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Human Dependency as Luck: some insights on human relationships

APPC Conference Paper

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Within the Virtue Ethics, and more broadly *eudaimonist* tradition in ethics, there is an overwhelming sense that human relationships play a central part in human flourishing. The most common sense in which this view is attested is through some kind of argument about the importance of friendship in the moral life of the individual. However, this strikes me as interesting, because, unlike many other elements of 'the good life' on the many *eudaimonist* lists, friendship is – at least, I will argue – something over which people always have limited control. It is uncontroversial (I hope) to say that the good life is dependent on other people – even if that dependency is limited to childhood – however, although we eventually learn to feed ourselves, teach ourselves and think for ourselves, we can never befriend ourselves. Friendship, or morally significant human relationships in any sense, seems to be set apart for this reason. In this paper I will suggest that one way of understanding that 'setting apart' is as a unique type of luck. And, rather than using the term undefinedly (as Bernard Williams advocated doing), I will use it in a sense relevant to a discussion on flourishing: as 'the substitution of a person's agency with external forces that can either contribute to or detract from human flourishing'. And, although this discussion holds relevance to any number of human relationships, I will focus on friendship here, because of both the wealth of literature available, and because it tends to be the human relationship that most scholars agree is a constituent of human flourishing.

Although Aristotle exposes three different kinds of friendship in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, here I will focus on his 'highest form of friendship'; "the friendship of men who are good, and alike in excellence […] these wish well alike to each other qua good",[1] because, as Bennet Helm notes, "most

[1] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics,* 8.3.1156b8-10

contemporary accounts, by focusing their attention on the non-deficient forms of friendship, ignore pleasure and utility friendships."[2] A friendship of the highest kind, Aristotle argues, "is complete both in respect of duration and in all other respects, and in it each gets from each in all respects the same as, or something like what, he gives; which is what ought to happen between friends."[3]

The first thing that is important to note about Aristotle's view of friendship is that it places a high importance on individuality. "There is a shift [in Aristotle] from the familiar 'loving someone for his sake' to a newly inflected 'loving someone for *his* sake', that is for the sake of the person who he is".[4] Friendship then, in this sense, is not a relationship had with others on account of their humanity, as might be the case in a Kantian 'Kingdom of Ends'. Rather, it is a relationship that is based in the individuality (personality) of the participants. Roger Scruton echoes this view in discussion of sexual attraction, saying "[s]exual desire is determinate: there is a particular person that you want. People are not interchangeable as objects of desire […] each desire is specific to its object, since it is a desire for that person *as* the individual that he is, and not as an instance of a general kind."[5]

There are two important implications of friendship being a love of the individual for a broader inquiry into luck. First, if friendship rests on some individual characteristics, and not on some characteristics that all humans hold in common,[6] then it is plausible to think of a situation in which an individual is surrounded by others who, for whatever reason, are utterly inconceivable as friends. (If we take Aristotle's condition of perfect friendship, goodness, we can plausibly think of an environment in which an individual is surrounded by vicious people, and thus effectively cut off from friendship). Second, in the event that an individual was to form a 'true' friendship (Aristotle calls it "perfect friendship"[7]) with another individual, and then lose that friendship (due to death,

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[2] Bennet Helm, 'Friendship', *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy,* Accessed from: http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/friendship/ [12th January 2011]
[3] *NE,* 8.4.1156b33-35
[4] A.W. Price, *Love and Friendship in Plato and Aristotle*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1989, pp.104-5
[5] Roger Scruton, *Beauty*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2009, p.44
[6] Aristotle holds that it is virtue, which is common between good people that one loves in a 'true' friend. See: *NE,* 8.3.1156b7-8
[7] *NE,* 8.3.1156b7

misunderstanding or any number of other unpredictable contingencies), that friendship could *never* be replaced. Other friendships may be made, but none would be the same as that one that was lost; individuality renders friends vulnerable to irreplaceable loss, and as such, luck is a necessary aspect of friendship and, therefore, of the flourishing life.

