



## The Aristotelian Virtue of Friendship

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# **The Aristotelian Virtue of Friendship**

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Friendship is an important everyday topic, suggesting that common wisdom could easily manage it. Unfortunately, Western common-sense views portray friendship as an emotionally intimate, affinity- and choice-based personal relationship that has been made a largely subjective concept (e.g., perceptions of intimacy and satisfaction) that is managed through interactional processes (Fowers, 2026). This is a very time- and culturally-bound interpretation because many understandings of friendship exist within and across scholarly disciplines, cultures, and times (Caine, 2009; Hruschka, 2010; Konstan, 1997). These varying interpretations of friendship differ from the Western, psychologized view in virtually every respect (including involuntary, public, non-intimate, and outcome-based processes).

To complicate matters, human friendship has clear evolutionary roots and psychological elements, even though purely evolutionary or psychological accounts have been inadequate, partly because they are under-theorized (Fowers, in press, 2026). Therefore, friendship theory is important, and Aristotle's (1999) theory is, surprisingly, one of the few well-articulated views of this common, but vital relationship.

### **An Aristotelian Framework for Friendship**

Aristotle's theory of friendship provides a helpful framework for conceptualizing this relationship. In this section, I will emphasize two points. The first emphasis is on Aristotle's provision of key theoretical resources and on some updates of his views deriving from contemporary theory and research and contemporary theoretical advances. The first thing to notice is that Aristotle's view of friendship is much more capacious and inclusive than contemporary accounts. Although he incorporates affinity and choice-based relationships, he also includes romantic pair bonds, close family relationships, and even personally important

business or political relationships in his concept of friendship. Aristotle referred to this breadth with the Greek term *philia*, which is usually, but somewhat inaccurately, translated as friendship.

The first thing to notice about Aristotle's (1999) account of friendship is the ineluctable morality of friendship for him. This is likely why he emphasized it so much (20% of the *NE*, his primary ethics text) and other moral theorists have generally neglected it. He rightly saw friendship as indispensable for living well, as psychological science has amply demonstrated (Fowers, 2026). A good life is the point of ethics for Aristotle, whereas many contemporary moral theories depend on right action for the definition of morality. This emphasis on right action is reinforced by including imperatives or rules that the theory indicates are necessary for morality. Aristotle did not promote such imperatives, focusing instead on the person's agency in deciding how to live.

Within the broader framework of friendship, Aristotle (1999) identifies three types, the familiar triad of pleasure, utility, and character friendships. The key feature that identifies the first two, in addition to their primary focus on pleasure or utility, is that they are outcome-focused relationships, and the friend is simply a means for obtaining the desired outcome. Therefore, these relationships are more transient and shallower than character friendships.

This division of friendship types follows one of the major themes of the *NE*, the distinction between instrumental and constitutive activities. Briefly, instrumental activities are characterized by a means-end focus, in which the end or outcome is valued and the means is secondary and discardable. In constitutive activities, the means is not discardable because it is inherently tied to the outcome. For example, spending time with a friend is both a means to obtain friendship and a constituent of friendship. One cannot have a strong (or character) friendship without spending significant amounts of time together, but spending time together

does not automatically result in a strong friendship. The time spent together must be mutually desired and engaged in for the sake of the friendship. The generic aims of character friendships fall into three categories: the welfare of the friend, the quality and longevity of the relationship, and constitutive goals that friends seek together (e.g., artistic, scholarly, or educational).

Another, less widely noticed, but very useful distinction Aristotle (1999) makes in the NE is between individual and shared activities. Individual activities are those that an individual could, in principle, act alone to achieve, such as obtaining a college degree, a job, or saving for retirement. A shared activity is one that can only be pursued and obtained with others, such as friendship, justice, or democracy. Of course, one can aspire to be a good friend, a just person, or a good citizen, but these goals include and are constituted by relationships. Without the ongoing engagement of others, these activities cannot continue or bear fruit. A third category of activities include those that could be pursued independently, but one chooses to pursue them with someone else, such as saving for retirement. I have termed these joint activities (Fowers, 2005).

In this presentation, a neo-Aristotelian viewpoint has primacy, in that Aristotle (1999) has the first word on most topics, but not the last word. For example, Aristotle anticipated much contemporary research in psychology and evolution that establishes a central truth about humans: people only live well if they are loved by others and can love them in a good way. He said, “To flourish, a person needs morally good friends” (Aristotle, 1999, 1170b 19). He further specifies that humans flourish only when we have *morally good* friends. Because he saw the good life as a moral life, he reasoned that humans live much better when we participate with our close friends in the best sorts of activities and when close friends bring out the best in one another.

