

## **POLITICS AND THE PERFECTION OF FRIENDSHIP: ARISTOTELIAN REFLECTIONS**

CLAUDIA BARACCHI \*

### **ABSTRACT**

Aristotle's discussion of friendship provides an inclusive analysis that, along with common everyday understanding, tries to take into account approaches as different as that of the sophists and Plato's meditation on this theme. The present essay examines the complexity of the phenomenon of friendship —especially the difficult intersection of friendship as loving intimacy between excellent individuals (*teleia philia*) and friendship as a genuinely political bond. Above all, it attempts to cast light on the political relevance of perfect friendship. Thus understood, friendship is disclosed as the end or destination of politics and may even presage the self-overcoming of politics as mere legality. This opens the way for an understanding of political finality as no mere expediency (in fact, as nothing less than communal thriving) and for thinking the political on the basis of *pathos* and singularity.

*Key words:* Aristotle, ethics, politics, friendship, justice.

---

\* New School for Social Research, New York. SOLICITADO: 02-18-09

## LA POLÍTICA Y LA PERFECCIÓN DE LA AMISTAD: REFLEXIONES ARISTOTÉLICAS

CLAUDIA BARACCHI

### RESUMEN

La discusión de Aristóteles sobre la amistad proporciona un análisis integrador que, junto con la comprensión cotidiana común, trata de tener en cuenta enfoques tan diferentes como los de los sofistas y la meditación de Platón sobre este tema. El presente ensayo examina la complejidad del fenómeno de la amistad, en especial la difícil intersección de la amistad como la intimidad amorosa entre individuos excelentes (*teleia philia*) y la amistad como un vínculo político genuino. Sobre todo, trata de arrojar luz sobre la relevancia política de la amistad perfecta. Así entendida, la amistad se revela como el fin o el destino de la política e incluso puede presagiar la auto-superación de la política como mera legalidad. Esto abre el camino para la comprensión de la finalidad de la política como no mera conveniencia (de hecho, nada menos que como comunidad próspera) y para pensar lo político sobre la base del *pathos* y la singularidad.

*Palabras clave:* Aristóteles, ética, política, amistad, justicia.

BOOKS THETA AND IOTA OF THE *Nicomachean Ethics* are devoted to the issue of friendship, *philia*. With regard to length, the discussion of friendship exceeds by far any other thematic elaboration in the treatise. It displays Aristotle's effort to do justice to the broad semantic range of the word *philia*, acknowledging the heterogeneity of determinations the term received in diverse contexts and ordinary practices. Indeed, this discussion embraces the "perfect," fully actualized bond of friendship as well as associations motivated by the most prosaic finalities; the horizontal relation between peers as well as the vertical bond uniting those of unequal status; and, most notably, the utterly singular relational experience as well as political cohesion.

The ambition here is remarkable, as usual: to provide an inclusive analysis that, along with common everyday understanding, is to take into account approaches as different as that of the sophists and Plato's immense meditation on the theme of friendship. However, we ask, is Aristotle, in his attempt, simply providing a taxonomy of diverse modes (kinds) of friendship, to be understood as relatively autonomous and unrelated phenomena equivocally receiving the same designation? Or, on the contrary, may the manifold of friendship be meaningfully understood in its organic unity, if not analogically referred to one encompassing determination? The complexity of the phenomenon of friendship—especially the difficult intersection of (1) friendship as loving intimacy between excellent individuals (*teleia philia*) and (2) friendship as a genuinely political bond—motivates the following considerations.

\*

ARISTOTLE MENTIONS THE LINK BETWEEN friendship and excellence in passing, at the outset of the investigation: "friendship is a virtue, or something with virtue, and besides, it is most necessary to life, for no one would choose to live without friends, though they would have all the other goods" (1155a4-6).<sup>1</sup> Accordingly, friendship is associated with justice, previously disclosed as excellence in the comprehensive sense. Aristotle states:

---

<sup>1</sup> Albeit with frequent divergences, in the present essay I follow Hippocrates G. Apostle's translation of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. The translations from *Eudemian Ethics* and *Magna Moralia* are my own, based on the Loeb editions (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1952 and 1935, respectively).

In travels [*en tais planais*], too, one may observe how close [*os oikeion*] and dear [*philon*] every human being is to another human being. Friendship seems to hold a *polis* together [*synechein*], too, and lawgivers seem to pay more attention to friendship than to justice; for concord [*homonoia*] seems to be somewhat akin [*homoion*] to friendship, and this they aim at most of all and try their utmost to drive out faction, which is enmity. And when human beings are friends, they have no need of justice at all, but when they are just, they still need friendship; and that which is most just is thought to be done in a friendly way [*philikon*]. (1155a21-29)

In the course of a journey, human beings tend to regard one another with sympathy. Not unlike sailors at sea, conscious of the perils of their worldly transit, they share the same vulnerability to the measureless and non-human. Friendship, then, would stem from such an elemental sentiment of solidarity and promote accord within the community. In this way, it encourages like-mindedness, a community “of one mind,” as it were.

Thus, in the very passage explicitly maintaining that friendship surpasses justice to the point of making justice obsolete, indeed unnecessary (friends, we are told, “have no need of justice at all”), Aristotle is also developing an understanding of friendship in terms of communal or political cohesion and, hence, of justice. Yet, the tension between friendship as irreducible to justice and friendship as equivalent with justice may be only apparent. Indeed, both terms can be understood in their perfection as well as in a less incisive, less fulfilled sense.

