform rational activity well, we are good (virtuous) human beings and live well (we are happy). [However] Scholars disagree about what kind of rational activity Aristotle means (Homiak 2003).

Whatever the disagreements, we can summarize Aristotle's argument thus far:

1. There is a supreme good at which all our actions and desires aim.
2. The proper function of humankind must be the supreme good.
3. The active exercise of the rational faculty is the proper function of humankind.
4. Therefore, the active exercise of the rational faculty is the supreme good at which all our actions and desires aim.

In the Aristotelian framework, a good shoemaker is not one who makes a shoe every once in a while, or makes poorly constructed shoes that fall apart. No, a good shoemaker is one who consistently makes high quality shoes. *He excels at his particular function.* Likewise, a good human is one who excels at his particular function of being a rational creature. The good person is consistently exercising his rational faculty and actively living in accordance with rational principle. This is our function according to Aristotle and this is the basic premise of his ethical argument. Later, in *The Nichomachean Ethics*, he offers the Doctrine of the Mean, which describes in detail what the good person will look like, how he will act under certain circumstances, and what kind of relationships he will have. That brings us to our main concern. Aristotle said, "The perfect form of friendship is that between the good, and those who resemble each other in virtue" (p.208, Book VIII, iii, 5). So, let us examine what he said about virtuous friendships. Aristotle criticizes friendships that are not based on virtue as being base or vulgar.

A friendship based on utility dissolves as soon as its profit ceases; for the friends did not love each other, but what they got out of each other. Friendships therefore based on pleasure and on utility can exist

between two bad men, [or] between one bad man and one good...But clearly only good men can be friends for what they are in themselves; since bad men do not take pleasure in each other, save as they get some advantage from each other (p.210, Book VIII, iv, 2).

Aristotle goes on to explain that a good and virtuous person will do good to his friend for his friend's sake, and not his own. There is a selflessness to the disposition of the virtuous, as opposed to the selfishness of the non-virtuous. And when this selfless goodwill is reciprocated between two individuals, it is a complete and true friendship. If one party is selfish, then the relationship is not mutual and it falls short of a complete friendship. Aristotle's view corroborates our common experience and intuition. It seems to make perfect sense until we go back and remember that he defined the supreme good as the "active exercise of the rational faculty." It is here where a couple of problems present themselves.

First, if the ultimate aim for a human is to actively exercise his rational faculty, then it does not require him to do it in a virtuous way. He could excel at calculating how to use people. He could excel at being manipulative in his relationships, as unfortunately many people do. He could even be rationally cruel; "artistically cruel" as it has been put. In other words, being virtuous is not a necessary condition for being rational. However, this may be unfair to Aristotle. Perhaps he didn't say that at all, and I've got it backwards. One could argue that Aristotle did not say that virtue is a necessary condition for being rational, but instead he argued the opposite that rationality is a necessary condition for behaving virtuously. That claim is controversial, as will be shown later, but I will concede it for now and respond with the following: In an end based framework, there is nothing beyond the final end. If my above summary of Aristotle's argument is correct, then the final end for Aristotle is the active exercise of the rational faculty; that is the supreme good. But a sufficient condition is beyond the necessary condition. If necessary condition Y is also the final end and supreme good, then there is nothing obligating us to go beyond that to the sufficient condition X. Let me offer

