The Friends and Enemies of Friendship

Abstract: The primary and proper sense of friendship, says Aristotle, 'is the kind that exists between good men as good men… It is in the friendship of good men that feelings of affection and friendship exist in their highest form. Such friendships are of course rare, because such men are few.' He argues further that even among good men, true friendship can take three forms: (a) between equally good persons, (b) between good persons and even better persons, and, (c) between good persons and the best person(s). After clarifying these distinctions, I will follow the lead of C.S. Lewis in *The Four Loves* and introduce a suppositional premise into the framework of the argument that inverts the order of these friendships, and, furthermore, entails the seemingly absurd possibility that a god become the friend of men − a possibility that Aristotle denies. Finally, I will argue that true friendship among persons can occur *only if* this absurd possibility becomes actual. Along the way, I will draw out the implications of this kind of friendship with regard to each other's creative and critical activities, and the persistent threats of vanity and envy, which are the chief enemies of friendship.

"Friends, Romans, Countrymen, lend me your ears!"
--Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar,* Act 3, Scene 2

I begin with the infamous first line of Marc Antony's speech because I'd like to use the three words of Antony—"friends, Romans, countrymen"—to identify three very specific degrees of friendship that are distinguished by Aristotle and notably exemplified by a well-known circle of friends, the Oxford Inklings.[1] (A fitting choice, given that they were all very familiar with

[1] The most well-known members of this group were C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, and Charles Williams. Other regular members were Warren H. Lewis, Henry ('Hugo') Dyson, Robert

Aristotle, with one of their members, C.S. Lewis, authoring a masterful study of *The Four Loves*.) Once these distinctions are clarified and refined, I will introduce a suppositional premise into the framework of the argument—or, as I prefer to say, a fantastical element into the story—that would make a considerable change in Aristotle's conclusions. Finally, I will show that the acceptance of this suppositional premise will entail the absurd possibility that a god become the friend of men—a possibility that Aristotle denies. In short, I will wildly conjecture that a possibility can only come about through an impossibility: that true friendship among persons can occur only if a god can become the friend of sinners. A fantastical proposition, I know—although it now occurs to me that this may be exactly what Shakespeare is showing us in *Julius Caesar*.

So, to begin. Aristotle's views on friendship (*philia*, in the Greek) are found primarily in books eight and nine of the *Nicomachean Ethics*.[2] There he says that friendship is "indispensible for life." (1155a5) Not only does everyone require some sort of friend in order to survive, we all require a teacher for life, someone to instruct us and shape us for the sort of life peculiar to human being. This is why Aristotle identifies friendship as a kind of virtue: it is necessary for the

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('Humphrey') Havard, Owen Barfield, Neville Coghill, J.A.W. Bennett, Adam Fox and David Cecil. There are several excellent studies of the Inklings: *The Company They Keep*, by Diana Pavlac Glyer, (Kent, OH: Kent Stste University Press, 2007); Humphrey Carpenter, *The Inklings* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997); Colin Duriez, *The Oxford Inklings* (Oxford: Lion Hudson, 2015); *The Fellowship: The Literary Lives of the Inklings*, by Phillip and Carol Zaleski (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2015).

[2] Throughout this essay I will be citing from Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, translated by Martin Ostwald (New York: Pearson, Library of Liberal Arts, 1999.)

happiness peculiar to Man. Without friendship most of us would not be born, and none of us would be raised. Furthermore, he says friendship "seems to hold states together…In fact, the just in the fullest sense is regarded as constituting an element of friendship. Friendship is noble as well as necessary." (1155a22-29) It is evident that *philia*, as Aristotle initially uses the word, has a very broad reference: it includes many relationships—between lovers; between spouses; between parents and children; between siblings; between rulers and citizens; between citizens themselves; between business partners; between hosts and guests; even between casual companions; as well as the more specific sort of relationship we usually call 'friendship'. In short, this broad use of *philia* is equivalent to the broad use of 'love'. Just as there are many kinds of love, and many degrees within each kind, there are many kinds and degrees of friendship. And just as Lewis, in *The Four Loves*, distinguishes these kinds of love from one another, Aristotle also draws distinctions between kinds of friendship. However, he does this differently than Lewis.