Aristotle also argues that friendship is a relational good. Having suggested earlier that friendship involves both loving and being loved,[8] he asks what is involved in both these things, and whether one is more primary to friendship than the other. By examining a mother's devotion to her child, Aristotle concludes that friendship is primarily concerned with loving, rather than being loved.

> In being loved […] people delight for its own sake; whence it would seem to be better than being honoured, and friendship [is] to be desirable in itself. But it seems to lie in loving rather than in being loved, as is indicated by the delight mothers take in loving; for some mothers hand over their children to be brought up, and so long as they know their fate they love them and do not seek to be loved in return […] but seem to be satisfied if they see them prospering.[9]

Aristotle's example is not perfect, given that the mother in question (who is not the recipient of any love), is not actually participating in friendship with the child.[10] However, if we look more closely at the example, Aristotle's point becomes clear. The mother, by loving her child, is performing some activity that is worthwhile in itself (loving), whilst the child – the recipient of love – receives no benefit from it due to ignorance. Therefore "friendship depends more on loving, and it is those who love their friends that are praised [therefore] loving seems to be the characteristic excellence of friends".[11] Aristotle here identifies one virtue of friendship: *love*. The friend, if she is to flourish as a friend, must have a character that is shaped by her regular loving activity toward particular individuals.

Aristotle argues that friendship is a genuine concern for the good of another because of who that person is qua individual. Furthermore, the practice of virtue in friendship lies in the giving of

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[8] *NE,* 8.2
[9] *NE*, 8.8.1159a25-30
[10] Although it may be said that she is friendly *toward* the child. The difference will become clear at the end of this Section.
[11] *NE*, 8.8.1159a32-34 (brackets added)

love, not in receiving it. However, as was said in discussing Aristotle's example of the mother above, simply loving someone and wishing her good is not sufficient to call her a friend (if it were, many prosecutable stalkers would have a claim to be the friend of their victims!). What is also required is that love be reciprocated by the individual who is the object of love. This Aristotle acknowledges, saying "of the love of lifeless objects we do not use the word 'friendship'; for it is not mutual love".[12] Obviously, we cannot be friends with inanimate objects, but the argument extends to humans as well. "[T]o a friend we say we ought to wish what is good for his sake. But to those who thus wish good we ascribe only goodwill, if the wish is not reciprocated; goodwill when it *is* reciprocal being friendship."[13] To make a claim to friendship, not only must an individual act lovingly toward another person, but she must have that love reciprocated by that other person; "they must be mutually recognised as bearing goodwill and wishing well to each other".[14]

Similarities can be drawn between Aristotle's account of friendship, and the popular contemporary account presented by Elizabeth Telfer in her article 'Friendship'.[15] Telfer's arguments will not only help to illuminate the relevance of Aristotle's account of friendship to modern thinking, but also make helpful additions to some of his thoughts, and in so doing, allow for a more sophisticated understanding of friendship.

From Aristotle, I derived two key conditions of friendship: the importance of individuality, and that friendship involves elements in both the self and the other; it is a relational good that only exists in reciprocity. Telfer argues for two necessary conditions of friendship: shared activity and what she calls "the passions of friendship".[16] Both these concepts touch on elements of Aristotle's conditions above, and the two accounts together form a sophisticated account of friendship. Shared activity, for Telfer, includes three different things: "reciprocal services, mutual contact and joint

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[12] *NE,* 8.2.1155b28-29
[13] *NE,* 8.2.1155b33-34
[14] *NE,* 8.2.1156b4-5
[15] Elizabeth Telfer, 'Friendship' in Michael Pakaluk (ed.), *Other Selves: Philosophers on Friendship*, Hackett Company Publishing Inc, Indiana, 1991
[16] *Ibid.,* p.251

pursuits".[17] It should not be difficult to see the connection here with the reciprocity condition that I derived from Aristotle. Telfer begins her article by examining why the relationship of a man who assists his elderly neighbour by fetching groceries and shovelling snow with that elderly neighbour should not be considered friendship. She accepts that "[i]t might be suggested that what is missing [...] is a lack of reciprocity"[18] However, it is not *only* reciprocity that is important here: "the old lady and the neighbour do not become friends simply because in return for his fetching and shovelling she knits him socks."[19] What is important, Telfer notes, is not just that the activity is reciprocal, but also that it is shared, "those activities the main point of which is that they involve contact with the friend".[20]

However, the "shared activity" condition is, for Telfer, insufficient to determine friendship. Rather, Telfer suggests that a particular psychological state is required for friendship to exist; which she describes as the "passions of friendship".[21] Telfer's understanding of these passions will be important in developing on Aristotle's notion of "perfect friendship", mentioned earlier.

