

**Mothering and the Sacrifice of Self:
Women and Friendship in Aristotle's
*Nicomachean Ethics***

Introduction

Aristotle introduces his discussion of friendship in Books Eight and Nine of the *Nicomachean Ethics* by claiming that it is a sort of virtue or involves virtue, and that friends are necessary for life as “(n)o one would choose to live without friends, even if (they) had all other goods” (1155a4-5).^{*} Among various types of friendship, Aristotle initially characterizes the perfect form as that between two good persons similar to each other in the excellence of their virtue. Two problems emerge, however, in Aristotle’s presentation of perfect friendship. First, it appears that it is only open to men, as women seem confined to a spurious form of friendship between husband and wife in the family. Second, perfect friendship seems unable to transcend the primary love of self that spurs human beings to wish for their own good most of all. The good person’s love of self is prior to and what allows for their love of others.

I argue, however, that despite Aristotle’s initial characterization of perfect friendship as exclusively masculine and self-centered, his brief reflections on the mother-child relationship brings a selfless feminine form of friendship to the fore. Aristotle suggests that a mother’s love is the paradigmatic example of unconditional love in human life. I thus conclude that the self-sacrifice of mothering points toward the possibility that women are capable of a selfless form of friendship that is akin to or even higher than the “perfect” friendship of two good men that Aristotle describes.

Aristotle’s discussion of friendship and the possible inclusion of women in its highest form are significant to his ethical theory as a whole for a number of reasons. First is the importance of friendship to politics (Tessitore, 1996: 74). According to Aristotle, friendship among fellow citizens, or that which he calls “concord,” is necessary to hold cities and political communities together (1155a22; 1167b2). Thus legislators pay more attention to producing concord than justice, because, as Aristotle claims, “(w)hen people are friends, they have no need of justice, but when they are just, they need friendship in addition” (1155a26-27). Aristotle attributes concord to cities when, “the citizens have the same judgment about their common interest, when they choose the same things, and when they execute what they have decided in common” (1167a26-28). In other words, concord or political friendship is unity of mind among citizens in deliberation and action with regard to important matters affecting the public interest. Examples Aristotle gives are fundamental constitutional questions such as whether or not certain public offices should be elective, foreign policy questions such as whether or not an alliance should be made with a particular foreign entity, and political questions such as who should rule the community.

^{*} Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*. Martin Ostwald, trans. New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1986. All subsequent citations will be taken from this edition.

The second reason why Aristotle's discussion of women and friendship is important is the relationship between friendship and nobility. Aristotle claims that "(f)riendship is noble as well as necessary: we praise those who love their friends and consider the possession of many friends a noble thing" (1155a29-30). Aristotle thus suggests that the ability to be and to possess friends is a noble thing in itself. Yet, Aristotle also says that "to those in their prime, (friends) give the opportunity to perform noble actions" (1155a14). This reminds us of Aristotle's discussion of the paradigmatic moral virtue of courage in Book Three, in which he argues that the end of courage or the sake for which it is chosen is the noble (1115b10-14, 21-23; 1116b1-2, 1117a6-7) (Ward, 2001: 71-72; but see Levy, 1990: 412). Thus, the second sense in which Aristotle refers to the noble in its relationship to friendship is that it appears to motivate and facilitate the doing of morally virtuous actions for the sake of the noble on the part of the friends (Tessitore, 1996: 74-75).

The relationship of friendship to philosophy is the third reason why it is important to consider Aristotle's discussion of friendship in light of its possibilities for women. According to Aristotle, friends "enhance our ability to think" (1155a14). Also, in the midst of his analysis of perfect friendship, Aristotle claims that among the various objects worthy of affection, "the unqualified good and the unqualified pleasant—are also found in it, and these are the highest objects worthy of affection" (1156b23-24). Aristotle therefore suggests that it is in the perfect friendship between those who are noble and good that the unqualified or universal good, the object of the philosophic quest, is grasped. Friendship, therefore, appears necessary to participate in what Aristotle calls "contemplation" in Book Ten, which comes to light at the end of the *Nicomachean Ethics* as the highest human life accompanied by the highest human good: happiness (see Burger, 2003: 52-53).

The crucial role that friendship plays in politics, nobility, and the philosophic life makes an analysis of Aristotle's understanding of this phenomenon critical to understanding his ethical theory as a whole. Moreover, I will attempt to illustrate that for Aristotle women are capable of partaking in or perhaps even transcending the highest form of friendship that he describes. If this is true, it would suggest Aristotle's belief that full participation in political deliberation and action, the nobility of moral virtue, and the life of philosophy can and should be open to women.

