Aristotle and the Philosophy of Friendship

LORRAINE SMITH PANGLE
University of Toronto

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Introduction

Friendship was a great subject of stories and of philosophical reflection in classical antiquity. Friendship was associated in the popular mind with courage, with republicanism, and with the spirited resistance to injustice and tyranny. The Greek poets celebrated the stories of such famous pairs of friends as Heracles and Iolaus, Theseus and Pirithous, and Orestes and Pylades. Festivals were held in honor of Harmodius and Aristogeiton, who were stubbornly credited in folklore with unseating the Athenian tyrant Peisistratus, despite the efforts of Herodotus, Thucydides, and Aristotle to prove that popular memory had gotten the story wrong.[1] Most famous of all friends were of course Achilles and Patroclus, but equally revealing is the story of Damon and Phintias, who were said to have lived under the Syracusan tyrant Dionysius. Phintias had been discovered plotting against the tyrant and was condemned to death. When he asked leave to return home first to set his affairs in order, Damon offered to stand as pledge for his safe return. Dionysius consented, though he marveled at Damon's simplicity. But when in fact Phintias returned on the appointed day to take his place on the scaffold and save his friend, so moved was the tyrant by the friends' mutual constancy that he commuted the sentence and begged to be accepted as a third in their friendship.[2] In the proud, unshakable loyalty and mutual trust of two men such as Damon and Phintias, we see classical virtue at its most impressive but also its most appealing, for it is the special charm and fascination of a great friendship that it seems at once so noble and so delightfully desirable.

The phenomenon of friendship, with its richness and complexity, its ability to support but also at times to undercut virtue, and the promise it holds out of bringing together in one happy union so much of what is highest and so much of what is sweetest in life, formed a fruitful topic of philosophic inquiry for the ancients. Plato and Cicero both wrote dialogues about friendship, and a number of others, including Plutarch and Theophrastus, wrote treatises on it, most of which have now been lost.[3] Epicurus devoted much

of his life to cultivating friendship and counted it as one of life's chief goods; he and Seneca both expounded their teachings on friendship in epistles to friends. But by far the fullest and most probing classical study of friendship is to be found in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics,* which devotes more space to it than to any of the moral virtues and which presents friendship as a bridge between the moral virtues and the highest life of philosophy. The study of friendship in the classical authors is in many ways a study of human love altogether, and the Greek word φιλία can cover all bonds of affection, from the closest erotic and familial ties to political loyalties, humanitarian sympathies, business partnerships, and even love for inanimate things. But φιλία means first and foremost friendship, and it is the contention of Aristotle and all of the classical authors who follow him that precisely in the friendships of mature and virtuous individuals do we see human love not only at its most revealing but also at its richest and highest.[4]

With the coming of the Christian world, however, friendship fell into eclipse. One theologian, the twelfth-century Aelred of Rievaulx, did write a dialogue on friendship somewhat in the spirit of Cicero's; and Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, and others acknowledged a certain place for friendship as a special form of love in the Christian life. Yet Christianity's call to devote one's heart as completely as possible to God, and to regard all men as brothers, made the existence of private, exclusive, and passionate attachments to individual human beings seem inherently questionable.[5] Moreover, Christianity's emphasis on humility, chastity, and a childlike trust in God gave grounds for regarding with particular suspicion the fierce, proudly republican, and sometimes homosexual attachments that characterized the celebrated friendships of antiquity. It would be wrong to suggest, however, that the coming of Christianity resulted in a widespread weakening of particular human bonds and the replacing of them with the broadly diffused gentle glow of charity. Rather, the chief effect of Christianity upon personal relations was to elevate one particular human bond, that of family, which had received special sanction in the Scriptures. Along with the elevation of the family came the relative elevation of women, who enjoyed in Christian aristocratic Europe more liberty, education, and influence than they had had in Greece and Rome, and whose central concerns were not politics or friendship but love and family.

It is thus not surprising that with the Renaissance there was a certain revival of philosophic interest in friendship. In the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, Michel de Montaigne and Francis Bacon both wrote essays in a rather classical vein in praise of friendship, both arguing that not erotic or familial love (or, by silent implication, Christian charity) but, rather, friendship between mature, equal, and good men is the human bond par excellence. Montaigne portrays friendship as not merely the finest form of love but the finest thing in life altogether, answering the deepest longings of the soul and providing the noblest use of human capacities. Both writers

maintain that, in contrast to friendship, every other human bond is more limited and more constrained, either by fortune or by low necessity, and hence is less reflective of and supportive of what is best in us.

In the four centuries since Bacon and Montaigne wrote, however, friendship has virtually disappeared as a theme of philosophical discourse. Kant treats it briefly as a matter of minor philosophic interest; Nietzsche mentions it as a potentially valuable but potentially enervating force, and likens the good friend to a good enemy; Emerson offers a hazily glowing tribute to friendship that scarcely rises to the level of philosophy; and Kierkegaard, with bold intransigence, rejects friendship as unchristian; but nowhere do we find another thinker who takes friendship as seriously or explores it as searchingly as do those of the classical tradition.[6] This devaluation of friendship is the result of a decisive new turn in philosophy that occurred in the years immediately after the publications of Montaigne's and Bacon's essays, the first editions of which appeared in 1580 and 1597, respectively. For it was early in the next century that Thomas Hobbes began to develop his powerful reinterpretation of human nature as directed neither to friendship nor to virtue, his argument that man is by nature solitary, and his analysis of our true condition as one of serious, always potentially deadly competition with other human beings for all that we most need and want.