an illustration. Being in Kansas City, Missouri is a necessary condition for being on the UMKC campus. Being at UMKC is sufficient for saying you are in Kansas City. However, if your final destination or end goal is to merely get to Kansas City, then there is nothing that guarantees or obligates you to go beyond that into the UMKC campus. Likewise, if active rationality (as the necessary condition) is the final end, then there is nothing that guarantees or obligates a person to go beyond that and behave virtuously. But perhaps I am still being unfair to Aristotle by not taking into consideration his detailed description of the virtuous person, as outlined in the *Doctrine of the Mean*. To that I would simply argue that the Mean does not follow necessarily from his premises that lay the foundation for the supreme good. One could rationalize being a coward just as easily, maybe more easily, than being courageous. But that is a whole other argument in itself. The point I am making is that even though virtually everything Aristotle says about friendship is correct in my opinion, his ethical framework, which is an integral part of his argument, does not fully support it. This creates problems for Aristotle when he begins to talk about virtuous friends being selfless and loving the other for their own sake. There is nothing about rationality that compels a person to go beyond the end of rationality and become selfless. Are there not friendships in which we are dreadfully fair with our companions; not sacrificing one moment of unearned time, one bit of undeserved energy, not giving any credit where it isn't due? These kinds of friendships are common – perhaps the most common. And what is unreasonable about them? Nothing. They are perfectly rational and fair, yet there is no self-sacrifice. One can achieve the supreme good of actively exercising one's rational faculty and still never be selfless, which is necessary to achieve complete friendship. Reason is blind and pitiless. There is nothing about reason itself that causes us to love.

The second problem for Aristotle is that the person who is actively rational may never achieve true intimacy. Aristotle writes, “It is not possible to have many friends in the full meaning of the word friendship, any more than it is to be in love with many people at once... for perfect friendship you must get to know a man thoroughly, and become intimate with him, which

is a very difficult thing to do” (p.212, Book VIII, vi, 2). Aristotle correctly points out the difficulty of achieving true friendship, that is, intimacy. But what Aristotle doesn't account for is this: for a person to achieve true intimacy he must often do things that some would see as completely irrational! He must forgive when his friend does not deserve it. He must take the risk of making himself vulnerable. He must have courage. He must have faith. This is why it is so difficult to be truly intimate with people. And to compound this difficulty, for complete friendship to be achieved, these things must be reciprocated. *Both* people must forgive, *both* must make themselves vulnerable, *both* must have courage, *both* must have faith. It is truly hard to be intimate! Some may see Aristotle's picture of the virtuous man as one who is perfectly temperate, reasonable, and moderate. And while these qualities can be guards against vice and wrongdoing, they can also be obstacles for what is required to truly love. The great missionary preacher Oswald Chambers (1935) once wrote, “If human love does not carry a man beyond himself, it is not love. If love is always discreet, always wise, always sensible and calculating, never carried beyond itself, it is not love at all. It may be affection, it may be warmth of feeling, but it has not the true nature of love in it” (p.52). And so it is true, real friendship requires real intimacy; real intimacy requires real love; and real love often requires what some see as irrational. Reason can often prevent us from taking that risk.

Now there is a disagreement as to what counts as being rational and this is the controversy that I spoke of earlier. While some see taking the risk of making oneself vulnerable as irrational, others may see it as perfectly rational and thus the claim that rationality is a necessary condition for behaving virtuously is confirmed for them. For example, one may reason that what is lost by failing to make oneself vulnerable and open to intimacy, is greater than what one gains by not taking the risk. In other words, rationality can tell us that it is more beneficial in the end to take the risk of making oneself vulnerable. But beneficial for whom? For oneself. Notice the selfish logic that is intrinsic to rationality. Any attempt to show that self-sacrifice is somehow rational will always employ some form of self-interest, which seems contrary to the very idea of “self-sacrifice.” This

kind of reasoning seems to go against what Aristotle said is characteristic of virtuous friendship, in which each party loves the other for their sake and not his own. But this argument would involve an in-depth exploration of duty, altruism, etc. which would greatly exceed the length and purpose of this essay. My only point for bringing it up is to show that *Aristotle's claim that rationality is a necessary condition for behaving virtuously is controversial at best*. There is an entire tradition that argues that many virtuous acts are completely irrational. A lot of people see love as an irrational endeavor. There may indeed be good reasons to love, but that does not necessarily make love rational. Thus far, we have seen that there can be nothing beyond the final end. The final end (and supreme good), for Aristotle, is the active exercise of the rational faculty. Also, a sufficient condition is "beyond" the necessary condition. If rationality is a necessary condition for behaving virtuously, and rationality is the final end, then one has no need to go beyond rationality and behave virtuously. Furthermore, the claim that rationality is a necessary condition for virtuous behavior is controversial at best because there are many virtuous acts that could be argued are completely irrational. Ultimately, Aristotle's ethical framework falls short as a foundation for explaining why virtuous friendships are the most complete. Something more is needed.

