

THE ROLE OF *PHILAUTIA* IN ARISTOTLE'S ETHICS

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FRIENDSHIP is the virtue that obtains the most extended and acute analysis within the *Nichomachean Ethics*. This structure, as it becomes clear almost at first sight, exhibits the capital role that friendship plays in Aristotelian philosophy. Its value is often stressed by scholars since it depicts – as it also happens, in a different way, with the analysis of justice – how Aristotle conceives interpersonal relationships, both in their weakest and strongest variants.¹ Nonetheless, despite the prominent role of friendship, scholars usually neglect the concept of *philautia*, i.e., the friendship with oneself or, venturing to paraphrase this Aristotelian idea more loosely, the friendship one is due to oneself. Frequently one says in everyday life that someone “does not love himself”, implying thereby that the way such individual acts or performs deeds is not proper of his person. This also implies that, by not knowing how to love himself, the said person is unable to love others. Regardless of the recurrent character of this phenomenon, only few times it is explained what the grounds of a legitimate love to oneself are. Aristotelian ethics render many valuable elements to elucidate this question, among other things, because the *philautia* described by the philosopher is a necessary condition to achieve happiness. The aim of this article is to analyze the key elements of *philautia* as well as the importance of this virtue within a fulfilled life. Before examining what Aristotle says in this regard, however, I will briefly study certain subjects directly related to *philautia* in order to outline an adequate context for the discussion. After analyzing some of the essential features of this kind of friendship, I will then study a question of primal importance: how does the *philautos*, the self-lover, seek material, ethical and intellectual goods?

As I have mentioned before, friendship and justice are the virtues for Aristo-

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¹ Not all scholars have recognized the specific weight of friendship within a fulfilled existence. An example of this is Sarah Broadie's *Ethics with Aristotle* (S. BROADIE, *Ethics with Aristotle*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1993). Although it is a remarkable book in many senses, the fact that it lacks a chapter on this virtue shows us that the importance of friendship is sometimes not easily recognized.

tle that define our life in society. One only needs to take a closer look at Aristotle's claims to realize how intertwined both virtues are in the discourse of the philosopher.² Aristotle says, on the one hand, that justice is not necessary for men who are friends, and on the other hand, he states that friendship is always missed when the only thing that prevails among men is justice.³ Furthermore, he says that legislators endeavor more in promoting friendship than justice among citizens in order that their interests coexist harmoniously. In addition, he affirms that friendship (and not justice) is what keeps a *polis* together.

1. FRIENDSHIP AND COMMUNITY

Friendship and justice define, thus, our living together in community. This implies, in other words, that each time we exercise these virtues we do it in relation to someone. We cannot be friends or practice justice on an abstract level. A friend is always a friend of somebody. Likewise, justice and injustice are always practiced on a different person than us. If one takes this into account, how is it possible to be friends or to act justly with oneself? Aristotle solves this paradoxical question by appealing analogically to his psychology of the different parts of the soul.⁴ A person is a self-lover once both parts of his soul, the rational and the irrational one, instead of being in discrepant tension, converge amicably in the actions of an individual. For that reason Aristotle says that «a man is in a sense like himself, single, and good for himself (*autos auto agathos*), so far as he is a friend and object of desire to himself».⁵

The virtuous self-lover acts according to his reason. His righteous behavior spans congruently across the course of his life. In contrast to the incontinent,

² «But neither will men act unjustly if they are just; therefore justice and friendship are either the same or not far different (*tauton ara e egus ti e dikaiosine kai e philia*)» (*Eudemian Ethics*, 1234 b31). For the quotations of Aristotle I will use J. BARNES (editor.), *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey 1991.

³ «Friendship seems too to hold states together (*eoike de kai tas poleis sunechain e filia*), and lawgivers to care more for it than for justice; for unanimity seems to be something like friendship (*e gar omonoia omoion tit e filia eoiken einai*), and this they aim at most of all; for unanimity seems to be something like friendship, and this they aim the most of all, and expel faction as their worst enemy; and when men are friends they have no need of justice, while when they are just they need friendship as well, and the truest form of justice is thought to be friendly equality (*kai filon men onton ouden dei dikaiosunes, dikairoi de ontes prosedoontai filias*)» (ARISTOTLE, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1155 a21-26).

⁴ «For that friendship – that to oneself – is, in a way, friendship by analogy, not absolutely. For loving and being loved require two separate individuals. Therefore a man is a friend to himself rather in the sense in which we have described the incontinent and continent as willing or unwilling, namely in the sense that the parts of his soul are in a certain relation to each other; and all problems of this sort have a similar explanation, e.g. whether a man can be a friend or enemy to himself and whether a man can wrong himself» (ARISTOTLE, *Eudemian Ethics*, 1240 a14-21).