Aristotle begins by distinguishing between three qualities that motivate our affection: the good, the pleasant, and the useful. When our affection for others is due to either of the latter qualities—pleasure or utility (or both)—it is, as he says, an "imperfect" friendship; but when our affection is due to the intrinsic goodness of another, then, he says, the friendship is "true" or "perfect". For the sake of clarity, let's call this kind of friendship 'true friendship', and reserve the term 'perfect' for a further distinction that Aristotle makes within this category, and which I will get to shortly. Several important (and intuitively sensible) points follow from this distinction between types of friendship: (1) Since pleasure and utility are mutable, temporary, and circumstantial, the friendships based on them are also mutable, temporary, and circumstantial. Friendships based on the goodness intrinsic to character, on the other hand, are permanent and

stable, because good character is likewise permanent and stable. (2) Friendships based on pleasure and/or utility are "incidental" friendships: they exist and are maintained only to the extent that the friends are a source of pleasure or usefulness. The friend is loved not for himself, but only for what he provides. Imperfect friendships are really just partnerships, for business or pleasure. A friendship based on goodness, on the other hand, is one of genuine affection for each other, not merely the pleasure or usefulness they each provide. (3) Even so, a true friendship, based on the mutual love between good (or virtuous) persons, will be pleasant and useful *in addition* to being good in itself: for a good person will be a source of pleasure to other good persons, and good people will be useful to each other in preserving or increasing the virtue that they see in each other.

A fourth important implication follows from Aristotle's further distinction that, within each of the three *kinds* of friendship—based on goodness, based on pleasure, or based on utility—the friendship can be either between equals or between unequals. This means that (4) within the category of true friendship there can be degrees of friendship. The highest degree, the most perfect friendship is that *among equals in excellence*. Good persons, when equal in goodness, will naturally be attracted to one another, and will (because they are virtuous) naturally wish each other good things for the other's own sake. Aristotle says, "The perfect form of friendship is that between good men who are *alike in excellence or virtue*." (1156b5) Since the most perfect friendship is that which exists between completely virtuous persons, and since such persons are, at best, extremely rare, there must be degrees of nearness to this perfection: true friendships that are more or less perfect. In other words, unless (all) the friends are free of all vice, even a true friendship may be tainted; less than perfect. According to Aristotle, the possibility of perfect friendship is exactly the same as the possibility of there being two or more

perfectly virtuous persons. We can begin to see the similarities between Aristotle's idea of friendship among equals when that equality is one of virtue and Lewis's idea of friendship: but the similarity is made even closer when we recall that, according to Aristotle, human virtue or excellence includes both moral and intellectual virtue: virtues of both character and intellect. This, I think, adds greatly to our understanding of the friendship among the Inklings. Not only were they good men in the moral sense, they were also *sharp*—quick-minded and orderly in their thought. Each was *brilliant* in his own way. They were both imaginative and logical; both creative and critical; they possessed both theoretical and practical wisdom. Their friendship was based not only on their similarities of conduct and conviction, but also on their similarities of wit and wisdom. Nevertheless, this last implication is crucial for understanding why Lewis ultimately distinguishes the kinds of love differently than Aristotle does.

From true friendships between equals, Aristotle moves to true friendships between unequals, which includes relationships such as those between parents and children, the old and the young, husbands and wives, and rulers and subjects. Obviously, this list includes both *storge* (exemplified best by the love between parents and children) and *eros* (exemplified best by the love between a husband and wife). Aristotle distinguishes between the various forms of unequal friendships, such as *storge* and *eros*, in terms of two factors: (i) the degree of inequality, and (ii) whether the added benefits of the friendship, apart from the difference in virtue between the friends, are more in terms of pleasure or more in terms of utility. Though it is true that, in addition to the benefit they give to each other's souls, lovers will be of use to each other (as help-mates), the added benefit of *eros* that is most prominent is mutual pleasure. With *storge*, it is the other way around; pleasure may (and should) be an added benefit of it, but, apart from its spiritual benefit, it exists primarily because of the mutual needs (both physical and

psychological) that are met. But Aristotle also maintains that there is a greater inequality between, say, a father and a son than there is between a husband and a wife.