Ever since the time of Hobbes, modern moral philosophy, even when it has not followed his teaching about the state of nature, has conceived of men's most important claims upon one another to lie outside the realm of friendship. Hobbes and Locke, understanding each individual's relations to his fellows to be rooted in self-interest, taught that these relations could be regulated by sensible laws and appeals to rational self-interest. Rousseau, fearing that the modern liberal project was resulting in the impoverishment and isolation of the individual soul, sought to counterbalance liberalism's spirit of cold calculation with a new emphasis on erotic love, now broadened to comprise a freely chosen friendship of two kindred spirits and pointed firmly toward the family as its natural fulfillment. Taking their lifeblood from this root, the great modern stories have almost invariably been love stories. The brittleness of the modern family may give us cause to suspect that Rousseau rested his own project too heavily on a slender and intractably wild reed in the human spirit. But the family's fragility has done little to discourage the ubiquitous hope of finding in one lifelong lover the chief companion of one's heart and mind.

When we move beyond the intimate ties of love and family, the most important claims upon us seem not to be those of friendship so much as broader and more abstract or universal claims, shaped, on the one hand, by a fundamentally Lockean understanding of human rights, and, on the other, by the belief in a duty to act unselfishly for the good of others that was given its clearest and most influential articulation by Kant. For Kant, there is of course nothing inherently wrong with acting out of affection

for a friend, just as there is nothing wrong as such with acting out of self-interest, although both motives can lead us to be partial and unfair. But the only moral reason for an action is that it accords with a universalizable principle. Philosophy since Kant has largely followed him in understanding truly moral, praiseworthy human relations to be based on *altruism,* a wholly selfless benevolence toward others, guided either by absolute moral law or by a utilitarian pursuit of the greatest good for the greatest number. In comparison to the claims of friendship, the claims of universal human rights and of altruism directed to the good of humanity seem higher, more selfless, more rational, and more fair.

Yet increasingly, the ideas of rights and of altruism have both come under serious questioning. Do rights really exist? Is altruism really possible? If it is possible, how are our altruistic motives related to our self-interested motives? Is it possible to subordinate self-interest to altruism, such that all one's activities and associations are chosen only because they ultimately accrue to the good of humanity? Or if this is not possible – if we normally act with a view to our own good but sometimes choose actions that have nothing to do with our own good or even oppose it – is there any higher, unifying principle or faculty of the soul that decides between these contrary principles of action, judging them by a common standard? Or do we simply lurch inexplicably between unrelated, incommensurable principles of action? If, on the other hand, the idea of altruism is a chimerical one, are we indeed at root the solitary and selfish beings that Hobbes claimed we are? Or are there altogether different ways of understanding individuals' evident ability to transcend their narrowly selfish concerns? Perhaps this ability can be better understood in terms not of universal laws but of virtues that grow out of and give natural perfection to passions of the soul, and in terms not of egoism and altruism but of friendship, again rooted in the natural passion of human affection and so bridging the concern with self and the concern with others. It is considerations such as these that seem to have prompted a remarkable contemporary resurgence of philosophic interest in Aristotle's moral philosophy, and in particular, his treatment of friendship.

When we approach the classical studies of friendship with an eye to the modern reasons for rejecting it as a theme of central philosophic importance, we see that the classics and especially Aristotle address the concerns at the root of the modern demotion of friendship in the most direct and forthright way. Aristotle does not assume the natural sociability of man but searchingly questions it. In friendship, he and Plato both suggest, we can best see the true character and extent of our desire to live with others when that desire is shorn of all considerations of necessity and utility. Likewise, Aristotle assumes neither the possibility nor the impossibility of what we would call altruism, but instead offers a sustained and sympathetic exploration of what is really at work in the human heart when an individual seems to disregard his own good to pursue the good of others. Aristotle does not

assume that the concern for a friend is necessarily tainted by partiality; he argues that friendship can be rooted in a true assessment of the friend's worth and, as such, can give the noblest expression to our sociability.

These three sets of issues, concerning the naturalness of friendship, the possibility of selflessness in friendship, and the relationship of friendship to justice, constitute indeed the central themes of all the major philosophical studies of friendship, and hence will form the main topics of inquiry for this book. What are the roots of friendship in human nature? How central to human happiness is loving and being loved? To what extent is the desire for affection and friendship reducible to other causes, to our defects and vulnerabilities and needs for things in themselves altogether extraneous to friendship, and to what extent is friendship itself a necessary or central component of the happiness of the healthiest human beings? How truly can and do human beings care for others for their own sakes and promote the good of others as an end in itself? Do they do this at all? Do they do it when the good of the other conflicts with their own deepest good? Or is every apparent selfless sacrifice in fact, in some complicated or disguised way, a pursuit of a greater good for oneself? To what extent can friendship answer the longing for a just community with others that political life invariably fails to answer perfectly? And what light does an examination of the problems of justice within friendship shed on the problem of justice as a whole?