Insofar as both of them grant the harmonious cohesiveness of the *polis*, friendship and justice may be seen as coextensive. As Aristotle asserts, “[i]n each kind of government friendship appears to the extent that what is just does” (1161a10-11). Such a relation between friendship and justice may imply either that (1) friendship is understood *lato sensu*, as a vaguely defined bond of solidarity, or that (2) being just will never have meant merely following the laws. The latter view of justice is in line with the previous analysis in Book Epsilon: as “complete virtue,” *aretê teleia*, justice indicates excellence with respect to another, i.e., in relation, and does not as such coincide with the mere observance of extrinsic prescriptions. It is excellence relationally manifested, the complete exercise of excellence by essentially relational beings. Thus, in its irreducibility to legality, justice is illuminated by the loving solicitude characteristic of friends. It may be said that friendship completes (perfects) justice, brings justice to its fullest manifestation: that which is most just, just even beyond just laws, carries

the mark of friendship. (Just as “pleasure perfects the activity,” and does so “not as a habit inhering in the one acting but as an end which supervenes like the bloom of youth to those in their prime of life” [1174b27-34].)

On the other hand, and perfectly in line with the preceding remarks, Aristotle states that friendship far exceeds justice understood in its narrow, legal sense. As the system of legality that grants stability and protects the *polis* from faction or divisiveness, justice is the necessary condition for the institution, subsistence, and continuation of the *polis*. But friendship (at least friendship for the sake of excellence, as distinct from convenience, expediency, pleasure or material advantage) surpasses this logic of survival: it is what adorns life in such a way as to turn living into living well. Time and again it becomes apparent that, in this sense, friendship would make juridical measures and the whole legislative effort somewhat unnecessary, or would crucially change their function. In this way, the Aristotelian reflection reveals a twofold convergence: a convergence, on the one hand, of friendship as *teleia philia* and justice as *teleia aretê*, and, on the other hand, of justice as legality and friendship as the basic accord and concord allowing for coexistence.

If friendship in the complete sense would reign, then, justice as that to which human beings asymptotically aspire would be fulfilled. *Concomitantly*, justice as the system of juridical institutions would be superseded, revealed as superfluous. This intimates that politics as juridical institution (let alone in its pre-juridical, pre-normative, auroral stratum), is not coeval with friendship, but rather precedes it, constitutes the condition of it. Political constitution in its juridical expression is necessary and called for precisely to the extent that friendship is not the common condition, i.e., to the extent that the members of the community are not as a whole gathered together in virtue of a prevailing bond of friendship. As we shall see better, friendship in its achieved sense is a “rare” phenomenon. Nevertheless, its sporadic incidence may function as a reminder and even a promise, however unreadable and fragmentary, of the justice that is not yet, that is to come: the justice for which human beings keep striving.

\*

ACCORDING TO ARISTOTLE, FRIENDSHIP in its primary sense (i.e., perfect, complete) is based on similarity (*homoiôsis*, 1156b8) and reciprocity

(1155b34).<sup>2</sup> It is on the ground of the assumption of similarity and reciprocity, that friendship is said to be a kind of love of oneself. (In Plato's *Republic*, again in the proximity of the question of justice, friendship is revealed in terms of inner harmonization, "becoming one's own friend," 443c-e.)

We should underline that what is common, i.e., what is involved in such a similarity and reciprocation, is not some accidental feature, but excellence itself. In other words, what is common is psychological conformation, i.e., one's disposition with respect to the good, the very structure in virtue of which one may be good *and* towards the good. As Aristotle observes, "[p]erfect friendship is between human beings who are good and similar [*homoion*] with respect to virtue; for, insofar as they are good, it is in a similar manner that they wish [*boulontai*] each other the good [things], and such human beings are good in themselves" (1156b7-10). At stake in friendship primarily understood is the sharing of excellence. It is such a movement towards the good, entailing excellence in psychological formation, which is eminently lovable in the friend.

Thus, the similarity between the friends is not based on something owned in the narrow sense of the term —a property or possession that can be the object of comparison and comparative evaluation. The friends resemble one another in their being similarly turned towards the good, in their pursuing and striving for the good. What they share is nothing possessed but, rather, that which is sought after or loved. As Aristotle puts it in the *Eudemian Ethics*, "for us [human beings] the good [*to eu*] is according to the other [*kath'eteron*]" (1245b18) and "each one wishes to live together [with one's friends] in [within the compass of] the end that one may be capable of" (1245b8), especially "in the superior good [*en to beltioni agathon*]" (1245b2), enjoying "more divine pleasures" (1245a39-b1).

The similarity between friends may be a matter of possession only in the strict sense of the having (*ekhein*) of habits, more precisely the having of excellent ones. Excellent habituation, i.e., the stabilization of excellent

---

<sup>2</sup> As Thomas Aquinas observes in his commentary on *Nicomachean Ethics*, friendship exceeds virtue, for it requires reciprocity and, hence, entails a doubling of excellent action.

psychological structures, may indeed be considered a property. Yet, it is that peculiar property that turns the one who has it towards that which exceeds one, that which is not possessed —that peculiar property that turns the one to whom it properly belongs beyond oneself, i.e., beyond the structures themselves of propriety as well as property and ownership, towards a certain self-dispossession. In this sense, excellent habituation signals that the human being in its culminating manifestation cannot be understood in terms of autonomy, self-enclosure, and self-identity, let alone individualism. In its highest accomplishment, the human being bespeaks constitutive permeability and heteronomous determination.