We can see now why Lewis writes that, "To the Ancients, Friendship seemed the happiest and most fully human of all loves; the crown of life and the school of virtue."[3] *Storge* and *eros* would seem to be lesser loves than *philia—provided that all the friends are perfectly virtuous*. For Aristotle, friendship among those who are perfectly virtuous is the highest form of love there is; below that, in descending order of goodness, are friendships between the virtuous and the increasingly less virtuous, until you reach a line—though it's a fuzzy line—beyond which true friendship is not possible. Aristotle gives two analogies to illustrate these levels of friendship; the family and the state. In a family, the love between brothers (provided they are virtuous) is analogous to friendship among equals; in the state, the analogy is with a polity, where all the citizens are (for the most part) virtuous. The love between a good husband and wife is the family's analogue to friendship between moderately unequal partners; in the state, this would be analogous to a noble aristocracy. When the degree of inequality is even greater, the respective analogues are the parent/child relationship and a benevolent monarchy. Thus, the order of categories in Marc Antony's speech: Friends (equals in virtue), Romans (moderate unequals in virtue, as between the Senate and the citizenry), countrymen (greater unequals in virtue, as between the Emperor and the citizens). Antony orders them as Aristotle does.

Let's return now to the fuzzy line. How great must be the disparity in virtue be in order for true friendship to no longer be possible? Though Aristotle does not explicitly say so, it is reasonable to assume that this is a possibility only insofar as each person, even the one inferior in virtue, at least *desires* to be virtuous and is *willing and able* to act in accordance with virtue. But

[3] C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (New York:Harvest Books, 1971), 57.

this is exactly what vice and moral weakness lack: vice is *not having* the desire for virtue; moral weakness is *not having* the will and ability to act in accordance with it. This would seem to be a well-defined criterion: vice and/or moral weakness on the part of one or more of the partners makes true friendship impossible. But it's not as simple as that. The possibility of disparity in degrees of virtue (and vice)—either (i) being more or less close to the mean in any specific action or emotion, or (ii) possessing a mixture of virtues and vices—makes it difficult to determine whether or not true friendship is possible. Wouldn't *any* lack of virtue be a possible inhibitor to a true friendship between unequals? And, yet, Aristotle admits not just the possibility, but the frequent actuality of unequal friendships based on virtue. He says that the relationships between parent and child, between husband and wife, between ruler and subject are all common examples of such an unequal friendship. Aristotle's (sensible) answer is algebraic: the higher the value of the lowest common denominator—that is, the higher the level of virtue of the most inferior partner(s)—the better chance that a true friendship will develop. Furthermore, his hierarchy of more or less perfect friendships implies that the ultimate outcome of a true but unequal friendship is to bring the inferior partner(s) up to the level of the superior one(s). Given Aristotle's claim that both vice and moral weakness are characteristics that cannot be changed once they have been established, it seems that this could only happen when (a) the inferior one's character is merely unformed and (b) the superior one's character is perfectly virtuous. Even where the first condition might be met (such as with a child), the second one is, to say the least, very difficult to achieve.

Now, let us suppose, what is at least supposable, that Aristotle is right in every respect but this: perfect virtue, though thinkable, is not actually possible among men, that both moral and intellectual perfection (of the kind appropriate to humans) are unattainable ideals. Furthermore,