This book is, then, an attempt to deepen our understanding of and engagement with the philosophical study of friendship, giving central place to Aristotle's treatment of the subject in Books 8 and 9 of his *Nicomachean Ethics,* a discussion which, for comprehensiveness, depth, and subtlety, has never been rivaled. In order to shed further light on the issues Aristotle explores and to see more clearly what is at stake in the positions he takes, I have interwoven the analysis of the *Ethics* with shorter expositions of the writings of Plato, Epicurus, Cicero, Seneca, Montaigne, and Bacon, as each of these authors develops in a fuller and more revealing way some aspect of Aristotle's thought, or carries some idea of his to a further extreme, thereby providing, in fact, a relevant and helpful contrast to Aristotle's position. These thinkers constitute a single tradition in the sense that they are engaged in a single conversation about the same problems in friendship and human nature. They all delve into these problems with utmost seriousness and with evident confidence that through such a conversation in books across the centuries, we can make important discoveries about human nature and our own hearts in such a way as to live happier lives.

The book seeks to engage the arguments of each thinker on their own terms in just this spirit. It proceeds on the working hypothesis that the project of philosophy as these authors undertook it is indeed possible – that behind the different conventions and experiences and habits of mind of fourth-century Athenians, Renaissance Frenchmen, and modern men and women are permanent human problems that we can make progress in answering.

This admittedly controversial hypothesis is susceptible of only one test: We must read each work on its own terms, as carefully as possible and with as open a mind as possible, and see what light it sheds on life.

The Place of Friendship in the *Nicomachean Ethics*

Let us begin, then, by placing Aristotle's major discussion of friendship in the context that he himself chose to give it. Why does he include this study in a work on ethics, rather than letting it stand alone, and why does it come where it does in the *Nicomachean Ethics*? In raising the subject at the outset of Book 8, Aristotle says that friendship is either a virtue or involves virtue. For various reasons that will soon become clear, however, true friendship, in contrast to friendliness or social grace, turns out not to be a virtue at all; and the fact that it in some way involves virtue does not distinguish it from such subjects as rhetoric and politics, to which Aristotle devotes separate works. In some way, friendship seems to have an especially close connection with moral virtue, standing as a crucial link in a chain that the treatment of the separate virtues has not yet completed.

Now a central project of Aristotle's ethical writings, a project whose audacity we lose sight of only because it has become so familiar, is to demonstrate the unity of virtue and happiness, or as Aristotle says in the opening lines of the *Eudemian Ethics,* to refute the belief – which at some level or to some degree or at some moments *every* human being must hold – that what is really good for us is not what is most pleasant, and that what is right or noble is often neither good nor pleasant. Aristotle argues, to the contrary, that the activity of virtue is the very substance of human happiness. By the time the serious reader of the *Nicomachean Ethics* reaches the opening of Book 8, he or she will likely be impressed with the extent to which Aristotle has succeeded in making this case, with his rich portrayals of the virtues as perfections of the natural capacities of the soul. Yet the reader may well also be struck and troubled by certain problems that have emerged in the moral person's outlook and self-understanding. Virtuous action is presented as supremely choiceworthy in itself, yet at some level, the virtuous man expects to be honored or rewarded as a compensation or at least recognition for the noble sacrifice he has made of his own good. Virtue and happiness seem to fit roughly but not perfectly together.

The problematic fit between virtue and happiness appears most acutely at the two major peaks of moral virtue, greatness of soul and justice. The great-souled man has all the virtues in the highest degree, and he strives to be and to appear independent and complete in himself. Yet his life is less a flurry of joyful activity than a patient search for actions that are worthy of his dignity and that he is unlikely to find unless fortune favors him with rare opportunities; less a self-sufficient whole than a search for honors that he deserves and desires but that can only be provided by inferiors who are

unworthy to judge him. Justice, also, "is more wonderful than the evening star and the morning star, and as the proverb says, 'in justice all virtue is gathered into one,'" yet justice is also thought with good reason to be "the good of another."[7] Can a life spent pursuing justice answer our longings for happiness, or is justice mainly good because it secures the peace and order that lay the groundwork for happy lives? The discussion of moral strength, moral weakness, and pleasure in Book 7 further underscores the question of whether the demands of duty are not, all too often, in conflict with the things that promise happiness. To the extent that they are, to the extent that our lower desires are at odds with what reason discovers to be noblest or most divine, then virtue will turn out to be less a harmonious wholeness than a stern subjection of inclination to judgment, less a fine-tuning of the strings to reach the perfect mean than a forcible straightening of warped timber.

