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Aristotle for Women Who Love Too Much

Rosalind Hursthouse

Having goodwill (*eunoia*) toward someone is, according to Aristotle, wishing him well, or wishing good things to him for his own sake (1155b31). As Talbot Brewer notes, Aristotle “seems to contradict himself” on the issue of whether mutual goodwill is present in friendships based on utility or pleasure as well as in those based on virtue (“character friendships”), and the different claims in the texts have sustained considerable scholarly debate.¹ On good textual grounds, Cooper and Broadie favor the interpretation according to which goodwill is present in all three,² and, on good textual grounds, Brewer rejects Cooper’s interpretation, taking Aristotle to claim that people in pleasure and utility friendships “do not in fact have *eunoia* toward each other, since they seek to benefit each other only because, and insofar as, they expect a reciprocal benefit for themselves,” a claim that he endorses as seeming like “exactly the right thing to say.”³

Brewer thus sets up a rather stark opposition, between pleasure and utility friends, on the one hand, who do not wish the other well “for his own sake” at all, but only with a view to their own benefit, and character friends, on the other, who do wish each other well for the other’s own sake and hence have mutual goodwill. But he does not consider the interesting interpretation favored by Price, which offers

1. Talbot Brewer, “Virtues We Can Share: Friendship and Aristotelian Ethical Theory,” *Ethics* 115:721–58, 730.

2. John Cooper, “Aristotle on the Forms of Friendship,” in his *Reason and Emotion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 312–35; Sarah Broadie, “Philosophical Introduction and Commentary,” in *Aristotle: Nicomachean Ethics*, ed. Sarah Broadie and Christopher Rowe (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), esp. 58, and the commentary on 1155b28–29 (409), 1156b7–11 (410), and 1167a12–14 (420).

3. Brewer, “Virtues We Can Share,” 730–31. Brewer’s reference is to 1167a13–18; see Broadie (*Aristotle: Nicomachean Ethics*, 420) for a different interpretation.

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something less stark. According to Price, in all three forms of friendship, “the parties wish one another well in the way in which they love one another, this being either for the other’s own sake, or in a way that bears enough resemblance to wishing another well for his sake.”⁴ His idea is that “the notion of well-wishing is Protean”; it takes different forms in the different forms of friendship and its primary form in character friendship where each friend wishes to forward the other’s *eudaimonia*.⁵ Like Brewer, he denies that goodwill is part of pleasure and utility friendships, but, significantly, he emphasizes the point that the divergence between himself and Cooper is one “of nuance.”⁶ “Aristotle’s general characterization of friendship was itself abstract, and to be enriched by reference to one kind, that of perfect friendship. Cooper supposes that it is the notion of goodwill that has to adapt itself to the shape of the facts; I suppose it is well-wishing.”⁷

Now on this (surely correct) reading of Cooper, Brewer has no need to set up such a stark opposition. What is essential to Brewer’s uplifting account of character friendship is that the goodwill in it takes a special form not to be found in the other kinds of friendship. The goodwill involves a strongly focused interest in the other’s virtuous character, or “evaluative outlook,” for the “good thing” above all one wishes for one’s character friend is the objective human good, *eudaimonia*, or the life of virtue.⁸ So all Brewer needs to deny is that this form of goodwill (or indeed, well-wishing in Price’s version) is present in the other kinds of friendship, with which Cooper and Broadie could readily agree. He need not go to the lengths of rejecting the Cooper-Broadie interpretation without qualification and claiming that in the other kinds, the friends wish good things for the other only “for instrumental reasons, in hopes of securing egoistic benefits.”⁹

I would like to urge acceptance of the Cooper-Broadie interpretation, not by rehearsing, again, the textual grounds but for a different reason. On the Cooper-Broadie interpretation, we find Aristotle passing on to his youthful audience a truly splendid piece of worldly wisdom (hinted at in my eye-catching title), which we lose if we deny it outright in the way Brewer does. And since, as I say, Brewer does not need to deny it, we might as well have both the worldly wisdom and the edification.

The piece of worldly wisdom turns on noting how readily, in some

4. A. W. Price, *Love and Friendship in Plato and Aristotle* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989), 144.

