



Aristotelian Happiness as Achieved through Friendship

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## Happiness Through Friendship

*There is still a difference between myself and other people. But the difference is less. Other people are closer. I am less concerned about the rest of my own life, and more concerned about the lives of others.*  
-- Derek Parfit

The search for happiness has been the subject to many philosophical pursuits throughout the ages. This is not only a Western philosophical pursuit however; Eastern philosophies also concerned themselves with happiness. Happiness, for the purpose of this paper, would be most similar to Aristotelian “Eudaimonia”, that is to say happiness is having a fulfilling good life stemming from virtuous behavior. Both Aristotle and Confucius had methods of being happy, and, as it seems to me, both place a value on friendship. It is this examination of friendship and its relationship to happiness that is the subject of this paper. I posit that friendship is not merely an assisting force towards happiness, but a necessary one. Using the philosophies of both Aristotle and Confucius, one can see the importance of friendship in two different philosophies, and while these philosophies are similar in many regards their differences do not conflict in any substantial sense. I believe that in examining the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Analects*, one can see a stream of thought that not only values friendship in the search for happiness but places friendship as one, if not *the*, key factor for having a happy life.

Before proceeding onwards, there are some issues that need to be addressed in the comparative project. Aristotelian Virtue Ethics and Confucian Role Ethics are both ethical systems in the sense that they dictate the proper way to conduct oneself. However, it is here that a linguistic problem arises. In Classical Chinese most of the words associated with ethics are absent. Henry Rosemont Jr. explains this shocking fact better

by saying, “Not merely does that language [Classical Chinese] contain no lexical item for ‘moral’, it also does not have terms corresponding to ‘freedom’, ‘liberty’, ‘autonomy’, ‘subjective’, ‘rights’, ... and most eerie of all for a moralist...no lexical item corresponding to ‘ought’”(61). I find no objection to these words being included in a lexical group referring to ethics, but they belong to a “concept cluster” that is ascribed to what Rosemont calls ‘Rights Based Ethics’. These terms could not even be applied to Aristotle’s virtue based ethics (63). This being said, translations of certain Classical Chinese terms will have *approximate* English meanings; *ren* is *ren* by virtue of the fact it is never defined by Confucius, one can only indirectly understand its meaning. Likewise, Greek *aretē* loses some of its nuance when simply translated as virtue, it seems to me. The concept clusters of these two languages, and the third of my own language, do align. While there is no one-to-one translation between *ren* and *philia*, I would suggest that the terms are comparable. Having been said, this paper will *not* translate such terms throughout, rather an approximate translation will be given at the introduction of a term, and then it will be transliterated into English for the remainder of the paper. While linguistic issues may be a barrier, I believe these issues can be set aside because of the philosophical similarity between the two philosophers; I am not claiming at any point that Aristotelian concepts have Confucian synonyms, but rather that they are similar *not* the same and they are both aiming at the same goal, that is culturing proper human beings who can be happy.

Why do we need friendship? Aristotle realizes the importance of friendship as a necessity to living a good life, saying, “No one would choose to live without friends, even if he had all other goods”(1155a NE). The Greek concept *philia*, often translated as

“brotherly love” or “friendship”, is important to understanding friendship in the Aristotelian sense. People need to have *philia* and have friends to reach the highest level of Good. So to truly live a Good, happy life one needs friends. Aristotle makes a distinction between three kinds of friendship, ones based on usefulness, pleasure, and virtue. The useful friendship dissolves when it is no longer useful, and, interestingly, those engaged in this type of friendship, “sometimes they do not even find each other pleasant”(1156a NE). Additionally, those friendships which are based on pleasure dissolve when one is no longer pleasurable or witty, or simply when one’s preferences and passions change. Aristotle goes on to say, in opposition to these forms of friendship, “The perfect form of friendship is that between good men who are alike in excellence or virtue”(1156b NE). This perfect friendship is perfect *philia*. To better explain, think of what you would want for yourself: everyone wants Good for themselves and the way to get to this Good, in Aristotle’s thought, is via virtue. So one ought to want virtue, but what should one want for a friend? Two virtuous men are in a friendship for the betterment of each other, but Aristotle posits that self-love is the basis of friendship. How can this be so? All the qualities of perfect *philia*, wishing good for the other person for their own sake, wishing to spend time together, having the same desires and sharing sorrow and joy (1166a NE), are things that one would also wish upon oneself. All the good and the bad; it is all shared. This sharing of emotional states is a kind of empathy that is important to *philia* (Sherman). This being said, Aristotle goes on to say:

Since a good man has every one of these sentiments toward himself, and since he has the same attitude towards his friend as he does to himself, for his friend really is another self, therefore friendship, too, is regarded as being one or other of these sentiments, and those who harbor them are regarded as friends. (1166a)

The key concept here is that of another self. The Aristotelian friend is another self, alike in virtue and allied in aims, therefore by being able to reflect in our other self and properly embody *philia*, that is to say “perfect friendship”. If one treats a friend not as an other but as the same as himself; not as extrinsically related but intrinsically (this however will be explained in more depth after discussing Confucianism). So in perfect *philia* one will love oneself (meaning in this instance the other self) not out of a base egoist viewpoint but by virtue of the fact that a true friend is *another* self, one who shares the same virtues, desires, and wishes and who allows for one to metaphorically look in a mirror to see their own faults (1169a). Kahane recognizes this fact as well, “It can be difficult...to fully be aware of what kind of person one is, and of how one’s actions correspond to a background picture of the good, even an excellent man will be cognizant of the risk of self-deception”(76). The path to the Good, it would seem, is not one to be taken alone. Rather the Good and Happiness are to be achieved by striving hand-in-hand towards a like end.

When considering the Confucian idea of friendship, one must keep in mind that concepts are rarely defined outright in the *Analects*. Friendship therefore can only be seen indirectly, but its purpose and virtues (here used loosely for reasons mentioned above), can be seen in 12.24, “Master Zeng said, ‘The Exemplary person attracts friends through refinement, and thereby promotes *ren*.’” Additionally this idea of friendship promoting *ren* is key to the Confucian perspective. *Ren* could be perhaps translated as benevolence or proper conduct, but as stated previously it shall be simply transliterated rather than translated henceforth. The Confucian term that is often translated as “exemplary persons” is *junzi* and this term, in my understanding, can be taken to be something equivalent to a

virtuous person. This being said, *junzi* have several qualities that involve friendship and *ren*. Confucius is quoted as saying to an unnamed interlocutor, “Do not have as a friend anyone who is not as good as you are”(1.8 Analects) Similar to the Aristotelian idea, one has friends who are alike in virtue, not just pleasurable or useful. In fact, Confucius goes so far as to say, “Persons...need to be critical and demanding with their friends, and amicable with their brothers”(13.28 Analects). Friends grow off of each other, learning and improving themselves; they are alike in virtue and quality, or *ren* as the case may be, but by engaging with each other they will grow and become even more virtuous. Where is friendship brought up in the *Analects*? The very first passage, 1.1, references friends and pleasure, for although friends are chosen based on virtue they are to be pleasurable with all their other qualities, “The Master said: ‘... To have friends come from distant quarters—is this not a source of enjoyment?’” While not ever explicitly talked about or defined, friendship is central to the *Analects*, hence its position of primacy in the work.