In light of these problems, friendship now comes to sight as a third and perhaps highest summit of the moral life, on which virtue and happiness may finally be united. If the life of a great-souled man lacks clear content, if putting himself in the service of his inferiors seems slavish, and if actions aimed at winning honor from them seem undignified, the pursuit of serious friendship is a worthy outlet for his energies and talents (1124b24–25a1). Friendship likewise completes and goes beyond justice, or even renders justice unnecessary (1155a26–27). The goodness shown in noble friendship seems higher than justice, not only because its object is so worthy but because it is entirely dependent on one's own character and choice and is not defined and compelled by law (*Eudemian Ethics* 1235a3–4).[8] Paradoxically, acts of friendship seem both more truly generous and more conducive to one's own happiness than acts done strictly because they are moral. Acting for the sake of what is noble means having primary regard not for the beneficiary's good but for one's own virtue or the good of one's soul, whereas acting for a friend seems to be self-forgetting. And yet spontaneous acts of friendship tend to be more pleasant than impersonal acts of virtue for the doer as well as for the recipient. Aristotle's discussion of friendship, surrounded as it is by two discussions of pleasure, encourages the hope that in the realm of friendship, one may find all the nobility of virtuous action at its best without the ultimate sacrifice of happiness, and thus both a proof of his thesis on the unity of virtue and happiness and at least a partial answer to the question of what the substantive concerns and activities of the best life should be.

Almost immediately after concluding his discussion of friendship, however, Aristotle moves into a discussion of the philosophic life. Here, in Book 10, he argues that the best life of all consists not in the active exercise of moral virtue but in the austere and almost solitary life of contemplation. Is this a conclusion for which we are prepared? In what way does it grow out of or even relate to Aristotle's treatment of friendship in Books 8 and 9?[9] This problem is but one aspect of the vexed question of the unity

of the *Nicomachean Ethics* – the question whether the text as we have it really represents a single, coherent, carefully written and structured account of human virtue or something rather less.[10] J. L. Ackrill offers a penetrating analysis of the disunity that seems to lurk at the heart of the *Nicomachean Ethics.*[11] The central difficulty, as he sees it, is that Aristotle never really explains how the accounts of moral virtue in Books 2 to 5 and that of the philosophic life in Book 10 fit together into a single account of the happy life. Does the wise man have one overarching reason for all that he does? Is moral virtue ultimately in the service of contemplation? But moral action, like contemplation, comes to sight as an end in itself, and it loses its essential character if transformed into mere means to some further end.[12] On the other hand, Ackrill argues, if morality is not to be ultimately justified and made coherent by its subordination to philosophy, Aristotle does not provide any other, deeper explanation for the principles upon which the moral virtues rest, other than the fact that they are the sorts of things which well-bred people in fact approve. Ackrill thus argues that the teaching of the *Ethics* is in principle incapable of clear articulation, or "broken backed."[13]

The Character of the *Nicomachean Ethics*

The problem of disunity in the presentation of life's ends leads us to confront a further, equally vexed question in Aristotelian scholarship: Just what sort of a work is the *Nicomachean Ethics,* and for what purpose was it written? Is it merely a collection of course notes on more or less related subjects? This seems most doubtful. As Franz Susemihl and Richard Bodéüs persuasively argue, the assumption that the book consists merely of notes taken by students, or a revision of such notes made by a follower such as Aristotle's son Nicomachus, is unsustainable in light of the very great subtlety and carefulness of the writing that a close study reveals.[14] Is it an assembly of independent investigations into separate topics, not intended to be altogether systematic or to form part of a larger system of moral and political teachings? This view now enjoys some currency in Aristotelian scholarship,[15] but it fails to account for Aristotle's statements at the opening and closing of the *Nicomachean Ethics* about the architectonic nature of his project and its connection to the *Politics,* and likewise his statements at the opening and closing of his discussion of friendship in 8.1 and 9.12, marking it as an ordered part of a larger investigation, the subject of which he has identified as human happiness altogether. Or even if the order of topics is carefully arranged, may the *Nicomachean Ethics* be merely a handbook intended for a general audience of nonspecialists, on a matter about which precision is not possible? This latter view is certainly supported by Aristotle's own disclaimers in Book 1 regarding the limited precision that is possible in ethics, and also by Plutarch's comments on Aristotelian education in his *Life of Alexander,*

as well as by the ancient collector of philosophical and philological trivia, Aulus Gellius.[16]

According to Gellius, Aristotle's works fell into two classes, the "exoteric" or public, and the "acroatic," which means "for hearing only." The exoteric teachings provided a training in rhetoric, logic, politics, and ethics, and they formed the subjects for Aristotle's "open admissions" evening lectures, attended by mature gentlemen and statesmen among others; the acroatic works dealt with the study of nature and dialectics, and they formed the subjects for Aristotle's restricted morning lectures. But although the *Nicomachean Ethics* is clearly addressed to a broader audience than are his logical and metaphysical writings, it would be incorrect to identify this work as merely popular, for Aristotle himself refers in it to his exoteric or popular writings as if they are other works with a different character, and scholars are now inclined to identify these works as Aristotle's lost literary works, especially his dialogues.[17]

On the other hand, if the *Nicomachean Ethics* is not among the works that Aristotle wrote in a popular, imprecise manner for a general audience, is it possible that it is intentionally obscure? This possibility, too, is suggested by Plutarch and Gellius in the discussions already cited. Plutarch, observing that Alexander not only had been a student of the popular lectures but also had been admitted to the acroatic teachings, says that Alexander,

> when he had already crossed into Asia, and learned that certain discourses on these matters had been published in books by Aristotle, wrote him a letter in which he spoke up on behalf of philosophy. And this is a copy of it: "Alexander to Aristotle, prosperity. You have not acted rightly in publishing the acroatic speeches. For in what shall we surpass others, if the discourses in which we have been educated are to become common to all? But I would rather excel in my acquaintance with the best things than in power. Farewell." Aristotle, to soothe his love of honor, said in defense that those discourses were "both published and not published."[18]

Gellius reproduces the same letter by Alexander and also gives Aristotle's purported answer in full, for which he says his source is the philosopher Andronicus: "Aristotle to King Alexander, prosperity. You have written me about the acroatic discourses, thinking that they should be guarded in secrecy. Know, then, that they have been both published and not published. For they are intelligible only to those who have heard us" (20.5.12).

