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Mavis Biss

University of Wisconsin-Madison, mlbiss@loyola.edu

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Aristotle on Friendship and Self-knowledge: The Friend Beyond the Mirror

Mavis Biss, *University of Wisconsin*

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Read through the lens of modern concerns regarding shared moral perception and difference between the self and other, Aristotle's theory of primary friendship raises challenging questions regarding the role of relationships in moral self-evaluation. Aristotle's emphasis on sameness of character in his description of the virtuous friend as "another self" figures centrally in all of his arguments for the necessity of friendship to self-knowledge. Although the attribution of the *Magna Moralia* to Aristotle is disputed, the comparison of the friend to a mirror in this work has encouraged many commentators to view the friend as a mirror that provides the clearest and most immediate image of one's own virtue. I will offer my own reading of Aristotle's theory of friendship, suggesting that the friend constitutes "another self" not as a mirror image, but rather as a partner in moral perception.

Framing self-knowledge as intuitive knowledge gained through active engagement with a partner in perception who generally shares one's moral perception captures the role of primary friendship in an ethically good life more fully than the conception of a friend as a mirror. I will expand on the *Eudemian Ethics* book VII, chapter 12 argument on self-knowledge with reference to Aristotle's account of primary friendship in the *Nicomachean Ethics* in order to develop this view of the relationship between friendship and self-knowledge. Throughout my discussion, I intend my claims regarding the relationship between primary friends to refer to relationships between adult individuals who already have formed virtuous characters. This specification should prevent my focus on problems involved in knowing one's goodness from being confused with issues related to becoming good or being good. In addition, I will endorse a moderate view of practical wisdom that takes Aristotle to place roughly equal weight on knowledge of universals and knowledge of particulars, where the latter involves emotion and moral perception refined through the course of experience.¹ My conception of the friend as a partner in perception has the advantage of accommodating various plausible positions on Aristotelian practical wisdom.

Self Knowledge and the Necessity of Friendship

The *Eudemian* argument for a connection between self-knowledge and friendship arises in the context of Aristotle's refutation of self-sufficiency as an ideal attainable by the virtuous person. While a certain view of social interaction may prompt the claim that the self-sufficient person has no need of friends, Aristotle contends that this perspective obscures the necessity of sharing one's life with friends. No level of self-sufficiency substitutes for the "mode of knowing" brought about by the shared perception of friendship. Aristotle's *Eudemian* argument for the involvement of friendship in the acquisition of self-knowledge has two stages; first he claims that we desire knowledge of the self over all other things, and following this he explains the role of the friend in attaining such knowledge.

In order to correct the mistaken notion that, like God, a human being may exist self-sufficiently and happily without friends, Aristotle specifies the End of an active human life as perception and knowledge. Arguing from this premise, Aristotle claims that the wish "to be oneself the object known" explains the desire for life (EE 1245a10). I will examine this section of argument before looking at how it connects to Aristotle's further claims regarding the role of friendship in attaining self-knowledge. The first stage of argument involves six steps, which require explication.

¹ The scope of this paper prevents me from providing a defense of this view. Commentators disagree as to whether knowledge of particulars (facilitated by emotion and experience) or knowledge of universals plays a greater role in Aristotelian practical wisdom. David Wiggins focuses on the immediate appreciation of morally salient particulars and suggests that there is almost no need for universal knowledge in deliberation ("Deliberation and Practical Wisdom", in *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics*. ed. Amelie Oksenberg Rorty. University of California Press, 1980). In contrast, Richard Sorabji stresses the intellectual aspect of practical reasoning ("Aristotle on the Role of Intellect in Virtue," in *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics*. ed. Amelie Oksenberg Rorty. University of California Press, 1980).

- i) The End of life is perception and knowledge and that of social life is perception and knowledge in common.
- ii) We want to perceive and know through our own experience; we are not interested in the existence of knowledge *simpliciter*.
- iii) To wish to perceive oneself is to wish oneself to have a good character.
- iv) We do not have good characteristics in ourselves, but “only by participating in these faculties in the process of perceiving or knowing.”
- v) We wish to live because we wish to know.
- vi) We wish to live because we wish to know ourselves.

Expanding on premise i), Aristotle claims that the universal desirability of knowledge motivates interest in life and “living must be deemed a mode of knowing” (EE 1244b29). Next, Aristotle contrasts the mode of knowing constitutive of life to knowledge in itself. We do not merely want a body of knowledge to be in existence regardless of whether or not we can access and engage this knowledge ourselves.² Interest in knowledge in itself seems analogous to “another person living instead of oneself” because knowledge *simpliciter* is detached from one’s own perception (experience) and play no role in the good. The existence of knowledge about one’s character certainly does not satisfy one’s desire for self-knowledge, or the desire to experience oneself as good. Aristotle maintains that the desirability of life and its characteristic activity of knowing cannot be separated from the desirability of being good. Statements v) and vi) follow from this claim.