The difficulty in working with the *Analects* is the fact that *ren* is not directly defined in text in any substantial sense. Robert T. Ames and Henry Rosemont Jr, in their translation of the text offer up some insight into *ren* by saying it “is made up of two elements *ren*... “person” and *er*... the number “two”. This etymological analysis underscores the Confucian assumption that...we are, from our inchoate beginnings, irreducibly social”(48). I believe that this begins to encapsulate the meaning of *ren* better, but it does not quiet allow one to tie it directly back into Aristotelian friendship. Rather, I suggests what was stated previously, that friendships are intrinsic relations rather than extrinsic. Thankfully for the purpose of the paper, Confucius’ star pupil, Yan Hui, provides a definition of *ren* in a later Confucian work. On a side note, Yan Hui is

historically considered to be the best student of Confucius, and he often impressed his master with his qualities and intellect. Alongside Mencius, Xunzi took up the Confucian tradition yet has remained less popular to Western readers, perhaps by virtue of his views on human nature, but in Xunzi's eponymous text the following conversation takes place, "Confucius said, "Yan Hui, what is the wise person like? What is the person of *ren* like?" Yan Yuan [an alternative name for Yan Hui] answered, 'The wise person knows himself, and the person of *ren* loves himself.' Confucius said, "Yan Hui can be called an enlightened gentleman [*junzi*]" (Hutton 328). I feel that this encapsulates the meaning of *ren*. In summary, friendships define one and being friends with someone entails that they are, in a sense, part of you or, if we are to relate it back to Aristotle, another self. This self-love is a feature of *ren* and it is through *ren* that one achieves a 'virtuous' life. Since this paper takes Happiness in an Aristotelian sense, I believe one could say that Happiness is contingent on friendship and, therefore, *ren*.

When looking at the two philosophies one can see some similarities, but the point that I wish to make is that of friendship being in both a kind of self-love. Does this make one an egoist however? Aristotle disagrees, saying, "the use of the term [egoist] is derived from the fact that the most common form of self-love is base, and those who are egoist in this sense are justly criticized" (1168b). The distinction here is between people who love only themselves. Opposing, there could also be someone who loves himself or herself but, as seen in Aristotle's philosophy in particular, this other self ought to be a friend. So while *philia* would be historically translated as "brotherly love" or "friendship" I would venture to say it is a special kind of love in which the same love that one has for oneself is bestowed upon another as a separate friend, by virtue of their friendship and

likeness. In Confucian philosophy, however, this is not said outright. Rather, *ren* is this amorphous term that dictates conduct and relationships, only later defined, to Confucius' praise, by Yan Hui. Perhaps one should consider *ren* in its simplest sense as referring to any relationship, but at its perfect state referring to perfect friendships, in an Aristotelian sense. This having been said, *ren* is defined by Yan Hui as self-love, and if *ren* is referring to our relations then it seems that these relationship comprise the self that is loved. So to provide rebuttal to calling this egoism as well, attention should be brought to the intrinsic nature of the *ren* friendships. As Ames puts it:

‘self-loving’ is neither the self-directed egoism assumed when one encourages others to love themselves nor the other directed altruism of loving other people. Indeed, for the person comprised of intrinsic rather than extrinsic relations..., such a self-regarding love with its embedded sense of ‘we’ is bi-directional; it is at once reflexive and inclusive. (2011)

It seems to me that this bi-directional nature is necessary to friendship. After all, friends have to reciprocate the friendship and love given. This is seen in both *philia* and *ren*. To engage in either is to engage in a special kind of self-love. That is to say that friends are, by the bi-directional property seen in both concepts, another self, so to treat them properly is to treat oneself well.

The ultimate goal of Aristotle's ethical system is to achieve Eudemonia, or happiness. In engaging in these proper virtuous friendships and by loving oneself, but not engaging in what Aristotle would call base egoism, is to not only set one's individual self on the way to happiness, but to also bring along extended relational selves—friends. Supporting this idea is Kahane, in saying, “In perfect friendship the, the boundaries of one's concern expand to include the friend's circumstances and friend's good”(70).

