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DOI:

[10.1111/jtsb.12190](https://doi.org/10.1111/jtsb.12190)

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Document Version

Peer reviewed version

Citation for published version (Harvard):

Kristjánsson, K 2018, 'Ten un-Aristotelian reasons for the instability of Aristotelian character friendships', *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jtsb.12190>

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Checked for eligibility: 18/12/2018

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Ten Un-Aristotelian Reasons for the Instability of Aristotelian Character Friendships

Kristján Kristjánsson

Abstract: Aristotle claims that friendship of the highest kind – ‘character friendship’ – is stable and enduring, once established. He is sensitive to one limitation placed upon such friendships: that, owing to their extreme closeness, devotion and intimacy, they can only be actualised with a small number of people. However, Aristotle is otherwise surprisingly cavalier about the formation and sustaining of character friendship, as if those are relatively unproblematic from psycho-moral and psycho-social perspectives. The main aim of this article is to repair the dearth of attention paid to these problematic areas. More specifically, after a brief rehearsal of some Aristotelian essentials in Section 2, I address five potential problems attached to character friendships between ‘equals’ in Section 3 (of substitutability, self-verification, mismatched developmental levels, divergent developmental paths, initiation and trust) and five problems between ‘unequals’ in Section 4 (of proportionality, the disciple’s and the guru’s conflicting motivations, paternalism, role inertia), closing with some summarising remarks in Section 5. My conclusion is that despite the attractiveness and plausibility of much of what Aristotle says, his account of character friendships cannot be endorsed without various caveats and qualifications.

Key words: Aristotle; character friendships; equal and unequal friendships; friendship problematics; psycho-moral conflicts

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1. Introduction: Fragile Friendships?

Voluminous bodies of literature continue to be published on Aristotelian and Aristotle-inspired virtue ethics, not only within mainstream moral philosophy but also within various practical fields of moral psychology and applied professional ethics. That said, these literatures are highly selective and some of the less palatable parts of Aristotle's moral teachings, by today's standards, tend to be conveniently overlooked. Indeed, the greatest portion of these literatures is reconstructive (or 'neo-Aristotelian' in some sense) rather than exegetical, let alone deferential.

No less than two of the ten books of the *Nicomachean Ethics* are devoted to the topic of friendship.¹ While these books tend to be acknowledged as a cardinal element of Aristotelian virtue ethics as a whole, they have not excited as lively an interest in philosophical circles as one might have expected. To be sure, some of the papers-writtenwritings about the subject are rare philosophical treats, both in terms of substance and presentation (see e.g. Cooper, 1977; Sherman, 1987; Brewer, 2005; Nehamas, 2016). Nevertheless, a lingering sense remains that the space devoted to the subject of friendship – in particular in its most developed and virtue-relevant kind as 'friendship for character' (Aristotle, 1985, p. 238 [1164a12]) – is not proportionate to the importance accorded to it in Aristotle's own moral theory. For Aristotle, friendship of this kind is not only intrinsically valuable (indeed invaluable) and noble as a constituent of the good life, it is also 'the greatest external good' (1985, pp. 208; 257 [1155a29; 1169b9–10], cf. p. 258 [1169b20–23]). Aristotle understands it simultaneously as 'a virtue' or a relation between people that 'involves virtue' (1985, p. 207 [1155a1–2]). While the conceptualisation of friendship as a relation may resonate better with modern sensibilities than that of friendship as a virtue, it is easy to see how the latter designation can fit into Aristotle's architectonic of virtue as a personal trait

¹ Moreover, almost a third of the *Eudemian Ethics* is devoted to this topic. For reasons of space, I leave that work out of consideration here, focusing almost entirely on the better-known discussion of friendship in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, with only sporadic references to Aristotle's other works.

of character. The capacity to give and receive (a particular kind of) love regularly and in the right way (by both loving and being loved, see 1985, p. 222 [1159a27–29]) would thus constitute a trait-like personal quality, potentially representing a virtue.²

One of the claims that Aristotle makes repeatedly in his account of friendship is that friendship of the highest kind – which I will henceforth simply refer to as ‘character friendship’ – is stable and enduring, once established (see e.g. 1985, pp. 213; 223; 238 [1156b17–19; 1159b3–4; 1164a12–13]). Aristotle is sensitive to one limitation placed upon such friendships: namely, that, owing to their extreme closeness, devotion and intimacy, they can be actualised only with a small number of people (1985, pp. 218; 262–263 [1170b29–1171a21]). One could argue that Aristotle is too sensitive to this limitation, so that focusing on it, as he does, is itself a limitation of his account. Apart from the fact that modern means of communication have made the conditions of closeness and intimacy easier to satisfy than in Aristotle’s time, a case could be made that even before those technological changes, some individuals at least seem to have been able to form ‘friendships of the highest kind’ with a significant number of people. Another relevant observation here is that despite his departures from Plato’s idealism, Aristotle retains his mentor’s unfortunate habit of defining ideals with respect to their most fully realised instances. So a case could also be made for the claim that the number limitation is just an implication of Aristotle’s overly high bar of what counts as character that is good enough to sustain character friendships. I will not pursue these lines of reasoning here but simply accept, for the sake of

² Cooper (1977, pp. 629–30 [footnote 11]) explains well how this potential virtue satisfies one of the standard conditions of Aristotelian virtue: of including an emotional component – a virtuous emotion (cf. Kristjánsson, 2018). However, Aristotle does not provide the standard description of friendship *qua* virtue in terms of a golden mean between two extreme forms of excess and deficiency.

argument, the claim that the number of one's character friends is bound to be small and that the criteria for inclusion are pretty stringent.³

Apart from the ~~is~~ limitation on the number of character friends, Aristotle is surprisingly cavalier about the formation and sustaining of character friendship, as if those are relatively unproblematic from psycho-moral and psycho-social perspectives. In contrast to the rest of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, where Aristotle is keenly aware that he is venturing over the terrain of an inexact science, mined with various counterexamples and dilemmas – and eager to ‘offer help’ with those (1985, p. 36 1104a10–11]) – the exploration of character friendships is strangely devoid of examples of cases that may debar, stunt, decimate and ultimately dissolve such friendships, and how to tackle those (as noted e.g. by Schoeman, 1985, p. 273). Admittedly, there are long sections addressing problems and difficulties in friendships more generally (see esp. 1985, pp. 232–243 [1162b1–1165a35]), but those are almost entirely focused on the two lower kinds of friendship (for pleasure and utility), suggesting that once elevated to the higher level of character friendship, these problems will vanish.⁴ Moreover, here for once, where Aristotle himself may need to be put right, philosophical watchdogs have mostly failed to bark.

While a number of scholars have noted problems with specific aspects of Aristotle's account of character friendships (as referenced in below sections), no one has to the best of my knowledge offered a sustained and systematic meditation on the various difficulties that may mar or even destroy such friendships. This area of Aristotelian scholarship continues to constitute

³ By letting Aristotle off this hook, I avoid a potential proliferation of possible reasons for the instability of character friendships. As becomes apparent below, I want to argue that even if we accept Aristotle's stringent inclusion conditions, character friendships may not be as stable as he thought.