III. The Proper Function of Humankind

Aristotle was correct to assert that friendships based on utility and pleasure are not true friendships, and it is only friendships based on virtue that achieve real intimacy. But something more is needed to explain why this is true and fill in the gaps of Aristotle's argument. Let us go back once again to what Aristotle said about the supreme good. He attempted to define the supreme good by ascertaining the proper function of humankind, which he said must be a function that is "over and beyond all the functions" of a human's particular members. He then concluded that living in accordance with reason is the proper function of humankind. But isn't reason a function of one of our members—the mind? So then reason is not over and beyond all of our other functions. It is simply a function which

distinguishes humans from the rest. Perhaps there is a different function which humans are designed for. Maybe the active exercise of the rational faculty is not the final end, but a means to something else—the true final end. Allow me to offer one possible answer which is quite simple: real friendship is based on a virtue where intimacy itself is the supreme good and the final end. *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines the word "intimate" as "inmost, most inward, deep seated; hence, pertaining to or connected with the inmost nature or fundamental character of a thing; essential; intrinsic." Perhaps it is this goal—to be "connected with the inmost nature" of something or someone—that is our deepest psychological desire, as well as our "proper function." When that desire is directed at an entity with the capacity for the same desire (i.e. a human being), is when intimacy can reach its fullest and most glorious form. Maybe intimacy, not rationality, is the "end which determines all our other desires." If intimacy is an end in itself, then reason is merely a tool to assist in achieving that end. In turn, emotion would also be a tool since true intimacy cannot exist without it. Therefore, a friendship in which both parties' goal is true intimacy will be the most complete friendship. When intimacy is the shared goal, everything else falls in line. Both parties will do what is required to achieve that goal: they will forgive, and they will allow themselves to be forgiven; they will take risks, and they will allow risks to be taken on their behalf; they will be courageous, and they will be vulnerable; they will be rational, and they will have faith. In this view, friendships based on utility and pleasure, while sometimes rational, can never achieve true intimacy because the goal of the parties involved is not intimacy, but something else. Their motives are not virtuous. It is only friendships where the motive of each party is virtuous—that is, concerned with intimacy—where they attain true friendship. This ethical framework, in which intimacy is the supreme good, may correct the deficiencies of Aristotle's framework and corroborate multiple aspects of the human experience. First, if the ultimate aim for a human is to achieve intimacy, then it requires him to do it in a virtuous way; that is, it requires him to be selfless. Selflessness, or goodwill as some might call it, is a necessary condition for intimacy to occur. Aristotle points

out that friendship is not an emotion, but a fixed disposition (p.212, Book VIII, v, 5). It is a voluntary activity in which we strive for intimacy. This requires us to have a disposition of general goodwill. Aristotle remarks, “Goodwill is inoperative friendship, which when it continues and reaches the point of intimacy may become friendship proper. Goodwill seems therefore to be the beginning of friendship, just as the pleasure of the eye is the beginning of love” (p.240, Book IX, v, 3). One cannot be truly intimate without having goodwill; just as one cannot have romantic love without first having some level of attraction. To put it in the terms of logic, we could say, “If intimacy, then goodwill.” Intimacy is sufficient for saying there is goodwill. Goodwill is a necessary condition for intimacy. Our experience confirms this truth. The people I know who have the most successfully intimate relationships, are also the kindest and most deep hearted people I know. And in turn, the people I know that lack goodwill the most; that are the cruelest and meanest people I can think of, are quite definitely the loneliest. Their lives are completely void of intimacy. They have not achieved it even with their spouse or children.