5. *Ibid.*, 145.

6. *Ibid.*, 161.

7. *Ibid.*, 154.

8. Brewer, “Virtues We Can Share,” 724.

9. *Ibid.*, 731 n. 23.

cases, we can draw the distinction between “benefiting someone ‘for his own sake’” and “loving/liking him for (or ‘as’ or ‘in’) himself.”

We should begin by noting that pleasure and utility friendships are friendships, not merely associations. People can be associates without being friends, because friends (*philoí*), tautologically, have to like/love (*philein*) each other, and we don’t like everyone with whom we associate.

As a familiar example of a utility friendship, I want us to consider our relationships with our academic colleagues. True, given the ancient Greeks’ lofty disdain for anything as vulgar as a job, not all of Aristotle’s remarks about utility friendships apply to them, but I doubt that many of us have business friendships or mutual practical enterprise friendships (as some neighboring landowners do), and I need an example that will be familiar to us all.¹⁰ So, consider your colleagues. Unless you are very lucky, it will be with you as it is with me; there will be some you do not like as well as some you like. (If we are unlucky, there will be some we actively dislike, but not liking is not as strong as disliking.) Among the ones we like, at least some will like us; we are friends. What does this mutual liking/friendship consist in?

Well, to a limited extent, we enjoy each other’s company. We enjoy lunches and after-work drinks and chats with each other, as we don’t with the ones that we don’t like, though collegiality and politeness will sometimes require that we engage in them. And, unless you are a monster of self-centeredness (in which case it seems unlikely that any of your colleagues will like you) you have, as I do, goodwill toward the ones you like who like you, your friends. It is not only that you wish good things to them, you actually put yourself out for their sake. You listen sympathetically to their troubles, readily offer to take one of their classes when they want to be away, offer to drive them to the airport to meet their mother when their car has broken down, offer to babysit, buy a book for them you know they would like when it catches your eye, and so on. And you expect the same sort of goodwill from them because, *ex hypothesi*, they like you; you are friends.

With respect to the colleagues that we don’t like and/or who don’t like us, things are different; we won’t usually offer to do such things. Naturally, we might sometimes offer for special reasons. I might offer to do an extra lecture on a course I was team teaching to enable a colleague I didn’t like to speak at a conference for the sake of the unity of the course. I might offer to babysit as part of a deal—“I’ll babysit on Thursday if you will give me a lift into work on Friday.” Then, when I do these things, I don’t do them out of goodwill, for the sake of the colleague in question, but for those special reasons. But, with the ones I like, such modest acts of altruism come quite naturally. I do them for

10. For similar modern examples, see Broadie, *Aristotle: Nicomachean Ethics*, 58.

David or Julia because I like them, because they are my friends, and I do them for their sake, not for the special reasons I need when it comes to Vivian and Peter. (Obviously, I would, if minimally decent, do things for Vivian's or Peter's sakes when they really need it and no one else has offered. But I'm not going to be the first to offer, as I do with those of my colleagues who are my friends.)

Nevertheless, in many of the cases of such friendly relationships with our colleagues, we do not like the other "for himself"—we are not friends with the other "as himself" but as a colleague.¹¹ This is shown by the fact that when we cease to be colleagues the liking, the friendship, dissolves. One of us changes departments, or retires, and it is "out of sight, out of mind." We don't miss each other, never think of each other unless especially reminded; meeting each other by accident we may well find we have little or nothing to talk about. It usually wouldn't occur to me to ring them up out of the blue and ask them to put themselves out for me in some way, and if they rang me up, expecting me to do that, I would be very surprised and slightly irritated. (Again, given minimal decency, it would be different if one of us were in desperate straits.)

We all, I assume, are familiar with this phenomenon. We don't expect these friendships to survive the breakup of the work relationship; that we work together is the basis of the friendship. But this does not lead us to ascribe ulterior motives to their, or our, modest beneficence to each other when we were colleagues. That such friendships, such mutual likings and goodwill, just come and go according to circumstances is unsurprising, simply how things happen.