⁵ ARISTOTLE, *Eudemian Ethics*, 1240 b19.

the *philautos* knows what is good and acts in conformity with it. Aristotle understands the *philautia* as a virtue of which practice entails a very significant diminution in the tension between the different parts of the soul. As can be seen, Plato is certainly present behind the Aristotelian analysis, for he was the first philosopher to deal systematically with this subject.⁶ I believe that Aristotle tries in the basics to provide a similar answer to that of his master: while Plato affirms in the myth of the *Phaedrus* that the charioteer falls down to earth if he lets one of the winged horses prevail over the other, Aristotle states that an incontinent individual lives an inordinate life as a result of his incapacity to find an equilibrium between the rational and the irrational parts of his self. I think, however, that Aristotle develops a more elaborate and detailed characterization of the relevance of the soul's 'agreement' within a fulfilled life. One of the most prominent effects of this unity of the self is that it is accompanied by a feeling of pleasantness for one's own existence as well as for the practice of virtuous deeds.⁷ Aristotle links thereby *philautia* with virtuous friendship, for such friends enjoy enormously their company due to their agreement on the fundamental features of a fulfilled existence. Virtuous friendship, as Aristotle repeats, involves an election on the part of both friends about which set of goods is suitable for happiness.⁸ This is the reason why one says that «true friends are a single soul»⁹, while «the wicked man is not one

⁶ In the *Phaedrus* this tension is explained thus: «We will liken the soul to the composite nature of a pair of winged horses and a charioteer. Now the horses and charioteers of the gods are all good and of good descent, but those of other races are mixed; and first the charioteer of the human soul drives a pair, and secondly one of the horses is noble and of noble breed, but the other quite the opposite in breed and character. Therefore in our case the driving is necessarily difficult and troublesome» (PLATO, *Phaedrus*, 246 b). This psychology becomes more complex in the *Republic* where Plato mentions that the irrational (*alogiston*) and the appetitive (*epythemitikon*) lead men to quench his thirst (437 b), but then comes in play another fiery part of the soul (*thymos*) different from the others. In any case, however, reason commands here also the other parts of the soul: «Does it not belong to the rational part (*to men logistikoi*) to rule, being wise and exercising forethought in behalf of the entire soul, and to the principle of high spirit to be subject to this and its ally (*to de thumoiidei huprekooi kai summachoi toutou*)? – Assuredly» (PLATO, *Republic*, 441 e). For the quotations of Plato I use J. M. COOPER (editor.), *Plato. Complete Works*, Hackett Publishing Company, Indianapolis 1998.

⁷ As a point of contrast of this claim, Broadie's next commentary is very insightful: «The incontinent person fails to live up to his rational choice, giving way to a contrary impulse. But the rational choice, even if betrayed, incorporates the assumption that one can act in the manner chosen. In this and other ways the choice is a manifestation of practical intelligence. But the vicious person hates himself for not being as he wishes to be, and wishes need not be practical» (S. BROADIE, *Ethics with Aristotle*, cit., p. 161).

⁸ ARISTOTLE, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1140 a26-28, 1145 a1-2.

⁹ IDEM, *Eudemian Ethics*, 1240 b2.

but many, in the same day other than himself and fickle». ¹⁰ Analogously, the same can be said of the self-lover and of the virtuous man: they possess a single soul so far as they consciously decide to lead a good life. Therefore, Aristotle does not hesitate to affirm that children cannot be *philautoi* «till they have attained the power of choice (*prohairesis*); for already then the mind is at variance with the appetite». ¹¹ What is relevant in this statement is that Aristotle makes it in a transcendental moment of his discussion. The power of choice can only be developed by means of exercising the noblest part of the human being, i.e. reason. In this sense, a friend of himself is the person who deliberates and acts righteously.