In arguing that Aristotle's philosophy of friendship is inclusive of women, I share a view similar to scholars such as Mary P. Nichols, Harold L. Levy, and Marcia L. Homiak. Nichols argues that in the *Politics* Aristotle indicates that an alternative to despotism and the development of free relations first emerges within the family. Also, by defining the relations between men and women in the family as political, Aristotle implies that women should participate with men in rule of the household. For Nichols, Aristotle's argument that political rule should govern the relations between the sexes is based on his belief in their equality, making shared rule just, and in their differences, such as differences in virtue, making shared rule advantageous (Nichols, 1996: 177-180 and 1992: 29-33). Levy is more radical, suggesting that for Aristotle women should not

only exercise political rule within the family, but should also assume political power in the city (Levy, 1990: 402-403, 408, 410, 412, 415n18).

Similarly, Homiak argues that Aristotle's rational ideal is not inherently masculine and thus worthy of emulation by women. Moreover, Aristotle's understanding of the rational life does not require the devaluation of feeling and emotion, traditionally associated with women, but rather that the rational part of the soul be properly guided and restrained by the non-rational part (Homiak, 2002: 80, 82, 90-94, 99; also see Sokolon, 2006: 4-5, 11-12, 15-22, 29-32). However, Homiak points out that rationality as an ethical ideal has been criticized by feminist scholars such as Carol Gilligan. In her book *In a Different Voice*, Gilligan argues that in contrast to men's moral reasoning, which adopts a perspective of "justice" that focuses on impartial and universalizable principles and is associated with rationality, women's moral reasoning adopts a perspective of "care" that focuses on the preservation of personal relationships and is associated with emotion (Homiak, 2002: 80; and see Gilligan, 1993: 24-39, 45-49).

Although in agreement with Nichols and Levy that Aristotle critiques patriarchy and male domination of women, I explore the *Ethics* and come to this conclusion by focusing on women's relation to children rather than the *Politics* and women's relation to men. Also, in contrast to both Homiak and Gilligan, I argue that a mother's "care" or altruistic self-denial for her child does not distance women from Aristotle's ethical and rational ideal, but rather brings them closer to it. Thus, I disagree with scholars such as Arlene Saxonhouse and Darrell Dobbs who argue that it is precisely because of their role as mothers that Aristotle argues for women's exclusion from the masculine public realm. According to Saxonhouse, Aristotle believes that women, bearing the young and preserving the household, lack the leisure to participate in the political discourse of citizenship (Saxonhouse, 1991: 48). Dobbs goes further, arguing that women's role in reproduction gives rise to certain moral and intellectual qualities that Aristotle believes makes them unsuitable for political rule (Dobbs, 1996: 86-87). I argue, in contrast, that Aristotle suggests that the activity of mothering, insofar as it manifests a sacrifice of self for the good understood as other, makes women uniquely suited to participate in rational dialogue and political decision-making.

In the argument that follows, I begin by analyzing Aristotle's understanding of perfect or true friendship, showing that its requirement for a quantitative or strict equality raises the question of whether or not such a friendship can exist between men and women. I address this question by exploring Aristotle's discussion of the friendship between husband and wife in the family, arguing that this relationship does not rise to the level of true friendship as Aristotle understands it. Next, I investigate self-love as the basis of love for another that appears at the root of perfect friendship. I argue that for Aristotle the noble self-sacrifice, even unto to death, that good men can make for their friends still remains within the horizon of a more primary love of self. I conclude by turning to Aristotle's brief references to the friendship a mother feels for her child as pointing to a possible resolution to both problems. The mother-child relationship, I argue, shows that for Aristotle it is within human nature to aspire to a truly selfless form of friendship for another, and that such friendship is indeed open to women.