Likewise, and opposite of base egoism, is a kind of altruism that places the *other* above

the *I*, but, instead, “the loving of one’s friend for his own sake need not imply the primacy of concern for the friend over concern for oneself: what is implied...is that the other’s good is itself reason enough...”(Kahane 74). Others are still different, but they are the same self, by virtue of their like goals and virtue, and one should not value concern over one’s close friend over themselves because they should be valued the same as oneself. While what is being said does sound strange, to be different yet the same, however the old adage does go “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you”, or perhaps to phrase it more properly for this paper, “treat others like you would treat yourself”. While this is an admirable goal to aspire to, it is difficult to always treat others the way you treat yourself because they are *other*. However, if we take what has been said above to be true, then it should be reasonably easy to treat “others” the way one would treat oneself because they are a separate self and not all that different. The remaining issue, it seems to me, is the choice of friends. One may not be able to choose family but one does and ought choose their own friends.

While the goal of this paper is philosophical in nature, the field of psychology is perhaps more suited to provide empirical data to support the claims about friendship and its factor in Happiness. Demir and Weitekamp, in outlining several factors that influence Happiness, discuss how one of the major factors in Happiness is voluntary activity; they explain, “friendships are voluntary relationships”(183). This aligns with what is said in Aristotle and, to a lesser extent, Confucius. One chooses friends for particular reasons. If these reasons were the right ones, choices based on like virtue, then happiness would soon follow, at least that is what this paper is positing. Demir and Weitekamp aimed to examine the quality of friendships and their impact on happiness, noting that quantity of

friends did not seem to be a factor of happiness, only of sociability. In interpreting their results the following is said: “having a friendship that is high in quality still adds something extra to our lives and has the potential to increase one’s happiness level. In other words, the relationship between friendship and happiness cannot be accounted for by personality”(199). The duo conducted their experiment in such a way to account for personality factors and their influence on happiness. This being said, their evidence does show that friendship has an impact on happiness. While this supports the thesis broadly, one of the major factors that Demir and Weitekamp attributed to increasing the quality of friendship and the factors that influenced the resulting happiness the most were Companionship and Self-Validation. While Companionship is rather straight forward, the later deserves a closer look. Self-Validation is described as such, “[it] refers to perceiving the other as a supporting and encouraging of one’s image, success, and self”(185) and this is attributed by them to self-verification which, “is a need whereby individuals seek to confirm their self-view, even though it could be negative”(202). While one could simply apply this to one’s individual self, as the psychologists are suggesting, I would venture further and suggest that *philia* and *ren* both engage in this Self-Validation because one’s friends are *another* self. Looking at self-verification, there is a very Aristotelian feel to the process. One seeks out a way to know oneself, even if that means learning something bad, but from that one can learn and grow. What better way to examine oneself than to be able to actually have another self to examine? Not only does psychological evidence support the fact that friendship is a benefit to Happiness (I do concede that psychology does not give friendship the same importance that I do, however, their standpoint supports my claim, because friendship does give “something

extra” and perhaps that is true Happiness) but it, even without knowing so, supports the notion of self-love seen in Aristotle. The science of psychology provides much needed empirical evidence which can help ease one’s skepticism about the subject of Friendship and Happiness. However, I must note that the psychologists were beaten to their conclusion by philosophers centuries ago, I still appreciate the supporting evidence, however.

Humans are undeniable social beings. From the moment we are born to the moment we die, people are part of our lives, and our memories, and these relations define and shape our lives in a substantial way. While family cannot be chosen, friends can. If happiness is contingent on proper Friendship, then the choice of friends may be the most important choice one ever makes. Aristotle and Confucius both recognized the importance of maximizing the virtues that govern relations, *philia* and *ren*. These concepts, although developed thousands of miles apart in cultures that did not interact, seem to be pointing to a singular idea that emphasizes friendship in the pursuit of happiness. To view another as a separate self and to treat them as such is to search for happiness in the best possible way. Contemporary psychological research supports this thesis and, in reinterpreting some definitions, one can see how the psychological and philosophical points of view are not all that different. To conclude, I wish to pose a question to emphasize the connection one should have with these chosen others: What would you do for yourself? What would you do for your friends? Are those answers the same?

*We only have each other /  
It's just you and me /  
What are we going to do?  
- Disney's Frozen (2013)*

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