If intimacy is the final end at which all our actions aim, then rationality is a means, or guide, to get us there. This would make Aristotle’s claim that rationality is a necessary condition for behaving virtuously more convincing. If intimacy is the end goal and virtuous behavior is necessary to achieve that goal, and being rational is necessary for behaving virtuously, then all of these things are achieved as a means to intimacy. To recall my earlier illustration, if the sufficient condition of getting to the UMKC campus is the end goal, then getting to the necessary condition of arriving in Kansas City is not enough. One is required to keep going until one gets to UMKC. Similarly, if the sufficient condition of virtuous behavior (intimacy) is the end goal, then merely achieving the necessary condition of being rational is not enough. One is required to go beyond. This brings clarity to the issue of selflessness. One can achieve rationality while still being selfish, but one cannot achieve intimacy while practicing selfishness. Intimacy requires a mutual giving of oneself to the other; a kind of submission or surrender that cannot happen if one person is selfishly holding

back. In his book *Humanity*, Jonathon Glover writes, “The deeper levels of relationships are denied to people who hold large parts of themselves back... to give yourself means that part of you belongs to the person you care for” (p.24). This is so true. The problem is that we have many selfish reasons for holding ourselves back. Many of them are rationalizations of self-defense. We fear being hurt. We fear being found out. So, we abandon intimacy and instead seek a cheap replacement a perversion something to give us the illusion of intimacy without any of its risks. We make friendships with people that will ask us what we’re doing this weekend, but would never ask us if we are happy in life. We maintain relationships with people we can laugh with, but would never feel comfortable crying in front of. We seek companions that will throw themselves at us physically, but deny us emotionally. We want friends that will never ask us hard questions; never tell us that we are doing wrong, or that we are hurting ourselves. We keep friends that we know will not call us out from hiding, because they are hiding themselves. Selfishness prevents intimacy. We would do well to remember the words that C.S. Lewis penned in *The Four Loves*

To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one...Wrap it carefully around with hobbies and little luxuries...lock it up safe in the casket orcoffin of your selfishness. But in that casket safe, dark, motionless, airless it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable... The only place outside heaven where you can be perfectly safe from all the dangers of love is hell! (121)

I am uncertain as to whether or not Lewis would agree with my intimacy-based framework. But his point is well taken. Love achieves intimacy, which is connection with the innermost nature of someone, but selfishness achieves the opposite. It separates us from the innermost nature of someone. It fractures relationships. So long as we are living selfishly and fearfully, we will be closed off from even the possibility of intimacy and left

in a state of isolation. Rationality, as the final end, cannot save us from this. But intimacy, as the final end, makes clear the path.

The second problem of Aristotle's is also corrected. As stated earlier, the perfectly rational person may never achieve true intimacy because it may be true that some virtuous actions, including love, are in fact irrational. But if intimacy is the final end and the aim of a person, then this controversy does not really matter. It makes no difference whether certain virtuous actions are actually rational or not because the ultimate end is not to be rational, but to be intimate. Of course someone could misinterpret this and take it to the extreme of believing that being rational does not matter at all and we can dive head first into any relationship that we want, so long as intimacy is our goal. This view is completely absurd. And unfortunately, there are many people that hold to it. They seem genuine and charismatic on the surface, but a closer look reveals a long trail of destruction behind them; people they have consumed and hurt all in the name of passion and intimacy. Hopefully no one will go away from this essay thinking I have argued for that. My argument is not that rationality is completely useless or does not matter at all. I have simply argued that it cannot be the final end. It may very well be the case that rationality is a necessary condition for behaving virtuously. I do not know. But rationality cannot be the final end, because then there is no need to go beyond it and we end up missing out on all the beauty of virtue and the wonderful risk of being open to intimacy. In the end, we would miss out on what I believe is our very purpose – the proper function of humankind.

Finally, I want to point out that the virtuous person, as I have defined it, is quite likely to achieve true intimacy. The first reason is because, in the framework I have outlined, to live virtuously means to strive for intimacy. The virtuous person will do what is necessary to cultivate and maintain real friendships. The only possible thing that could keep them from this is failing to find someone who is equally dedicated to striving for intimacy. That is the risk involved in it – there are no guarantees. But that brings me to the second reason: a virtuous person will seek equally virtuous friends. The person that strives for real intimacy will not waste her time

with those that wish to play games, to be dishonest, or to just “have a little fun.” That does not mean the virtuous person will be closed off to everyone who falls short of this standard. As I explained earlier, the virtuous person must have a general disposition of goodwill and can have any given number of lesser friendships. However, she will reserve her most intimate and closest friendships for those who are equally virtuous.