Perfect Friendship

Aristotle sets out to define what friendship is in chapters three and four of Book Eight of the *Ethics*. He begins by defining friendship broadly as the condition in which two persons will the good for one another, and are aware of one another's good will (1156a3-5). Aristotle then subdivides friendship into three kinds based on three different objects of affection. The first two kinds of friendship Aristotle identifies are friendships based on utility and those based on pleasure. In friendships of utility, we will the good of the friend because they're useful to us; we feel affection for the useful and not for the person for who they are, or their character. Similarly, in friendships of pleasure, we will the good of the friend because they give us pleasure; we feel affection for the pleasant and not the person (1156a3-5, 14-19). The third kind of friendship Aristotle identifies is its true or perfect form. The perfect form of friendship is based on goodness. According to Aristotle, we will the good of the friend because "they are good," and moreover, "(t)hose who wish for their friends' good for their friends' sake are friends in the truest sense, since their attitude is determined by what their friends are and not incidental considerations" (1156b10-12). Thus, in the perfect form of friendship, we feel affection for the friend for who they are, and not for the utility or pleasure that we can get out of the relationship. It therefore appears that in perfect friendship the friends are viewed by each other as ends in themselves rather than simply means to other ends more desirable. It involves, it seems, not a selfish desire for the useful or the pleasant, but rather a recognition and affection for the goodness of the other's character.

Aristotle proceeds to delineate the characteristics of perfect friendship as follows. 1) The friends must be alike in their virtue, adhering to the proverb "that birds of a feather flock together" rather than "opposites attract." According to Aristotle, the actions of the good are almost identical to each other. 2) Perfect friendship is long lasting as, according to Aristotle, goodness or virtue, which friends value in each other, is a thing that lasts. 3) Perfect friendship is rare, since such good or virtuous persons are few. 4) It requires a long time for the friends to get to know each other, as they must have confidence in each other's good character. In other words, the friends must actually *be* good and not just seem good. Thus, perfect friendship, according to Aristotle, cannot exist among the bad or those who lack virtue, as such persons, although they may desire the useful and the pleasant from each other, "do not find joy... on the basis of what they are" (1156b6-33; 1157a16-19).

The fifth characteristic of perfect friendship is that the friends must enjoy spending time together. Aristotle claims that "nothing characterizes friends as much as living in each other's company," and moreover, although people can have an abstract feeling of good will toward those among whom they don't live or don't like, or at least not wish them any ill, they "are not really friends, because they do not spend their days together and do not find joy in one another, and these seem to be the chief marks of friendship" (1157b18; 1158a5-10). Even the supremely happy desire the company of friends, as they, Aristotle claims, "are the least suited to live in isolation" (1157b22). The human, for Aristotle, is a naturally social and political being.

The sixth and final characteristic of perfect friendship, as mentioned previously, seems to be that the good as such, or the universal good, appears, accompanied by the unqualifiedly pleasant, or the highest type of pleasure without pain (1155b22; 1156b23-25). If we understand the good as such as the object of philosophic contemplation, it appears that for Aristotle, perfect friendship allows for its manifestation in some way. If this is true, it seems that perfect friendship does indeed point to a greater good beyond itself, which is also pleasant, but in such a way that it does not destroy the integrity of the persons in the relationship or reduce the friends to means rather than ends; they can be both ends in themselves as persons, and point to something beyond themselves—the good.

Problems with perfect friendship, however, begin to emerge in chapter seven with Aristotle's contention that perfect or true friendship requires equality between the friends (1157b37). As a consequence, a good person "does not become the friend of someone whose station is superior to his own," and moreover, "(p)ersons much inferior to them in station do not expect to be friends with kings, nor do insignificant people expect to be friends with the best and wisest men" (1159a1-2). Thus, for Aristotle, equality does not have the same meaning in friendship as it does in matters of justice. In relationships of justice, the equal, according to Aristotle, is primarily qualitative or proportionate, where the superior in merit receives more of a share, the inferior in merit less (1158b30-31). Justice, in other words, is getting what you deserve, and people deserve different things. In relationships of friendship, on other hand, the equal is what Aristotle calls "quantitative," or is equality "in the strict sense," in which the subjects are the same and give and receive in equal measure (1158b31-33). Friendship, one might say, is not getting what you deserve, but being and getting the same (see Tessitore, 1996: 79). Aristotle therefore claims that if "there is a wide disparity between the partners as regards their virtue, vice, wealth, or anything else... then they are no longer friends or expect to be friends" (1158b31-33).

The implication of Aristotle's discussion of equality as it relates to friendship is that it appears that even perfect friendship has a limit to the good the friends wish for each other. It would seem that a person does not want their friend to become better than they are, and thus superior to them. This points to a fundamental tension in Aristotle's account of friendship thus far. The person wills the good of their friend for their friend's sake, but they seem not to wish their friend so much good such that the friend becomes better than they were before. This would pain the person, because such inequality would destroy the friendship. As a consequence, Aristotle concludes, "one will wish the greatest good for his friend... But perhaps not all the greatest goods, for each man *wishes for his own good most of all*" (Italics mine) (1159a11-12).

