

Building from
happiness to
friendship



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In *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle examines happiness, which is the good towards which every human action is directed. Entangled in this pursuit is Aristotle's discussion of such ideas as virtue, magnanimity, justice and friendship, as well as the relationships between all of these. Before he can address these relationships, however, Aristotle must unpack each of the ideas so that they may exist outside mere relation to others. Having done this, he may then build upon each: from virtue, Aristotle builds to magnanimity; from magnanimity he builds to justice; and from justice he builds to friendship. I will thus take a similar approach in this essay, which aims to condense these relationships, and identify any themes that reoccur ~~and~~ particularly the theme of equality. When he has neared the end of his text, Aristotle also begins to discuss the political implications of his work, which originated in a pursuit of what was "the highest good." These implications thus serve as an important and clarifying application of Aristotle's ideas, and I will thus similarly conclude with analysis of these implications. But, as Aristotle does, I must begin with the elementary block which is all human's common pursuit, namely happiness. Aristotle, who is speaking to "competent students of what is right and just," or in other words those who "have received a proper upbringing in moral conduct," is therefore talking to a different audience that Plato does in *The Republic* (Ostwald, 7). He thus can jump right into his discussion of happiness, which he assimilates with people who "always or to the highest degree both do and contemplate what is in conformity with virtue" (25). Aristotle defines virtues then as a mean between excess and deficiency in each case, later stating that humans must apply their unique function of rationality and reason to settle upon this mean. Thus, for example, the mean between

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small-mindedness and vanity is magnanimity, or high-mindedness. Virtue, which is divided into intellectual and moral virtues, may then be realized by a virtuous man who acts consciously, chooses the specific manner in which he acts, and chooses this action for its own sake ~~to~~ making his action one that is “just and self-controlled” (39). Within his discussion of virtue, Aristotle identifies multiple means that exist between excesses. The chief virtue, however, and the one that essentially builds upon the other virtues discussed, is magnanimity, or high-mindedness. As does magnificence, magnanimity operates on a great, even grand scale: but whereas magnificence outshines meager generosity, magnanimity outshines small honors. Thus, it is then “in matters of honor and dishonor that a high-minded man has the right attitude,” in fact, “they regard themselves as worthy of honor above all else” (94). The magnanimous, however, deserves what is greatest because he is greatest, and “High-mindedness is thus the crown, as it were, of the virtues: it magnifies them and it cannot exist without them” (95). What is responsible for this position of magnanimity with respect to the other virtues is its relationship with nobility, which “is common to all the virtues” (90). As Aristotle writes, it is impossible to be truly high-minded “without goodness and nobility” (95). Thus nobility is what allows the magnanimous to embody all of the virtues, and build upon them. Building then upon his discussion of the virtues, and in particular “high-mindedness,” Aristotle moves on to justice. Like high-mindedness, justice is a virtue, and thus a mean between two extremes. As, Aristotle writes, the “‘just’ is what is lawful and fair, and the ‘unjust’ is what is unlawful and unfair,” and thus the just man takes not too much, nor too little of what is his share (112). In this sense, the just man is additionally

choiceworthy, as his actions prove to be virtuous. In fact, as Aristotle argues, “ justice is regarded as the highest of all virtues. and, as the proverb has it, ‘ In justice every virtue is summed up’” (114). At face value then, immediate connections can be drawn between high-mindedness ~~to~~ from which Aristotle built to justice ~~to~~ and justice, which both are umbrellas for the other virtues. This parallel does not last long, however, as Aristotle distinguishes justice as “ complete virtue,” “ because he who possesses it can make use of his virtue not only by himself, but also in his relations with his fellow men” (114). Thus, whereas high-mindedness enabled the individual to know what he deserved, justice allows the individual to know what others, including himself, deserve. Justice then takes the skill of the high-minded, and applies it on a community level with interpersonal relationships. Aristotle then offsets his characterization of complete justice with what he calls partial justice, a term which begins to consider issues of equality and fairness in what is “ just.” The topic of equality was first evoked, however, in his discussion of high-minded individuals, who were more fortunate than the small-minded and vain individuals. That is, “ Gifts of fortune, it is believed, also contribute to high-mindedness” since “ men of noble birth, of power, or of wealth are regarded as worthy of honor” (96). Aristotle thus considers this reality of inequality in what he terms “ merit,” as he begins his discussion of partial justice. Partial justice itself has two forms: one being “ what is just ~~to~~ in the distribution of honors,” among other things, and the other being what is just in “ a rectifying function,” and each takes an unique stance on equality and fairness (117). Aristotle first discusses distributive justice, which stems from a characterization of justice as both fair and equal. Here Aristotle’s argument follows the reality of high-mindedness, that not everyone possesses equal