2. POLITICAL AND CONTEMPLATIVE LIFE IN THE *PHILAUTOS*

Pleasantness for one's own existence, however, is not only due to the virtuous deeds of man. Its cause of being lies fundamentally in the part of his soul the person loves the most and in function of which he is able to perform righteous deeds. As Aristotle explicitly remarks:

Besides, a man is said to have or not have self-control (*kai enkratres de kai akrates*) according as his intellect (*ton nous*) has or has not the control, on the assumption that this is the man himself; and the things men have done from reason are thought most properly their own acts and voluntary acts (*kai pepragenai dokousin autoi kai ekousios estin malista*). That this is the man himself, then, or is so more than anything else, is plain, and also that the good man (*adelphos*) loves (*agapa*) most this part of him. Whence it follows that he is not truly a lover of self (*philautos*), of another type than that which is a matter of reproach, and as different from that as living according to reason is from living as passion dictates (*kai diaferon tosouton oson to kata logon zen tou katha pathos*), and desiring what is noble from desiring what seems advantageous. ¹²

This passage is of great relevance for it stresses the following points:

- 1) Men can be put to a certain extent on the same level with their *nous*, the noblest part of their self.
- 2) A man that acts according to this noble part of himself is a virtuous self-lover.
- 3) The noble deeds of the *philautos* differ from those guided by pleasure or utility.

In contrast with Richard Kraut – whose analysis of *philautia* is, in many regards, outstanding – I do not believe at all that Aristotle establishes a dichotomy between practical and theoretical *nous* in this passage. ¹³ Even though

¹⁰ IDEM, *Eudemian Ethics*, 1240 b17.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, 1240 b33 - 34.

¹² ARISTOTLE, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1168 b39 - 1169 a6.

¹³ «When he argues that the ethically virtuous person rightly loves himself most of all, he claims (1169 a3) that there is one part of the soul that such a person loves more than any other his understanding (1168 b35). As the context indicates, *nous* here refers to the part of

the context where the importance of *nous* is discussed is directly linked to the analysis of the self-control characteristic of a virtuous individual (and, consequently, also linked to political life), I believe that there are no sufficient elements to exclude from Aristotle's scheme the pleasure that goes in hand with contemplation. The proximity of this discussion in the *Nicomachean Ethics* with book x, in which Aristotle makes very similar remarks about the preponderance of *nous* in human life, suggests in my understanding that the books on friendship play a mediating role between the previously discussed virtues and the contemplative life. In my judgment, Kraut's intention is to prevent this passage from being read rigidly under the lens of book x, but because of that effort he seems to incur in the opposite extreme. The possibility of a flexible interpretation to both directions becomes problematic under his assumptions. It is true that there is enjoyment and pleasantness attached to the practice of virtues such as courage, agreeableness and magnificence, but this does not explain satisfactorily why the *philautos* wants to live and preserve that part of his self that properly make of him a human being. If we separate this passage completely from theoretical *nous*, it is impossible to understand Aristotle's idea of man being "more than anything else" his intellect, a remark of a mysterious nature in Kraut's opinion.¹⁴ Just as in the case of virtuous friends, the *philautos* wants to spend time by himself because he enjoys his own company. This desire of spending time with himself can only be understood as an activity that makes virtuous individuals suspend, momentarily, their participation in political life. To put it briefly, if the *philautos* wants to love this 'divine' part of himself, he will have to step outside society in order to examine his previously performed actions and to live a philosophical life. *Philautia*, thus, seems to play a very interesting role given the fact that it is irreducible to political or to contemplative life. As it occurs with happiness itself, *philautia* is something pleasant, of continuous duration and intrinsic value. Nevertheless, the *philautos* needs to practice contemplation in order to love that essential part of his self which is the *nous*.

This key passage of book ix, as I have previously remarked, points also in its final lines to one of the most distinctive features of the *philautos*, i.e., his performance of virtuous deeds for their sake alone. It seems to me that Aris-

the soul that enables someone to deliberate and make choices: someone's understanding is in control when he is continent, and loses control when he is incontinent (1168 b34-5). Though *nous* sometimes refers to the part of the soul that engages in theoretical reasoning (x. 7 1177a13, 1178 a7), in ix. 8 it refers to practical reason. And in ix. 8 Aristotle says that this practical understanding is the part of the soul that the ethically virtuous person loves most» (R. KRAUT, *Aristotle on the Human Good*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey 1989, p. 128).

¹⁴ «Furthermore, he makes the mysterious claim that each person «is or most of all is» this part of the soul (1169 a2)» (R. KRAUT, *Aristotle on the Human Good*, cit., p. 128).

total makes this claim with the purpose of showing the structural continuity that exists between the friendship of two virtuous individuals and the friendship to oneself. In the book VIII of the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle says that the bond between two individuals by virtue of living together constitutes the most authentic kind of friendship; it is not grounded on such contingent interests as friendships based on pleasure or utility.¹⁵ Among virtuous persons there exists a fundamental agreement on the goods one seeks for oneself and for the others. In a similar fashion, one can say that the *philautos* does not voraciously look for goods that satisfy his passions or that are of advantage to him – although he does not exclude these goods from his life, for they are also quite necessary –, for he knows that a life preponderantly based on them is quite unsatisfying. Moreover, if one behaves that way, it is impossible to find a convenient equilibrium for the parts of the soul to coexist harmoniously. If happiness depended on attaining transitory goods, it would authentically be a question of luck and fortune to reach it. If one assumes such conduct one ignores the function that distinguishes man from any other being and that makes him guide his efforts towards the superior attainable good which is happiness.