On the need for certain passions, Telfer observes an example

> Consider, for example, the situation where two neighbours, each living along, perform services for each other, go to the pictures together, and drop in on each other to chat in the evenings. Would we be able to say that the pair were friends, simply on the strength of this situation? I think it is clear that we would not, on the ground that friendship depends, not only on the performance of certain *actions*, but on their being performed for certain specific *reasons*.

This observation is not for nothing; it is relatively easy to see how any number of consequentialist approaches to friendship would see the 'shared activity' condition as sufficient for friendship. And although there isn't time here to debate the merit of such a view, it is worth observing - as Telfer notes - that such a view flies in the face of ordinary thinking about friendship.

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[17] *Ibid.*
[18] *Ibid.,* p.250
[19] *Ibid.*
[20] *Ibid.,* p.250-1. In fact, Telfer lists three key conditions of shared activity: reciprocal services, mutual contact and joint pursuits.
[21] *Ibid.,* p.251

What does Telfer consider the passions of friendship to be? It begins, she argues, with affection; "friends must have affection for, or be fond of, each other".[22] Telfer is specific in her definition of affection as "a desire for another's welfare and happiness *as a particular individual*".[23] The importance of individuality (which is a cornerstone of Aristotle's theory) means that Telfer's account of affection should be "distinguished both from sense of duty and from benevolence",[24] because it isn't indiscriminate; some people enjoy favouritism in the eyes of the agent, and are subject to her affection, whilst others are not.

However, looking more closely at Telfer's understanding of affection shows some points at which she and Aristotle disagree. Although Aristotle believes that it is the virtue in a person that makes her a worthy candidate for friendship, and that in loving someone as an individual, one loves her for the virtue one sees in her, Telfer sees the criterion for love much more broadly.

> [Affection] does not seem to have any necessary connexion with the particular character of him [sic] for whom it is felt. If asked to explain why we are fond of someone, we *may* mention characteristics in him which stimulate affection, but if makes equally good sense to give an historical explanation – 'I've known him for a long time.' [...] Affection is in this sense *irrational*, and because of this may survive radical changes in the character of its object. Thus we often continue to be fond of someone when we no longer like or respect him, and such a situation is not considered in any way odd.[25]

The separation from Aristotle here is significant, not only because Telfer appears to have more sensibly explained the common experience of friendship – but also renders friendship even more indeterminate than it was for Aristotle; one cannot be sure even what the *nature* of one's friends might be – letalone the specific identity of any particular friend!

So, although there is an inherent open-endedness about who one's friends might be, and what characteristics each individual friend might possess, I will argue (along similar lines to Aristotle) that it is possible to identify certain characteristics that one's friends *must* possess. Even if it impossible to

[22] *Ibid.*
[23] *Ibid.*
[24] *Ibid.*
[25] *Ibid.,* p.252

guarantee that one's friends be virtuous, a friendship cannot exist without particular virtues. There are, I will argue, two virtues which, when present in two moral agents, complement each other in a way that forms a friendship. This complementarity, I will argue, results in people's friendship being reliant on luck; a specific type of luck, dependence luck.

We have already seen one virtue of friendship from our analysis of Aristotle: love. This virtue belongs to the 'friend-as-benefactor', the acting friend. In loving, a friend directs her affection toward another, desiring both what is good for the other, and also desiring the other herself (because she conceives the individual other *as* good). As I have said, Aristotle believes this to be the primary excellence of friendship.