Friends, then, share their disposition towards the good: they are similarly turned towards the good, similarly caught in the love of the good. It is such a thrust, such a love irreducible to their love for each other, which friends share. Similarity as well as reciprocity must be understood in light of such an excess, of such an openness beyond each of the friends involved, beyond even their relatedness, their tending to be at one, to become one. Aristotle recognizes the exuberance and overflowing character of friendship: friendship is *hyperbolê*, hyperbolic, inherently marked by excess (1158a12, 1166b1). One loves another in virtue of the other's orientation towards the good, an orientation that one experiences as well. So, in loving the other, each is first of all recognizing him- or herself as other.

This is so not only because each recognizes him- or herself through the other, i.e., because one comes to oneself essentially thanks to the departure towards the other, in an ecstatic movement outside oneself that can never allow for a simple return without dispersal. More remarkably still, one recognizes oneself as other because one contemplates in the other an in(de)finite openness to radical alterity, to an alterity altogether irreducible to an other human being as well as to (any other) being. Such is the openness to becoming who one is (who one is to be), taking up the task of fully activating oneself —a task irreducible to self-determination, to the extent that the work of self-activation entails progressive discovery, uncovering oneself and learning about oneself as one is in the process of taking place.

That one recognizes oneself as other means that one catches a glimpse of oneself as an open structure of receptivity and hospitality,

inhabited by, and striving towards, that which is irreducible to oneself. Friendship would entail sharing in common that which is not owned, but desired-sharing (experiencing, sustaining) in common the open structure of incompleteness, the longing thereby implied.

Thus, in loving the other, each is at the same time projected beyond him- or herself, beyond the other, and beyond their relationship as well. Indeed, friendship can neither be reduced to nor be contained within the exchange merely between the friends. For, in loving the other, one is caught in the shared common movement towards the good, that is to say, in the movement of living well, of life in its plenitude (in a plenitude that coincides with a yearning for fulfillment).<sup>3</sup> This is, of course, what happiness names. The love of the friend is *at once* a thrust beyond the friend. Indeed, such a thrust beyond is essentially involved in the inception as well as the abiding of friendship.

\*

WE MUST EMPHASIZE THAT SIMILARITY and reciprocity thus understood can hardly be considered a calculable matter. So it is certainly the case, as Aristotle points out, that friendship is among equals, a matter of equality (*philotês isotês*, 1158a1).<sup>4</sup> However, *isotês* here seems to name the togetherness of two

---

<sup>3</sup> In light of such considerations, it would be relevant to read Aristotle's reflection at 1170a-b, on the goodness of being, i.e., of living, and most notably of the activation and intensification (the energy) of life manifest in living-together (*suzên*) and "sensing-together" (sharing *pathos*, or even "con-senting," as Agamben translates the term *sunaisthesis*). Says Aristotle: "they are pleased by sensing-together that which is in itself good... So just as one's own being is choiceworthy to one, so is the being of a friend, or almost so. But being was stated to be choiceworthy to one because one senses himself as being good, and such a sensation is pleasant in itself. Hence one should sense-together the being of the friend, and this would come about by living-together and sharing in speeches and thoughts.... So since being, which is by nature good and pleasant, is in virtue of itself choiceworthy to someone blessed, and since a friend's being, too, is almost so, then also a friend would be choiceworthy" (1170b8-18). See Giorgio Agamben, *L'amico* (Roma: Nottetempo, 2007).

<sup>4</sup> Aristotle is here reporting a saying ("legetai gar..."). Already Timaeus referred the assonant equivalence *philotês-isotês*, friendship-equality, to Pythagoras (Diogenes Laertius, *Vitae Philosophorum* VIII.10). To Pythagoras is also attributed the formulation *koina ta tôn philôn*, the pronouncement dear to Plato stating that friends share everything in common. Both sayings on friendship enjoyed lasting



people who are equal in that each of them enacts oneself as a strange oneness entailing openness. In the privileged and paradigmatically conducive space that friendship offers, each of them can more fully unfold, more excellently take up the task of becoming oneself—the task of living—. They are equal in sharing the same aspiration, the same propulsion, the same longing orienting them towards a certain kind of life. As Aristotle observes (1158b29-33), at stake in “perfect” friendship is not so much proportional equality, based on the evaluation of worth or merit (as is the case in justice), but rather numerical equality. In such a friendship, the friends are one before the other one, together in sharing a common desire, and each one of them is one precisely in virtue of such an orientation, of such a movement that is simultaneously transgressive (movement beyond [oneself]) and relational (movement towards [an other]).

And yet, pursuing the same desire will not possibly have meant becoming the same. On the contrary, taking up the task of living well will have entailed confronting the ever unique question regarding oneself, one’s utterly singular circumstances and conditions, and hence developing the traits and actualizing the genuinely distinctive potentiality each one bears. Pursuing the same desire, thus, will have meant becoming oneself.<sup>5</sup>

---

authoritativeness as expressions of ancient wisdom. See, e.g., Plato’s *Lysis* 207c and *De legibus* 757a, Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* Iota 1168b8, and Cicero’s *De officiis* I.51.