## **Psychological Research on Friendship**

Close friendship quality is a strong predictor of happiness or subjective well-being from children to retirees (Demir & Özdemir, 2010; Goswami, 2012; Holder & Coleman, 2009; Pinquart & Sörensen, 2000; Raboteg-Saric & Sakic, 2013; Wrzus et al., 2012) in the West. Unsurprisingly, this has been amply confirmed by contemporary social science (Demir, 2015; Holt-Lunstad, 2018; Li & Kanazawa, 2016; Lima et al., 2017; Xie et al., 2018). The converse (i.e., that loneliness and isolation are mortality and quality of life risks) has also been established by contemporary social scientists (Böger & Hushold, 2018; Cacioppo & Patrick, 2008; Martina et al., 2018). These results consistently suggest that close friendships and identifiable characteristics of these friendships contribute positively to the quality and length of an individual's life. The extensive methods array available in psychological and other disciplines provides many opportunities to empirically study friendship in depth, offering many possibilities that were simply not available to Aristotle.

It is important to say that friendship has been seen as significant both in psychological and evolutionary research. Let me say a few words about each. I carefully reviewed the psychological research on friendship (103 studies; Fowers, 2026). The first two findings give one pause, in that there is great empirical interest in friendship in psychology, with the term cited as a subject term 11,905 times. Yet this literature is almost completely empirical, with virtually no theory, making a very fragmented literature, with no consensus on what friendship is or on what constitutes friendship quality.

This literature has been characterized by a strong emphasis on emotional ties and face-to-face interactions (Demir et al., 2013; Fowers, 2026; Hrushka & Silk, 2017). Nevertheless, this research has been highly subjectified, and friendship is generally seen as personal, and private.

Among the positive correlates of friendship quality are communication (Fehr & Harasymchuk, 2017; Sias, 2020), self-disclosure (Morry, 2005; Venetis et al., 2018), social support (Fisher et al., 2020; Page-Gould et al., 2008; Xie et al., 2018; Zhou et al., 2016), empathy (Mattingly et al., 2011), and self-perceived relationship competence (Persisch et al., 2020). Another feature of this literature is that mediators and moderators of friendship quality are typically positive relationship processes (e.g., communication, closeness, empathy, or trust).

While conducting this review, the Communication-Satisfaction Model (CSM) of close relationships emerged (Fowers, 2025, in press). The seven features of Western friendships that stand out in this model are that friendships tend to be voluntarily chosen, private, affinity-based, peer relationships whose value is subjectively evaluated by the friends, are enriched by good communication (self-disclosure and mutual affirmation) and are valuable because they provide benefits (both tangible and psychological) to individuals. Although the CSM is largely implicit for both scholars and lay people, Westerners tend to take these features for granted. They are like “water to us fishes” (Tiberius, 2013, p. 29).

Despite the impressive breadth and sophistication of psychological research on close friendships, there are two limitations. First, most psychological scientists tend to unreflectively adopt the common-sense modern Western depiction of friendship in their theory and measurement (the CSM). If I am right, it would be no surprise that many self-report studies would produce positive correlations between intimacy, support and individual satisfaction with the relationship, and between close friendship satisfaction and overall well-being (e.g., Demir & Özdemir, 2010; Goswami, 2012; Wrzus et al., 2012). Research participants who are culturally steeped in the idea that communication and intimacy should produce relationship satisfaction

would readily return responses that tell investigators exactly that because that is how they have learned to understand close friendships.

Second, psychological scientists have focused primarily on how relationship quantity and quality are related to indicators of subjective well-being such as positive affect and satisfaction with life. Although these empirical relationships are worth knowing about, this view locates the value of relationships within the individual and seems to take individual benefit as the primary outcome metric (Fowers, 2010; Fowers et al., 2016). Obviously, friendships have benefits, but is it not just as plausible that benefits are secondary to the mutual care, giving, and commitment that comprise high-quality relationships? This simple question is important because *virtually all the science* assumes that benefit exchange is the point of relationships. This instrumental approach to friendship research not only limits what can be studied, it also deeply contradicts two of the most salient features of strong relationships: that individuals give to friends without seeking recompense and that individuals care as much about a friend's welfare as they do about their own.

Friendship research is not entirely individualistic and instrumentalistic. There are several researchers who focus on interpersonal giving without seeking reciprocation and on the inherent value of the the friend's welfare (Brewer, 2007; Canevello & Crocker, 2017; Crocker & Canevello, 2020; Clark & Aragón, 2013). Unfortunately, these researchers are somewhat marginalized and the CSM remains the most prominent approach even though it is largely implicit and its exchange and outcome foci do not fit real-world friendships (Fowers, in press, 2026).