What exactly is involved in 'loving'? What activities will develop this character trait?[26] Aristotle argues that virtuous behaviour requires the following: "in the first place he must have knowledge, secondly he must choose the acts, and choose them for their own sakes, and thirdly his action must proceed from a firm and unchangeable character."[27] These requirements, Anthony Price argues, mean that virtuous behaviour in friendship requires:

> [T]hat both should have achieved ethical maturity; each must ascribe an intrinsic value to the other's acting well; each must join in choosing the acts of the other; and each must know what the other is doing. The last two conditions require the friends to live together, that is to live a life in common (not particularly within four walls). If they lose all contact, then, despite any continuing personal debts, the success of one can impinge upon the *eudaimonia* of the other no more than if the latter were dead, that is either not at all, or only marginally.[28]

The first two conditions Price outlines are fairly self-explanatory, if friendly activity is to be virtuous it obviously needs to be both rationally chosen (thus necessitating ethical maturity), and friendship with a particular individual must be desired for its own sake (thus fulfilling the 'individuality' criterion as well as acknowledging friendship as a basic good). It is the final two conditions – more specifically, their requirements – that are of interest here. Price argues that what is

[26] It is important to note that despite the grammatical form, the word 'loving' as used here is not itself an activity, it is a disposition of character. In this sense, love is a virtue in a similar sense to the approach taken by Christian ethical theories, embodied in the maxim "love one another as I have loved you."
[27] *NE,* 8.2.4.1105a31-1105b1
[28] Price, *op. cit.,* p.120

required is *communal activity*. Note that he does not outline any activity in particular, only that friends must "live a life in common", and make regular contact. To fully understand this thought, and the way in which activity can be loving (and thus, virtuous), it will be helpful to consider an argument from moral theologian Germain Grisez concerning what he calls "reflexive goods".

Substantive goods (such as life, knowledge, play and aesthetic experience) are instantiated even before they are consciously recognised as intelligible reasons for action. Reflexive goods differ from substantive ones because their instantiation "include[s] the choices by which one acts for them."[29] Instantiating the reflexive goods requires that the moral agent make a *choice* (to be a friend, to make decisions true to ones beliefs, and so on), and without such a choice, the good will not be instantiated.

Grisez argues that there is an intricate relationship between the substantive and reflexive goods that will make Price's argument on friendship all the more pertinent. "[T]he reflexive purposes are related to the substantive […] in the sense that the latter must serve as vehicles for the former."[30] It is through activities that instantiate substantive goods, Grisez argues, that we participate in reflexive ones. "It is impossible to act simply to achieve a reflexive purpose – and no more. Inevitably it is necessary to include some substantive purpose in one's action in order to give content to the activity by which one seeks to realise the reflexive purpose."[31] We cannot simply act 'for friendship', without any accompanying activity, and any activity that is done 'for friendship' will also entail some substantive good (conversation obtains knowledge, dining instantiates health, and so on). In this argument, Grisez appears to agree with Price, Aristotle and Telfer that friendship requires some contact or shared activity.

> Consider friendship. Presumably one seeks to realise friendship by being friendly. But a friendly act must have some substance to it. If a young man and a young woman go on a date together (a friendly act), the

[29] Grisez, Boyle & Finnis, 'Practical Principles, Moral Truth & Ultimate Ends', p.107
[30] Germain Grisez & Russel Shaw, *Beyond the New Morality,* University of Notre Dame Press, London, 1980, p.73
[31] *Ibid.*

> date has got to involve some sort of specific activity: taking a walk in the park (play), going to a concert or a movie (aesthetic experience), talking (speculative knowledge […]), or whatever.[32]

However, when these activities are 'friendly', they are not pursued for their own sake. They are recognised as intelligibly good and valuable, but when they are participated in 'lovingly' (i.e. with a friend), the activity becomes of secondary importance to the company. The activities Grisez outlined above are all instantiations of substantive goods but the purpose of the participants is, primarily, friendship. However, the activities in which friends participate lovingly are not irrelevant to friendship; the shared experience of substantive goods reflects the love with which the shared activity is initiated: the flourishing of the other. Two friends who share a meal and conversation together lovingly will not do so only because each independently believes that health and knowledge are good for them individually. Loving activity will also be conducted because the friend is desired for her own sake, because the good of that friend is desired, and, importantly, the activity is seen as being 'for the good' of the other.