<sup>5</sup> The friendship among philosophers (those who, in turn, are friends of wisdom) makes this especially perspicuous: pursuing wisdom together, as friends, will not have meant coming to the same results, but rather cultivating together a certain *ēthos*, sharing a life of (self-) examination. Consider the passage in *Nicomachean Ethics* Alpha in which Aristotle prepares to undertake a critique of the Platonists’ (if not Plato’s) view of the good: “such an inquiry is made with great reluctance,” warns Aristotle, “because the men, *andras*, who introduced the *eidē* are friends. Yet, it would perhaps be thought better, and also a duty, to forsake, *anairein*, even what is close in order to save the truth, especially as we are philosophers; for while both are dear, it is pious to honor truth” (1096a12-16). If, *prima facie*, it appears as though friendship and the pursuit of the truth are dissociated and the latter is chosen over against the former, it should nonetheless be recalled that the alleged privilege of truth is affirmed by turning to and quoting the friend. Aristotle is here echoing Plato, who, again, attributes this posture to Socrates: we should pursue the truth despite the rifts and differences this may bring about between us and those we love, our friends (*Phaed.* 91c, *Resp.* X 595b-c). In his commentary on the *Nicomachean Ethics*, with his usual equanimity, Thomas underlines the closeness between the friends (Aristotle, Plato) precisely there where the pursuit of the truth seems to be contrasted to friendship and shown as incompatible with it: “Along the same lines is also the judgment of Plato who, in rejecting the opinion of his teacher Socrates,

In the thrust of friendship lies the possibility of the individuation of each, the phenomenon of each pursuing his/her most unique development. Individuation, the becoming of each according to one's potential, is no individualism: unbridgeable singularity takes shape in and as relatedness, relationality, interconnectedness.

Thus —and this is of paramount importance, although seldom observed— the similarity and equality at stake in this discourse cannot be resolved into matters of custom, communal conventions, status and reputation. The relationship here explored may not be viewed merely as the bond of convenience and conformity uniting those enjoying the same political visibility, just as the community of those striving after the good (the community of the best) may not be mistaken for aristocracy as the class endowed with material advantage, power, automatically inherited rights. Indeed, one could even say that relatedness in the mode of friendship discloses the possibility for the dawning of the individual as such, beyond functional relationships, satisfaction of conventional requirements, and fulfillment of given roles —beyond the highly codified civic-political interactions.

---

says that it is necessary to care more for truth than for anything else. Somewhere else he affirms that Socrates is certainly a friend, but truth is even more so (*amicus quidem Socrates, sed magis amica veritas*). In yet another place he says that one should certainly care little for Socrates but a lot for truth" (I.6.5). Thus, no sooner is the friendship with "men" set aside, for the sake of companionship with the truth, than it is taken up again. Indeed, the friendship among "men" is reasserted in a privileged sense, as the friendship among the friends of wisdom: for "we," Aristotle emphatically affirms, "are philosophers." The philosophers are revealed, thus, as those exemplary friends who share the same compulsion toward wisdom, even as the manner in which each comports himself in his pursuit may be quite unique, even at odds with others. The friendship among philosophers casts light on the many ways in which the same may be shared. In this sense, friendship appears not to be a matter of agreement (of saying the same) in any straightforward sense, but a matter of undergoing the same experience (*pathos*), of being exposed to the same claim, of sharing a certain thrust, a certain searching relation to the truth: to the truth not owned, known, and mastered, but, once again, searched —even more precisely, loved. Thus understood, friendship can be no alternative to the love of truth, but appears to rest on the sharing of such a love. The philosophical impulse discloses friendship as the sharing of a desire to understand, a desire that prescribes an unrelenting exploration, the tracing of one's own path of inquiry and not the acquiescence to friends and teachers —a desire that, therefore, not only may but almost inevitably does lead to trajectories in tension with each other, when not altogether incompatible. Yet, these paths that may not agree and, at the limit, not even intersect, are drawn in response to a shared, common compulsion.

In this way, the Aristotelian reflection cannot simply be interpreted and expounded in terms of the historical/cultural context it reflects and out of which it develops. Aristotle's understanding of friendship cannot be said purely to pertain to relationships between and among free male adults, or, more precisely, between and among citizens belonging to the dominant class—the only ones living a life of political engagement and leisure. While, to be sure, in the context familiar to Aristotle only free men, emancipated from the strictures of necessity, would be in the position of experiencing the bond of friendship in its accomplished sense, Aristotle's thinking is not merely delimited by such a framework. Irreducible to the historically determined relational/communal shapes whose mark it nevertheless bears, Aristotle's thinking envisions friendship as the terrain most conducive to human growth and development, as the relational engagement above all and most fully promoting the unfolding of human possibility and, hence, displaying the human being in its structural openness, caught in the in(de) finite task of becoming toward the good. Far from being a matter of self-identity or sameness, of identification with and belonging in a certain class or clan, friendship, precisely in casting light on the experience of excess, calls identity into question in its very possibility, whether at the level of conceptual determinacy, categorial stability, or socio-cultural classification. Friendship rests on sameness (of desire) not defined in its whatness, on a sameness that cannot be resolved into conformity. It is in this perspective that Aristotle's analysis remains alive and vibrant, well beyond considerations of historiographic, archeological, or antiquarian tenor.

\*

AS WAS ANTICIPATED, IN LOVING A FRIEND one loves oneself. In this sense, Aristotle states that “being disposed toward a friend is like being disposed to oneself (for a friend is another self)” (1166a31-32).<sup>6</sup> In accord with oneself and harboring the love of the good, as if overflowing, one loves outside oneself, wishing the good of another and actively pursuing it (1166a1-14). Indeed, since the traits of such a bearing belong to “someone good [*epieikei*] in relation to him- or herself... friendship too seems to be some of these features, and friends seem

---

<sup>6</sup> See also 1170b11. Porphyry attributes to Pythagoras the view of the friend as an *alter ego* (*Vita Pythagorae* 33). Again, the *alter ego* (“other” or “heterogeneous self”) must be understood as another indeterminately open/desiring structure, and not as the replica of a self-same subject.

to be those who have them” (1166a30-33). Friendship is thought to originate from one’s disposition towards oneself (1166a1-2), and hence to reflect and resemble it: “the excess of friendship [*hyperbole tes philias*] is similar [*homoiontai*] to that [sentiment] towards oneself” (1166b1).

