Neither strangers, nor friends. Aristotle on civic friendship and extended altruism

Maria Silvia Vaccarezza

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Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues

University of Birmingham, Edgbaston, Birmingham, B15 2TT United Kingdom

T: +44 (0) 121 414 3602 F: +44 (0) 121 414 4865

E: jubileecentre@contacts.bham.ac.uk W: www.jubileecentre.ac.uk

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[EARLY DRAFT – PLEASE DO NOT CIRCULATE WITHOUT PERMISSION]

Maria Silvia Vaccarezza – University of Genova

Modern liberal thought has long taken it for granted that there are two main ways of dealing with others; roughly, it implies that we entertain self-interested commercial relations with strangers, and loving, selfless bonds with loved ones. What this simplistic view neglects – among other things – is that, besides these two forms of relation, there is a large intermediate sphere of relations with those who are neither strangers, nor friends, and towards whom we are often moved by benevolence and altruism.

In this paper, I defend the very idea of extended altruism moving from an analysis of Aristotelian friendliness (or "weak *philia*", see *NE* 1126b 10-1127a 12) and civic friendship, *politike philia* (see *EE* VIII.9-10; VIII.7 1241a 32; *NE* IX.12 1161b 13; X.1 1163b 34; X.6 1167b 2; X.10 1171 a17). Since neither of them implies mutual love of affection, I argue that a joint analysis of these two forms of bond can afford precious insights on Aristotelian extended altruism, and suggest a fruitful analysis of a "third way" of conceiving social relations. Both "weak *philia*" and *politike philia* are based on a common ground, represented by the community (*koinonia*) and the fact of sharing a common life (*suzen*) in the *polis*. Both, furthermore, require virtuous dispositions and states, such as justice, like-mindedness, benevolence, goodwill, empathy, and generosity, but also truthfulness, wit, and even humility.

What this analysis shows is that, in Aristotle's perspective, belonging to the same *polis* represents a bond which is strong enough to be more than a commercial alliance. As Cooper suggests (1990, 236), citizenship is a kind of extension of the psychological traits which bind the members of a family one another. Being part of the *polis* and feeling related to one's own fellow-citizens, therefore, implies an extended notion of the self, and fosters extended altruism, of which the two *philiai* are an expression.

Is such picture of social relations realistic and applicable today, or can it only be an interpretation of the Aristotelian view on the role of the *polis*? If we have a look at recent socio-economic research (e.g., at the work of the economist Luigino Bruni), what we discover is that the Aristotelian "third way" between self-interest and proper love finds surprising confirms in the challenge posed to the "*homo oeconomicus*" view, and in a renewed emphasis on empathy,

reciprocity and cooperation as the key elements of actual economic interactions within civil society, to the point that it can even represent a challenge to the original dichotomy between self-interested economic interactions and selfless loving relations.

1. Aristotle's Account of Friendliness

In chapters 12-14 of book IV of *Nicomachean Ethics***,** Aristotle deals with three "social" virtues: good temper, friendliness, and wit. Such minor, and quite neglected, virtues, take place within social relationships, in that, as Aristotle states, they have to do with "mixing with others—living in their company, sharing with them in conversation and the business of life" (NE 1126b 10-11).

From 1126b 10 to 1127a 12**,** he deepens, among these virtues, a nameless one consisting in a mean between the two opposite vices of being complaisant and objecting to everything, and he explains that, although this virtue has no name, it resembles *philia*, not in the strict sense of friendship but in the broad one of amiability or friendliness[1], i.e., a mean state between obsequiousness, or even flattery, and churlishness. It is a peculiarity of this virtue to be devoid of affection, for otherwise it would completely coincide with friendship; the one who is friendly towards others has no particular familiarity with his interlocutor, and behaves in a friendly way only because of his disposition. He deals with the other people considering all the possible differences among them, and therefore is versatile and able to mold his behavior to the situation without losing his virtue.

Although the other two nameless virtues mentioned in the same passage are other-regarding as much as friendliness is, only the latter seems to constitute a proper kind of relationship, to be added to the Aristotelian list of the many different ways people relate to each other, both personally and socially. To sum them up, we find:

- good will (*eunoia*);
- like-mindedness (*homonoia*);
- proper friendship (*philia*), in its several forms;
- friendliness.