⁴ We see the same tendency in lay conceptions of friendship today: namely, to consider any break-down of friendship to indicate that what had appeared to be ‘real friendship’ was in fact all along something ‘lower’, such as masked selfishness (see Nehamas, 2016, p. 23).

what Nehamas calls ‘an isolated area of calm in philosophy’s roiling waters’ (2016, p. 14).⁵ The main aim of the present article is to repair the dearth of attention paid to the difficulties in question. More specifically, after a brief rehearsal of some Aristotelian essentials in Section 2, I address *five* potential problems attached to character friendships between ‘equals’ in Section 3 and *five* between ‘unequals’⁶ in Section 4 – closing with some summarising remarks in Section 5. My conclusion is that despite the attractiveness and plausibility of much of what Aristotle says, his account of character friendships cannot be taken on board without various caveats and qualifications. By providing an argumentative counterweight to the singularly positive description of those friendships in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, I am not offering a pessimistic alternative. Indeed, I consider many of the claims made by Aristotle here to involve compelling psycho-moral truths. However, by repeating them too often, we may be missing something important: namely, the insight that character friendships are fragile and contingently (though not essentially) quite unstable.⁷

Social scientists often complain about philosophers being mute about their methods. I want to note here at the outset that, with regard to my method, ‘terms and conditions apply’. Those terms and conditions have to do with the fact that I am representative of a group that

⁵ [Nehamas himself considers friendship to be more ‘fraught with risk’ than Aristotle imagined \(2016, p. 25\); yet his discussion of the risks mostly follows the pattern of analysing in more depth the problems that Aristotle himself identified, rather than suggesting new ones as I propose to do.](#)

⁶ Some interpreters (see e.g. Brewer, 2005, p. 725) take Aristotle to be making a distinction between equality and inequality of moral character/virtue only. However, the examples he takes (father–son; man–woman; older–younger person) and the way he describes them as relationships ‘of any sort of ruler towards the one he rules’ (1985, p. 220 [1158b12–14]) indicate that he is referring to social status and power relations (of natural or institutional superiority–inferiority). While those will also, in Aristotle’s view, coincide with qualitative differences in moral character/virtue, the possibility is not ruled out that people can be of equal social status but still unequal in virtue, and Aristotle seems to allow for character friendships between such individuals. In Section 3, therefore, among other things, I examine cases of that sort. In short, in what follows I assume that all socially unequal friendships involve unequal virtue but that not all socially equal friendships involve equal virtue. [The reason for this \(admittedly\) controversial assumption is that I wish to question Aristotle’s stability claim in the context of his own set of basic assumptions, rather than taking on the more radical \(but perhaps somewhat easier\) task of questioning those assumptions themselves.](#)

⁷ That they are not *essentially* unstable is shown by the fact that most of us will either have experienced stable friendships of this kind ourselves or seen such friendships actualised by others in close personal proximity.

Owen Flanagan (2017) calls ‘WEIRD’ (Western, educated, industrialised, rich and democratic) – and one could add male and middle-aged to the present equation. I draw unabashedly on my personal experiences in this article, and those may not be representative of the majority of human cultures and historical contexts, for example those of Aristotle’s Athens.⁸ One of the reasons why Aristotelianism seems to strike a chord with practically minded academics outside of philosophy, which has led to its domestications into some areas of social science (see e.g. Fowers & Anderson, 2018), is Aristotle’s naturalistic method, which seems to entail that all moral theorising needs to be answerable to findings from empirical science.⁹ I will be drawing on some of those empirical sources in my exploration – and hence not waxing entirely personal or rhapsodical. However, despite the reams written about friendship from a social-science perspective, surprisingly little of it carries any direct significance with respect to the notion of Aristotelian character friendship. For example, no longitudinal studies seem to have been carried out on the development of friendship types.¹⁰ It could even be argued, as Fowers and Anderson (2018) do, that certain assumptions in much of the social-science literature (instrumentalism, individualism and the equation of the good life with that of subjective wellbeing) are directly inimical to any study or understanding of friendships on an Aristotelian account.

⁸ [Talbot Brewer \(in personal correspondence\) has kindly helped me to think through some of the differences between contemporary Western society and Aristotle’s Athens regarding the formation and sustaining of character friendships. One complication in our era is the obsession with ‘authenticity’ as a life quest: a quest that encourages continuous self-reinventions which may be inimical to stable, life-long character friendships. One might also want to attend to contemporary sociological work on the variety of roles we are pressed into playing on a daily basis in our lives, and the way these roles change over time as we take on new tasks and new jobs. We would need to think about role identities and their place in modern life, and about precariousness in the workplace; about contemporary immigration and geographic mobility, and about how these experiences change our sense of what does and does not count as a sensible life trajectory with respect to the formation and sustaining of deep friendships. These would be topics for another paper. I simply note them here in anticipation of the objection that the following discussion of the problem that Aristotle seems to ‘miss’ is suspiciously ahistorical.](#)

⁹ Aristotle himself notes that, in terms of friendship, some of the ‘puzzles’ surrounding it are ‘more proper to natural science’ than philosophy (1985, p. 209 [1155b1–10]).

¹⁰ See the helpful overview of the literature in Fowers and Anderson (2018), who both elicit salient empirical sources and explain various conspicuous absences and questionable psychological assumptions.

In any case, the methodological point I wish to make here is that, although this article is meant to constitute more than mere philosophical analysis, the scarcity of relevant social scientific sources means that my empirical claims will have to make do with considerable input from armchair psychology, based on context-relative observations and personal experiences – by someone who happens to have found character friendships difficult to form and sustain.

2. General Rehearsals of Character Friendship and Some Deliberate Exclusions

The general contours of Aristotle’s account of friendship will be familiar to many readers. There is neither need nor space to rehearse all of them here. Rather I make do with a brisk tour in the present section, priming readers only on those general issues that are directly relevant to discussions in subsequent sections and that offer some passkeys through the various labyrinths. It is *de rigueur* to dwell briefly on the difference between *philia* (as ‘love’) and contemporary conceptions of ‘friendship’. In some modern languages, the equation of ‘love’ and ‘friendship’ will sound alien. However, given the increasingly bloated use of the word ‘love’ in current English, where the locution ‘loving a friend’ seems to have no odd connotations, the semantic differences between English and ancient Greek should perhaps be the least of our worries.¹¹ In any case, I simply assume, for convenience of exposition, that the term *philia* is correctly understood by present readers.