The requirement for quantitative or strict equality in the relationship causes two problems or questions to emerge in Aristotle's account of perfect friendship. First, can the affection one feels for another overcome or transcend what seems to be a more primary love of self? Indeed, if a strict equality is necessary between true friends, what passion is the friendship actually serving? For instance, although Aristotle claims that friendship, "appears to consist in giving rather than in receiving affection," he also claims

that most people enjoy receiving affection, as such affection is closely related to honour, and honour, according to Aristotle, is the aim of most people (1159a26-27, 16-17). Moreover, Aristotle asserts that “(t)hose who desire honour from good and knowing men aim at having their own opinion of themselves confirmed... (their belief in) their own goodness is reassured by the judgment of those who say they are good” (1159a21-24). It would seem, therefore, that the friendship between two good persons serves the passion of pride, or the desire for affirmation from someone we perceive like ourselves of the high opinion we have of our own worth. Perhaps one could say that a good person could never in their heart, as it were, really think that another was superior to them and be friends with them, if it were possible, even, for a good person to think that another was actually better than them.

The second problem or question to emerge from Aristotle’s requirement for strict equality is whether or not men and women can be true friends, thus allowing women to participate in the kind of perfect friendship between two good persons that Aristotle describes. From the point of view of biology, at least, it would seem that men and women are very different, thus failing to meet Aristotle’s strict standard of sameness or like-to-like in this regard. Can men and women, however, aspire to a strict equality or sameness in virtue? If not, it would appear that for Aristotle the possibility of perfect friendship only arises among men, as he never explicitly discusses the possibility of perfect friendship between two women.

In what follows, I focus first on the question of friendship between men and women, and then return to the tension between love of self and affection for another when two good persons are friends.

Women and Friendship

The possibility of friendship between men and women is first raised in chapter seven of Book Eight when Aristotle argues that a spurious form of friendship is possible between those who are unequal, provided that the superior partner receives greater affection from the inferior, and the inferior in turn receives less affection from the superior (1168b23-28). A kind of proportionate rather than strict equality is thus maintained between the partners, making the relationship seem more like one of justice rather than friendship. Nonetheless, Aristotle gives four examples of this spurious type of friendship: that between father and son, older and younger, ruler and subject, and, what we will be concerned with, husband and wife (1158b11-13). As a relationship of inequality, in order for husband and wife to enter into an imperfect form of friendship, a proportionate equality would have to be established in which the husband, as superior, receives more affection from his wife than he gives to her as the inferior partner. Moreover, Aristotle suggests that the possibility of friendship between man and woman, whether spurious or true, initially arises within the family between husband and wife, and perhaps for Aristotle can only occur within this context.

The next reference to friendship between husband and wife occurs in Aristotle’s discussion of friendship and politics in chapters nine to eleven of Book Eight. As

mentioned previously, friendship for Aristotle is not just a private phenomenon existing between individuals, but also a political phenomenon that takes place on the political level between citizens. In other words, friendship is not just personal but also political. In chapter ten, Aristotle identifies six different regimes or political systems, three just and three unjust. The three just regimes are kingship, aristocracy and timocracy (more commonly called polity), and the three unjust regimes, each perversions of the just ones, are tyranny, oligarchy and democracy respectively (1160a31-35; 1160b10-20). In chapters ten and eleven Aristotle argues that friendships within the particular political regimes each have analogues to different friendships within the family. For instance, the friendship between a king and his subjects is analogous to the friendship between father and sons. Both are friendships of inequality. Thus, as a king, in his superior ability to do good to his subjects, should receive a greater affection from his subjects than he gives to them, so a father, as the author of his children's being and hence more like a god to humans than a king to subjects, should receive more affection from his sons than he gives them in return (1160b24-27; 1161a11-17, 20-23). However, the kingly rule of the father turns tyrannical if he treats his children like slaves (1160b26-30).

The friendship between citizens in a timocratic regime, on the other hand, is analogous to the friendship between brothers. As timocratic citizens share in ruling and being ruled in turn as all are "on an equal footing," so brothers, according to Aristotle, are "equal and belong to the same age group, and... generally have the same emotions and the same characters" (1161a26-29). Friendship between timocrats and brothers, unlike that between king and subjects and fathers and sons, is based on equality and sameness and thus more closely resembles the perfect or true friendship between equal persons alike in their virtue and character. The timocratic relationship between brothers can turn democratic, however, if no respect at all is paid to age differences or forms of merit between the brothers.

