

Truth and Friendship: The Importance of the Conversation of Friends

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Introduction

Most will readily grant that friendship is helpful in philosophy, the pursuit of wisdom. Indeed, as Aristotle and Aquinas understand it, true or virtuous friendship is clearly *helpful* for most any worthy goal that a person pursues. Beyond that, however, is the question: is friendship *necessary* for being a good philosopher? Or in other words, is friendship necessary for success in the pursuit of wisdom? Two views in response to this question are possible: one is that it is too obvious a point to even require a proof, and the other is that it is too difficult a point to even attempt a proof. But perhaps the truth is somewhere in between. Upon considering the common stereotype of the philosopher as someone who pursues private, intellectual projects in an ivory castle, it becomes clear that this is more than just a stereotype. For many of us, it is an accurate portrayal of how we pursue wisdom. So much for the necessity of friendship being too obvious. As for the difficulty of proving it, let us proceed to consider the matter itself.

St. Thomas Aquinas distinguishes two ways that a thing may be “necessary” for some end. In the first way, a thing is necessary if without it, the end simply cannot be attained. Thus food is necessary for the maintenance of human life. In the second way, a thing is necessary if with it, an end “is attained better and more conveniently” than without it. Thus a horse is necessary for a long journey.¹ It is in this second sense, I will argue, that

1. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger, 1948), III, 1.2c [ST].

friendship is necessary for the successful pursuit of wisdom. Here is another way of stating this thesis: one can only be as good a philosopher as he or she is (and has) a good friend.

When Aquinas considers those things that are “required” for happiness, he includes friendship. In asserting that friendship is necessary for happiness in this life, he explains: “For in order that man may do well, whether in the works of the active life, or in those of the contemplative life, he needs the fellowship of friends.”² What Aquinas asserts here remains largely unheeded, and perhaps especially by those who have devoted their lives to philosophy.³ Why, in order to do well in the works of the contemplative life, which surely are those works leading to wisdom, does a man need the fellowship of friends? Aquinas’s point can be explained and defended through the following syllogism: Good conversation is essential to the pursuit of wisdom. Friends are most capable of good conversation. Therefore, friends are most capable of the pursuit of wisdom. Let us commence with the minor premise by considering the conversation of friends, and then proceed to the major premise by considering why this conversation is so critical for the pursuit of wisdom.

The Conversation of Friends

We should start by reminding ourselves of a key insight in Aristotle’s notion of friendship. Persons can be true friends, i.e., friends in the proper sense of the term, to the extent that each a) pursues and lives the virtuous life, and b) desires to pursue and live that life *together with* the friend.⁴

Now, what most characterizes the conversation of friends? It seems that the *telos* of conversation between friends is simply this: to pursue the truth together. But perhaps we should not say “simply,” for this *telos* is two-fold: it is a pursuit of truth, and it is done *together*. In other words, in conversation, friends seek both the discovery or contemplation of truths, as well as the sharing of their lives. These two things should not be separated, but they can be distinguished. We enter into many conversations that aim at conveying, learning, or considering some truth, but in which we do not seek to share our lives with the interlocutor. In friendship on the other hand, there is always the added element of the common life: beyond the

2. *ST*, I-II 4.8c.

3. A welcome exception is a new book by David Burrell, C.S.C., *Friendship and Ways to Truth*, (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000).

4. See Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* 1156b6ff.

immediate object of the conversation itself, we are consciously doing something *together*.⁵

Given that seeking truth together is the *telos* of the conversation of friends, what are some of the properties of this conversation? There are at least two that deserve mention: simplicity and depth. The word “simplicity” captures the crucial fact that the conversation of friends is marked by the lack of concern for *appearances*, i.e., the appearances of the self in conversation. One of the great hindrances to fruitful conversation is the tendency to reflect more upon how we are presenting ourselves, than upon the topic of the conversation. With friends, we can simply be ourselves. We need not be concerned with impressing, or with being misunderstood, since our friends know us for who we are. And since our friends love us, we can count on being supported and on being given the benefit of the doubt. This allows for a great freedom and focus in conversation: friends can attend to the matter at hand without self-consciousness, distraction, or fear.