let us say that a leading indicator of the unattainability of these ideals is, in fact, the secret supposition on the part of any person that he or she is close—or at least closer than others—to these ideals. Taking this supposition—let's call it 'original sin', just to give it a name—as a part of a metaphysical tale, what would poetic logic dictate for the rest of the story? First, we'd have to see that none of these true friendships—between unequals (*storge* and *eros*) or between equals (*philia*)—are, in themselves, perfect. While they are certainly good, they are not self-sufficiently good; they can 'go bad', as it were, especially when they are *thought* to be supreme or incorruptible. Secondly, we would see that the only kind of equality among friends in terms of virtue would be equality of *imperfection*, not of perfection. While the friends may share a measure of virtue, they will also share a measure of vice; even if the degree of virtue is high and the degree of vice is low, the friendship cannot be perfect. The particular vices and virtues may differ between such friends (one may lack fortitude while the other has it; the other may have a short temper, while the other possesses patience), but any vice at all, even if it is offset in the other by a corresponding virtue, is an obstacle to perfect friendship. Third, we'd see that in *unequal* friendships, although the virtue of one partner will be greater than the other, the difference between them will not be absolute: the superior partner will not be perfect, and the inferior partner will not be completely vicious. Fourth—and this is crucial—we'd see that the unequal friendships will be *better* than the equal ones in this sense: that there is a clear and mutual recognition of a 'better' and a 'worse'. Such recognition would not happen among equals, given the supposition that our natural tendency is to think of ourselves as closer to virtue than others: in an equal friendship, this tendency is applied to our friends as well as ourselves: not just *I*, but *we* are better than the others. For suppose that you have a friendship between equals, but that the equality is of a low quality—say, the friendship between gossips, or porn stars, or social

planners—would there be any recognition *between them* of a nobler basis for friendship? Granted, it's also possible that the virtue of each may be relatively high (as it was among the Inklings), but even so, there would be no recognition of an even higher plane of virtue, and an even better friendship.

Lewis, in his chapter on Friendship in *The Four Loves*, shows that the failure to recognize a higher or more superior virtue to that shared by the equals within the bond of friendship is inimical to friendship itself. As Lewis explains,

> Alone among unsympathetic companions, I hold certain views and standards timidly, half ashamed to avow them and half doubtful if they can after all be right. Put me back among my friends and in half an hour—in ten minutes—these same views and standards become once more indisputable. The opinion of this little circle, while I am in it, outweighs that of a thousand outsiders.[4]

In equal friendships, we are peers; but as a group of peers, the natural tendency is to consider our group peerless. "For we all wish to be judged by our peers… Only they really know our mind and only they judge it by standards we fully acknowledge. Theirs is the praise we really covet and the blame we really dread."[5] As a consequence, the members of the group become "deaf to the opinion of the outer world, by discounting it as the chatter of outsiders who 'don't understand,' of the 'conventional,' 'the bourgeois,' the 'Establishment,' of prigs, prudes and humbugs."[6] This tendency, inherent to friendship, applies to friendships at all levels of virtue or vice. Lewis observes that "the common taste or vision or point of view which [forms the basis of

[4] C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (New York:Harvest Books, 1971), 79.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid., 80.

friendship] need not always be a nice one." "The little pockets of early Christians survived because they cared exclusively for the love of 'the brethren' and stopped their ears to the opinion of the Pagan society all around them. But a circle of criminals, cranks or perverts survives in just the same way." "Friendship (as the ancients saw) can be a school of virtue; but also (as they did not see) a school of vice. It is ambivalent. It makes good men better and bad men worse."[7]

We might reasonably ask, at this point, whether or not a friendship among criminals, cranks and perverts of equal standing can be said to be based on virtue at all. Granted, such friendships would be of pretty low quality, but they might still have some moral value if they provide a sense of belonging and acceptance that is not merely instrumental or entertaining. The deafness of such a group of friends to the voices of those morally (or intellectually) superior to them is obvious enough, but what about a friendship among equals whose level of virtue is comparatively high? Would they, too, be deaf to the voice(s) of one(s) whose virtue is perfect? If Lewis is correct about this deafness being inimical to friendship itself, then yes, they would. "It will be obvious," he says, "that the element of secession, of indifference or deafness (at least on some matters) to the voices of the outer world, is common to all Friendships, whether good, bad, or merely innocuous."[8] This, in itself, is not necessarily dangerous, especially if the friends are highly virtuous. "The danger is that this partial indifference or deafness to outside opinion, justified and necessary though it is, may lead to a wholesale indifference or deafness."[9] If we remember our supposition that moral and/or intellectual perfection are not possible among mere mortals, it's clear that a morally perfect being would have to be considered an 'outsider' in this

[7] Ibid., 78-9; 79-80; 80.