Loving could fairly be called the active, outgoing virtue that allows an individual to 'make' friends with someone. However, there is another virtue, one that might be described as a passive, receptive virtue that is also necessary for friendship: *openness*. This virtue is one that allows a moral agent to be receptive to the love of another, that a person be disposed to receiving love, and thus to 'being' a friend in the objective sense. Being a 'friendly' person means being prepared to receive the love of another and open to reciprocating it. Without this receptiveness, the loving activity of one individual can be rendered impotent through a lack of reciprocity.

This type of 'impotent love' is what Aristotle calls "goodwill", and receiving goodwill without reciprocating it is akin to "being honoured", whilst reciprocal goodwill is called friendship.[33] "[T]o those who thus wish good we ascribe only goodwill, if the wish is not reciprocated; goodwill

[32] *Ibid.,* pp.76-77
[33] *NE*, 8.2.1155b32-34 & 8.8.1159a15-16

when it *is* reciprocal being friendship."[34] Once again, the importance of reciprocity in friendship needs to be highlighted, for it is only this reciprocity that separates friendship from some kind of worship.

As a virtue, openness would entail more than just a desire to 'have' friends or a desire to be popular. (A desire which has become increasingly common with the emergence of social network sites such as MySpace and Facebook, where a person's 'friends' are counted and displayed publicly, and used as a source of social esteem.) Rather, the person who is truly open would recognise friendship as a basic good and as intrinsically valuable. She would, as a lover of the good, always be ready to receive the love of another, knowing that, were she able to reciprocate it, she would be able to participate in a relationship of utmost value. Openness, as a virtue is a disposition of receptivity to love because one recognises that (i) friendship is a basic good, and (ii) unless one is both loved and loves, one will never participate in friendship.

So far in this paper I have been floating the idea that friendship (and other relational goods) are subject to a unique type of luck: dependence luck. Now, with an understanding of friendship and the virtues associated with it, it is possible to demonstrate exactly why this is the case. This section will have two parts: first it will explain why luck is a necessary aspect of relational goods, and second, it will show how this type of luck is an entirely new kind of luck, and not one discussed in the usual taxonomies throughout the literature on luck.

As I have shown, an integral aspect of friendship is reciprocity, a friendship does not occur without mutuality of feeling and activity. This reciprocity is reflected in the virtues of friendship, where love and openness work together in two different moral agents to form the relational good called friendship. Furthermore, friendship is a requirement of the flourishing human being. In this sense humans *need* friendship in order to live an excellent life. Without friendship, a person will not find complete happiness.

[34] *NE,* 8.2.1155b32-33

However, only one of the two aspects of friendship is under the agent's control. A person can either love, or be open to love (or both), but the practice of these two virtues alone is not sufficient for her to participate in friendship, she requires some other person to possess the corresponding virtues, and then choose to share those virtues with her through activity. She can pour love out to another, admire her character and desire only good for her, but unless her love is accepted through openness and reciprocated through love, she will not have a friendship.

It could be suggested that these virtues will always be reciprocated because each person shares the same need for friendship; dependency. The argument would be as follows: given that each person needs friendship for her flourishing, every person will be actively seeking friends. In this environment, simple opportunism will mean that friendships will inevitably form, as each person acts to fulfil her own flourishing. However, this view of friendship is mistaken on a number of levels. First, people do not form friendships purely out of desire for their own flourishing,[35] but out of a real love for the other as an individual. Love is directed toward a particular individual and one desires her good *because of who she is as an individual*. Friendship, therefore, cannot be opportunistic; only certain individuals will be compatible with our personality, and therefore appear as intelligible objects of love.[36]

The argument also ignores a simple reality: there are a vast number of people in the world. Each of these people are candidates for friendship (although some may not have a compatible personality). This means that the prospective friend may need and love people *who do not need and love her in return*. If she loves someone whose need for friendship is already filled (and therefore doesn't share her need for friendship), there is every chance her love will not be reciprocated. If her love is directed to someone who is not open (virtuously) to friendship, she may never develop a friendship.