On Aristotle’s view, the desire to have a good character and the desire for self-knowledge motivate each other, or are interdependent. Point iii) follows from the idea that only determinate things constitute proper objects of knowledge. As previously explained, a good character is determinate in that the good person consistently takes pleasure in the same things and appeals to the same knowledge when making choices. In contrast, the “inferior” person’s soul is in “a state of faction” on account of internal inconsistencies. Lacking a character fixed by a disposition towards excellence, this person may perceive various instances of her own behavior, but she cannot attain self-knowledge. Like a structured melody, the coherence of a good character makes it knowable, whereas excessive dissonance may render a song or a character unidentifiable.

Point iv) relates most directly to the importance of friendship for self-knowledge, for here Aristotle dispels the possibility of direct self-awareness or self-possession. Positing self-awareness as a mediated process, Aristotle writes, “when perceiving one becomes perceived by means of what one previously perceives, in the manner and respect in which one perceives it, and when knowing one becomes known” (EE 1245a7-9). Aristotle combines two ideas: because one’s character is activated through the outward activity of perception, self-knowledge requires extroverted attention.

The conclusions that (v) one’s desire to live results from the desire to know and that (vi) “one wishes oneself to be the object known” complete the first stage of argument relating to the connection between self-knowledge and friendship. This line of reasoning builds off of the plausible assumptions that lived experience constitutes a “mode of knowing” and that the good is desirable. Here, Aristotle defers his argument in order to address the case made by the advocate of self-sufficiency. One might insist that casual interaction with others cannot be of much importance. Furthermore, the sharing of information within a friendship is obsolete for two self-sufficient people because such exchange requires that one person be in a state of lack. On Aristotle’s view, these objections contradict “the facts of experience” in that they obscure the sense in which the term ‘friend’ refers to “another self” (EE 1245a28).

Aristotle’s explanation of the way in which the friend serves as “another self” in the *Nicomachean Ethics* illuminates his account of the role of friendship in self-knowledge presented in the *Eudemian Ethics*. The primary friend is “a separate self” and “what is most akin” insofar as primary friends both act from a stable disposition, wish for each other’s benefit, enjoy each other’s company and

² Paula Gottlieb helped clarify this point for me.

experience pleasure and pain in relation to the same things (EN 1166a8). These significant relationships of resemblance clarify why perceiving the friend contributes to self-knowledge. Aristotle's argument centers on the similarity between friends' characters, by virtue of which knowing the friend is "in a manner to perceive and in a manner to know oneself" (EE 1245a35-7). Even so, it would not seem that perceiving the friend contributes anything significant to self-knowledge if Aristotle had not already asserted the mediated nature of self-awareness in general (see iii. and iv.). Friendship must figure in the perception of one's own goodness, which on Aristotle's view cannot be achieved apart from outward-directed knowing and perceiving. The way in which a friend allows one to perceive one's own virtue turns on how much difference there can be between the self and "another self."

The Friend Beyond the Mirror: A Partner in Perception

While a mirror merely reflects the self in its sameness, a partner necessarily confronts the self with difference. Hence, my challenge to the mirror interpretation raises the question of how much difference between individuals an Aristotelian friendship can tolerate. Must friends who illuminate each other's virtue have not only the same set of values as a whole, but also the same past experiences, temperament and preferred activities? On the basis of some of Aristotle's statements, the friend seems like a mirror that reflects the exact image of one's own goodness. Interaction with the friend, on this view, allows a person to perceive the "concrete actualization" of her virtue. But insofar as no individual possesses virtue in the abstract, the determinate expressions of virtue will differ from person to person. Hence, knowledge of one's own character amounts to knowledge of the particular pattern in which various virtues are related in the self.³ Aristotle's thesis regarding the unity of the virtues requires that every virtuous person have all of the virtues. Character friends can be the same in the sense of having good character, although the specific proportions of the virtues may be different for each individual. Nancy Sherman suggests that different virtues predominate in different individuals, such that character-friends are "distinct yet complementary."⁴

On this view, particular virtues can be actualized to different degrees in people who are equal in overall virtue. Sherman's discussion on this point seems fully compatible with Aristotle, although Aristotle does not elaborate on how individuals manifest varying degrees of virtue.⁵ It is less clear what we should say about whether individuals manifest specific virtues in varying manners. The friend might be generous to a greater extent than oneself, but how could she be generous in a different way? If the virtuous person hits upon the mean between excess and deficiency with respect to any given activity, it seems as though any individual's concrete actualization of virtue is achieved in the same manner. On the other hand, Aristotle famously states that the mean between excess and deficiency is "relative to us" and "this is not one thing, nor is it the same for all" (EN 1106a32).⁶ Given differences in individuals' situations, the mean could be constituted by different actions in the case of two friends who both express a particular virtue. Friends who are the same in virtue may, and perhaps must, have differences in the degree and manner in which the bouquet of virtues find concrete expression in their characters.