merit, and thus in receiving what each deserves, the distribution of honor, material goods, and “ anything else that can be divided among those who have a share in the political system” should be done proportionally to their merit (117). Thus, as Aristotle writes, “ If the persons are not equal, their (just) shares will not be equal,” and “ consequently, the just is something proportionate” (118, 119). There is, nonetheless, equality in the sense that “ proportion is equality of ratios,” and thus the just in this sense dictates that equality be enforced only in ratios, the proportions of which are unequal (119). Justice by rectification, on the other hand applies a new sense of equality, seeking to maintain the status quo, or equilibrium, through the transactions that citizens make. Whereas the just in the distributive sense sought to distribute common funds according to “ geometric” proportions, as Aristotle terms it, the just in the rectifying sense seeks to perform transactions according to “ arithmetical” proportions. Here justice then takes the form of a sort of blind justice, “ it treats parties as equals and asks only whether one has done and the other has suffered wrong” (121). Such justice is eventually performed by a judge, who seeks to restore equilibrium by locating the median between gain and loss in the conflict ~~is~~ irrelevant of the merits of the parties involved. Aristotle closes his examination of justice by returning to its meaning in a broader sense, and particularly how it is found in political matters. As Aristotle writes, “ The just in political matters is found among men who share a common life in order that their association bring them self-sufficiency, and who are free and equal, either proportionally or arithmetically” (129). From here, Aristotle can then build to friendship, which will necessarily involve virtues such as high-mindedness, but again on a community level. As Aristotle argues, “ justice, alone of all the virtues is

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thought to be the good of another, because it is a relation to our fellow men in that it does what is of advantage to others” (114). In this sense, as justice built upon high-mindedness, so does friendship, which Aristotle argues is the mean between obsequiousness and flattery, built upon justice. Friendship nonetheless shares similarities with high-mindedness *as* the crown of the virtues *as* it exists in its best form as between similar, or like individuals. Thus, according to Aristotle, a high-minded man will “utterly despise honors conferred by ordinary people and on trivial grounds, for that is not what he deserves” (95). Similarly, friendships are not disposed towards like-unlike associations as they are likewise less rewarding in associations of unequals. Aristotle therefore declares that “The perfect form of friendship is that between good men who are alike in excellence and virtue” (219). Friendship then plays a significant role in the relationships of the community. This beneficial role is a result of the mutual care that friends provide one another where, as Aristotle writes, a friend “will put up with *and* likewise refuse to put up with *the* right things in the right manner” (103). Similarly, “friends help young men avoid error; to older people they give the care and help needed to supplement the failing powers of action which infirmity brings in its train; and to those in their prime they give the opportunity to perform noble actions” (215). Friends then essentially provide those who are not high-minded the guidance to choose the right actions and to live virtuously. Of course, such genuine friendships as are described above are most frequently between individuals of good virtue already, but considering friendship in terms of the capabilities of the high-minded shows the thread that connects virtue on an individual level with virtue that exists on the community level, or where justice and friendship are concerned. It is also

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helpful to think of friendship here as the accumulation of a second self, or soul. That is, since the soul is the origin of the contemplative life of reason and rationale, as well as the origin of choice making, a friend is the soul or the self's complement as it too serves these functions. Aristotle also discusses friendship in terms of equality. As Aristotle thus summarizes, "Friendship is equality and likeness, and especially the likeness of those who are similar in virtue" (230). But as equality took on varying meanings in justice, so does it in friendship where it can exist in a quantitative sense (rectifying) and a proportional sense (distributive). To illustrate this difference, Aristotle first discusses friendships among equals versus among unequals. After discussing equals, Aristotle concludes, "In sum, the friendships we have so far discussed are based on equality; both partners receive and wish the same thing from and for one another" (226). Shortly thereafter, Aristotle presents the other version of equality found in friendships between unequals. Here Aristotle concludes, "In all friendships which involve the superiority of one of the partners, the affection, too, must be proportionate: the better and more useful partner should receive more affection than he gives" (227). Thus, as in justice, equality in friendships can take the form of quantitative, as well as proportionate, exchange; however there is one final difference which Aristotle identifies. That is, in justice, proportionate equality outnumbers quantitative occurrences while in friendship the opposite is true. Friendship nonetheless takes an elevated position in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, which leads to several implications. Most significant of these, however, is the implication that Aristotle's emphasis on friendship constructs regarding justice and the role of lawmakers. That is, as he notes at the beginning of his discussion of <https://assignbuster.com/building-from-happiness-to-friendship/>

friendship in book eight, “ Friendship also seems to hold states together, and lawgivers apparently devote more attention to it than to justice” (215). Aristotle’s text thus contributes to this political trend which emphasizes friendship over justice, especially in his discussion of the three true forms of constitutions and their perversions. As Aristotle notes, there are three such governments: kingship, aristocracy, and timocracy, of which kingship is the best and timocracy the worst. Such uncorrupted forms of government then achieve their success largely due to the benefits of friendship which they enjoy in the form of increased justice (231). These governments are perverted, however, when their friendships are perverted, and, in the case of kingship for example, a king becomes a tyrant who “ looks out for his own advantage” instead of “ the advantage of his subjects” (233). Similar occurrences lead to the perversions of the two other constitutions since “ In the perverted constitutions, the role of friendship decreases to the same extent as the part played by the just” (236). Aristotle even argues that, in the presence of friendships, justice is no longer needed. To understand this argument, however, requires us to return to Aristotle’s initial and fundamental building blocks ~~the~~ the blocks from which he built to high-mindedness, then justice, and then friendship. In fact, portions of these initial blocks, which include the pursuit of the highest good, which is happiness, can still be noticed in the much larger structure which Aristotle has built by the end of his text. That is, what is common to all political communities is an initial pursuit of what is to their common advantage or good, and it is this initial and fundamental pursuit that is finally carried out in the friendships that are stimulated in governments.