What of the relationship between husband and wife in the family? Is it similar to the kingly but unequal relationship between fathers and sons, or is it closer to the timocratic but equal relationship between brothers? Aristotle places it somewhat in the middle of these two alternatives. He argues that the relationship between husband and wife is aristocratic, as "it is based on excellence or virtue: the superior partner gets a larger share of good, and each gets what is suited to (them)" (1161a24-25). The relationship between husband and wife is therefore based on virtue, but their virtues are unequal. Thus, as aristocrats should get more of the good and affection from the common people because the former are more virtuous than the latter, so the husband should receive more affection from his wife as his virtue is superior to hers. Moreover, Aristotle claims that the husband's rule over his wife and the household, "depends on his worth or merit, and the sphere of his rule is that which is proper to man. Whatever is more suited to a woman he turns over to his wife" (1160b33-35). The aristocratic relationship between husband and wife, therefore, turns oligarchic when the husband gives his wife no say at all in the running of the household, or, as Aristotle, claims, the wife rules the household because she is a rich heiress. This latter form of corruption suggests that for Aristotle, the proper virtue of a woman does not suit her to rule within the family, a form

of familial organization that he portrays as unjust (Dobbs, 1996: 83-84; but see Nichols, 1996: 177 and 1992: 30; Saxonhouse, 1991: 36-37; and Levy, 1990: 398-400, 409-410).

Aristotle's characterization of the friendship between husband and wife as aristocratic clearly points to the fact that he believes this relationship can be based on virtue and not just biology. However, the virtues or proper spheres of men and women in the family are presented as different and unequal, with the husband possessing the ruling and superior kind (but see Levy, 1990: 398, 402-403). The friendship between husband and wife in this discussion, therefore, does not seem to meet the requirements of perfect friendship.

In chapter twelve of Book Eight, Aristotle again turns to friendship within the family despite having just discussed this in chapters ten and eleven in which familial friendships were presented as analogous to friendships within the different political regimes. What can account for the oddness of Aristotle's procedure, or why must we revisit the issue of friendship within the family? Aristotle seems to suggest that although our understanding of familial relations is influenced by politics and political regimes, for instance more hierarchical regimes will be composed of more hierarchically ordered families, and more egalitarian regimes of more egalitarian families, friendship within the family is still independent of politics or can stand on its own as it were; family relations are still essentially private as opposed to political relations. Friendship, or the affection felt between family members can exist without reference to the regime, and are thus more natural or prior to conventional relations within the political community (Tessitore, 1996: 83; Schollmeier, 1994: 7; Hardie, 1968: 318). Aristotle thus argues "(t)he friendship between man and wife seems to be inherent in us by nature. For man is by nature more inclined to live in couples than to live as a social and political being, inasmuch as the household is earlier and more indispensable than the (city), and to the extent that procreation is a bond more universal to all living things (than living in a {city})" (1162a16-19). Aristotle thereby points to the sexual or reproductive relationship between men and women as the natural basis of their friendship, and the children that come to be, according to Aristotle, are "regarded as the bond that holds them together, and that is why childless marriages break up more easily" (1162a28).

In chapter twelve, therefore, it appears that Aristotle will provide an account of friendship in the family from within, or from the point of view of the family conceived as a private and more natural association than the city, rather than from without or from the point of view of the political regime. An example of the difference between the political perspective on the family and the private perspective of the family occurs in Aristotle's account of the parent-child relationship, which, as mentioned above, is derived from the reproductive relationship between man and woman. According to the political account of the family the friendship between fathers and sons is analogous to that between a king and his subjects: as a king is more deserving of and should receive more affection from his subjects than he shows to them, so a father, as the author of their being, is more deserving of and should receive more affection from his children than he shows to them. However, according to the private and more natural perspective of the family which we receive in chapter twelve, parents, "know better that the offspring is theirs than children

know that they are their parents' offspring, and the bond which ties the begetter to the begotten is closer than that which ties the generated to its author" (1161b20-22). It would seem, therefore, that parents naturally feel closer to their children than their children do to them, suggesting that parents give more affection to their children than they receive in return. The hierarchy of affection is thus reversed in the natural account of the parent-child relationship.