But such an idea of esotericism as is evidently implied in this letter is useless as an interpretive tool, for any interpretive aids that Aristotle may have given orally to his students are surely lost to us. Indeed, if his serious teachings are unintelligible without keys that he never committed to writing, then our plight as modern readers is grave indeed. But we have reason to hope that this letter, if not an outright forgery, is at least less than perfectly frank, and that as Plutarch hints, it is shaped by the wish to reassure Alexander that the rare knowledge upon which he prides himself has not become common

currency. Would it not be very strange that a philosopher who found truths that he considered worth publishing should intentionally make them inaccessible and should be content for his own hard-won insights to die with his immediate circle? Is it not more likely that a wise man would have addressed himself to thoughtful readers in every time and place by writing books that, however difficult, are fully comprehensible on their own terms to all who have listened carefully and "heard" what is in the text?[19]

However, if the passages from Plutarch and Gellius fail to offer any useful explanation for Aristotle's obscurity, they do raise a crucial question: Who, precisely, was the intended audience of the *Nicomachean Ethics*? Aristotle himself takes up this question in Book 1, quoting verses from Hesiod:

> That man is best of all who thinks everything out himself. . . .
> Good also is he who follows one who speaks well.
> But he who neither thinks for himself nor, listening to another,
> Stores it up in his heart, that man is utterly useless.
> (1095b10–13, quoting *Works and Days* 293, 295–7)

Presumably, then, it is the second group for whom Aristotle writes – neither the wise who need no instruction nor the obtuse who are deaf to reason and respond only to force, but an intermediate group who are capable of listening to and profiting from the words of the philosopher. Other comments about the intended effect of his book support the same conclusion: Ethics is a subordinate part of the science of politics, and the purpose of this study is not sterile knowledge but good action or praxis (1094a18–b11, 1103b26–30). Finally, we have Aristotle's direct account of what is needed in a good listener of his ethical discourse: He must be well brought up, already habituated in moral virtue, and sufficiently mature to have experience of the world and command over his own emotions (1094b27–95a13, 95b4–6).

Considerations such as these, together with the often neglected fact that the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Politics* are clearly intended to form two parts of a single whole, have led Richard Bodéüs to argue that the intended audience of the *Nicomachean Ethics* is current or future legislators.[20] As he sees it, the book's purpose is neither to offer a theoretical account of human psychology for the philosopher nor to provide a moral education to those who are not virtuous, but to assist those who are virtuous and who are entrusted with the moral education of others to see more clearly the end to which their actions should be directed and the principles that should guide them. They must, for example, understand the importance of early habituation, the ways in which education and laws must be adapted to fit the regime, and the dependence of moral virtue, even in most mature individuals, upon coercive legal sanctions.[21]

I believe that Bodéüs makes a major contribution in correctly identifying the primary audience of the *Nicomachean Ethics* and in describing much of what Aristotle hopes to accomplish in it. However, it seems to me that

Aristotle's project is both more complex and more ambitious than Bodéüs allows. In the first place, if this treatise were intended only for legislators, why would Aristotle have provided no parallel study of ethics and human nature for the student of philosophy? Bodéüs argues that the *Eudemian Ethics* is such a book, but it is very similar both in its starting points and in its way of proceeding, and as he himself notes, it does not derive ethical principles from more general principles of nature.[22] I am inclined, rather, to the view that the *Eudemian Ethics* is simply an earlier version of the same work; the differences between the two treatments of friendship in particular suggest that the *Nicomachean* represents a deeper and fuller rethinking of the same problems.[23] And what are we to make of the fact that the *Nicomachean Ethics* evidently developed as part of the curriculum for Aristotle's school? Although we do not know the extent to which Aristotle revised his course lectures in writing the book, the book does seem clearly to have grown out of some such course, whose audience would have included not merely the mature, well-bred citizens who Aristotle says are the right kind of listener for ethical discourses, but also the immature students of philosophy who attended both Aristotle's more public and his more restricted, advanced courses. Did Aristotle expect these theoretical-minded students to get no benefit from the course on ethics, or is there some particular benefit that they may have derived precisely from observing Aristotle addressing these most respectable citizens?