[35] Although such self-interest is a factor, see: Finnis, *Natural Law & Natural Rights*, p.143
[36] On what grounds people make such a judgement is not, I believe, the subject of philosophy, but a branch of social psychology.

Alternatively, she may be open to receiving the love of another person, and yet find her personality is incompatible with any of the other people she meets, thus meaning that no person can love her in a way that can allow for the development of friendship. It should be clear how individuality and reciprocity are factors which mean that the resolution of dependency is subject to luck.

The definition of luck provided at the beginning of this paper was 'the substitution of a person's agency with external forces that can either contribute to or detract from human flourishing'. The external force that is present here is the presence of virtues of friendship and a compatible personality in people whom we meet throughout our lives. These factors can make impotent the actions of an agent by rendering openness and love ineffective in achieving friendship. And, insofar as friendship is necessary for flourishing, these contingencies have a clear influence (for better or worse) on flourishing.

It is clear that luck plays a role in friendship, however, it is not yet clear that it is an entirely different type of luck from the usual four, as first advocated by Thomas Nagel in the paper 'Moral Luck'. Nagel suggested that the broad concept 'luck' could be divided into four categories.

> There are roughly four ways in which the natural objects of moral assessment are disturbingly subject to luck. One is the phenomenon of constitutive luck – the kind of person you are, where this is not just a question of what you deliberately do, but of your inclinations, capacities and temperament. Another category is luck in one's circumstances – the kind of problems and situations one faces. The other two have to do with the causes and effects of action: luck in how one is determined by antecedent circumstances, and luck in the way one's actions and projects turn out.[37]

Obviously, there are elements of these types of luck involved in friendship: given personality has an important role, constitutive luck will have some significance here; circumstantial luck will govern which people we meet (and therefore which are potential friends); and various causal factors may help or hinder the quest for friends (if the first contact I have with a person is when she tells me she's run over my puppy, I will have less chance of being friends with her than if she has just saved my

[37] Thomas Nagel, 'Moral Luck' in Statman (ed.), *Moral Luck*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 1993, p.60

grandmother from a burning building). However, none of these types of luck go to the heart of the dependency I have outlined above.

The fact that distinguishes dependence luck from the four types of luck above is that *dependence luck is not causal*. Whilst the above four types of luck show how various psychological and physical causalities can determine (to some extent) our ability to live a flourishing life, dependence luck is based in the reflexive nature of friendship (and other relational goods). Friendship requires a free choice on the part of two agents who enter into a mutually loving and open relationship where each desires the good of the other for the other's own sake. However, neither person can create a friendship individually, both rely on the reciprocity of the other; a reciprocity that is determined by a free choice – that is, by factors outside of causal determination. Because it arises because of the free choice of other agents, this type of luck is also particular to relational goods – specifically, those goods for which love and openness are virtues – which can, for this reason, be called 'dependent goods'.

Luck is intrinsic to the very nature of friendship, and this fact distinguishes it from all the other types. Dependence luck is a *fact* of friendship; it is inherent to the concept. Although one may conceive of a world in which constitutive and circumstantial luck's power may be diminished (through human ingenuity, be it technological, philosophical, pedagogical, or some other field), as long as human nature remains as it is, and friendship remains a basic good, dependence luck will be influential in human flourishing. Because *dependence luck is a necessary condition of the good life*, it should be separated from other types of luck.

By way of ending, it's worthwhile to consider how awareness of dependence luck might make any difference to the actual practice of befriending, or assist in the development of those virtues I have discussed. The simple answer is, I'm not entirely sure, but I have some suspicions. Firstly, there is a clue in what I said about openness – that it is, amongst other things, an awareness of friendship as good – here (if I'm right), some level of consciousness about the meta-ethics of friendship is actually

part of the virtue itself. If this is the case, it's possible that awareness of dependence luck might play a similar function; whereby meta-ethical awareness of dependence luck and the limits of one's own volition encourage the ongoing practice of virtue in an agent. It's also likely that an experience of dependence luck, and reflection upon that experience, is an effective way of bringing such meta-ethical awareness about, and the nature of the beast is such that an experience of dependence luck, for better or worse, is inevitable.