[8] Ibid., 81.

[9] Ibid.

scenario, regardless of the level virtue among a group of peers. Because of this inherent quality of friendship, even a highly (but imperfectly) virtuous circle of friends "can create around it a vacuum across which no voice will carry." When this happens—and, without the action of a different love, it inevitably will—"Whatever faults the circle has—and no circle is without them—thus become incurable."[10]

This is why it is only in an *unequal* friendship that one recognizes the reality of imperfection and the possibility of improvement, and *longs* for such improvement. Thus it would seem that *any improvement in the friendship between equals could only come about if each of those equals were a friend with those whom they consciously knew to be their superiors*. These superiors might have names like Plato, or Augustine, or Dante, or Milton; MacDonald, or Chesterton, or Dostoyevski, or Solzhenitsyn.[11] Furthermore, since we are supposing that even the superior partner in any unequal friendship cannot be without fault, it would be *necessary for his own good* (as well as the good of the inferior partner) that he, too—the one (or ones) relatively superior to the others—be able to enter into a friendship in which *he* becomes conscious that he is the inferior partner, while the other is superior in goodness. Now, in order to avoid an infinite regress of imperfections (Aristotle himself is famous for abhorring infinite regresses, even more than nature abhorring a vacuum), it is clear that our supposition has led us to a further supposition that, although it follows, is much harder to swallow: namely, that the perfection of the natural loves (*philia*, *eros* and *storge*), if such perfection is to be, *requires a distinct, fourth*

[10] Ibid., 82.

[11] This brings up the related question: can we be friends with the dead? I think it must be possible, in some sense − otherwise what's the purpose of reading and studying their works? In some sense, the dead must still be alive.

kind of love, from a source that must transcend the possibilities inherent in us. It *must not* admit of a perverse form; it *cannot* be demonic. If it could, then we would require a fifth kind of love in order to redeem this one. It would be friendship *with* perfection: the most unequal friendship. So, the supposition we began with—that perfect virtue, though thinkable, is not actually possible among men—has turned Aristotle's order of friendship on its head: the most *unequal* kind of love or friendship would have to be highest on this earth, while the friendship among equals, though good, is least among the best. In this story, the order would need to be reversed: Countrymen, Romans, Friends. It's not got quite the same ring to it, but no matter. Humble and wholehearted obedience to the sovereign of virtue would have to be first, followed by humble respect for our betters; last (but no less important), humble appreciation for our peers.

See what happens when you tuck such a small supposition into your tale? The whole world-story goes topsy-turvy. Nevertheless, the logic of it is clear.

We might illustrate the point by imagining a conversation between a person (call her J) who holds to Aristotle's view that friendship among equals is highest, and someone else (call him R) who supposes (as I have) that the highest is friendship between an incorruptible sovereign and an incorrigible subject. J is having trouble with one of her friends—her husband, in fact. She asks R why he thinks the friendship is in trouble. He says, "You have lost love because you never attempted obedience." J bristles at this, but responds; "I thought love meant equality and free companionship." "Ah, equality!" says R, "Yes, we must all be guarded by equal rights from one another's greed, because we are fallen. Just as we must all wear clothes for the same reason. But the naked body should be there underneath the clothes, ripening for the day when we shall need them no longer. Equality is not the deepest thing, you know." J is puzzled. "I always thought that's just what it was. I thought it was in their souls that people were equal," she

says. “You were mistaken,” replies R, “That is the last place they are equal. Equality guards life; it doesn’t make it. It is medicine, not food…has no one ever told you that obedience—humility—is an erotic necessity? You are putting equality just where it ought not to be.”