Thus, being one’s own friend by no means signifies being a self-enclosed harmony, but rather points to the harmonious movement of a love that overflows, connects, and attunes. Again, friendship with oneself hardly bespeaks self-identity: it rather indicates the love and pursuit of that which exceeds one. In turn, friendship with an other cannot be reduced to a process of appropriation assimilating the friend (the other) to structures of identity. The friend as “another self” cannot signify that I bring the other back to myself, but that I am towards the other and the other pervades me *ab origine*; that I am thus deprived of (self-)possession and control; that alterity, not even anthropologically reducible, is constitutive of me and I am always already late with respect to such constitution.

Experiencing oneself in such a relation to oneself that cannot be a matter of self-possession or self-knowledge unqualified, one is in the condition of loving, outside oneself, those who are similarly harboring and enacting the good—those similarly living toward the good or longing for an attunement to it.<sup>7</sup> It is in this sense that friendship occurs for the sake of and thanks to

---

<sup>7</sup> In *L'anima alle soglie del pensiero nella filosofia greca* (Napoli: Bibliopolis, 1988), Hans Georg Gadamer focuses on the connection between friendship and self-knowledge (93-109) and, most notably, on the question of *philautia* in Aristotle. The Platonic legacy can be discerned in the view that friendship with another requires friendship with oneself (101). Yet, Gadamer maintains, such a condition of friendship entails neither the priority nor the autarchy of the contemplative moment, whether knowledge or self-knowledge (103). This is evident from the determination of the human being obtained through the contrast to the gods, a contrast putting human limits and finitude into relief. According to Aristotle, Gadamer argues, humans may not know themselves without qualification, let alone know themselves prior to and aside from their involvement with others. Indeed, precisely because they are not gods, humans may know (and hence be friends with) others to a higher degree than they know themselves; most notably, they may know, find access to themselves only thanks to the detour through others (103-109). Aristotle recognizes the prescription of self-knowledge (*Magna Moralia* 1213a13-26). Yet, while the god cannot think the other than itself (its simplicity and completeness prevent that), the human can only elucidate itself to itself through the exposure to and elucidation of the other. The very capacity of the human for realizing difference and effecting integration is distinctive of the

the good. It is in this sense that the good elicits friendship and, therefore, that friendship or love is of and for the good. The love of an other is folded into the shared love of the altogether other designated as the good. Taking it with utmost caution, we may in this regard recall Plato's understanding of the good, in the *Lysis*, as *prôton philon*, "the first friend," or friend in the primary sense.

\*

INSISTING ON THE MEASURELESSNESS (indeterminability) characterizing the similarity as well as reciprocity of friends aims at underlining the critique, implicit in the Aristotelian discussion, of identity structures. If we neglect such imperviousness to measurement (to determination), we can hardly avoid interpreting similarity in terms of equal political-economic status and reciprocity in terms of any marketplace transaction. Aristotle's entire line of thinking would wither into conventionalism, mere celebration of the political-cultural formations of its time. This much is at stake in the interpretation of similarity and reciprocity.

In light of such measurelessness and incommensurability, friendship cannot exhaust itself in an enclosed relationship between two (or among few). Rather, it always involves the sense of belonging together in that which exceeds both, in that which exceeds the human as such and can, thus, be designated as inhuman. I am attracted to an other because in him or her I perceive the same propulsion towards a common end: because we love the same, which is beyond (not "the" beyond).

And yet, Aristotle is also acutely aware that such an infinite movement beyond rests on altogether finite conditions: that the experience of such a driving relatedness cannot be lived with infinitely and indifferently many others; that, on the contrary, friendship in this sense is an infrequent occurrence. It is at this juncture that the issue of *eunoia* is introduced, drawing a connection between (1) friendship as the relation that can only be experienced with a few others and (2)

---

human *vis-à-vis* the divine. That one mirrors oneself in the friend (*Phaedrus* 255d) means that one comes to oneself through the other, thanks to "being-with" (*suzên*). Gadamer's argumentation is also supported by *Eudemian Ethics* 1245b16-19.

friendship in its political valence (*homonoia*), gathering human beings as such, in the *polis* and beyond.

Regarding friendship in the accomplished sense, Aristotle notes that “such friendships are rare, for few can be such friends.” Besides these few occurrences, one may cultivate a kind disposition or benevolence (*eunoia*) towards others: the *pathos* of *eunoia* may be manifest or latent (*lanthanô*) to the one to whom it is directed, may or may not be reciprocated, and may be undergone with respect to indefinitely many others held to be good, whether known or unknown (1155b32-1156a5). However, friendships in the sense of lived relationship, intimate frequentation, and shared experience are as numerically limited as human life and scope are finite.<sup>8</sup> While, through friendship, human life crucially opens itself up to infinity, human beings’ finitude in space, time, and resources quantitatively delimits the realization or actualization (*energeia*) of friendship. Humans possess neither the endurance nor the energy to sustain love towards indifferently many others:

It is impossible to be a friend to many in a perfect friendship, just as it is impossible to love [*eran*] many persons at the same time (for love is like an excess [*hyperbole*], and such excess is by nature felt towards one), and it is not easy for many people to satisfy very much the same person at the same time, or perhaps for many to be good at the same time. (1158a10-14)

