Forty

IF FRIENDSHIP HURTS, AN EPICUREAN DESERTS: A REPLY TO ANDREW MITCHELL

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In "Friendship Amongst the Self-Sufficient: Epicurus," Andrew Mitchell explores the Epicurean view of the relationship between self-sufficiency and friendship by contrasting it with the views of Aristotle and the Stoics (2001). Epicurus, Aristotle, and the Stoics do indeed have interestingly different views on friendship that are well worth comparing. Yet Mitchell's characterization of Aristotelian friendship is misleading, his account of Stoic friendship is inaccurate, and his interpretation of Epicurean friendship is curiously imaginative but ultimately rather strange.

The Greek word Mitchell translates as "friendship" is *philia*. It is important to bear in mind that this term has considerably wider connotations than our word "friendship." Aristotle observes that nature implants *philia* in a parent for its offspring and in offspring for its parent, not only among human beings but also among birds and most animals (*NE* 8.1, 1155a17). Not only do members of the same family feel *philia* for each other, Aristotle claims, but all members of the human species can feel it for one another. Aristotle also observes that travelers in foreign countries can see how near and dear and "friendly" every person can be to another human being (*NE* 8.1, 1155a20–22).

Moreover, Aristotle distinguishes three different kinds of *philia* corresponding to the three different objects worthy of affection: the good, the pleasant, and the useful. If the motive bringing two people together is usefulness, then the partners do not feel affection for one another in themselves, but only for the sake of the advantage accruing to each from the other (*NE* 8.3, 1156a10–13). Young people tend to be guided by emotion, Aristotle explains, so their *philia* is based on pleasure. Once there is no longer pleasure from the partnership, it dissolves. The perfect form of *philia* is based on virtue, so it is only possible between good persons who are alike in excellence. Mitchell focuses only on this type of Aristotelian "friendship." Yet some confusion afflicts his account. The individual who lives a life of scientific and philosophical study (*theoria*) in his pursuit of speculative wisdom (*sophia*) is the most self-sufficient of all individuals, Aristotle argues, because he requires no equipment or assistance from others in his contemplative activity. Thus such a thinker can freely perform his theoretical studies in isolation from other people. The scientist-philosopher needs no social milieu in order to conduct his research. So *this* is not "the excellent person [who] will need people for him to benefit" (*NE* 9.9, 1169b14). Rather, Aristotle describes another very

different kind of hero in the *Ethics*—the person of practical wisdom (*phronimos*). The person of practical wisdom is deeply enmeshed in the social fabric, practices all of the social virtues, and thus does indeed need others as objects upon which he exercises his virtues of generosity, justice, courage, and the rest. In his account Mitchell neglects to distinguish these two very different models of virtue in Aristotle. Thus his interpretation of the relationship between self-sufficiency and friendship in Aristotle is misleading.

Unfortunately, his characterization of Stoic friendship suffers from deeper mistakes. He writes that the Stoics construed self-sufficiency as "the proper performance of one's part within a whole (rather than as any attempt to be a whole unto oneself)" (this volume, p. 337). This seriously distorts the Stoic conception of the individual. The Stoics quite deliberately present a consistent account of exactly how a human person strives to become "a whole unto himself." It is precisely through the developmental process of maturation (known as *oikeiosis*) that a human being comes to identify his nature, that is identify himself, as a free, rational, and autonomous being. To be whole, the Stoics believe, is to organize all one's activities, commitments, responsibilities, and desires into a coherent, rational plan that is consistently and uncompromisingly virtuous. Such a plan also harmonizes with the rational structure of nature itself. And such a project of resolutely perfecting oneself is an ongoing enterprise that can and usually does require a lifetime. If this does not count as an attempt to be a whole unto oneself, I cannot imagine what would.

To argue that "the Stoic sage must be a friend in order to fully express his/her accordance with nature" is simply false (ibid.). The Stoic sage is the person who, through an arduous process of self-reflection, practice, and rational-emotive therapy, has achieved the state of perfected reason and complete virtue. Virtue, the Stoics believed, was both necessary and sufficient for happiness. All externals, including other people, provide opportunities to display one's virtue, but they are not true goods because they are not constitutive of the sage's virtue. Material objects are like game equipment one uses to demonstrate one's skill or excellence (Epictetus, *Discourses* 2.5.1–21). But the absence of a piece of game equipment in no way vitiates one's excellence, since one's virtue is a condition of one's soul, and it cannot be lost once achieved. Every single action, no matter how trivial, is performed in accordance with the perfected virtue of the Stoic sage, whether eating a meal, getting dressed, or combing one's hair. Whether the Stoic sage is alone or surrounded by others is totally indifferent to his state of happiness, which consists in perfected reason and complete virtue. That is, the Stoic sage depends on no one and nothing in living his life in accordance with nature. A more self-sufficient happiness is difficult to conceive.

Epictetus recognized that if two partners value any material possession or person more highly than their moral integrity and self-respect, then they cannot ever be real friends, because they will always be potential competitors for that external. If, on the other hand, they value fidelity, self-respect, self-

control, forbearance, and co-operation more highly than the external (which, after all, has merely instrumental and conditional value), then they can freely pursue what is noble and virtuous together by identifying the good of each other as their own good. Mitchell correctly sees that the Stoic thereby removes the source of all possible conflict between himself and his friend. Yet valuing one's own virtue above all else does *not* mean, as he claims, being totally indifferent to the external world. Nor does it mean merely bearing no ill will toward others. It means, rather, that one approaches all things in the external world with the intention of acting rationally. And dealing with externals rationally, the Stoics argued, entails treating other people justly, respectfully, kindly, generously, and peacefully. Therefore, Stoic friendship, like Aristotle's perfect kind of friendship, is based on virtue, and not on utility or pleasure. But unlike Aristotle's perfect kind of *philia*, Stoic friendship is *not* undertaken out of need.

Finally, Mitchell warns "the temptation to see in Epicurus' work a flight from pain must be resisted" (this volume, p. 342). Yet many, many Epicurean texts like the following make this temptation powerfully irresistible: "For we do everything for the sake of being neither in pain nor in terror. … For we are in need of pleasure only when we are in pain because of the absence of pleasure, and when we are not in pain, then we no longer need pleasure. And this is why we say that pleasure is the starting-point and goal of living blessedly" (*ER* 4.128). Mitchell (this volume, p. 341) construes the quotation "one must be willing to run some risks for the sake of friendship" (*ER* 6.28) as "a resolution to constancy in the face of chance and danger," yet this interpretation is underdetermined by the sense of the text itself. For it is not at all clear that given the role of pleasure specified in Epicurean ethical theory an Epicurean could ever be justified in facing danger and enduring pain for the sake of his friend. How would such altruism be motivated by a necessary or natural desire? The textual evidence indicates that Epicureans hold that: (1) pain is always to be avoided; (2) virtue will always produce pleasure; and (3) friendship is a virtue. The problem is that, on Mitchell's interpretation, Epicureans also hold that (4) friendship exposes us to risk and pain. Logically speaking, these four claims are mutually incompatible. Thus either Mitchell's interpretation of Epicureanism is wrong because Epicureans do not, in fact, accept claim (4), or Epicureanism itself is logically inconsistent (because Epicureans simultaneously hold all four claims).

Since the removal of physical pain and mental terror is the paramount good for Epicurus, contra Mitchell, Epicurean friendship can only survive in times when pain is absent. For example, if an Epicurean's friend needs him to perform a painful action, say helping to move heavy furniture, the theoretically consistent Epicurean would fly from such a painful, friendly act. If he does not, he is a good friend but no Epicurean at all.

Works Cited

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