Aristotle suggests two reasons why parents naturally love their children more than their children do them. The first is that children belong to their parents in a way that parents do not belong to their children. As a tooth and a hair belongs to its owner, so a child belongs to its source, but, "the source does not belong at all—or only to a lesser degree—to that which has sprung from it" (1161b22-23). Therefore, whereas parents feel that their children are inseparable from them, children feel that their parents are separable (but see Schollmeier, 1994: 8-9). As Aristotle says, "parents love their children as themselves: offspring is, as it were, another self" (1161b27-28).

The second reason that parental affection for children is naturally greater than what they receive from children in return has to do with the point in time parents and children come to know each other. According to Aristotle, parents "love their children as soon as they are born, but children their parents only as, with the passage of time, they acquire understanding or perception. This also explains why affection felt by mothers is greater (than that of fathers)" (1161b24-27). As this last sentence indicates, in the natural account of friendship within the family, a mother's love or her relationship to her children manifests itself. The political perspective on the family spoke only about the hierarchical relationship between fathers and sons, while a mother's love for her child remained completely invisible.

The natural friendship between husband and wife, like the natural friendship between parents and children, also manifests significant differences from the political regime's understanding of that friendship. Unlike the politicized relationship between husband and wife in which their friendship is aristocratic, with the superior virtue of the husband making him more deserving of a greater affection from his wife than he is obliged to show her in return, the natural friendship between man and woman in the family, Aristotle suggests, allows for a greater equality. As we have seen, the biological differences between man and woman bring them together for the purpose of reproduction, and children, according to Aristotle, are a good common to both partners (1162a29). Moreover, Aristotle claims, "human beings live together not merely for procreation, but also to secure the needs of life... Thus they satisfy one another's needs by contributing each (their) own to the common store. For that reason, this kind of friendship brings both usefulness and pleasantness with it, and if the partners are good, it may be based on virtue or excellence" (1162a21-25).

The natural friendship between husband and wife, therefore, seems to incorporate within itself the three basic forms of friendship; beginning with utility and pleasure, it can even aspire to a friendship based on goodness. Does this virtue friendship between husband and wife reach the level or satisfy the requirements of Aristotle's perfect form of

friendship between two good persons alike in virtue? Aristotle, with respect to man and woman, argues, “(t)here is a division of labor from the beginning and different functions for man and wife” (1162a22). Furthermore, Aristotle states that “each partner has (their) own peculiar excellence and they can find joy in that fact” (1162a26). The greater equality in the natural friendship between husband and wife is thus not a quantitative equality of sameness, but rather an equality based on differences that are complementary rather than antagonistic. It does not satisfy the requirement of strict equality or the like-to-like standard that must be present in Aristotle’s account of the perfect friendship between two good persons alike in their virtue. We must conclude, therefore, that friendship between husband and wife is not perfect in the strict sense that Aristotle understands it. True friendship, it seems, is the exclusive preserve of men; it appears to exist only between two good men and not between men and women (but see Dobbs, 1996: 87; and Saxonhouse, 1991: 46-47).

Friendship and the Self

The second problem that emerged with Aristotle’s contention that perfect friendship requires strict equality is that it appeared that the affection one may feel for another never transcends the more primary love we have ourselves. Aristotle returns to the issue of self-love as prior to love of another in chapter four of Book Nine. Chapter four opens with the suggestion that “(t)he friendly relations we have with our neighbors and which serve to define the various kinds of friendship seem to be derived from our relations to ourselves” (1166a1-2). Aristotle thus indicates that the type of friendship or feeling we have toward ourselves is the basis of or condition for the type of friendship we are capable of having with others. Aristotle illustrates that the relation to the self is constitutive of our relation to the other by contrasting the self-love of the good man to the self-hatred of the bad or morally weak.

In order to understand why, in Aristotle’s view, the bad loathe themselves, we must begin with the condition of the soul. Aristotle claims that soul of a morally weak person is divided against itself in which, “one part, because of wickedness, feels sorrow when it abstains from certain things, another part feels pleasure: one part pulls in one direction and the other in another as if to tear the individual to pieces” (1166b20-23). In the morally weak person, therefore, the rational and irrational parts of the soul desire different things; reason knows and wishes to do what is right, but gives into the passions and agrees to do what is wrong. Why? Because not reason or that which thinks but passion rules the soul. As a result the morally weak, about whom there is nothing lovable, seek the company of others to be distracted from memory of their many bad deeds in the past and likely ones in the future (1166b13-18). Moreover, vice loves company, as it were, thus “the friendship of base people becomes wicked, because... they share in base pursuits, and becoming like one another they become wicked” (1172a8-10). Finally, hating themselves, the morally weak come to wish for their own death, thereby extinguishing the thinking part of themselves that ceaselessly reminds them of who and what they are (1166b11).