Aristotle implies (1156b1–3) that there are pleasure friendships that are not erotic, without giving us any hint as to what they may be. Let us guess that they are, for example, the friendships that spring up in groups of (typically young) people who, in Aristotle's day, hunt, drank, or trained for the Olympics together, and in our day, drink, go clubbing, or engage in some sporting activity together. And, again in our day, groups of, typically, the old, who go on luxury cruises together.

In such groups, as with colleagues, there will nearly always be some who like each other and some who don't. Insofar as there is any room for modest beneficence, it will, as with colleagues, occur between the ones who like each other, who are friends, spontaneously, and without calculation, for the sake of the friend. As with colleagues, this standing goodwill between those who like each other, who are friends, contrasts

11. Not in all cases, of course. I would be the last to deny that a shared and mutually recognized dedication to one's subject is a promising ground for a character friendship.

with the occasional beneficent acts those who are not friends might do either for special reasons or out of minimal decency.

And, as with colleagues, the parties to the friendship do not like the other “in himself.” They are not friends with the other “as himself” but as a sharer in a pleasurable activity. And this is shown by the fact that such friendships, the mutual liking and goodwill, simply evaporate when one or both parties to the friendship leave the group, or the group dissolves, and they are no longer enjoying themselves together. Once again, this is a familiar and unsurprising fact. (People who have been friends on cruises always exchange addresses when they part, sincerely, and often tearfully, promising to keep in touch. And they very rarely do. And no one is surprised.)

Aristotle’s perspicuous piece of worldly wisdom is that of course the same is true of pleasure friendships when they are erotic. There is mutual liking and goodwill, based on mutual pleasure; the other is loved/liked not as himself but as a pleasure-giving companion. And when the sexual attraction, and hence the pleasure in the company of the other goes, the liking/love and the goodwill just evaporate, as they do in all the other friendships in which the others are not liked/loved “for themselves.” Why is this worth his pointing out?

It is worth Aristotle’s pointing it out to his youthful audience because they are particularly prone to sexual passion and going wrong about pleasure. Passion combined with mutual liking/loving gives erotic pleasure friendships a number of features that the nonerotic pleasure friendships and utility friendships do not share, and this makes it difficult to discern their fundamental similarity and hence the transitoriness of the goodwill involved.

Consider how the erotic friendships, with their extra features, will appear to the young on the Brewer interpretation. Suppose that I am a young Athenian man, passionately involved with an older one. I see him manifesting goodwill to me. It is quite unmistakable—he goes to endless trouble, is so patient and thoughtful. And of course I would do anything for him. That is, after all, how passion so often takes one—the enjoyment of each other’s company and the willingness to do things for the other are so unlimited, so, in those respects, different from the other pleasure and utility friendships. As Aristotle says, the lover “promises everything” (1164a6), and this is very different from the way things are among friendly colleagues and shipmates. So now let us suppose that Aristotle, instead of (seemingly) saying contradictory things, says, unambiguously, what Brewer would have him say. “If there is real mutual goodwill, rather than merely instrumentally motivated beneficence, this cannot be a pleasure (or utility) friendship, but must be a character one, in which each friend loves the other as himself.” How readily I will believe that! Exalted by passion, I have invested him with all the virtues

(passion does that too), and I am more than happy to think that I have them, albeit imperfectly, as well. (How nice of Aristotle to allow that, when he elsewhere seems to have been telling me that I have a long way to go.)

But I am probably in for a bad shock. The circumstances that form the bases of the other transitory friendships are external relations, such that a change in one party to the friendship necessarily brings about a corresponding change in the other. (If you leave, we are no longer colleagues.) But the circumstance that forms the basis of the erotic friendships is passion, and if my erstwhile lover ceases to find me sexually attractive this will not, alas, bring about a corresponding change in me; I may still love him as much as ever. Of course, given the convention of the *erastes/eromenos* relationship in ancient Greece, it is highly unlikely that I shall have been expecting that our relationship would be permanent. I may well not have thought, even vaguely, that we would wind up as friends at all after we were both married. But I certainly was not expecting that the goodwill was going to evaporate, completely, in only a day, as it may well do.