Here Aristotle’s reflection is twofold. In the first place, because of the intensity characteristic of friendship as well as love, one can envision only a limited number of such experiences. The hyperbolic character of friendship can be sustained only according to a certain measure. Sharing widely and indiscriminately with many such a condition seems to be out of the question: “the actual community of sensibility” (*energeian tês sunaisthêsêôs*), Aristotle affirms, “is necessarily in a small group” (*Eudemian Ethics* 1245b23-4). Secondly, because of the structure of what is, of communities as we know them, it may indeed be impossible

---

<sup>8</sup> Unlike the Stoics, Aristotle emphasizes friendship as “loving exchange,” as a matter of *pathos*, of affection in the broadest sense of the term. Luigi Pizzolato draws the contrast between, on the one hand, the friendship that is shared and reciprocated virtue and, on the other hand, the “cold” disposition of benevolence, which is non-affective, unidirectional, not reciprocated (*L’idea di amicizia nel mondo antico classico e cristiano* [Torino: Einaudi, 1993], 53).

for many to be good, and therefore this would automatically limit the possibility of perfect friendship.<sup>9</sup>

However, there seem to be further concerns that Aristotle is attempting to articulate here. In particular, the question stands out regarding what is proper and proportionate to the human condition. Connected with this is the problematic non-coincidence of what is possible in principle, abstractly, and what is practicable, actually realizable. Broadly speaking, at stake are the issues of measure and sustainability.<sup>10</sup> The question thus broached regards the *metron* properly defining the human, letting the human become definite and manifest as such, in its integrity and distinctive outline, at its best. Aristotle wonders:

In the case of virtuous human beings, should there be as many friends as possible, or is there, as in the case of a city, a certain limit [*metron*] of them? For neither would ten human beings make a city, nor will it remain a city if increased to one hundred thousand human beings. Perhaps a plurality has no unity unless it falls between certain limits [*horismenon*]. So in the case of friends, too, there is a limited plurality, and perhaps there is an upper limit of those with whom one could live together; for, as we remarked, this is thought to be friendship at its best [*philikotaton*]. It is clear, then, that one cannot live together with many friends and attend to all of them in turn. (1170b30-1171a4)

We cannot fail to notice Aristotle's tentativeness in drawing these conclusions (his repeated "perhaps," his appeal to what "is thought"). And yet, experience provides compelling evidence: "It is difficult, too, to share the joys and sorrows in an intimate way with a great number of friends; for it is quite likely that at the same time one will be sharing pleasures with one of them but grieving with another" (1171a6-8). There seems to be an insurmountable difficulty concerning the indeterminate extension and extendibility of actually lived friendship. As was observed above, the cause of this is the finite (or, we could say, aspectival) character of the human being, of each discrete human venture. Such is the restraining condition

---

<sup>9</sup> In this connection, consider also *Politics* 1328a36-b2, displaying the tension between goodness as that which can be shared in varying degrees ("by some but not others or only a little") and goodness as that which can be pursued "in different ways."

<sup>10</sup> As Aristotle points out, the question of the measure, *metron*, of the human may be framed by reference to the excellent human being (1166a13).



of a being whose power, potency, or potentiality, if not unqualifiedly determinate, remains far from all-encompassing, infinite, and absolute. The experience of friendship in the perfect sense entails thrusting oneself to and being traversed by the incalculable or measureless. In being thus projected and traversed, the human being *as such* undergoes measure: it undergoes measure as its own, indeed, obtains the measure it requires in order to be. The human being is itself the phenomenon of such a measure taking place. This becomes most perspicuous in the experience of friendship, for it is in such a *pathos* of excess that the human being is disclosed as structurally incapable of infinite undergoing.

The thrust beyond and the being traversed (which define friendship) imply the limit they transgress; in transgressing such a limit or measure they also, at once, reinstate it. This means: one will experience the *hyperbolê* of friendship perhaps once, twice, at most very few times in one's life. Again, these remarks on friendship reveal Aristotle's clear distinction between, on the one hand, a posture or sentiment of benevolence, *eunoia*, possibly towards each and every other and, on the other hand, friendship in its actuality and embodiment. Much as, in this context, the emphasis is on friendship in its embodied being at work, we should underline that the former feeling is no mere formality. However latent, not actualized in a relationship, the attitude of benevolence is not nothing.

The following passage decisively elaborates this point, differentiating friendship in its practical unfolding from the not necessarily enacted kind inclination toward someone. The latter may be seen as the incipit of friendship, incipient friendship:

Benevolence, then, is like the beginning [*arkhe*] of friendship, just like the pleasure of being in love with another by sight; for no one is in love if he or she has not first been pleased by the look [*dia tes opseos hedone*] [of the beloved], and the one who enjoys the form of a person is not by this alone in love, unless he or she also longs for that person when absent and desires that person's presence. So, too, people cannot be friends unless they have first become well-disposed [*eunoi*] towards each other, but those who are well-disposed are not by this alone friends; for they only wish what is good for those towards whom they are well-disposed but would neither participate in any actions with them nor trouble themselves for them. Thus one might say, metaphorically, that benevolence is untitled [*argen*] friendship; and it is when benevolence



is prolonged and reaches the point of familiarity [*synetheian*] that it becomes friendship, not the friendship for the sake of usefulness or pleasure, for no benevolence arises in these. (1167a3-14)

Thus, the posture of kindness towards others is seen as the precursor of friendship, indeed, as the condition for its possibility. However, if not temporally developing and resulting in practical community, it remains uncultivated friendship, friendship suffering from *argia* (*a-ergia*), that is, not working, inoperative. Action constitutes the cultivation, the setting-to-work (*energeia*), even the refinement of friendship.