Deepening such forms a little will make it possible to better understand the reasons and features of what I take to be Aristotelian extended altruism, which, as Irwin remarks, "will be intelligible if the reasons that justify the concerns of friendship also justify the wider concerns of justice and

[1] The first of the two vicious persons, the one who is called *areskos* (obsequious), is someone who praises too much other people, in order to avoid contradicting them and to be always pleasant to them; on the contrary, the one who lacks *philia*, called *duskolos* (churlish) and *duseris* (contentious), is someone who does not care if he is unpleasant, but opposes everything. The mean state consists in accepting everything in the right way, not for love or hatred, but only because of virtuous habit. At the end of the passage, Aristotle distinguishes two further typologies among the vicious excess: the one who wants to be pleasant without any further purpose is obsequious (*areskos*), whereas the one who behaves this way for the sake of utility or money is called a flatterer (*kolax*).

the other virtues" (1990, 397).

2. Friendliness, Like-Mindedness, and Civic Friendship

Aristotle's account of good will can be found from NE 1166b 30 onwards. Good will consists in a friendly feeling, which differs from friendship, for it is directed to people we do not know, and without them being aware of it. Aristotle takes good will to be a kind of "inactive" friendship, because it is not necessarily mutual or evident, and furthermore because it lacks passion and does not entail the wish to spend life together.

As for like-mindedness (NE 1167a 22 ff.), Aristotle considers it "something friendly". Like-mindedness does not consist merely in agreeing on things, but is rather a deep consent on something very important. Within the *polis***,** there is like-mindedness when fellow-citizens agree on their interests and they choose and put into practice the things they have judged rightly together (cf. Jori 2003, 400). It is evident, therefore, that this kind of relationship is typical of the *polis*, since it is related to a common deliberation about the good of the community.

Finally, we find the most complete and comprehensive expression of sociality, namely, friendship. According to Aristotle, unlike the two previous forms, proper friendship is a virtue or at least is together with virtue (cf. NE 1155a 1-2). Being a friend with someone means wishing him well for his own sake, and not for the sake of personal advantage, and entails, in addition to mutual good will, love and desire, together with awareness of these feelings. But the most peculiar trait of friendship, which notably it shares with friendliness, is the wish to spend life together, as Aristotle states at NE 1157b 19: "Nothing is so characteristic of friends as living together [*suzen*]"; and at NE 1171b 32: "[Is it then the case that] for friends what's most desirable is sharing lives? For friendship is community [*koinonia*]."

What characterizes above all the most perfect and virtuous form of relationship, thus, is not, as one might imagine, the feeling's intensity, but the wish and the actual practice of living together, which is exactly the same trait that constitutes the background of friendliness. Thus, it is worth exploring the main features of and the deep reasons for this living together, which represents the keystone of friendship, and at the same time**,** is the context of the daily social relationships which are the background of friendliness.

The practice of living together arises from the same elementary fact which brings about the political community: "Man is a civic being, one whose nature is to live with others" (*NE* 1169b 18). The human being's peculiarity of being able to live in community is based on his linguistic

ability: since he is capable of a rational conversation, it is just this capacity that allows to distinguish a human living together from an animal. Moreover, it seems that both *koinonia* and *suzen* are above all typical of the *polis*: *koinonia*, in fact, can be any association of people who share a common goal, or any society which has an economic or commercial aim (cf. *NE* 1160a 14-20), but at the highest degree, it is the great community comprehensive of all particular goals, which is the *polis*. And living together, although it does not mean being involved in an emotional relationship, results from the awareness of being part of the same community of values and aims. This is why the three nameless virtues which take place in "mixing with others (*homiliai*)–living in their company (*suzen*), sharing with them in conversation and the business of life (*logon kai pragmaton koinonein*)" (*NE* 1126b 10-11), including friendliness, can be said to be social, as well as political, virtues, given their *polis*-focused nature. As Irwin notes, «good temper, friendliness, and wit concern the appropriate attitude of one person to another in the relatively informal social encounters that are not covered by the specific obligations of justice, friendship and the other major virtues (cf. *NE* 1127a 33-b3). In such encounters virtue requires some self-assertion against others and some accommodation to others […]. Unwillingness to accommodate makes us unsociable and ill-humoured; but excessive accommodation makes us too eager to please […]. The right attitude in these cases results from proper consideration for myself and for the good of others». (Irwin 1990, 443-44)

Therefore, the virtues displayed in this social context, and especially friendliness, are clearly *polis*-dependent, since they can flourish only within an emotionally weak bond among people, which is, at the same time, strong enough to allow one to wish the other's good. They are, therefore, typical of the citizen; unlike family or tribe, the social bond implies the desire to lead a common life even in absence of love or affection.

Summing up the main traits of friendliness, we can therefore see that it has the following interrelated features:

(1) Even if it does not imply a close relationship together with mutual love, it nevertheless shares with complete friendship, its unavoidable precondition, namely, living together;
(2) It takes place in a political context, namely, in the daily life of the *polis*'s public space;
(3) It is therefore particularly related to a community, and, being a relationship which takes place in a social context, it shares some traits with that peculiar form of friendship which Aristotle calls *politike philia*. Since this latter kind of friendship implies mutual love and

fondness, friendliness cannot simply be a form of it; rather, we can say that it is one of its possible expressions;

(4) It seems related to *homonoia* as well, both for the lack of an emotional component and because they are both typical of the citizen.