Friendship for Aristotle is conscious ‘reciprocated goodwill’ (1985, p. 210 [1155b32–35]). It assumes three main types, where the first two (friendships for pleasure and utility) are ‘incomplete’ – because of their essentially instrumental and transitory natures – but the most developed type (character friendships) is ‘complete’ because of its unique non-instrumental and

¹¹ In my own native language, Icelandic, the locution ‘loving a friend’ would, however, sound soppy or erotically laden. Notably, in this article I circumvent another broader meaning of *philia*, applied sporadically by Aristotle, where it refers to relatively impersonal civic friendships.

enduring nature (1985, pp. 211ff [1156a6ff]). The two inferior types are not mere *ersatz* versions of character friendship, however, that can be disposed of like sucked oranges once they have served their purpose. Pleasure and utility friendships have clear uses and are necessary for smooth human association. While ‘base’ people can actualise them, but not the complete type, ‘good’ (namely virtuous) people enjoy all three types in different contexts but most specifically the complete type (1985, pp. 212 and 216 [1156b6–8 and 1157b1–4]).¹² Character friendships are paradigmatically instantiated between people ‘similar in virtue’ (1985, p. 212 [1156b6–8]). Yet nothing in Aristotle’s account supports the assumption that such friendships are limited to people of *perfect* virtue and much militates against it, for example his emphasis on the moral developmental/educational value of complete friendships, where one or both parties are evidently still quite defective with respect to their appropriate virtues, and on how such friendships can be instantiated between character-and-status-relevant ‘unequals’ (e.g. parents and children).¹³

Celebrations of deep friendships between ‘soulmates’ and ‘kindred spirits’ are obviously as old as the hills, predating Aristotle. However, Aristotle’s account of the highest type of *philia* has some unerring marks that make it stand out – collectively – as unique. One distinctive characteristic is how it is anchored in virtue and mutual appreciation of virtue, offering a contrast to the ~~aesthetic and~~ psychological and sociological rationales that one often sees in alternative accounts. Another distinctive feature is the love of the friend for the friend’s own sake and in particular for the sake of the friend’s moral character. The third is the assumption of how character friends draw mutual benefits from a symbiosis of moral developmental features, as aspirations to self-improvement. The fourth has to do with mutual trust and affirmation of shared

¹² For example, character friends continue to derive pleasure from their friendships, and those friendships are also useful for them, but the pleasure takes on a different form from that experienced in mere friendship for pleasure. It becomes the sort of unique Aristotelian pleasure in unimpeded activity that typically crowns the display of virtue.

¹³ Cooper offers a compelling argument for this point (1977, pp. 627–629).

values – although questions can be raised about how far that unity of values needs to extend (see further later).¹⁴ Aristotle repeatedly makes the strong claim that the true character friend is ‘related to his friend as he is to himself, since the friend is another himself’ (1985, p. 246 [1166a30–33]; cf. pp. 260 and 265 [1170b6–7; 1172a32–34]). It is not entirely clear whether Aristotle is here (a) speaking metaphorically, (b) making a moral point about the essential substantive sharing of direction and purpose or (c) making an ontological point about the inherently relational nature of selfhood. Sherman interprets Aristotle’s claim ontologically as presupposing ‘some notion of an extended self, or a self enlarged through attachments’ (1987, p. 600). I am sceptical of this strong interpretation, as Aristotle did not have at his disposal a selfhood theory in the modern sense (Kristjánsson, 2010). However, whichever interpretation one favours, all speak against the objection commonly lodged by proponents of ‘care ethics’ (see e.g. Noddings, 1999) that Aristotelian virtue ethics fails to take account of the relational nature of human wellbeing.

From a moral educational perspective, Aristotle’s account of character friendship can be seen as a treasure trove because of the developmental element that reigns supreme in it. Character friends become ‘better from their activities and their mutual correction’ as ‘each moulds the other’, and through this mutual moulding they become ‘more capable of understanding and acting’ (1985, pp. 266 and 208 [1172a11–14 and 1155a15–16]). For this to happen, the friends must ‘share conversation and thought’ (1985, p. 261 [1170b11–13]) – a condition that is obviously easier to satisfy nowadays, in a digital world, than it was in Aristotle’s time. It is not unreasonable to suppose that Aristotle had the potential emulative influence of character friends in mind when he made his uncharacteristically positive remark

¹⁴ The overview of the specific features of character friendships offered by Fowers and Anderson (2018) is particularly striking as it is written by non-philosophers who focus on differences from standard social scientific conceptions of friendship, as revealed in various (but often unstated) research assumptions.

about even ‘the bad man, if he is being brought into a better way of life’ being able to ‘make some advance’ so that he might eventually ‘change completely’ (1941, p. 32 [13a22–31]). This remark has been seen—a comment that is often seen to contradict Aristotle’s alleged early-years determinism about the supposed effects of bad or good upbringing that can never be wiped off (see Kristjánsson, 2015, chap. 5). In any case, what Aristotle says about the role of the character friend as an exemplar is likely to be accepted or rejected in the measure in which readers accept or reject his more general virtue ethical assumptions about what constitutes character development and its facilitating conditions (see Hoyos-Valdés, 2018⁷).

Talbot Brewer (2005) has written a tightly argued and beautifully turned article about the nature of Aristotelian moral education through character friendships as the mutual affirmation of evaluative outlooks. He explains how character friends progress through appreciatively attending to good character, progressively unveiled in the other person. Rather than constituting a ‘static and complacent mutual admiration society’, the friendship relation involves an evolving bond within which ‘friends draw each other out and participate in the fine-toothed articulation of each other’s character’ (2005, p. 726). The question which assails us here, however, is to what extent the friends need to affirm each other’s evaluative outlooks ‘unreservedly and unconditionally’ (2005, p. 730) and to what extent the ‘collaboration’ of ‘two jointly produced sensibilities’ (2005, p. 758) can include critical and potentially painful challenges to the other’s outlook.

As I propose to elicit in the following sections some of the more *general* psycho-moral and psycho-social problems that may threaten character friendships, and which do not register on Aristotle’s radar, I need to leave out of consideration a number of *specific* issues that would merit lengthy discussion and even full papers of their own. Let me briefly mention three.

(a) *Husband-and-wife-character friendships*. Aristotle says just enough about this form of friendship to whet readers' appetites. Such friendships, while characterised by inequality, are natural and possible, Aristotle maintains, as long as both parties are 'decent'; for each 'has a proper virtue' (1985, p. 232 [1162a25–26]). This topic is crying out for a fuller account of what in the nature of those family relationships facilitates and what hinders character friendships. I shelve this issue mostly, although I return briefly to it in the final section.

(b) *Parent-and-children character friendships*. Parental friendships are entirely natural and normal, for Aristotle, and they do not represent a one-way traffic of virtues being picked up by children from parents, but also the other way round, as the parent 'regards his children as his own' (1985, p. 230 [1161b20–24]).¹⁵ Parents are, in a sense, learning about themselves, and unfolding their own characters, by learning from their children. Nothing attests more clearly to the assumption that character friendship does not require fully developed (*phronetic*) virtue than Aristotle's acknowledgements that children are capable of such friendships, for children will obviously not yet have (fully) developed their *phronesis*.¹⁶ This assumption should not surprise readers, given Aristotle's well-known discussion in the *Rhetoric* (2007) of the praiseworthy characteristics that set the young apart, many of which he does not hesitate to call 'virtues', such as emulousness, open-mindedness, optimism, trust, courage and guilelessness.¹⁷ I shall not explore this topic in more detail at the present juncture, as I have done so in a separate publication in which I rebutted a number of scepticisms, old and new, about the possibility of character friendships between parents and children (Kristjánsson, 2007, chap. 8). Notably, Aristotle did not explore character friendships *between* children. However, speaking

¹⁵ [Unfortunately, Aristotle only talks about the father as the parent here.](#)

¹⁶ Not surprisingly, Aristotle demands, however, that children have developed some minimal 'comprehension or [at least] perception', in order to be able to form friendships with parents (1985, p. 230 [1161b26–27]).