\*

A FEW CONSIDERATIONS ARE IN ORDER regarding the analysis of friendship thus far, which will take us back to the relation between friendship and justice. As we have seen, benevolence (*eunoia*), albeit not friendship in its accomplished sense, is said to be the origin, *arkhê*, of friendship. Benevolence is *teleia philia* without shared time and experience, neither enacted, exercised, nor cultivated: it is “perfect” friendship, but *argê*, deprived of its manifestation in *ergon* and of the condition of *energeia*. It could be said that benevolence is friendship not taking place, friendship in principle. In the other I intuit a possibility, a possible opening, the development of a possible interaction — though I may not (do not, will not) act on it.

In the *Nicomachean Ethics* (1166b30-1167b16) and *Eudemean Ethics* (1241a1-34) alike, the phenomena of benevolence, *eunoia*, and concord or like-mindedness, *homonoia*, are treated concomitantly and never sharply separated. We encountered the latter already at the very outset of the discussion of friendship (1155a21 ff.), where Aristotle employed it to describe the sense of accord among voyagers. At that juncture we pointed out that *homonoia*, even before granting the unity and coherence of a political organism, thus being functionally equivalent with justice, indicates the elementary feeling of bonding, solidarity, and recognition — a feeling characterizing less the political aggregation in contraposition to other *poleis* than the human community as such.

In the later elaborations, *homonoia* is said to designate community of intent, shared vision regarding practical and political matters. It is what Aristotle calls “political friendship,” *politikê philia* (1167b2, 1241a33). While *eunoia* and *homonoia* do not exactly overlap, they similarly refer to

a bond that can potentially be extended indefinitely, even to people far and unknown. Benevolence, *eunoia*, the friendship that remains “in principle,” seems to provide the link between “perfect” friendship, of which it constitutes the origin, and the political bond, *homonoia*. In fact, *eunoia*, the basic awareness that there are others with whom I belong and, consequently, a common good with which I am concerned, casts light on the fact that the experience of friendship, which cannot be lived indefinitely many times, can be nevertheless be universalized— transposed into the experience of shared finality and political accord, *homonoia*. It can be universalized without thereby turning into mere abstraction, for it rests on the primordial *pathos* of commonality and attraction.<sup>11</sup> In this sense, the phenomenon of *homonoia*, like-mindedness regarding political deliberation, remains significantly bound to the matrix (the *arkhê*) of friendship in its each time unique, lived, and hyperbolic character.

While refusing the conflation of “perfect” and “political” friendship, Aristotle no less resists the simple disjunction thereof. Divining the contiguity and continuity of these phenomena and the importance of thinking them jointly, he explores the *continuum* of friendship, ultimately referring the political relation back to the experience of friendship between excellent human beings (the infinite thrust through finite conditions). Such an experience remains for Aristotle the root and “measure” of the manifold phenomenology of friendship.

To corroborate this point further, we should underline that *homonoia* is itself conceived of by reference to excellence. Indeed,

[s]uch concord is in good human beings [*en tois epieikesin*], for these have the same thoughts [*homonoousi*] in themselves as well as in relation to one another, resting upon the same [ground], so to speak; for the things wished by such human beings are constant and do not ebb and flow like the water in the straight of Euripus, and they also wish things just and

---

<sup>11</sup> Here we glimpse at a kind of incipient cosmopolitanism—to be sure not to be assimilated to Pauline universalism, whose radical novelty must be acknowledged, and not even to the elaboration of cosmopolitanism within the stoic-Kantian rationalistic lineage. The universalization arising from experience here at stake could, rather, be understood in light of Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*, along the lines suggested by Hannah Arendt in *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy* (ed. Ronald Beiner [Chicago: University of Chicago, 1989]).

conducive, and these are the things they aim at in common. Bad human beings, on the other hand, cannot have the same thoughts except to a small extent, just as they cannot be friends. (1167b5-11)

In the *Eudemian Ethics*, Aristotle is even more decisive in capturing the dependence of *homonoia* on excellence or goodness: “Concord,” he states, “occurs in the case of good human beings [*epi ton agathon*]” (1241a22). Furthermore, since “it seems that, like friendship, concord cannot be said simply,” it follows that “the primary and natural [*prote kai physei*] manifestation of it is good [*spoudaia*], so that it is not the case that those who are bad can concur [*homonoiein*] in that way” (1241a23-26). Not only, then, does Aristotle not oppose “perfect” friendship, understood as a private affair, and “political” friendship, understood as the alliance through dogmatic or ideological identification for the sake of public prosperity. Quite outstandingly, Aristotle is intimating that political friendship should be disclosed by reference to the basic phenomenon of individual friendship—to that relationship in the context of which most of all individuals can become themselves and exercise, magnify, and further cultivate excellence or goodness.<sup>12</sup> Political aggregation should be disclosed by reference to this basic experience—even as, in its hyperbolic character, such an experience can hardly provide a calculable paradigm for the erection of ideological programs.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> Here the possibility opens up for bringing together Aristotle’s emphasis on the perfection/perfectibility of each distinct being and a politics of recognition.