What I want to claim is not that friendliness, *homonoia*, and *politike philia* coincide, but that friendliness and *homonoia* are two possible (even if not the only) expressions of the same disposition, namely, *politike philia*.

At NE 1171a 16-19, while discussing friendship in political relationships (*politike philia*), Aristotle claims that it is impossible to establish a friendly relationship with many people, since such relationships lack the necessary regularity, intimacy, and deep mutual knowledge that characterize real friendship, and these lacks quickly corrupt friendship, transforming it into the vice of flattery. The only exception to this general rule, according to Aristotle, is represented by *politike philia*[2]; in this kind of relationship, indeed, the knowledge of the common goal of the *polis* is strong enough to keep the bond among fellow-citizens virtuous, even in a context characterized by a "weak" living together. This passage, therefore, strengthens the thesis that, even if it is not possible to identify *politike philia* with friendliness, nevertheless Aristotle's words entitle us to suppose some kind of relationship between the two.

Let's ask now: why should belonging to the same *polis* create such a bond between fellow-citizens, so to make them care about each other's good and virtue?

As Cooper suggests, the answer lies in the nature of the *polis* itself, which is not a commercial alliance, as if it were a public limited company, in which the common good depends on the fact that everyone has a strong economic interest in the company, but rather is a common life in which citizens are concerned about each other's moral goodness. The link between them is therefore a kind of *philia*, which does not presuppose love, since the *polis* – as narrow as it may be – is nevertheless too broad a context to allow an emotional relationship with everyone. Thus, not every kind of *philia* requires intimacy; in the political context**,** sharing the same institutions

[2] "Those who have many friends, and greet everyone in an intimate fashion, are thought to be friends of nobody, except in the way that fellow-citizens are friends; in fact people call them obsequious [*areskous*]. Merely as a citizen, then, one can be a friend to many even while not being obsequious."

and values is a sufficient condition for there being benevolence towards fellow-citizens[3].

Let us recall some conclusions drawn before:

> (1) there is a link between friendliness and *politike philia*, since both take place within the political context, characterized by the fact of living together without being intimate with each other;
>
> (2) friendliness consists in a friendly behavior, due to the concern for the other's goodness, and subordinates the will not to displease to the worry for what is fine and what is advantageous: «If someone is doing something that actually brings disgrace, and no slight disgrace at that, or brings harm, and opposing it will cause little distress, the friendly person will not accept it but will object». (NE 1126b 34-37).

As Irwin puts it, «friendliness is displayed in social intercourse and common life to all fellow-citizens, whether or not they happen to be friends or relatives or acquaintances. A fellow citizen may not be a virtuous person, and therefore may not be another self in the way one virtuous person is for another. Nor does the virtuous person share his life with a mere fellow-citizen to the extent he shares it with a virtuous friend. But if the fellow-citizen is virtuous enough to share some similar aims, the virtuous person can extend his practical reason in the same way as with a virtuous friend». (1990, 399)

However, as I have mentioned before, there seems to be also a link between friendliness, political friendship and like-mindedness. What is, then, the difference between them? As it emerges clearly from Aristotle's words, like-mindedness is more related to decision and political judgment than to a personal relationship with others, since its subject is represented by "projects for action, and of these, ones that have a certain magnitude, and can be engaged in by both parties, or by everyone, e.g. when it seems a good thing to a whole city that offices should be elective, or that an alliance be made with the Spartans, or that Pittacus should rule" (*NE* 1167a 28-33).

In the Aristotelian *polis*, therefore, a kind of friendship among fellow-citizens takes place, which has at least two consequences:

- at a *political* level, i.e., when political decisions are involved, the citizens' relationship to

[3] Julia Annas, commenting on this thesis (1993, 242), even if she agrees with Cooper's basic claims about political relationships, states that nothing in Aristotelian text entitles us to identify among the citizens a concern for each other's moral goodness. Elsewhere (Annas 1977), furthermore, she lessens the importance of these less intimate forms of *philia*, considering them lower than the personal and close relationship of proper *philia*/friendship, which, according to her, represents the real subject of the Aristotelian inquiry.

each other is one of like-mindedness;

- at a *social* level, i.e., in informal contexts, their attitude towards each other is a friendly one, implying mutual correction if necessary.