Yet, why suppose that likeness promotes awareness of one's virtue more than contrast? Presumably interaction with less virtuous people can draw attention to one's own strength of character. John Cooper has pointed out that while self-consciousness may require consciousness of another person, it does not require friendship.⁷ However, Cooper notes the difference between self-consciousness and

³ Sherman, Nancy. *The Fabric of Character*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989. p.141

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ Aristotle writes, "the characteristics are scattered, and it is difficult for all to be realized in one person" (EE 1245a31-32). One might read this remark as an indication that the virtues are realized to varying degrees.

⁶ Here I assume that the ethical mean is agent-relative to some extent based on Aristotle's assertions that the mean is "relative to us," and that it "is not one thing, nor is it the same for all" (EN 1106a32-33). For a challenge to this interpretation see Lesley Brown's "What is "the mean relative to us" in Aristotle's Ethics?" in *Phronesis: A Journal for Ancient Philosophy*. Volume 42, Number 1, 1997, pp. 77-93

⁷ Cooper, John. "Friendship and the Good in Aristotle", in *Aristotle's Ethics: Critical Essays*, ed. Nancy Sherman. Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1999. p. 281

self-knowledge, or “knowledge of one’s character and qualities, motives and abilities,” and acknowledges the merit of Aristotle’s arguments for the necessary role of friendship at this level of self-awareness.⁸ Because the friend can be observed with greater objectivity than the self, knowledge of the friend’s character combined with “intuitively felt” knowledge of one’s similarity to the friend serve as a “bridge” to self-knowledge. In this way, self-knowledge mediated through friendship provides protection against self-deception.⁹

There is still reason to question why friendship based on virtue would provide a more certain path to self-knowledge than interactions with acquaintances, or pleasant and useful friends. Cooper addresses two objections to the *Nicomachean* and *Magna Moralia*¹⁰ arguments that articulate this concern: 1) Why should a person assume that she can be objective about another person’s character (whom she loves) and 2) Why should a person trust her intuitive sense of kinship with another person?¹¹ Both of these worries suggest the danger that self-deception runs all the way down, frustrating all avenues to self-knowledge. Since observation of others does seem less biased than self-perception, and an intuitive sense of affinity to a character friend develops over extended periods of time spent in that person’s company, Cooper maintains that Aristotle makes a good, but not definitive, case for the involvement of friendship in self-knowledge.

In reference to his reconstruction of the central points in the *Nicomachean* and *Magna Moralia* arguments, Cooper writes: “Neither this nor any other argument is likely to show the way to an absolutely assured knowledge of what one is really like, proof against all possible doubt.”¹² Although absolute assurance of one’s goodness may be unattainable, we may still wonder if self-confidence in one’s virtue is attainable primarily through the use of a character-friend as a mirror. My interpretation of the *Eudemean* argument suggests a more involved relationship between character friendship and self-knowledge. Aristotle’s appreciation “of the social bases of a secure self-concept and of the role intimacy plays in providing a means to this” is drawn out more fully by conceptualizing the friend not as a mirror, but as a partner in perception.¹³

Aristotle remarks on the natural pleasantness of sharing in both ordinary and elevated pleasures with a friend, as well as the friend’s role in fulfilling the desire to “behold oneself enjoying the superior good” (EE 1245b2). A speculative interpretation of the latter point expands the friend’s self-illuminating function beyond that of a mirror. The pleasure taken in the superior good can become self-conscious actively, passively or, as Aristotle cryptically suggests, in some other way (ibid). I will explore the possible implications of these modes of self-perception in order to show how the friend contributes to self-knowledge as a partner in perception, rather than merely as a mirror.

One may enjoy a friend’s virtuous action and, in seeing the friend’s virtue as related to one’s own, become aware of the manifest convergence in perception and its particular gratification. This interaction doesn’t seem to be precisely active or passive because the perceiver of the friend is neither the agent nor the recipient of virtuous action. Perception of a friend’s virtuous actions may expand one’s own experience because due to the friend’s likeness to the self, this person’s choices, reactions and concerns are relevant to one’s own. Here, it is important that the friend is a “separate self” and not a “reflected self.” Perception of the friend may teach the virtuous person something about choices that she *would*

⁸ *ibid.*, p. 282-3

⁹ *ibid.*, p. 284

¹⁰ In the *Magna Moralia* Aristotle states: “Moreover, direct study of ourselves is impossible (this is shown by the fact that the very things that we censure others for, we don’t notice ourselves doing, and this comes about through partiality or passion, which in many of us blind our judgment of what is right). And so, just as when we want to see our own faces, we see them by looking in a mirror, similarly when we wish to know our own characters, we can know them by looking up a friend. For a friend, as we say, is another self” (MM 1212b8-24). *Magna Moralia*. Jonathan Barnes, ed., *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, the Revised Oxford Translation. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984.