¹⁷ [I discuss these claims from the *Rhetoric* in Kristjánsson \(2007, chaps. 7–8\).](#)

against the apparent consensus in the literature that friendships between children are mostly, or even exclusively, of the two lower types (in particular friendship for pleasure) are findings from one of the few empirical studies that have systematically applied Aristotle's taxonomical repertoire (Walker, Curren & Jones, 2016; [cf. also Hoyos-Valdés, 2018, who argues against the consensus](#)). Studying the motivations for friendship among 9–10 year old children, this study revealed 'unexpectedly sophisticated descriptions of virtue' (2016, p. 296) and solid understandings of non-instrumentalist reasons for forming friendships based on the other child's moral character.

(c) *Philia–eros conflicts*. Aristotle is crystal clear about the distinction between *philia* and *eros*. Yet stunningly, from a modern perspective, he does not discuss cases of conflict between the two, for instance where erotic/romantic attraction gets in the way of character friendship.¹⁸ The most nuanced recent book-length study of (essentially) Aristotelian friendship, namely that of Nehamas (2016), does not attend to this issue in any detail either. I am not assuming here that there is an inherent incompatibility between romantic attraction and character friendship. However, if popular modern works of literature and film are to be believed, one of the commonest reasons for the non-formation or eventual dissolution of [what would be meant to be](#) non-sexual friendships between males and females (or between same-sex friends who are potentially sexually attracted to one another) is a conflict between *philia* and *eros* in instances where one or both of the friends are already romantically attached to someone else, or where sexual attraction from one of the friends is not reciprocated by the other. Even works with a

¹⁸ Meilaender (1993) seems to assume that this conflict is already dealt with by Aristotle as part of the potential conflict between friendship for pleasure and friendship for character. However, arguably, the motives and desires underlying erotic attraction are deeper – and tap into different psychological resources – than the motives behind standard cases of pleasure-driven friendships.

‘happy ending’, such as *When Harry Met Sally*, provide salutary insights into the insidious threats and barriers in question.

This is a topic that would merit a full paper, if not a full book, treatment along Aristotelian lines, although clearly not a merely exegetical one as there is not much in his own texts to go on. I do not have space to bear down on this issue except tangentially during an exploration of some of the general character-friendship problematics in Sections 3 and 4. Meanwhile, I recommend a paper by Gilbert Meilaender (1993) which draws on a host of relevant sources and discusses the topic in ways that are redolent of Aristotle (or, more precisely, of what an imagined Aristotle might have said about the topic in a contemporary context). While written from an overtly Christian perspective, Meilaender subtly analyses the faint undercurrent of excitement often floating close to the surface in friendships between the genders and how this undercurrent may gradually plunge any budding character friendship into a maelstrom of misunderstandings, jealousies and conflicts. He is also keenly sensitive to the hidden motives and secret desires that may be at work in the subterranean regions of the minds of such friends, while not entirely transparent to themselves. Meilaender’s ultimate conclusion is a positive one – that ‘we have every reason to attempt’ character friendships of this kind, despite their ‘inherent difficulties’. As already noted, it is outside the present purview to elaborate on this conclusion here, or hypothesise what Aristotle would have said about it. I have simply mentioned this issue here as part of a deck-clearing exercise of the various interesting topics that I need to skirt in the service of the more fundamental aims of the present article.

3. Five Potential Problems Affecting Character Friendships between Equals

I single out below five potential problems affecting character friendships between ‘equal’ or relatively equal parties in terms of power relations (~~recall footnote 5~~): problems that could all lead to a diminution of the fixity and durability that Aristotle attributes to character friendships in general.

(a) *Problem of essential substitutability*. This is a direct descendant of a well-known problem considered to affect ‘Platonic love’ (on a true Platonic understanding, not the popular one). In Platonic love – so the standard objection goes – one loves a person to the extent that she instantiates certain admirable universal qualities of goodness, truth and beauty. However, this seems to imply that if another person appeared on one’s radar who did an even better job of manifesting those qualities, one’s love *would* (and even *should* morally) transfer to that new person. Much tends to be made of Aristotle’s escape from Plato’s idealism in general and Plato’s depersonalised view of *philia* in particular. Aristotelian friendship is meant to represent love of another person *qua* person, and thus not fall prey to the substitutability objection. The argument here would be that ‘complete friendship’ (i.e. character friendship) is ‘friendship of good people similar in virtue’; that the friend constitutes a unique second self; and that one loves the friend ‘because of the friend himself, not coincidentally’ – nor instrumentally (1985, pp. 212–213 [1156b7–12]).

While this is an obvious escape route from the Platonic *horror mundi*, it may not suffice to quell entirely all unease. Remember that what motivates character friendships are not specifically relational and personality-trait features that are commonly foregrounded in contemporary social scientific accounts of friendship (see e.g. Fowers & Anderson, 2018), such as disclosure, ~~empathy~~, reliance, bonding, a common sense of humour, similarities in Big-Five personality profiles, etc. Rather, it is essentially the other person’s character repertoire: to what

extent and precisely how she is virtuous. Aristotle admits freely that character friendships can only be actualised with a limited number of people; hence, one must be highly selective in one's choice of friends. Indeed, the friendship attachment thrives on its exclusiveness (cf. Sherman, 1987, p. 604; Nehamas, 2016, p. 203), and one needs to get the exclusive friendships right. However, here a tension arises in Aristotle's account between the intrinsic liking of a person who one happens to have befriended and the liking of the virtues in that friend – which one may also like intrinsically, in addition to the benefits they confer upon oneself in helping mould one's character. But liking those virtues is still not the same as liking the person *qua* this individual, warts and all. As Schoeman correctly notes, Aristotle's account runs the risk of becoming 'dangerously Platonic' (1985, p. 278). It is difficult to see why a reasonable choice could not be made between friends on grounds of the admirability of their character profiles only, in which case the one with the greater virtues or better fit of virtues to one's own might be seen to stand in a privileged position. To give one example, a disciple might decide that she prefers spending quality time with her new guru friend than with a fellow disciple friend. That would mean privileging a relationship of unequal friendship over an equal one, but there is nothing in ~~the~~ Aristotelian Aristotle's own account that defines equal friendships as inherently better than unequal ones.¹⁹ Recall also that the closer one gets to full Aristotelian virtue, the further one steers away from internal conflict and ambivalence. It would thus be alien to the Aristotelian spirit to consider a unique combination of character faults in a character friend to be attractive as such,²⁰ even though one might have originally 'bonded' with a person because of those faults and their similarity to one's own.

¹⁹ At least not if the unequal friendship satisfies the 'equalising principle' discussed in (4a) below.