The good person, on the other hand, loves himself because, unlike the soul of the morally weak, the soul of the morally virtuous is in harmony. According to Aristotle, “a good man remains consistent in his judgment, and he desires the same objects with every part of his soul” (1166b14-15). In other words, in the morally virtuous the rational and irrational parts of the soul desire the same things; reason, guiding the soul, discovers the good and the passions follow. The good person, therefore, wishes to spend time with himself most of all, as the memory of his own good deeds and the contemplation of future ones gives him pleasure, and, unlike the morally weak, he is unlikely to share his own pleasures but especially his own pains with others (1166a25-27; 1171b4-10). Moreover, in contrast to the mutual pursuit of vice which makes the bad worse, Aristotle claims “the friendship of good men is good, and it increases with (the frequency of) their meetings... They become better as they are active together and correct one another: from the mould of the other each takes the imprint of the traits he likes” (1172a10-14). Being such a good person who becomes better in his friendships with others, he, unlike the morally weak, wishes for his own life and preservation, especially for the “intellectual part of himself” or that part “with which he thinks” (1166a16-18) (Schollmeier, 1994: 49, 57-58; but see Burger, 2003: 47). Thus the good person, according to Aristotle, is “his own best friend... and should have the greatest affection for himself” (1168b9-10). Aristotle therefore suggests that perfect friendships between good men who are alike in their virtue are derived from a more fundamental love they have for themselves (but see Stern-Gillet, 1995: 67, 69-71, 73-74; Schollmeier, 1994: 50-51, 53; and Hardie, 1968: 324-325). Since, according to Aristotle, a good man “has the same attitude toward his friend as he does toward himself, for his friend is really another self,” a good man who loves himself can then love another who is like himself (1166a30-32).

Aristotle acknowledges in chapter eight the problematic nature of the claim that a fundamental selfishness is at the root of friendship in its truest sense, as most people regard the love of self or egoism as something blameworthy. However, Aristotle argues that egoism generally appears as a negative trait because most egoists seek to gratify the irrational part of their souls by basely pursuing material wealth and bodily pleasures (1168b15-23). Although such men are justly sanctioned, Aristotle argues that there is another, superior type of egoist that should be praised rather than blamed. The good man who seeks to gratify the rational or “most sovereign” part of his soul by doing virtuous and noble actions, thereby wishing what is truly good for himself, is for Aristotle an egoist or lover of self in the truest sense (1168b24-30). In his search for nobility and personal glory, he does good deeds for his friends, even unto death, as nobility requires having friends to sacrifice for (1169a17-22, 25-27). Such a noble human being, by loving himself and looking to his own good most of all, benefits his fellow human beings and the political communities in which they live (Mara, 1998: 317; Stern-Gillet, 1995: 104, 110, 112-113, 115-118).

Conclusion: Mothering and the Sacrifice of Self

Aristotle’s analysis of perfect friendship seems to suggest that it exists between good men who seek out friends like themselves for whom to sacrifice, thus gratifying their more fundamental love of self through noble actions that earn them personal fame.

Such an understanding of friendship excludes women and denies any truly altruistic motivations. I would like to conclude, however, by briefly exploring Aristotle's reflections on the mother-child relationship as it impacts his understanding of friendship.

As noted previously, in Book Eight mother-love was suppressed in the politicized understanding of the family, only coming into view when the focus shifted to the family from within conceived as a web of natural relationships. Moreover, Aristotle pointed out that a mother's affection for her child was greater than that felt by fathers. Aristotle reminds us of this at the end of chapter seven in Book Nine, when he says "mothers love their children more (than fathers do): birth involves a greater effort on the mother's part, and she knows more clearly that the child is hers" (1168a25-28). The intensity of a mother's love for her child, it seems, is what causes Aristotle in chapter four of Book Nine to use motherhood as the model of what it means to be a friend. At the beginning of chapter four Aristotle says a friend is a person who:

1)... wishes for and does what is good or what appears to him to be good for his friend's sake; or 2) a person who wishes for the existence and life of his friend for the friend's sake. This is also the feeling which mothers have for their children and which friends who have had a quarrel (but are still friends, have for one another)... a friend also (is) 3) a person who spends his time in our company and 4) whose desires are the same as ours, or 5) a person who shares sorrow and joy with his friend. This quality, too, is most frequently found in mothers. By one or another of these sentiments people also define friendship. A good man has all these feelings in relation to himself (1166a3-10).