The property of “depth” is closely related to simplicity. Friends are most able to converse about “matters of moment.” Those things that are most serious and weighty are the ones that friends tend to share with one another, and often only with one another. In describing how the apostle John was privileged above all the other apostles in his relation with the Lord, Aquinas asserts this principle: secrets are revealed to friends.⁶ St. John was made privy to truths that others would not be, and perhaps could not be, by virtue of his friendship with the Lord.

Good Conversation and the Pursuit of Wisdom

In a consideration of wisdom, it is important to distinguish between the natural, intellectual virtue of wisdom, and the wisdom that is a supernatural gift of the Holy Spirit. The focus in this paper is on the natural virtue; it is more straightforward to speak of the “pursuit” of this virtue, than of the pursuit of the supernatural gift. It is also important to distinguish between speculative wisdom, the habit of considering the highest, unchanging truths,

5. In Book IX of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle gives a gem of an argument as to why even the supremely happy man needs friends. He says that just as a man enjoys the perception of his own existence, so too he wants to enjoy the perception of the existence of his friend, who is his “other self.” And he has this perception through conversation, “for this is what living together would seem to mean in the case of man, and not, as in the case of cattle, feeding in the same place” (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, ed. Richard Mckeon [New York: Random House, 1941], 1170b10-13).

6. Thomas Aquinas, *Lectura super Joannem*, prologue, #11.

and practical wisdom, or prudence, which is the habit of applying reason to moral action in specific cases. The considerations here will focus on speculative wisdom, although they are applicable to practical wisdom also.

Now in order to distinguish wisdom from the other speculative, intellectual virtues, Aquinas makes the distinction between truth that is known through itself, called a principle, and truth that is known as the term of reason's inquiry. As regards the latter, he distinguishes between that which is the term, or last, in some particular genus and that which is "the ultimate term of all human knowledge." He proceeds to explain:

And, since "things that are knowable last from our standpoint, are knowable first and chiefly in their nature," (*Physics*, I,1.) hence that which is last with respect to all human knowledge is that which is knowable first and chiefly in its nature. And about these is there "wisdom, which considers the highest causes," as stated in the *Metaphysics*, (I, 1,2).⁷

If one thing is clear in Aristotle and Aquinas's understanding of wisdom, it is that wisdom is a *bonum arduum*, an arduous good. To understand reality through understanding the highest causes of reality: this is the heart of wisdom ... and sadly, something that even philosophers often lose sight of. We truly succeed in the pursuit of wisdom only inasmuch as we are able to come to see the first causes, and all else through these first causes. Insight into the first causes themselves is difficult for at least two reasons: (a) as the highest realities, they are related to our intellect, as the sun is to our vision,⁸ and (b) they are reached as the term of an extended line of inquiry which entails, among other things, sustained and even heroic effort. It should come as no surprise that Aristotle suggests that youth are ill suited for doing philosophy.⁹

But what is the basis for this assertion? Why are there even many "philosophers" for whom many years have yielded a paltry harvest of wisdom? Surely, there is no simple answer to this question. One answer, however, might be that what Aristotle and Aquinas call virtuous friendship is necessary to doing what must be done to succeed in the pursuit of wisdom. Since the essence of true friendship is the communal striving toward the good life—the life of virtues both intellectual and moral—there are many different approaches we could take to this matter. Several connections between the conversation of friends and the pursuit of wisdom might prove helpful.

7. *ST*, I-II, 57.2c.

8. See Aristotle *Metaphysics* 993b10, and *ST*, I, 1.5ad1.

9. See *Nicomachean Ethics* 1142a12-17. Aristotle notes that it is commonly held that neither practical wisdom nor speculative wisdom is to be found in the youth.