In this context, we should also consider Aristotle's remark at 1103b27–28 that "we are not investigating in order to know what virtue is, but in order that we may become good." Since Aristotle has said that the right kind of listener should already be habituated in virtue, and that those who lack such habituation cannot become virtuous through mere study (1103a14–18, 1105b9–18), this remark is puzzling; we would have expected him to say that we investigate ethics in order to become better legislators or teachers of virtue. But perhaps there is some sense in which even the mature, morally serious citizens whom Aristotle identifies as his primary audience do *not* fully understand what they are doing, and hence are not completely virtuous, or some way in which watching Aristotle's examination of their moral presuppositions can bring gifted youth to a virtue more complete than that of their less reflective elders.

In the second place, Bodéüs does not seem to give sufficient attention to the ways in which Aristotle not only clarifies the understanding of virtue current in fourth-century Greek society but also enters into critical, even transformative dialogue with it.[24] As Aristide Tessitore remarks, "Aristotle's appeal to the best sensibilities of morally serious persons is not merely a reflection or codification of the current social practice of notables."[25] Tessitore mentions Aristotle's criticism of the contentiousness and arrogance often displayed by men of high birth; also instructive is Aristotle's catalogue of the virtues and vices at 1107a28–1108b10, where he shows the extent of his

innovation by repeatedly speaking of "nameless" virtues and vices, and by arguing against the common perception that each virtue is opposed to only one vice. Perhaps most important of all are Aristotle's omissions: his silent demotion of piety from the canon of the virtues and his explicit denial that modesty or shame, closely related to pious reverence, is a virtue in grown men (1128b10–25). Aristotle's presentation of all of the moral virtues as being substantially if not perfectly accessible to those in a private station; his portrayal of the man of greatness of soul as reluctant to wade into the political fray, except in a great cause; and his extensive discussions of friendship in the *Nicomachean Ethics* and of the life of cultivated leisure in the *Politics* all help to shape a moral ethos that is more rational, more independent, less turbulently political, and less dependent on the presence of a republican regime than was the ethos of the leading citizens in classical Greece.

In thus helping to foster a cultivated middle ground between the life of the simply political man and that of the philosopher, Aristotle performed a signal public service, both for his own countrymen and for citizens of the Roman Empire and of the Christian monarchies that succeeded it. This constructive engagement with conventional morality proves that the philosopher can indeed be the best of citizens. It allowed Aristotle to win for philosophy the trust and respect of his readers, and a certain toleration, at least, for his provocative claim in *Nicomachean Ethics* 10 that the philosophic life is the best and highest life for a human being.[26]

The great question is this. If, as Bodéüs observes in the pregnant final sentence of his book, the moral, civic life that hitherto seemed entirely an end in itself is really best understood as pointing beyond itself to philosophy, what does that imply about the philosopher's own relationship to the moral ethos he has encouraged and helped to shape? Does Aristotle, as Bodéüs suggests, simply have a clearer, more complete, more fully integrated version of the same outlook, and is his own most serious work that of educating legislators and teachers?[27] Or does he have a different perspective altogether? If it is the former, if there is a straight and direct ascent from the perspective of the morally serious citizen to that of the philosopher, it seems strange that Aristotle would not show more clearly how the two lives are related, and how the virtues and ends of the one develop and mature into the virtues and ends of the other. On the other hand, if the philosopher has a different understanding of human nature and human happiness, we might expect that, alongside his practical guides to ethics and politics, Aristotle would have written a separate, more rigorous study of human nature, beginning not from common opinion but from first principles.

But perhaps the truth is rather more complicated than either of these scenarios would imply. If, as Plato suggests with his metaphor of the cave, the path to philosophy is a twisting, difficult, even painful ascent, and especially if (to modify the metaphor) it is a path that must cross a chasm before one regains solid ground and finds new and stronger reasons for being good

and a new core to one's happiness, then Aristotle's project becomes much more complex, and its puzzling character becomes easier to understand.[28] If, moreover, as the cave metaphor also suggests, the dialectical ascent to philosophy must begin from precisely the same ground upon which the moral if unreflective citizen stands, and must begin by following the same process of sympathetic clarification of moral opinion that Aristotle engages in with the most serious members of that citizenry, then it makes sense that there should be no essentially different ethics, no separate treatise on human nature, for the philosophic students.

As among Aristotle's broader audience, there would be among these students a range of different types, from quiet, thoughtful youths like Menexenus, to intensely political souls such as Alcibiades, to mathematically inclined students such as Theaetetus, who show little interest in politics and may already be too prone to dismiss the moral and political realm as merely conventional. But all who are to succeed in philosophy need to have had an education in virtue that has fostered in them a love of what is noble for its own sake, since such a love cannot be transmitted through logical proofs, and since without it, it is impossible to be serious about the most important human questions. At the same time, if the student is to progress in a solid ascent beyond a merely conventional outlook, he cannot simply replace assumptions of one sort with assumptions of another. He cannot, in particular, assume that any amount of knowledge of the nonhuman world can, by itself, reveal the most important truths about human life, or that any number of observable differences in the way human beings act, or even in the rules according to which they act, can exclude the possibility that human morality still has, beneath all its variety and all its hypocrisy, a universal, coherent, and natural core.

The serious student of philosophy must therefore become a serious student of ethics and must begin with a probing but respectful analysis of just those assumptions that the ordinary moral citizen holds. Only after drawing from the latter's necessarily uneven self-understanding the most coherent articulation of the principles implicit in his moral choices and aspirations is the student in a position to judge the ultimate adequacy of this outlook. If he can show that his own understanding of the phenomena provide the best answers to questions or problems implicit in those very opinions, then his philosophic undertaking will have the best possible grounding.