Although any vice will be detrimental to true friendship (whether equal or unequal), we might wonder here, which vices are the most detrimental? Is it cowardice; self-indulgence; stinginess; apathy; a short temper; impatience; grouchiness; boorishness; boastfulness; greed? The most likely on this list would be apathy, impatience, grouchiness, or a short temper. But the argument just given points us to the most detrimental vices: pride (or, to use Aristotle’s term, vanity) and envy. These are the primary enemies of friendship. A further proof of this is that these vices inhibit the forgiveness that prevents the other vices from being inevitably divisive. When I am proud or envious, I will not be willing to forgive the faults of others. Conversely, the virtues most *necessary* and *beneficial* for friendship—the friends of friendship—are the opposites of these vices: humility and goodwill. But by ‘goodwill’ I have in mind an older use of the expression, which has a two-fold meaning, connoting both a *joyful contentment* with one’s own talents, abilities, accomplishments and good fortune, and a *joyful sharing* in the talents, abilities, accomplishments and good fortune of others. This is a wonderfully rich concept. Like humility, it is both outward-looking and inward-looking. For humility, properly speaking, is not simply (or primarily) a diminishing of oneself, but, rather, a rightful recognition and a loving subjection of oneself to someone greater—or to someone who is greatest—in goodness and beauty. Likewise, goodwill stems from a belief and recognition that the unique gifts and contributions of each individual all have value in the divine scheme of the universe.

Like all the virtues, goodwill and humility are chosen attitudes, resulting in practical actions. But, since they are prerequisites to any true friendships whatsoever—that is (in

accordance with our supposition), *they could not be fostered within any existing friendships*—we would have to characterize their origin as divine, and their acquisition as something like grace. For imperfect people, no matter the degree of equality among them or the extent of their goodwill towards each other, cannot overcome even the most miniscule vice without the aid of divine charity. Even among my closest friends, without such a gift I secretly (or not-so-secretly) pit myself against them, wishing to outdo them. In my vanity, I am greedy for more accolades or attentions or acolytes or articles than they have, and when I do not get it, I am envious. Equal rights must be imposed to keep such things in check, because we each tend to think that what we have to say or do is more important or more profound than what others have to say or do. The imposed equality helps to prevent an even worse outbreak of vanity—it's medicine. But humility and goodwill is food; it will, if received and partaken of, ripen our souls for the day when we will be perfect countrymen in God's country, perfect 'Romans' in the Republic of Virtue, and perfect friends—brothers and sisters—in the Ideal Family. It was this humble obedience before God, this humble respect for their betters, and this humble appreciation for each other that made the Oxford Inklings a nearly perfect circle of friends. It has done so in other circles as well.

Does all of this sound familiar? Have I plagiarized?[12] I'm sorry. I'm just supposin'. Let's go one infinite step further: let's get out of the abstractions. This is, after all, a *story*. We need

[12] Hopefully, the plagiarism is clear. But, if not, let me make it explicit (and thereby insure that it is not, strictly speaking, plagiarism). The "supposition" is found in various places in the New Testament (where it is a revelation rather than a supposition). See especially Romans chapter 3, Ephesians chapter 2, and Hebrews chapter 10. It is implied by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. That there is a fourth kind of love − *agape*, or charity − which is divine, and characteristic of God, is found most notably in I Corinthians chapter 13, the Gospel of John chapter 3, and I John

characters who instantiate the ideas. We all know that no kind of love is anything apart from some person (or persons) who embody it. So, wouldn't this fourth kind of love—if it's a necessity in this story—have to be embodied? Wouldn't it have to be *somebody*; somebody who would be such a friend to me and to you? For example, a god who takes on flesh and becomes the friend of sinners? Even Aristotle acknowledges that a true friend—a virtuous one—will give up his life for the sake of his friends if that's what's required for their good. But Aristotle does not have the gods in mind. He says, reasonably enough, that there can be no friendship when the disparity of virtue (or any other good) is too great. And since the disparity between the gods and men is extreme, there can be no friendship between them. It's not possible.

But, with God, all things are possible.

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chapter 4. The argument for the necessity of this love in order to perfect the other kinds of love—the natural loves—is the burden of Lewis's book, *The Four Loves*. The conversation between R and J (Ransom and Jane) is lifted from Lewis's novel, *That Hideous Strength* (New York: Scribner, 1945, 145.) And, the imitation here—asking whether or not I have plagiarized—is itself plagiarized from Kiergekaard's *Philosophical Fragments*. All are excellent sources from which to "plagiarize".