Conversation between friends provides the natural context for pursuing wisdom. Friends, first of all, make one another more aware of what the human good is. In “living together” or being together with a friend, each is drawn, indeed inspired, to focus on what is most important. Who has not had the experience, particularly when actually engaged in conversation with a friend, of being inspired by that friend to be better? What we might not do for ourselves, or do as well for ourselves, we will do or do better because of our friends. Now this certainly applies in the case of pursuing insight into the highest things. Thus friends inspire one another to pursue wisdom, *and* encourage one another when the road seems long. How many times would we have turned back, in this as in other pursuits, if it were not for their encouragement?

But what about the speculative project itself? It goes without saying that in formulating correct principles and reasoning well from them, the human intellect needs the assistance of other intellects, both in its formative stages and in its mature exercise. Yet here one can reasonably ask: need it be assistance from a *friend*? It is obvious that many of those who help along the speculative journey need not be and are not friends. For instance, in the early stages of the intellectual life, such as in schooling, teachers are not friends in the full sense to students, due to their inequality. And in the case of the mature intellectual, it might seem that there is no pressing need for friends, as long as the person has another to help work through problems.

A response can be made first as regards the young. Does not experience reveal that the best teachers are those who bear themselves toward their students, as though they were friends? While not actually being a friend in the full sense to a student, the good teacher is always first concerned with the true good of the student—just as a friend would be. In other words, the teacher plays the role now that later, in the student’s maturity, will be played by a friend.

The case of the mature intellectual bears a little more investigation. Here the point about the “simplicity” of the conversation of friends is crucial. Friends are able to look at reality together with the power of *two intellects*. Since friends are truly “other selves,”¹⁰ their intellectual powers can function as though one, with no intervention of selfish or vain concerns. Two intellects focus together on discerning the truth.

Beyond the superiority of two intellects rather than one alone, there is the inestimable benefit of the corrective influence of the friend concerning

10. See *Nicomachean Ethics* 1170b7.

the acquisition of insight and the pursuit of demonstrative arguments. Anyone who has earnestly trodden the path of the intellectual life realizes how many times he or she has been preserved from error or fallacy through the watchful eye of another. Now certainly non-friends can correct a thinker when he or she errs; but it is the correction of friends that is usually most thoughtfully given, *and* most fruitfully received.

At the beginning of the fifth book of the *Republic*, Socrates gives expression to the spirit of the pursuit of wisdom among friends. Glaucon, trying to encourage Socrates to explain his position on the difficult problem of holding children in common, says: "Then don't hesitate, for your audience isn't inconsiderate, incredulous, or hostile." Socrates responds with the question: "Are you trying to encourage me by saying that?" He continues:

Well, you're doing the opposite. Your encouragement would be fine, if I could be sure I was speaking with knowledge, for one can feel both secure and confident when one knows the truth about the dearest and most important things and speaks about them among those who are themselves wise and dear friends. But to speak, as I'm doing, at a time when one is unsure of oneself and searching for the truth, is a frightening and insecure thing to do. I'm not afraid of being laughed at—that would be childish indeed. But I am afraid that, if I slip from the truth, just where it's most important not to, I'll not only fall myself but drag my friends down as well.¹¹

Of course, Socrates is convinced by his friends to proceed and give his argument. His attitude here illustrates the inspiration, the confidence, and the cautious attentiveness that animate the conversation of friends. This particular example also indicates how certain questions are so vexing or sensitive that one only feels comfortable discussing them among friends.

Now a *Christian* philosopher has a unique insight into the importance of friendship in the pursuit of wisdom. Consider that Aquinas speaks of wisdom as a virtue that exercises *judgment*. After he explains in the text quoted earlier that wisdom considers the highest causes, he proceeds to note: "Wherefore it [speculative wisdom] rightly judges all things and sets them in order, because there can be no perfect and universal judgment that is not based on the first causes."¹² Aquinas distinguishes between two ways that one can be of good judgment: through the proper use of reason, or through *connaturality* or sympathy with the subject being

11. Plato, *Republic*, trans. G. M. A. Grube and C. D. C. Reeve (Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett, 1992), 450d-451b.