## **The Evolution of Friendship**

Making a case that the capacity for and interest in friendship are elements of human nature (i.e., evolved characteristics of humans) requires many forms of evidence. A high standard of evidence is necessary to corroborate the kind of retrospective explanations of human evolution that can be easily crafted according to one's pet theory. Evidence for the evolution of specifically human forms of friendship must include all the following elements. One must argue that friendship is a solution to longstanding selection pressures, which means that the individuals capable of friendship were more likely to successfully reproduce, spreading friendship capacity through the population. Reproductive success is, of course, the linchpin of evolution. Therefore, friendship should be ubiquitous among humans. Additionally, the capacity for close relationships should develop automatically, without extensive and explicit training. There should be some continuity in close relationships with our nearest relatives (chimpanzees and bonobos), but also significant discontinuity, the latter meaning that human friendship is constituted by a set of features that are distinctive for our species. Finally, evidence that friendship is related to well-being would also support its status as a functional aspect of human nature. All this evidence is readily available (Fowers, in press).

Although the evolution of human friendships is well recognized, some aspects of these relationships present serious difficulties for evolutionary science as well. Whereas close relationships clearly contribute to reproductive success, there are also some important ways that close friendships appear to transcend reproductive fitness. For example, close friendships often persist after reproduction is no longer possible. Some relationships can be described as exchange oriented, with each party benefiting materially from the exchanges, but other relationships focus on mutual caring and giving in response to the friend's needs without any apparent benefit

accounting (e.g., Clark & Aragón, 2013). In fact, benefit accounting is actively discouraged in many cultures (Hruschka, 2010). The standard means- (friendship) end (reproductive success) formulation is basic to evolutionary theory. The evidence for distinct forms of benefit-oriented and inherently valuable friendships is part of why the neo-Aristotelian viewpoint is so compelling. Evolution has encouraged long-term, non-exchange relationships, even at the risk of exploitation. This threat is met by the capacity to identify true and false friends. Otherwise, close friendships could be extremely costly if benefits are not closely monitored.

In addition, close human friendships are often seen as irreplaceable. That irreplaceability means that the end of a close friendship is a serious loss. In addition, close friendship is valued, whether or not reproduction is at issue. For example, close relationships (capaciously conceived) often involve caring for severely impaired individuals (e.g., Alzheimer's caregiving or caring for a severely injured person). From a standard evolutionary perspective, it is difficult to explain why people would care for frail individuals who can do little or nothing in exchange (Lang & Fowers, 2019). These and other questions have made it difficult to understand the full range of friendship from an evolutionary perspective. Joan Silk (2003), an eminent evolutionary scientist, dubbed this the ongoing "puzzle of friendship" (p. 37), which no one has solved to date.

The attributes and expressions of close friendship just described are not OKa nearly as mysterious from a neo-Aristotelian viewpoint because the best type of friendship is constituted by non-instrumental activities, such as conversation, mutual caring, and play. We can follow evolutionary science in recognizing that strong, long-lasting friendships are characteristically human, but we must transcend the evolutionary paradigm by solving the puzzle of friendship through recognizing the evolution of relationships from instrumental activities into relationships

comprised by non-instrumental (i.e., inherently valuable) activities. Aristotle's relational ontology provides the conceptual resources for this resolution.

### **Additional Elements of Friendship**

In this short talk, I can only touch on psychological and evolutionary research on friendship, noting that this topic has large scholarly literatures associated with it. If I had more time, I could also talk about friendship in terms of attachment theory and social role theory, both of which are important to understand friendship well. Another juicy tidbit is that I have worked out a way to argue for the evolution of the constitutive form of friendship. Greater depth will have to await another time. If you can come to the University of San Francisco de Victoria in Madrid, January 12 and 13, I will address these topics. Otherwise, please read my forthcoming book on an integrative theory of friendship (Fowers, in press).

### **Character Education and Friendship**

The second emphasis today is on engaging with children and adolescents about friendship. Teaching the virtue of friendship has been a largely lost opportunity for character educators heretofore (at least in the U.S.), partly due to the psychologization of the topic. Therefore, the Aristotelian theory of friendship provides a powerful curriculum for educators. Friendship is central to children and adolescents and their friendship choices contribute mightily to their future lives. The importance of choosing the right friends and pursuing those friendships in the best ways cannot be overstated relative to the quality of children's future lives. Students desperately need guidance because friendship can be so fraught, especially with the ready availability of social media. We will hear from Julia Zorilla about the role of social media in contemporary friendships in a moment. The opportunity to connect with students on such an important and potentially life-altering virtue cannot be neglected.

There are several points that are useful for teaching the character strength of friendship. First it is worthwhile helping students understand the morality of friendship. That is, discuss the role of friendship in the best kind of life, and discuss how friendship is a natural human inclination, one that is a matter of nature fulfillment, not imperative. One can also teach about the three forms of friendship and the value of each one. It is helpful for youth to know about character friendship so that they can deal effectively with the overweening influence of individualism and instrumentalism in Western culture. The constitutive/instrumental distinction is generally overlooked, but it can be very useful for adolescents. This distinction makes it possible to have an in-depth discussion of what it means to love the good. In this case, this includes the value of character friendships, and the tendency to value the friend's welfare as much as one's own. This behavioral commitment to valuing the friend's well-being is what we mean by loving one's friend.

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