IV. Answering Objections

Now that I have outlined an ethical framework in which intimacy is the supreme good, and have shown how this framework could possibly correct Aristotle's flaws and corroborate the human experience, I will attempt to answer some objections that could be raised against it. Someone might say: *Your framework based on intimacy ultimately results in more friendships of utility because you are essentially suggesting that we use one another as a means to an end – the end being intimacy.* Technically this objection could hold, but practically it doesn't work. This objection attempts to portray my argument as trivializing humans as a means to something else. But my argument does not do that. In a strict and literal sense, yes I am suggesting we use each other as a means to intimacy. However, the way in which I am suggesting we use each other is wholly different than any other kind of utilitarian framework. There is a way in which someone can use an object as a means to an end that cheapens the value of the object – to use it as *merely* a means to an end. And there is a way in which someone can use an object as a means to an end that bolsters the value of that object, that cultivates the health of that object, and that helps to fulfill the purpose of that object. Let me offer an illustration. If someone wanted to build the perfect house, it would involve them using wood as a means. However, they would not buy the cheapest wood available. They would not clumsily place the wood in position, or cut it without measuring first. No, they would seek out the highest quality wood. They would treat it to make it stronger and bring out the natural beauty of its grain. They would use the precision of a surgeon when measuring and cutting and they would place the wood

in its position in the most careful matter – all for the end of building the perfect house. Similarly, to “use” someone as a means to intimacy is not to cheapen them, but to exhort them. When the goal is intimacy, a person will seek out a friend of the highest character; of the utmost integrity. They will treat this person in a way that makes them stronger and brings out their natural beauty. And they will be mindful in caring for this person’s heart. Using someone as a means to intimacy does not cheapen that person at all. It helps to fulfill their very purpose and requires a disposition of selfless goodwill.

Your framework is too psychological. All this talk of such vague concepts of intimacy and love are too abstract. My framework is no more psychological than Aristotle’s. I basically use his entire framework, the only difference being that I substitute intimacy in place of reason as the proper function of humankind. I defined the term “intimate” as thoroughly as possible. Ultimately, any argument that speculates the end that “determines all our other desires” will be psychological to some extent.

How can you say that intimacy is the proper function of humankind? Isn’t that teleological? Much of Aristotle’s views are teleological. I am using what Aristotle said as a foundation for my argument. If humankind does have a proper function, then my argument provides good evidence that the function of humankind is more likely to be intimacy, rather than rationality.

If intimacy is the supreme good, then wouldn’t breaking off a friendship be the most evil thing you could do? This, in my opinion, is the most powerful objection to my argument. To answer it, I will refer to Aristotle. He says that in a case of extreme moral decline of a friend, one is justified in breaking off the friendship. But as long as there is capability of reform, we should continue to pursue him and help him morally. Ultimately, says Aristotle, “if one cannot restore him, one gives him up” (p.237, Book IX, iii, 3). It could be argued, in a case like this, that it is not the morally good person that broke off the friendship, but the one who became evil and selfish. It is they who turned away. The morally good friend simply let him go.

In conclusion, intimate friendship seems to be a painfully organic thing. It cannot be quantified or charted. It does not

fit into the peg of rationality. It always has a way of slipping through and evading any of our attempts to fully understand it intellectually. It is possible to use our rational faculty as a guide as we gain more experience in choosing friends. It can also help in the challenge of achieving intimacy with those whom we did not choose, such as our relatives. But in the end, the endeavors of love, intimacy, and friendship remain a beautiful mystery. I believe Aristotle had a lot of insight into relationships and much can be learned from his writings. He was correct that virtue is a form of activity – an art. Perhaps, for most of us, the gaps between the necessary and sufficient conditions for friendship lie not in our knowledge, but in the application of that knowledge.

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