²⁰ Schoeman talks about 'a kind of trust that can arise between flawed souls that cannot arise between paragons of virtue' (1985, p. 277). While intuitively appealing, I cannot see any possible Aristotelian rationale for this view. The same applies to Nehamas's observation (2016, p. 27) that sometimes we love our friends precisely because of their

Brewer (2005) is aware of the problem that the sensible Aristotelian person will need to choose the better of two alternatives – and that includes cases of choosing between friends. He faults Aristotle for not taking direct account of this problem and offering a solution. To rescue Aristotle, Brewer offers the additional consideration that the irreplaceability of our friends ‘owes in large part to the history we share with them – a history we could not possibly discover ourselves to share with some stranger’. Friendship is about shared sensibilities, and such sensibilities cannot be brought to fruition except ‘through a long series of previous interactions’ (2005, pp. 243–245). Brewer’s argument offers good reasons for sticking to old friends and not discarding them for new ones. It is not only that such a choice would fail to be cost-effective; it is simply not possible, for deep psychological and historical reasons, to create, *ex nihilo*, a friendship trajectory with a new friend that matches that of one’s relationship with an old one. However, Aristotle’s point is not only about *old* character friendships being enduring, but rather *all* such friendships, once formed. Many character friendships do not have long, unrepeatably histories undergirding them; typical university students will form a number of such friendships in their first year of study, and while those cannot be of the ships-in-the night variety to count as true character friendships, some of those will turn out to remain stationary, others to decline and disappear altogether as possibilities of new and more rewarding friendships open up. Moreover, even though an exclusive, historically conditioned friendship with one person cannot simply be transferred to another friend, there is no reason why I cannot have the same kind of exclusive (to them) friendship with another or perhaps many others. So while the problem of essential substitutability may leave some character friendships untouched, for the reasons that Brewer

shortcomings (that everyone else may find irritating). That is a distinctively un-Aristotelian view unless the shortcomings in question are just morally irrelevant foibles.

mentions, it will continue to speak against the strong claim that all character friendships, by their very nature, are essentially stable.

(b) *Problem of self-verification.* Aristotle makes an innocent-looking remark, in his discussion of friendship, about those wanting honour from good people being in the business of ‘seeking to confirm their own view of themselves’ (1985, p. 222 [1159a21–24]). While this remark does not amount to any psychological theory of self-confirmations, it bespeaks sensitivity to concerns that have been raised and conceptualised in contemporary psychology under the umbrella of ‘self-verification theory’.

Psychologist William Swann has conducted a number of experiments which demonstrate that people tend to pay attention to, seek, believe, value and retain feedback that confirms their present self-concept, whether that self-concept is positive or negative. These findings contradict the well-entrenched assumption that people in general are self-enhancement seekers: consumed by an overwhelming desire to think well of themselves and always on the lookout for responses that show them in a positive light. In contrast to this assumption, Swann’s studies suggest that once people have incorporated a given characteristic – however negative – firmly into their self-concept, they seek feedback that verifies that characteristic, even if it brings them pain. In other words, we like to seek out others who see us as we see ourselves, and we tend to flee contexts in which such self-verifying evaluations are not forthcoming. Swann refers to this tendency as ‘self-traps’: stubborn impediments to higher self-esteem. Swann does not reject the view that we also have a desire for positive feedback, but he suggests that people with a negative self-concept are deeply torn and ambivalent emotionally; they want both a favourable and an unfavourable evaluation, and are therefore caught in a self-trap. The underlying motive,

Swann hypothesises, is the desire for self-stability and self-cohesion: the desire for a homeostatic self (Swann, 1996, pp. 10–14, 23–25, 51; see further in Kristjánsson, 2010, chap. 10).

Aristotle is obviously a great believer in psychological homeostasis also, especially in terms of the harmony of virtuous emotions (Kristjánsson, 2018), and he sees it being accomplished through the attainment of full virtue. However, not being an island, the person on the path to virtue will also care about the approval of the character friend and strive to be worthy of it. Brewer explains how this desire is different from being moved to self-reform by the mere wish for another's approval (2005, p. 735). Brewer also describes an ideal trajectory in which the two friends collaborate on 'the ongoing task of talking their own half-formed evaluative commitments into a full-fledged and determinate stance in the world' (2005, p. 735). This all sounds good in theory. However, if Swann is right, the desire for self-verification – say, the desire for the friend's confirming one's own persistent character weakness as endearing – may, for psychological reasons, often trump the desire for self-improvement, even in people who are upwardly mobile morally. This is the reason why social media outlets, such as Facebook, typically turn into echo chambers of the self, as one chooses 'friends' with whom one can live inside a filter bubble of mutual self-verifications. I have seen (budding) character friendships disintegrate when talking through the other's 'half-formed evaluative commitments' is seen as a threat to the other's self-concept instead of verifying it. Aristotle's innocent-looking remark about friends 'seeking to confirm their own view of themselves' may actually suggest the possibility of incipient tensions between friends – when such confirmations are not immediately forthcoming – that can turn into full-scale antagonisms, making the friendships vulnerable and unstable.

(c) *Problem of mismatched developmental levels.* Interestingly, Aristotle considers it an empirical question, to be settled by natural science, whether similar or dissimilar people make better character friends (1985, pp. 208–208 [1155a32–1155b10]). That said, he does allow for character friendships between people unequal in virtue (cf. Sherman, 1987, p. 610).²¹ In Section 4, I explore some problems relating to such friendships between people of unequal power (ruler versus ruled), but the present section focuses on friends of relatively equal natural and social status, yet occupying different levels of character development. Driving the aspirations of the less developed friend may be a certain degree of dissatisfaction with the state of her character (cf. Brewer, 2005, p. 737); she may even see the more developed friend as a moral exemplar to emulate. Conversely, the better developed friend may see in the other individual a person upon whom a lot of love can be constructively bestowed.

While ‘in friendships of virtue, there are no accusations’ (1985, p. 235 [1163a21–22]), the attitude of the better developed party is not likely to assume a cringing spirit of indiscriminate tolerance towards the particular weaknesses of the less developed friend. This can engender the problem of (lack of) self-verification discussed above as (3c). However, more importantly for present purposes, even if the desire for self-improvement trumps the desire for self-verification, ~~more importantly for present purposes,~~ well-known problems of moral emulation are likely to kick in. Those include *hero-worship*, where the learner uncritically imitates or mimics the role model, warts and all; *moral inertia*, where moral exemplars are seen as standing so high above the learner that idolising them becomes disempowering rather than uplifting; and *moral over-stretching*, where the learner tries to follow in the footsteps of a role model, but not being as sure-footed, may end up in unfamiliar circumstances where, rather than

²¹ As the famous Robert Frost poem says, ‘If one by one we counted people out / For the least sin, it wouldn’t take us long / To get so we had no one left to live with.’

virtue progressing, vice breaks forth with redoubled ardour because the learner falls to temptations that the advanced role model could overcome.²² It is not difficult to imagine how difficulties in navigating the dual purposes of character emulation and character friendship could take its toll on the latter and gradually enfeeble it by dissipation.