The conclusion to the above passage suggests that for Aristotle, the way in which a good man loves and treats himself is analogous to the way in which a mother loves and treats her child. Moreover, as a model of friendship, the mother wishes for her child's life for her child's sake, loving her child even if the child quarrels with her or treats her badly, and, wanting the same thing for her child as the child wants for itself—the good—she shares in her child's sorrows and joys. The affection that mothers feel toward their children for their children's sake puts them in the category of the benefactor that Aristotle discusses in chapter seven of Book Nine. A benefactor, according to Aristotle, does good deeds and shows affection for the recipient without expecting or usually receiving anything in return. Aristotle proceeds to give three analogues of the relationship between benefactor and recipient: that between a craftsman and his product, a poet and his poem, and a mother and her child (1167b32-1168a5, 25-28). What unites the three examples is that the love the craftsman, poet and mother feels is for that which they have brought into being.

Given that the last example of the benefactor is the only one that treats of a relation between human beings, couldn't we say that the affection and care a mother

shows for her child is an illustration of a truly altruistic or selfless form of friendship? Aristotle appears to suggest otherwise. He explains the apparently selfless motive of the benefactor by reference to the fact that existence for all human beings is something desirable, but that “we exist in activity... by living and acting, and in (their) activity the maker is, in a sense, the work produced. (They) therefore love (their) work, because (they) love existence” (1168a5-8). Aristotle thus indicates that in our activity of making things, as craftsmen make products and poets make poems, and in doing for others, as mothers do for their children, we make ourselves. We create our own identity in the work that we do and the projects we take on, which are a reflection of ourselves and make us who we are. However, the greatest work or project, thereby producing the greatest personal development and satisfaction for the maker, would appear to be making another human being who they are (Schollmeier, 1994: 63, 69). The latter, it seems, could apply especially to the task of mothering (but see Dobbs, 1996: 76).

It would appear that for Aristotle, even the friendship a mother has for her child is, like the friendship between good men, self-seeking at root. Yet, if we return to Aristotle’s first reference to the mother-child relationship, perhaps we can conclude that Aristotle gives us glimmer of higher possibilities. As mentioned previously, in Book Eight, Aristotle argues that friendship consists more in giving rather than receiving affection. This, for Aristotle, is illustrated by the fact that “mothers enjoy giving affection” (1159a27). Again, a mother’s affection for her child is presented as the model or paradigm of friendship. That mothering, like friendship, is defined more by giving rather than receiving affection, becomes manifest, according to Aristotle, when “(s)ome mothers give their children away to be brought up by others, and though they know them and feel affection for them they do not seek to receive affection in return, if they cannot have it both ways. It seems to be sufficient for them to see their children prosper and to feel affection for them, even if the children do not render their mother her due, because they do not know her” (1159a27-32). If, as Aristotle maintains, parents love their offspring as another self, a mother who gives up her child to others whom she thinks can give them a better upbringing, sacrifices a part of herself for the good of her child in its condition as other. Such sacrifice of self, however, does not make the mother who she is by allowing her to make another human being, as is the case with other benefactors. Although she gives birth to her child, not she, but others, raise the child. Nor does her sacrifice of self earn her personal glory, as it does for the good man who engages in noble self-sacrifice for friends and political community. According to Aristotle, a mother will make this sacrifice even if it remains completely invisible, as her child may never know her. It would seem, therefore, that a mother who gives up her child to others so that the child can have a better life, makes a true sacrifice of self for the love of another without any expectation of self-fulfillment in return. In this sense she is like the woman in Socrates’ just city articulated in Plato’s *Republic* who turns her offspring over to communal rearers for the happiness of the child and the greater good of the city (460b8-d5).^{*} Perhaps for Aristotle this is the one example of unconditional love in human life.

I would argue that Aristotle’s example of the self-sacrifice of mothering causes a truly selfless form of feminine friendship to come into view. It suggests that Aristotle

^{*} Plato. *Republic*. C.D.C. Reeve, trans. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2004.

believes it is possible for human beings, or within their nature, to act out of love for another that transcends the love of self. Moreover, it seems that for Aristotle the uniqueness of mother-love shows that women are capable of an altruistic form of friendship—transcending the self in awareness of a good beyond the self—and thus that they are capable of participating in a form of friendship that equals or is even truer than the friendship between good men.

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