When it does, I would then find myself in the bewildered state that, nowadays, I think is more common among women. I must have spent hours (perhaps weeks?) of my life listening to my women friends bewailing the breakup of an affair and saying they “didn’t understand.” What they didn’t understand was how it could be that he was (apparently) so sweet and loving if he didn’t really care for them. If he just cared about them as a sexual object instead of “for themselves,” why had he gone to so much trouble about their birthday, looked after them so tenderly when they had flu (and looked revolting), and been so delightful with their cranky child, so patient with their tiresome mother, so interested in their work, . . . and “promised everything”? It only made sense if all of these beneficent acts were done for ulterior reasons, not for their sake, but that didn’t make sense. He could have acted in those ways only for their sake. *So* he must have loved them for themselves alone and not their yellow hair.¹² But then, how could he have stopped doing so so suddenly? They hadn’t necessarily been thinking in terms of settling down for ever—but nor had they been expecting that he

12.

Never shall a young man,
 Thrown into despair
 By those great honey-coloured
 Ramparts at your ear,
 Love you for yourself alone
 And not your yellow hair.
 —W. B. Yeats, “For Anne Gregory”

would just turn the sweetness off, like a tap. How could he have—it was incomprehensible.

That “*So* he must have loved them for themselves . . .” relies on the same stark dichotomy that the Brewer interpretation draws. If goodwill in friendship exists only in character friendships, then my poor friends’ bewilderment is inescapable. Either they had, and have inexplicably lost (“I haven’t changed!” “I didn’t do anything!”), a character friendship wherein they were loved for themselves, or they cannot make sense of other people’s beneficent actions at all.

But on the Cooper-Broadie interpretation, with the examples of the other pleasure friendships and the utility friendships in place, the “*So* . . .” is the obvious mistake in the reasoning. I know that my colleague friends do the nice things they do do for me for my sake, as I do mine for theirs. It would be absurd to try to understand their actions in terms of their calculating that somehow they must do these things in order to preserve me as a useful colleague or guarantee that I will reciprocate; such an “explanation” would make nonsense, not sense, of their actions. But I don’t infer, “*So* they must really like me for myself and will miss me dreadfully when they go off to their exciting new job in another department.”

In the context of these examples, we have no difficulty in separating “does things for me for my sake” and “likes me for myself, not just as a colleague.” To escape from the bewilderment over the breakup of an erotic friendship, one has only to separate “did (lots and lots of) things for my sake” and “loved me for myself alone.” We know, from the other examples, that these two things just don’t automatically go together, and they do not go together in erotic friendships either.

Hence it should not be surprising, when the basis of an erotic pleasure friendship dissolves—which requires only one party to the friendship to cease to feel sexual attraction—that the liking and the goodwill go too. And we do not find it at all surprising when we are the one who first ceases to feel the sexual attraction. Looking back on our slavish goodwill, we laugh and say, “I must have been mad.”

We probably were. *Eros* is a dangerous god, tempting us to believe that in our transitory erotic pleasure friendships we are loved for ourselves. But we are not; that happens only in character friendships, and on the Cooper-Broadie interpretation, the extravagant goodwill involved in erotic friendship is not grounds for supposing that the form of the friendship is anything other than what it is. This form of goodwill is peculiar to erotic relationships and in its pure form (which is perhaps rare) a far cry from the form celebrated in Brewer’s account.

However, as Brewer notes, few actual friendships are likely to be pure cases of the three forms that Aristotle distinguishes. This may be particularly true of erotic pleasure friendships between decent people,

who, one might think, may well have at least some interest in each other's good characters. Such pleasure friendships are the starting point of many good marriages for us, at least, and possibly in a few cases in Aristotle's day too.¹³

13. Price notes that Aristotle acknowledges that pleasure friendships may develop into character friendships when the friends "are alike in character and have come to be fond of each other's characters through familiarity" (1157a3–12) and speculates, on the basis of a passage in *Prior Analytics*, that, in his lost *Eroticus*, Aristotle may have done more to develop his idea that *eros* "may generate a different kind of loving, less erotic and more faithful . . . linking individuals not merely as satisfiers of one another's incidental needs, but as partners in a life of personal self-realization" (*Love and Friendship*, 249).