3. THE ETHICAL QUEST FOR GOODS

In light of the above, I think we have enough elements to discuss properly how a self-lover seeks the goods that are within his reach. This question is of capital importance, for Aristotle tries to determine whether or not the self-lover is an egoist. As a first step in his analysis, Aristotle examines several *endoxa* in his study on *philautia* that seem to be in frank opposition. On the one hand, «a bad man seems to do everything for his own sake (*dokei te o men phaulos eauton xarin panta pratein*), and the more so the more wicked he is – and so men reproach him, for instance with doing nothing of his own accord – while the good man acts for honor's sake, and the more so the better he is, and acts for his friend's sake, and sacrifices his own interest (*o de epieikes dia to kalon, kai oso an beltion e, mallon dia to kalon, kai philon eneka, to de autou pariesin – tois logois de toutois ta erga diaphornei, ouk alogos*)». ¹⁶ On the other hand, however, there is the common opinion according to which «these attributes are found most of all in a man's attitude towards himself, and so are all the other attitudes by which a friend is defined; for, as we have said, it is from this relation that all the characteristics of friendship have extended to others (*eiretai gar o tap autou panta ta philika kai pros tous allous diekei*)». ¹⁷ This dichotomy can only be solved, as Reeve has very well remarked, if we distinguish two kinds of egoism: a

¹⁵ ARISTOTLE, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1157 b25-35.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, 1168 a33-35.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, 1168 b4-9.

bad and a good one.¹⁸ In fact, using one of his customary strategies, Aristotle clarifies the concept of egoism appealing to a distinction: if someone greedily pretends to satisfy the irrational part of his soul by pleasing all his passions and appetites, he can be called, with a good enough reason, an egoist. To act without the mediation of reason leads to a satisfaction that does not concern the interests of others. As an example we could say that if a person openly declares that he wants to possess all the material goods of the world, we could censure his conduct for ignoring the wellbeing of other individuals, and more specifically, for not guiding his desires by reason.

But what happens with people who act according to reason on their quest for the different kinds of goods? Following the previous line of argument, what would happen if someone says that he wants to possess, in a full and perfect manner, all the intellectual and the ethical virtues? Would that be an unmeasured ambition that ought to be censured like that of a greedy man? Maybe under these terms one does not dare to offer an answer, but I think that problem disappears once we formulate the same question differently: can we righteously desire to develop our noblest and superior powers to the fullest?

I believe that in this case the Aristotelian *philautos* would have to give an affirmative answer. Despite the fact that it seems quite unproportionate to say that one wants to be 'perfect', such a claim can be read under a weaker perspective. A person who says he wants for himself all virtues is only declaring that he expresses is that he wants to reach, within the limitations of human existence, the highest good reasonably attainable.¹⁹ The fundamental difference between both cases is that the greedy man wants to reach, preponderantly, material goods, and seeks them in spite of the consequences his desires may have on others. In this regard, Kraut makes a very intelligent remark about the virtuous man who seeks goods within a shared ethical horizon: «So the competition among virtuous individuals to be best is a competition among individuals who observe decent limits: each wants to be best, but will undertake such actions as well as they leave others with their fair share of opportunities for moral activity. No virtuous person wants to be the best if this

¹⁸ «This results in a manifest aporia, but it is one that Aristotle is fully aware of, and that he attempts to solve – as he attempts to solve all aporiai – by refining the notion that causes the problem. There are, he argues, two kinds of selfishness: bad-selfishness and good-selfishness, as we may call them. If someone is bad-selfish, he awards himself the biggest share of the goods of competition – money, honors, and bodily pleasures – and gratifies his feelings or the non-rational part of his psyche (1168 b15-22). If someone is good-selfish, he «gratifies the most controlling part of himself, obeying it in everything» (1168 b30-31)» (C. D. C. REEVE, *Practices of Reason: Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1995, p. 176).