(d) *Problem of divergent developmental paths.* Even if character friends start at relatively equal levels of virtue and aspire to mould each other's characters in progressive ways, life is complex and has a way of upsetting the best of plans. Thus, events can intervene through which 'friends come to be separated by some wide gap in virtue, vice, wealth, or something else' (1985, p. 221 [1159a33–34]). Indeed, this – along with geographical distance which [\(obviously prior to modern technological advances\)](#) makes the friendship impossible to cultivate – is the only qualification which Aristotle himself accepts on the stability-of-character-friendship thesis; for 'then they are friends no more and do not even expect to be' (1985, p. 221 [1159a34–35]).²³

However, it is almost as if Aristotle has second thoughts on this, for later he qualifies the earlier qualification. Even if the friend pursues a radically different developmental path in terms of character (e.g. becoming god-like in virtue or vicious), the friendship should not be 'dissolved at once'. Moreover, the fact that the friend regresses morally is not a valid reason for the termination of the friendship unless he becomes 'incurably vicious'. 'If someone can be set right, we should try harder to rescue his character than his property'; and even if termination becomes the only option, we should 'accord something to past friends because of the former friendship', in terms of sweet memories and kind thoughts (1985, p. 244 [1165b15–35]).

²² As Hoyos-Valdés (2018⁷) notes, this may be a reason [not to disfavour over-emphasise](#) a role-model approach to character development [and focus rather on learning from friends who are socially equal and at similar developmental levels](#) in the context of character friendships.

²³ [Otherwise, one is led to assume \(although Aristotle does not state this explicitly\) that character friendships, once formed, typically last for life.](#)

Aristotle is clearly willing to cut the wayward friend a lot of slack here. That is perhaps understandable in light of the fact that the loss of friendship can engender feelings of loss as strong as those of grief over another's death (cf. Kristjánsson, 2018, chap. 7).²⁴ While admirable, Aristotle may be placing unreasonably strong psychological restrictions on the dissolution of friendships as a result of the friends following divergent developmental paths. For true character friendship to be sustained, some common sensibilities have to be throbbing in the nerves of the two parties. If the two stop pursuing similar virtues in similar enough contexts, it is likely the mutual interest in each other's destiny will gradually fade – and I would hypothesise that this will happen, in many cases, long before the friend has become 'incurably vicious'. In some cases of divergent paths, the friendship simply reaches its natural summit at some point and then begins to veneer slowly in the opposite direction.²⁵ There seems to be no good reason to buy into Aristotle's argument that only radical departures from a common virtue basis can upset the inherent stability of character friendships.²⁶

(e) *Problem of initiation and trust.*²⁷ Perhaps it would have been natural to begin with this problem; however, the problems characterised above as (a)-(d) do cast some retrospective light on the initial difficulties in establishing character friendships. Aristotle blithely circumvents these difficulties apart from a couple of off-hand remarks where he says that 'though the wish for friendship comes quickly, friendship does not' (1985, p. 213 [1156b31–32]) and that we should never try to 'make a friend of someone who is unwilling' (1985, p. 234 [1163a2–4]). Aristotle's

²⁴ Recall here also that given the Aristotelian friend-as-another-self premise, mourning the loss of friendship may be tantamount to mourning the loss of oneself (cf. Nehamas, 2016, p. 201).

²⁵ [As Nehamas puts it well, friendships 'leads in new and surprising directions and, for that reason, our understanding of each other and ourselves is, and will always be, provisional, contestable, and incomplete' \(2016, p. 206\).](#)

²⁶ Nehamas correctly points out that even the development of attitudes that are not typically considered morally laden, such as divergent views on arts and aesthetics, can lead to the disintegration of good friendships, as those views will nonetheless be understood to be indicative of character differences (2016, pp. 183–184).

²⁷ Strictly speaking, this is obviously not a problem of 'stability' (as could be supposed by the title of this article). However, equally obviously, for a friendship to become stable, it must get off the ground in the first place.

whole discussion elides the full repertoire of issues that most people, I believe, will have experienced as obtruding when trying to forge new deep friendships. As Cooper puts it, he ‘does not, except incidentally, have anything to say about how friendships are formed in the first place’ (1977, p. 645).

The first concern is the very fact that, in addition to its intrinsic benefits, friendship is by its nature an ‘external good’ (1985, p. 257 [1169b10]): namely, a good that requires certain propitious external circumstances to be in place. To put it bluntly, some people simply never come within shouting distance of anyone whom they deem, rightly or wrongly, to be a potential character friend, and other people simply do not see the need for such friendships, full stop. As sensitive as Aristotle normally is to the vagaries of moral luck, one would have expected him to at least address cursorily some of those external-luck issues relating to friendship initiation, but he does not.²⁸

The second difficulty concerns the very act of initiation. Analogous concerns apply here as to the initiation of romantic relationships. The more eager party must not seem to be too eager, making a dead set at winning someone else’s character friendship by flinging herself at her head. Too much eagerness may undermine trust and cause the other party to pull up the drawbridge. There is also the danger of the existence or at least suspicion of ulterior motives. Is the person who is approaching me with so much enthusiasm really interested in getting to know me as a person, and growing together with me, *or* is she really looking for some sort of utility friendship, *or* is this just *eros* masquerading as *philia*?²⁹ Compounding the complexity of those questions is

²⁸ As Sherman correctly notes, the moral-luck problem hits harder at friendship than other character virtues, esp. insofar as we understand *philia* as a relational activity rather than just an individual state or trait of character, see 1987, p. 602.

²⁹ Again, Meilaender (1993) offers helpful comments on possible *eros–philia* conflicts and how those may impact negatively the formation of friendships between people who are potentially romantically attracted to one another, in addition to being ‘kindred spirits’.

the fact that human beings do not possess self-transparency. Even if we got an honest answer from the other person about her motives, it might not be the true answer. She could be self-estranged. In my experience, many potentially rewarding character friendships never pass through this initial stage and get on a firm footing because of lack of trust. Some people are simply too fastidious and worried about the possibility of ulterior motives to let anyone as close to them as character friendships require in terms of psychological intimacy and self-disclosure. Perhaps Aristotle would consider such extreme suspiciousness an evidence of character failings, clouding the person's moral vision. However, much as he discusses forms of excess and deficiency in connection with other virtues, he remains mute about those in the case of friendship.

A more coherent Aristotelian than Aristotle himself would say that the formation of deep character friendships requires a lot of free-flowing, fluid interactions to begin with, and that the eventual consolidation and coagulation of this fluid is subject to many internal and external constraints. There seems to be ~~very~~ little inherently stability about the way character friendships are formed or how, if at all, they proceed beyond the stage of initiation, through possible barriers of lack of trust, confidence and mutual personal attraction.

4. Five Potential Problems Affecting Character Friendships between Unequals

To help illuminate problems in character friendships between people of unequal social standing, let us consider cases of relationships between what I shall call 'guru' and 'disciple' (e.g. mentor-mentee, PhD supervisor-PhD student and others of a similar ilk), rather than the cases Aristotle foregrounds and that I cast aside in Section 2, for reasons of space, between parents and children and husbands and wives. Those latter cases are more complex because of the supposed

admixture of 'social' and 'natural' superiority. To avoid getting caught up in the quagmire of potential debate about that assumption, let us focus on the purely 'social' cases.