The *Nicomachean Ethics* therefore seems to have, as Tessitore argues, two groups of readers: the primary audience of morally serious citizens whom Aristotle wishes to help attain the most rational, happy version possible of the active civic life to which they are dedicated, and the student or potential student of philosophy.[29] Even the third class of human beings that Aristotle mentioned in his quotation from Hesiod, those incapable of following reason, are not forgotten: One function of the *Nicomachean Ethics* and especially of the *Politics* is to show how such people can be prevented, as far as possible,

from harming themselves and others, and to teach the sober moderation of political hopes that such recalcitrance to reason makes necessary.[30] But Aristotle's dialogue with the active citizen who is not autonomous but who listens to reason takes precedence. It does so because this dialogue forms the foundation also for the more rigorous philosophic education, and because, as Hesiod's lines suggest, the most perfect student will need the fewest hints and profit the most from light but sharp spurs to the exercise of his own mind. But Aristotle's choice of emphasis is also a result of caution, of a keen appreciation of the inherent treacherousness of philosophic education.

This treacherousness has little to do with the conclusions to Aristotle's researches, about which he is quite frank: Such teachings as the superiority of the philosophic life, or the argument that true knowledge of the good is never contravened in action, or that the activity of true virtue, resting on knowledge, is the substance of happiness are clear for all to see. But Aristotle, who thought deeply about the requirements of good education, both moral and philosophical, was keenly aware of all the ways in which education could go wrong. He saw that even philosophic education was less simply rational and more dependent upon the proper shaping of the passions than is commonly thought. Inasmuch as it involves a turning of the soul to new tastes and judgments, it is not wholly unlike the habituation of children to virtue. In philosophic education, this turning involves the cultivation of certain austere and rarefied pleasures and the relinquishment of certain unfounded hopes. Although many of the truths of moral philosophy as Aristotle saw them are easy enough to recite, in the way that a drunken man may recite verses of Empedocles (1147b9–12), they are hard to accept into the depths of one's soul in such a way as to become truly sovereign there, and to purge the heart of bitter, unruly passions.

On the other hand, if the goodness of the philosophic life and the highest reasons for being virtuous are absorbed only slowly, the corrosive questions that philosophy is capable of unleashing against conventional morality are appallingly obvious: questions that expose the merely conventional basis and self-serving character of much of what passes for virtue; questions that, like Alcibiades' famous interrogation of Pericles, expose the dubiousness of unreflective reverence for law;[31] questions about the coherence of the reigning civic religion; questions such as Socrates' imprudent imitators pressed against the leading men of Athens, bringing the city's wrath down upon their teacher. Aristotle, like Plato and Socrates, was convinced of the innocence of the philosopher himself, and Aristotle went further than either of his predecessors in showing how helpful philosophy could be in guiding political life and legislation. But like his great predecessors, he also saw how destructive philosophic education could be when it failed, as it did with Alcibiades and Critias, with the Sophists who used philosophy recklessly for fame, and with the students of Sophists who in the worst cases treated it as a tool to be turned to whatever tyrannical use they desired. These are the ugly stepchildren of

philosophy, who have lost the citizen's conventional reasons for being good without acquiring the philosopher's deeper reasons, who have retained the political man's ambition to rule over others without retaining the good purposes that are necessary if a ruler is to be a statesman and not a parasite upon the body politic.

Evidently with such educational failures in mind, Aristotle argues that it is naive to suppose that any argument that is rational is necessarily constructive, or that a teacher should adopt just any line of questioning that is pertinent to the subject, without thinking carefully about the pedagogical needs of the students and their stages of development. In the *Eudemian Ethics,* he explains his own reasons for writing carefully and always weighing his words not only by the truth but also by what is useful for the political communities to which he and his future students will belong:

> For the statesman as well, it ought not to be considered superfluous to engage in a theoretical inquiry of such a sort as will make clear not only what a thing is, but on account of what it is; for such is the philosophic investigation about each thing. Yet this requires great caution. For there are some who, on the basis of the opinion that what characterizes a philosopher is saying nothing at random and speaking with reason, often without being detected make arguments that are extraneous to the subject and empty, doing this sometimes on account of ignorance, sometimes on account of boastfulness, with the result that even men of experience and capacity for action are taken in by these people, who neither possess nor are capable of either architectonic or practical intelligence. (1216b37–17a6)

It is therefore quite reasonable that Aristotle should have been rather clearer about his conclusions than about all the considerations that led him to these conclusions. In order to do right by the full spectrum of his readers, Aristotle aims to provide both the material needed for an ascent from common opinion to philosophic truth *and* the healthiest, most rational, most defensible stopping points along the way. Because the answers that one group of readers needs to hear and the questions that the other needs to ask are not always in harmony, it should not be surprising that the surface of the book sometimes seems puzzling and inconsistent, its order is often obscure, and the unity of its teaching is not always in evidence. If indeed some such dual purpose is at work in the *Nicomachean Ethics,* then all difficulties in the text – all inconsistencies, apparent repetitions, obvious exaggerations, unexplained shifts to important new themes – should be approached with this context in mind. Does a given difficulty, which may of course result from a mere lapse on Aristotle's part, or a defect in the transmission of his text, make sense in the light of the complexity of the book? Might the passage in question be designed to answer a problem not explicitly posed, or designed to give a provisional answer to a question, while at the same time providing the elements for a further exploration, leading to a different and more comprehensive understanding? Does the

passage, so understood, help to provide additional support for conclusions that Aristotle states in a somewhat formulaic way?