¹⁹ Cfr. ARISTOTLE, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1097 a23. This idea is of capital importance in book I because in function of it Aristotle structures his critic towards the Platonic idea of good.

turns his equals into people who are predominantly passive recipients of his moral feats». ²⁰ The aim of practicing a particular virtue – say, for example, to be the bravest soldier in the battlefield – can easily lead to contend with other persons. In that case, the *philautos* will act in accordance with his moral dispositions, but he will stop right in the moment when his actions interfere with the will of others who, like himself, want to be virtuous. His interest in the noblest and higher goods does not diminish at all when he gives way to others so that they too can perform noble actions. The man who loves himself virtuously can love others' deeds because he wishes to flourish not solitarily but within a community. If he has to contend with them due to a given circumstance, he will engage in a friendly dispute following always the dictates of the noblest part of his soul. Therefore, the question of whether one can be considered an egoist for wanting to develop his rational and moral capacities does not stand by itself. Within the vast set of virtues, there are virtues such as friendship, justice, reciprocity, sincerity, and generosity, just to mention a few, which by definition forbid one to act regardless of the others. This is the reason why Aristotle does not hesitate to affirm that «if *all* were to strive towards what is noble and strain every nerve to do the noblest deeds, everything would be as it should be for the common good, and every one would secure for himself the goods that are the greatest, since excellence is the greatest of goods (*panton de amilomenon pros to kalon kai diateinomenon ta kalista pratein koine t' an pant' eie ta deonta ka idia ekasto ta megista ton agathon, eiper e arête toiouton estin*)». ²¹

The exercise of this virtue coordinates with perfect synchrony the different interests of all individuals. At the basis of political life lies a mutuality that opens a wide field wherein to perform noble actions. For this reason I believe that the discussion of the philosopher on the different kinds of 'sacrifices' is of great importance. A self-lover, as Aristotle remarks, «does many acts for the sake of his friends and his country, and if necessary dies for them (*kai to ton philon eneka polla prattein kai tes patridos, kai de hiperapothneskein*)». ²² Furthermore, the *philautos* will throw away wealth, honors and office in order that his friends might have the opportunity to act virtuously. ²³

In response to the question of why this occurs Reeve provides an insightful answer: «It follows – and that it does is important for many of Aristotle's subsequent arguments – that the virtuous person is not an egoist about value. What he values is virtuous activity not (or not primarily) that the virtuous activity is his own». ²⁴ If this was not the case, one could not say that our friend-

²⁰ R. KRAUT, *Aristotle on the Human Good*, cit., pp. 126-127.

²¹ ARISTOTLE, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1169a6-10.

²² *Ibidem*, 1169 a18-21.

²³ Cfr. *ibidem*, 1169 a25-31.

²⁴ C. D. C. REEVE, *Practices of Reason: Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*, cit., p. 176.

ship with others is an extension of our friendship with ourselves. A friend, as Aristotle says, shares with himself pleasures and pains, joys and sorrows of life, obeying the *nous* that makes him a rational being. In virtue of the highest part of his self a person is able to take pleasure in observing others act righteously. The contemplation of such deeds turns out to be pleasant and reaffirms his disposition to act according to his *nous*.

In general terms, as I have mentioned before, it seems that the Aristotelian analysis of friendship constitutes a kind of bridge between books I-VII and book X. Friendship, in a certain way, synthesizes all the dispositions of character of a virtuous person. On the one hand, the *philautos* finds a just mean between the different parts of his soul – in contrast with the incontinent, whose self is strongly divided between his reason and his appetites –, so that he is capable of acknowledging the needs of others, even if this implies to sometimes leave aside his own personal interests. On the other hand, the *philautos* conceives his existence as a good in itself and seeks, therefore, to preserve his highest faculty above any other thing. The self-lover enjoys his own company because the memory of his virtuous deeds does not bear regret or shame to him, and also because he has great hopes set on the future. This contemplative exercise demands a period of time in which one can leave daily affairs and the political life aside. Analogously as with the case of happiness, it is impossible to privilege absolutely either contemplative or political life without damaging the unity of human life which Aristotle tries to affirm. If we prevent ourselves from doing that, I believe that we can thoroughly comprehend these two inseparable and essential instances of ethical life.

ABSTRACT: This paper discusses the importance of philautia in the Nicomachean Ethics and the Eudemian Ethics. It studies the similarities between the friendship to oneself and the friendship to others, and examines the role of nous for practical and contemplative life. It analyzes also how a virtuous self-lover, in contrast with an incontinent man, desires material and intellectual goods without interfering with others' ethical development.

KEYWORDS: Aristotelian friendship, philautía, virtue, nous, ethical development.