12. *ST*, I-II, 57.2c.

judged.¹³ He uses this distinction to explain that the supernatural gift of wisdom bestows the ability to judge well of divine things by a connaturality with them through supernatural charity,¹⁴ which is a supernatural friendship with God. Thus it turns out that in the supernatural order, as well as the natural, friendship is the key to wisdom.

It is particularly noteworthy that the Christian also understands that the ultimate object of contemplation is itself a person (or a Trinity of Persons). For Aristotle, friendship belongs to the ultimate end itself only inasmuch as friends, having grown together in virtue, contemplate the highest objects together; united in love, they look outward together at the first causes. Friendship takes on a whole new importance when the First Cause itself is a person, with whom one can have a friendship. Aware that in this most special way a person's end *is* friendship, the Christian philosopher can see that human friendship provides a basis for a natural ability to judge of the end by a kind of connaturality. Indeed, how can one comprehend a call to divine friendship without some lived experience of true friendship? This point, however, certainly does not exclude the possibility of grace making up for deficiencies in nature. In other words, it is not absolutely necessary that one experience human friendship in order to appreciate divine friendship; recall Aquinas's teaching that God's gratuitous offer of supernatural beatitude is the "*communicatio*," or shared-good, upon which is based the truly supernatural friendship of charity.¹⁵ At the same time, we would do well to appreciate the importance of human friendship as a natural preparation for divine friendship, both for comprehending it and exercising it.

Conclusion

An insight from Maritain's essay, "Truth and Human Fellowship," provides a fitting conclusion for this discussion. Maritain argues that, contrary to a popular opinion, there is not an essential connection between a) claiming to know truth, and b) feeling bound to impose that truth on others. He explains:

In reality it is through rational means, that is, through persuasion, not through coercion, that the rational animal is bound by his very nature to try to induce his fellow men to share in what he knows or claims to know as true or just. The

13. Maritain gives an excellent treatment of the notion of connaturality in *The Range of Reason* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1952), pp. 22-29.

14. *ST*, II-II, 45.2c.

15. See *ST*, II-II, 23.1c.

metaphysician, because he trusts human reason, and the believer, because he trusts divine grace and knows that "a forced faith is a hypocrisy hateful to God and man," as Cardinal Manning put it, do not use holy war to make their "eternal truth" accessible to other people; they appeal to the inner freedom of other people by offering them either their demonstrations or the testimony of their love.¹⁶

This is a helpful distinction of two ways of appealing to others to bring them to see what you see: by rational demonstrations or by the testimony of love. *It is friends who are in the position to do both of these at the same time, and in a most excellent manner.* The conversation of friends always has the character of being a testimony of love, and is, once again, the natural context for a common consideration of demonstrations.

Friendship, then, is "necessary" for the pursuit of wisdom, necessary in the same way that a horse is for a long journey. If it is possible for a person to attain some wisdom without true friendship, it is only because others have acted "as friends" along the way. We have focused on that action most characteristic of friendship: conversation. It is no accident that an age marked by paucity in virtuous friendships, is marked also by a loss of the art of conversation. If the thesis of this paper stands, it is then also no accident that there is a dearth of men and women reaching to the heights of wisdom. Maritain remarked, "The fact that philosophical discussions seem to consist of deaf men's quarrels is not reassuring for civilization."¹⁷ Indeed it is not. Maritain rightly saw that there is no simple remedy to this problem. We should not suggest: why can't we all just be friends. Indeed, if Aristotle and Aquinas have anything to teach us about friendship, it is that the main reason we *can't* be friends is that our appetites are not ordered to the true good. If philosophers' discussions are to consist of more than deaf men's quarrels, more of us need to see moral virtue and friendship as necessary parts of the pursuit of wisdom.

16. Jacques Maritain, "Truth and Human Fellowship," *On the Use of Philosophy* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1961), pp. 20-21.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 25.