(a) *Problem of proportionality.* Aristotle implicitly acknowledges the danger of instability in character friendships between unequals by placing a stringent condition on what makes them work. This is his principle of proportionality, or 'equalising principle', according to which, in unequal friendships, the stronger party 'must be loved more than he loves; for when the loving reflects the comparative worth of friends, equality is achieved in a way' (1985, p. 221 [1158b26–29]). So while the weaker party gets 'more profit' (presumably in terms of character growth), the stronger party gets more honour and devotion (1985, pp. 236–237 [1163b1–15]). It is thus 'proportion that equalizes and preserves the friendship' (1985, p. 238 [1163b34]).

This is an astounding principle which can be assailed on many fronts. First, it seems to fly in the face of ordinary human psychology, old and new. Indeed, Aristotle himself seems to be flatly denying his own principle when he says later that 'benefactors seem to love their beneficiaries more than the beneficiaries love them [in return]' just like the craftsman 'likes his own product more than it would like him if it acquired a soul' (1985, pp. 250–251 [1167b16–35]). It does not help much to argue that the latter are psychological observations about how human beings really are, but that the equalising principle is a normative principle; for Aristotle is eager throughout to ground his normative theory in actual human psychology: what makes real people tick.

Second, as Aristotle presumes that the stronger party is also superior in terms of virtue, she will be superior in terms of moral sensitivity and perception: what Brewer calls 'unclouded moral vision and deliberation' (2005, p. 747). The guru will thus, under normal circumstances, be more alert to spotting sprouts of developing virtue in the disciple, that can be nourished, than

the disciple will be to fathom the depth of the guru's character strengths – not least because young people tend to 'think they know everything' already (Aristotle, 2007, p. 150 [1389b5–7]). Even if the disciple realises she has more to gain from the friendship, she may appreciate the guru more in terms of utility friendship than character friendship (see further in [4b] below).

Third, as the guru is likely to be older than the disciple, it is more common for an older person to have 'a crush' on a younger person than vice versa, and I would hypothesise that the same applies for both erotic and intellectual stimulation. Again, this would impede the equalising principle.

All in all, the equalising principle leaves uncomfortable residues. It seems neither psychologically nor morally plausible. If 'proportionality' in terms of this principle is a necessary condition for the successful development of unequal character friendships, then it is likely to make them extremely difficult to form and even more difficult to sustain.

(b) *Problem of the disciple's conflicting motivations.* The strict condition of the non-instrumentally motivated nature of character friendships places heavy psycho-moral burdens on the disciple seeking (an unequal) friendship with a guru.³⁰ On the one hand, the disciple (e.g. a student approaching a famous professor) knows how much potential utility she can gain from forming a lasting bond with the guru. Aristotle reminds us that the type of friendship 'that seems to arise most from contraries is friendship for utility', for example of 'ignorant to knowledgeable; for we aim at whatever we find we lack' (1985, p. 223 [1159b12–15]).³¹ On the other hand, however, the disciple is not allowed to aim at the friendship solely as a means to an end – even

³⁰ Aristotle does not say explicitly that character friends cannot be motivated at all by instrumentalist concerns. However, at least they must not be motivated by such concerns only.

³¹ [Talk of 'contraries' here refers to Aristotle's assumption that socially unequal friendships involve unequal virtue. I explained earlier why I have decided, for present purposes, not to question this assumption.](#)

as a means to her own self-improvement³² – for it to constitute a potential character friendship. As ‘all or most people wish for what is fine, but decide to do what is beneficial’ (1985, p. 234 [1162b35]), the disciple may become internally torn and fall prey to the moral pathology of integrity that has been widely discussed in recent decades in terms of how it hits at utilitarian thinkers with their infamous ‘one thought too many’ (Williams, 1981, p. 18).

The disciple runs the risk of having ‘one thought too many’ about the prospective friendship. In trying to suppress the thought of the potential benefits of the friendship with the guru, and by focusing on its intrinsic benefits, the disciple may end up being (or at least appearing) duplicitous to herself and others. The guru – who will have had many experiences of such approaches – will most likely be acutely sensitive to possible mixed motives. This can lead to serious conflicts and disruptions, for – as Aristotle says – ‘friends are most at odds when they are not friends in the way they think they are’, and he likens these situations to finding out that a currency is debased (1985, p. 243 [1165b5–11]).

This problem of conflicting or conflicted motivations suggests less a failure of Aristotle’s account of the potential value of unequal friendships for both parties than it speaks to the psycho-moral challenges posed by being allowed to aim at the good of self-improvement, in a potential relationship with a friend, only obliquely. I have seen friendships break down for those reasons. Once again, Aristotle’s lack of attention to this problem bespeaks insensitivity to some of the small leaks that may sink great friendships.

(c) *Problem of the guru’s conflicting motivations.* Analogously to the problem of the disciple’s conflicting motivations, Aristotle’s specification of true character friendships places significant burdens on the motivational make-up of the guru. We all know that, for Aristotle, pleasure supervenes upon and crowns successfully completed virtuous activities. However, the

³² Brewer reminds us well of this important fact, see 2005, p. 723 (footnote 3).

pleasures of friendship cannot be aimed at directly in the case of character friendship, any more than the substance of the virtues in general can be short-circuited to get straight to the benefits. However much the guru may enjoy the disciple's company and admiration (and especially if there are hints of *eros* mixed with the *philia*), the guru must love the disciple for the latter's own sake; not for the sake of any present or future pleasures. Otherwise, of course, the friendship is simply relegated to the 'for-pleasure' type.³³

Aristotle sweetens this pill with his remark that 'good people are pleasant both unconditionally and for each other' (1985, p. 213 [1156b14–16]). I take that as a reminder that there is nothing wrong (but indeed everything right) with friends reaping pleasure from each other's company as long as the friendship is not sought solely for the sake of the pleasures. It is also worth mentioning that nothing in Aristotle's account excludes the possibility that different types of friendship relations can be pursued with the same person simultaneously or in tandem. So the guru and the disciple may enjoy playing squash together, just for the pleasure of the sport, without paying any attention in those moments to the deeper layers of the friendship. Sherman takes a good example of a friend developing a love for Georgian houses, picked up from a character friend, having had no interest in them earlier (1987, p. 599). This new interest may then motivate the person to seek pleasure in this new pastime independent of the character friendship which originally occasioned it.

I would hypothesise that the motivations of friendship for pleasure and friendship for character are even more difficult to separate psychologically than the motivations underlying utility versus character friendships. Both friendships for pleasure and character require an easy spontaneity rather than an arm's-length, calculating stance. Precisely because of that

³³ That said, one could argue that the pleasures supervening upon the activities involved in character friendships are essentially different from the pleasures at work in simple 'pleasure friendships'.

psychological fact, and the fact of our own essential non-self-transparency, the guru may experience role conflicts and blind spots in his love of the disciple: shortcomings that may in the end stultify the friendship relation (by instrumentalising it through depriving it of unconditionality) rather than keeping it enduring and refreshed.