¹¹ Cooper (1999), p 284

¹² *ibid.*

¹³ *ibid.*, p. 285

make or concerns that she *would* have if in similar circumstances and such shared perception may further elucidate why she holds her particular set of commitments and why they are good.

While one looks *at* a mirror, a partner in perception would be someone who looks *with* the virtuous person. Looking at the friend does not further self-knowledge in the same way that looking with her would. The *Magna Moralia* argument concentrates on one's ability to study others more objectively than the self, yet in friendship one does not only perceive the other's activities, rather one engages with the other in activity and conversation. Nancy Sherman claims that character friendship requires a certain "transport of the imagination," by means of which one sees situations from another's perspective.¹⁴ The perception of difference between self and other seems essential to this process, as the acknowledgement of another point of view calls for recognition of divergence from one's own position. Insofar as Aristotelian practical reasoning involves "situated knowledge," in the form of personal experiences that inform deliberation, fully understanding another person's point of view expands the self's powers of moral perception. When friends co-deliberate or discuss matters of moral deliberation each may experience the harmonizing of emotional response, experience and moral perception as a background to minor disagreements caused by differences in perspective, temperament or life circumstances. Sherman understands this harmonizing as an "emotional consensus" between friends.¹⁵ Instead of reflecting an image of one's virtue, the friend actively engages one's moral perception, treats one's experience as relevant and endorses one's character through her responsiveness to its expressions. In this way, a partner in perception simultaneously improves the self and facilitates moral self-evaluation.

Aristotle's notion that friends improve each other supplies another reason for conceiving of "another self" as a partner in perception, for surely a mirror does not develop that which it reflects. According to Aristotle, character friends "seem to become better by being active and correcting each other, for they take each other's imprint in those respects in which they please one another" (EN 1172a12). Friends who are the same by "resembling each other in excellence" may have identical knowledge of universals, or the major premise of a practical syllogism, and still perceive situations somewhat differently (EN 1156b7). Participation in activities with the friend would afford a person opportunities to negotiate her perception of particulars with another person. In this way, friendship may allow an already virtuous person to further improve her moral perception and expand her experience.

Rather than developing the idea that knowing the friend is "in a manner" to know the self, Aristotle shifts the focus of the *Eudemian* argument to the ways in which a shared life contributes to one's goodness, enjoyment and happiness. In isolation these comments do not support the idea that knowing the self through the friend involves more than accessing an image of the self. Even so, a richer sense of the contribution of communal perception to self-knowledge is implied by the first stage of Aristotle's *Eudemian* argument.

Because there is no reason to assume that life and social life are separate affairs, the initial argument for the intrinsic desirability of self-knowledge links shared perception up with goodness, pleasure, happiness and self-knowledge. If (as stated in i.) social life is "perception and knowledge in common," then shared perception constitutes part of the End of life in general. The inclusion of shared perception in each subsequent stage of reasoning results in the conclusion that we wish to share our lives because we wish to know ourselves (v, vi).¹⁶ Knowing in common seems to be a special mode of

¹⁴ Sherman (1989), p.143

¹⁵ Sherman, Nancy. *Making a Necessity of Virtue*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997. p.205

¹⁶ The revised sketch of the *Eudemian* argument would be as follows:

- i) The End of (social) life is perception and knowledge in common.
- ii) We want to perceive and know in common through our shared experience; we are not interested in the existence of knowledge *simpliciter*.
- iii) To wish to perceive oneself is to wish oneself to have a good character.
- iv) We do not have good characteristics in ourselves, but through perceiving and knowing in common.
- v) We wish to live because we wish to share knowledge with others.

knowing, available to humans, but not to God. Aristotle rejects the argument for self-sufficiency because “for us well-being has reference to something other than ourselves, but in his case he is himself his own well-being” (EE 1245b17-20). The social nature of human life creates the need for friendship, for only through shared perception can one know one’s own goodness.

The ability of my interpretation of “another self” as a partner in perception to fit Aristotle’s accounts of the individual virtues, practical wisdom and the varieties of friendship into a coherent description of the relationship between friendship and self-knowledge testifies to its improvement upon the commonly held mirror interpretation. Given that individuals’ characters obviously never exactly reflect each other, the only way to make sense of the mirror interpretation of the *Eudemian* argument is to assume an over-intellectualized view of practical wisdom that implausibly implies the identification of a human person with her theoretical nous. In developing my interpretation, I hope to have drawn out some significant implications of the *Eudemian Ethics* book VII, chapter 12 argument for the necessity of friendship to self-knowledge by accommodating the most central and distinctive aspects of Aristotle’s ethics.