3. Citizenship and Extended Altruism: now and then

The *polis*, as we have seen, represents a bond which is strong enough to be more than a commercial alliance. As Cooper suggests, citizenship is a kind of extension of the psychological traits which bind the members of a family one another,[4] so that everyone feels the good of anybody else as if it were his own good. Common good, does not consist in the sum of many individual advantages: everyone's virtue interferes with the virtue of anyone else, it helps, shapes, and affects it, and vice damages, reduces, and compromises it,[5] just as it happens among friends in the strict sense:

The friendship of inferior people, then, has bad effects, since they take part in inferior occupations, not being possessed of stable character, and become bad into the bargain, by making themselves resemble one another; whereas the friendship of decent people is decent, and grows in proportion to their interaction; and they even 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. (*NE* 1172a 8-13)

The virtuous man, who takes part in a common life of reasoning and thought with his fellow-citizens, is involved in the development of his own moral life and, since he is aware of the *polis*' good and advantageous goal, he feels intrinsically bound to those who share it with him, and therefore cannot lie to them about what is good and fine, but wants to show them what is really good, even correcting them when necessary.

Aquinas, in his commentary on *Nicomachean Ethics*, underlines the double motivation of the virtuous agent: the virtuous man refuses to please his interlocutor both because he does not want

[4] Cf. Cooper: "Civic friendship is just an extension to a whole city of the kinds of psychological bonds that tie together a family and make possible this immediate participation by each family member in the good of the others" (1990, 236). Cf. also Berti: "Pertanto una forma importante di amicizia è l'amicizia civica, che sta a fondamento della *polis*, ossia la solidarietà che ciascuno prova nei confronti dei suoi concittadini, con i quali collabora alla realizzazione del bene commune" (1995, 104).

[5] Cf. Annas: "In achieving the good life we are greatly helped by having friends. If we have a supportive context of friends, we are more likely better to understand to ourselves and better to achieve our moral goals" (1993, 252). It is easy to notice here a resemblance with Locke's state of nature, conceived (as opposed to Hobbes') as a primitive civil society, where one finds families, clans, and voluntary associations. See Locke's *Second Treatise of Government*.

to listen to a harmful talk (for, as we have seen, vice spreads, and nobody is impervious to it) and because he wants to correct him, since he has a sincere concern about him.

In conclusion, therefore, we can say that an analysis of the various kinds of relationship within *Nicomachean Ethics* entitles us to understand more clearly the Aristotelian account of social relationships, and above all**,** to discover a close link between citizenship and extended altruism**.** The results we can draw from this are complementary:

(1) The link between friendliness and *politike philia* shows that the former is not a generic and formal disposition, but a sincere concern, even if it lacks love or fondness, which is founded on a solid basis, namely, being member of the same *polis* and sharing a common goal.

(2) On the other hand, the link between *politike philia* and friendliness dissipates the idea that the relation between fellow-citizens is a self-serving and extrinsic one, showing, on the contrary, that this relationship involves a disposition, namely, friendliness, whose goal is to contribute to the fellow-citizens' goodness.

Is such picture of social relations realistic and applicable today, or can it only be an interpretation of the Aristotelian view on the role of the *polis*? I can't dwell here at length with the implications of Aristotle's notion of extended altruism for the way of conceiving today's globalized society. Surely, applying the Aristotelian framework as such would be nonsense; however, if we have a look at recent socio-economic research (e.g., at the work of the economist Luigino Bruni), what we discover is that the Aristotelian "third way" between self-interest and proper love finds surprising confirms in the challenge posed to the "*homo oeconomicus*" view, and in a renewed emphasis on reciprocity and cooperation as the key elements of actual economic interactions within civil society, to the point that it can even represent a challenge to the original dichotomy between self-interested economic interactions and selfless loving relations. Such perspective is taken in a particularly serious way by the so-called Civil Economy, an approach which sees reciprocity as a multi-faceted essential dimension of social interactions, ranging from contract (self-interested exchange) to mutual gift (see Bruni, x). Civil Economy proposes to challenge a very well-established economic tradition, which assigns primacy to instrumental sociality and rationality, and sees other forms of sociality as a mere "'background' onto which economic choices were represented as essentially instrumental and unaffected by the relational context where economic interaction takes place. Economics has adopted 'self-interest' as the general motivation of economic agency, and anonymity as the normal characteristic of market activity"

(Bruni, 2008). Against such view, Civil Economy aims at making sense of “genuinely pro-social behaviours that are embedded in ordinary market dynamics (e.g. the voluntary contribution to public goods), and not just focusing on non-market behaviours” (2).

As I have briefly illustrated by giving the Civil Economy example, conceiving of instrumental reason and of self-interest as ruling out any uninterested behavior within society prevents from understanding many social and economic phenomena. Thus, a recovery of social and civic virtues, following Aristotle’s insights on extended altruism, is a much-needed endeavor if we are to understand social interactions.

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