(d) *Problem of paternalism.* Brewer's account of the role of character friendships in reshaping and reaffirming each other's evaluative outlooks, 'so as increasingly to approximate a standard of shareability with others' (2005, p. 722), offers a take on the educational component of *philia* that, while going beyond the letters of Aristotle's texts, absorbs its spirit. The eventual goal is to be able to 'affirm each other's evaluative outlooks unreservedly and unconditionally' (2005, p. 730). What matters here, however, is the nature of the revision process that takes place between the aspirations for what Brewer calls 'self-affirmability' (2005, p. 728) and the eventual mutually affirmed outlooks. It is an Aristotelian commonplace that *phronetic* virtue does not have any ethical value unless it is self-chosen in a strong sense: indeed, otherwise it does not even deserve the name *phronetic* virtue. Fully virtuous persons are not only 'in concord with themselves' but also with their character friends 'since they are practically of the same mind' (1985, p. 250 [1167b5–7]). This does not mean that two character friends will always act in the same way, because their choice of actions will always be relative to personal temperament and circumstance (including social roles), but each will have an understanding and appreciation of the rationale behind the other's decision making, as it is all guided by the same intellectual virtue of *phronesis*.

Before friends, as Sherman notes, we 'bare ourselves and acknowledge the foibles and weaknesses we hide from others' (1987, p. 611, cf. Aristotle, 2007, p. 135 [1384b22–23]). It is easy enough to understand how this process works in friendships characterised by equality.

Equality of social standing will often correspond to (approximate) equality of character development, and the roughly similarly developed friends will – at least ideally – cherish the mutual self-disclosures and self-corrections that aim towards the goal of self-affirmability and growth in virtue. However, things may not be that simple in unequal friendships. For as Aristotle himself puts it, it is proper to good people ‘not to permit [error] in their friends’ (1985, p. 223 [1159b7–8]). Now, being told about the error of your ways by a friend of similar standing, and prone to errors of similar magnitude, is one thing; being told the same by someone superior to you may smack of condescending paternalism.³⁴ What I have seen in many unequal friendships is one or two of the following extremes:³⁵ either the guru dissolves all the faults of the disciple in the *aqua regia* of his love – hence depriving the protégé of the opportunity to learn and grow – or the guru becomes too eager to help the disciple, ending up (to use a famous Confucian metaphor) by pulling the shoots upwards with too much force, thus uprooting them. It is the latter option that smacks of paternalism, and such paternalism is not only unfortunate for all the well-known general reasons but is specifically bad from an Aristotelian standpoint as it prevents the disciple from developing a *phronetic* mind of her own.

Schoeman (1985) offers enlightening thoughts on this potential problem of paternalism that may jeopardise the best of unequal character friendships. He senses in Aristotle’s account a lack of healthy tolerance (when the friend fails to live up to expectations), as well as a lack of respect for the independence of the other. Interestingly, Schoeman sees in this tendency not only an over-zealous aspiration to correct the other, but also unwillingness to expose the vulnerability

³⁴ One could argue that everything will depend here on the openness of the disciple to correction, and the gentleness and sensitivity of the guru in correcting her.

³⁵ Again, it would have helped here if Aristotle had explored character friendships via his architectonic of a golden mean with extremes of excess and deficiency.

of oneself to the independence of the other (1985, p. 282).³⁶ Whatever the exact psychological mechanisms at work here, the problem of paternalism is, in my experience, a danger that menacingly threatens unequal character friendships.

(e) *Problem of role inertia*. This problem is basically a warped mirror image of (3d): the problem of divergent developmental paths. We could even paraphrase this problem as that of converging developmental paths. In an ideal situation, the disciple gradually catches up with the guru in terms of character development: their paths converge. However, the two typically remain stuck in the roles in which they first met. Whole undergraduate textbooks in sociology and social psychology are basically about this very issue of social-role inertia. This is, for example, what makes student reunions so awkward when the old teachers are present also. The students almost automatically lower themselves to a level at which they were long ago so as not to challenge the authority of the teachers.

The problem of role inertia does not mean that the guru and the disciple cannot remain friends, even character friends. In fact, it does not pose a direct challenge to Aristotle's stability assumption as such. The problem lies rather in the form that the friendship takes. It risks becoming inauthentic, even phoney, if its stability is secured via a connection of continuing unequal friendship when the two parties have, in fact, progressed to a level where it should have assumed the nature of equal friendship.

5. Concluding Remarks

This article has not aimed to offer a deflationary account of Aristotelian character friendships. I have no doubt that such friendships~~these~~ satisfy Owen Flanagan's principle of 'minimal psychological realism': they are possible 'for creatures like us' (1991, p. 32). Neither has the aim

³⁶ This seems to me to be an uncharitable reading of Aristotle, but I will not elaborate on that point here.

of this article been to discourage the formation of character friendships. Worry is, as someone one said, the interest paid on trouble before it falls due; and despite all the problems explored above, the intrinsic value~~benefits~~ of successful character friendships is~~are~~ so great that entering into those is definitely a risk worth taking, ~~other things being equal~~.

Aristotle does identify a *quantitative* problem with character friendships: that they can only be had with a very limited number of people. I have added a series of *qualitative* problems potentially affecting equal or unequal friendships, pointing out that Aristotle either does not mention these problems or never puts the relevant worries about them to rest. It is not only that he seems insensitive to the general fact of the wear and tear of time that naturally dissipates many character friendships unless they are regularly revitalised; he is singularly unconcerned about the more specific psycho-moral and psycho-social issues that pose a threat to their assumed essential stability. In order to expose this weakness, I have drawn upon a host of potential problems through a taxonomy of 5x2 categories. I realise that this taxonomy may seem slightly contrived. Another option would have been to focus exclusively on the problems that I myself consider most potentially serious – which happen to be those listed as (a) in Sections 3 and 4, respectively. However, as this is the first article that proposes to identify potential threats to the stability thesis in a systematic manner, I decided to be as inclusive as possible and simply present all the problems that I could think of, without arranging them in any explicit order of priorities or seriousness.

In blowing the whistle on some of those issues, I have stuck my head above the philosophical parapet by drawing on personal experiences and a number of social scientific studies, either directly or obliquely. Readers may not share my experiences, and they may want to draw on alternative empirical sources. I have no problems with either option. All I have

wanted to do is to encourage avid Aristotelians to consider relaxing their insistence that it is somehow conceptually true that character friendships are essentially stable.

As a final thought, I skirted the issue of character friendships between husbands and wives in Section 2 for reasons of space. There are many reasons, however, which would make it plausible to argue that a stable marriage provides the ideal soil in which true character friendship can grow. Marriage forms a traditional institution with many inbuilt buffers against the problems identified in Sections 3–4. It presents a form of life with levels of intimacy and the existence of common tasks (such as child-rearing and mutual financial provision) that seem to offer unprecedented opportunities for mutual self-affirmations and for avoiding problems of paternalism, divergent developmental paths, and so forth. Yet the fact that so many apparently stable marriages eventually break down may, by parity of reasoning, offer a testament to the fragility of character friendships.³⁷ We humans are weak-kneed beings, constantly facing moral and developmental challenges that do not always admit of any happy denouement.

Acknowledgements

I thank Talbot Brewer, ~~and~~ Robert C. Roberts [and two anonymous reviewers of this journal](#) for helpful comments on an earlier draft.

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³⁷ Of course, many marriages do not start out as, and never become, character friendships.

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