In particular, I hope to show that Aristotle's extensive treatment of friendship in the penultimate books of the *Nicomachean Ethics,* standing between his full elaboration of the moral virtues and the discussion of the philosophic life, is an important and hitherto overlooked source of arguments, both explicit and implicit, for the life of philosophy, and that the movement to the philosophic life is part of the key to the order of arguments in these books. For while Books 8 and 9 have a surface order that is more systematic than is usually recognized – moving from the three kinds of friendship in 8.2–8.6 to the relationship of friendship to justice in 8.7–9.3 to the elements of friendship in 9.4–9.12 – these books also have an inner progression to a deeper understanding of the phenomena that is connected to the emergence of philosophy as a theme in Book 9.[32]

Aristotle's Introduction to the Theme of Friendship

In the light of the complexity of his overall project, it is not surprising that Aristotle should give a complicated account of the necessity of friendship in the good life. His justification of the turn to friendship in 8.1 stresses the ways in which friendship is regarded as both necessary and noble, and the ways in which the necessity and nobility of friendship are intertwined. He expands at much greater length on friendship's necessity than upon its nobility, suggesting that its most important grounds lie in individuals' needs or concerns with their own happiness and not in an overflow of generous benevolence or selfless sacrifice. Yet the necessity he describes is a rich and broad necessity, encompassing the needs not only for survival but also for natural fulfillment. "Without friends," Aristotle says, "no one would choose to live, though he possessed all the other goods" (1155a5–6). Friendship is an essential safeguard for the life, property, and political freedom or power that virtue requires as equipment for its full exercise, and it provides the worthiest objects of virtuous action (1155a6–10).[33] Moreover, it provides the guidance that young men need, the assistance that weak and elderly men need, and the clarity of insight that even the best men need in order to act and to think as well as possible (1155a11–16). In all of this, friendship appears less as an end in itself than as a crucial condition for the individual's welfare and virtuous activity.

But Aristotle also notes that friendship seems to be necessary in quite a different way that is rooted in our animal nature and that does not aim at virtue at all. Nature has implanted in many animals, and especially in human beings, a love of those who are kindred – of children and parents above all, but also of fellow tribesmen and even of the whole human race (1155a16–22).[34] Throughout most of Books 8 and 9 of the *Ethics,* Aristotle will push this natural root of friendship into the background, but

here at the outset he gives it central place in his account of friendship's necessity.

Finally, friendship is indispensable to the political community: "Friendship also seems to hold the polis together, and lawgivers seem to be more seriously concerned with it than with justice. For concord seems to be something similar to friendship, and they strive most to attain concord and to drive out faction, its enemy" (1155a22–26). Without the concord that comes from a common purpose and the faith in a common good, without the sympathetic interest in one's fellows that makes one want to treat them equitably and to pursue their good along with one's own, no political community can exist in Aristotle's view; he considers it naive to think that a true community can ever be secured by a mere compact. Various combinations of self-interest and fear may hold alliances and empires together, but a political community that seeks to promote the good life for human beings requires something more.[35] Aristotle's stress on the need for friendship suggests that even good laws, even when supported by a dedication to justice among the citizenry, are not sufficient to maintain order and harmony. For, as he shows in his discussions of justice in the fifth book of the *Ethics* and the third book of the *Politics,* justice is not a single principle but, rather, a cluster of related but not wholly compatible principles, such that the claims of justice made by different citizens according to different principles or types of justice are bound to come into conflict. In particular, there is inevitable conflict between the claims of the few to honor and rule on the basis of excellence according to distributive justice, and the claims of the many to justice as simple equality, including their not simply unreasonable resistance to being ruled by anyone who is not of their own choosing and does not share their character and outlook. Since perfect justice is not attainable, patriotic affection of the citizens toward one another and toward the fatherland is essential for keeping competing claims from erupting into civil war. Finally, Aristotle argues, friendship not only underlies justice but also includes and goes beyond justice: "Where there is friendship there is no need of justice" (1155a26–27). Aristotle thereby implicitly raises the important question of the relation of friendship to justice. Do the best friendships simply incorporate justice, or do they in fact dispense with the need for justice, by creating either a perfect selflessness in each friend or a perfect unity of their interests and concerns?

Aristotle's account of friendship's necessity contains a mixture of his own observations and reports of common opinions, but when he turns to the nobility of friendship, he makes reference only to generally held opinions: "We praise those who love their friends, and having many friends seems to be something noble, and further, men suppose that good men and friends are the same" (1155a29–31).[36] These opinions provide useful starting points, but when examined in the light of Aristotle's whole treatment of friendship, they will prove to be in need of serious revision. Aristotle will argue that