<sup>13</sup> The view of the political as resting on the elementary experience of friendship, albeit in its minimalistic version as solidarity, is of course crucially at odds with Carl Schmitt’s theorization of radical enmity as the condition for the possibility of the political, motivating the constitution of the political as such. It is equally at odds with his treatment of friendship as a mere factor of political cohesion, somehow derivative *vis-à-vis* the primordially of conflict. While this clearly exceeds the scope of the present work, it would be relevant to disallow the Schmittian claims to a Greek ancestry, and retrieve, most evidently in the Platonic-Aristotelian lineage, a quite different perspective on the question of the origin of the political. Concomitantly, such an inquiry would call into question the construal of political friendship as purely ancillary to programmatic politics and separate from the unique experience of the loving relation. At the inception of the founding discourse in Plato’s *Republic*, the *arkhé* of the *polis* is not said to be the establishment of a common identity over against the enemy outside—i.e., the establishment of the bond of friendship among those akin and identical, committed to one another and to the defense of their own. In this context, the bond of friendship for the sake of self-defense against the common enemy comes into play only later: war is secondary to political founding, not equiprimordial with it. Rather, what is constitutive of

The question of communal togetherness is approached on the ground of the lived, radically singular experience of friendship. The embodied uniqueness of each friendship can provide no pattern, no principle upon which to structure political interaction, and yet, the political seems to rest on the universality of such a radically unique vicissitude. It presupposes that the experience of friendship, if in each case different, is precisely as such shared in common, available to human beings as such. It presupposes, furthermore, that the feeling of sympathy and affection, if not possibly enacted *ad infinitum*, is in principle infinitely extendible.

Thus, political friendship should not be construed merely in terms of computation and strategic alignment, just as communal finality should not be reduced to mere expediency, but embrace the pursuit of the good in view of "life as a whole" (1160a23). First and foremost, political friendship refers to and reveals the possibility, in principle, of being together and sharing kindness and projects in common. We have already

---

the political is the fact that, as Plato has Socrates say, each one is in need of much and is not self-sufficient (369b). Human beings come together out of need, on the ground of the implicit recognition of a shared condition, and with the awareness, however nebulous, that they may grow together. One of the tasks taken up in the conversation is indeed bringing the "community of pleasures and pains" more incisively to consciousness (464a). An articulate consideration of this dialogue in light of the present concerns would have to take into account the progression from Book II to Book V: the peaceful city, peacefully interacting with other cities, is superseded and war is introduced, since the growth of appetites in the city requires more resources and they must be acquired by conquering neighboring land (373d-e); the city/soul is established in its threefold structure, according to the logic of friendship/identity inside and war against the enemy/other outside (Books II-V); all the while, it should be noticed that the disruption and devaluation of the institution of the family/clan in the city tends to take the issue of identification on a level altogether other than tribal/conventional, a level that could be said psychological/biological and whose workings will not be mastered in the end (Book VIII); ultimately, the logic upon which this city rests is overcome, it is said that the citizens of other *poleis* against which the city may be at war are not for the most part enemies: those "men, women, and children" are "friendly," only a few among them are to be held responsible, and therefore the destruction of war must be avoided (471a-b). The community in which one belongs becomes increasingly inclusive. This progressive broadening of the political organism is brought to a culmination in the "cosmopolitan dream" of the ending myth: the figure of Er points to a human being so unique as to be *pamphulos*, "of all tribes," irreducible to any political, tribal, territorial identification (614b). See my *Of Myth, Life, and War in Plato's Republic* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana UP, 2002).

pointed out that friendship, even in its political sense, does and does not coincide with justice: to the extent that justice is understood as legality, friendship clearly exceeds its scope; however, to the extent that justice is understood as excessive *vis-à-vis* the texts of the law, it indicates in a certain sense friendship itself. Whether elaborated in terms of friendship or of justice, ultimately *homonoia* indicates a togetherness that cannot simply be brought back to prescriptive regulations, codification of duty, the economy of quantifiable giving and taking. An element of excess, even in terms of gratuitous generosity, is not only the mark of “perfect” friendship (consider the enactment of loving beneficence, *euergein*, characteristic of friendship, or the impulse to *eu poiein* in *Magna Moralia* 1212b31), but, as Aristotle points out in Epsilon, also of justice itself. Itself irreducible to the obligation “to return a service to one who has shown grace,” justice may in principle involve the excessive giving that is the “proper mark of grace”: the initiative “to show grace” to begin with, in a gesture of unsolicited giving (1133a3-5).

Thus, when affirming that, if human beings were friends, justice (as juridical normativity) would be superfluous, Aristotle is envisioning friendship as the end or destination of politics: as the highest conceivable accomplishment of politics, or even politics’ own self-overcoming. In this sense, friendship would mark the overcoming of politics as mere policy, as the work of instituting extrinsic rules of coexistence. It would mark the perfection of politics to come—the harmonization of the many, gathered beyond legal prescriptions, no longer having to protect their own from the others’ projected infringement, but choosing and recognizing each other. The vision of such an open teleology discloses the domain of becoming as the possibility of formation, growth, and evolution. The orientation to such a completion and accomplishment would be announced precisely in friendship (in politics) as *homonoia*: the proximity with others and awareness of belonging together (as in the course of a voyage), of common circumstances (*pathê*), of mutual implication and dependence. It would be announced in the conscious taking note of what is always already the case (the fact of interdependence and com-passion) that would sustain the thinking of community from *pathos*.

In the folds of such a vision of the possible lies the insight that the end of politics is neither mere expediency nor the structuring, ordering, and coordination of civil coexistence. (Accordingly, the distinction and opposition of private and public emerge in their questionable character, and so does the

Kantian lasting pronouncement of the irrelevance of friendship and happiness *vis-à-vis* politics.) As is the case with friendship, rather, politics aims at happiness, at living well, at the flowering of life in its manifold potential.

Aristotle's analysis of the friendship between unequals (vertical relationships, within the human community and beyond), importantly complements the reflections exposed in the present essay. Here, however, this can be only hinted at, leaving this discussion of friendship and the *polis* not unfittingly open-ended.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> For a more comprehensive discussion of this theme, see my *Aristotle's Ethics as First Philosophy* [Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2008], especially 260-307.