Between Advantage and Virtue: Aristotle’s Theory of Political Friendship

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Abstract:

How can the Aristotelian account of friendship contribute to an understanding of the notion of politikē philia? The aim of this paper is to sketch out a general description of political friendship in the light of Aristotle’s well-known distinction between friendships of utility, friendships of pleasure and friendships between virtuous people drawn in Book VIII of the Nicomachean Ethics. I shall define the boundaries of political friendship through the analysis of resemblances to and differences from both friendship according ethical excellence and friendship grounded in mere utility. Political friendship seems to be a kind of advantage-friendship sui generis, where the search for utility does not prevent people from displaying other-regarding qualities like cooperation, trust and loyalty, that are typical of friendship according to ethical excellence. I will also show that activity according to justice replaces the form of mutual and intimate love that should subsist in a friendship based on ethical virtue.

In our culture, the ordinary use of the word ‘friendship’ is generally confined to the characterization of some kind of intimate relationship between a few people, inspired by values like love, trust and reciprocal concern with a friend’s happiness. By contrast, in order to understand how friendship is conceived by Aristotle and the role it plays in his thought, we need to cast our net wider. The topic of friendship occupies a prominent place in his ethical writings; his treatment of philia covers books VIII-IX of the Nicomachean Ethics, a fifth of the whole work, and one of the four books of the Eudemian Ethics. In his ethical works, friendship emerges as a complex and protean dimension of human life, whose richness cannot be fully grasped without an understanding of its relationships towards other issues of high philosophical relevance: goodness, justice, happiness and self-identity.

Yet, one dimension of Aristotle’s account of friendship to which I believe it has not been payed enough attention is the political. On my view, this is partly due to the absence of a systematic treatment of polis. If we.
the notion of *politikē philia* might be that nowhere is it introduced as a proper kind of friendship, and - even if we assume that Aristotle takes it as a real form of *philia* - it might be held as a "diluted" and "reduced" form⁲.

Conversely, Yack attempts to highlight the importance of political friendship in Aristotle’s thought, although he is inclined to take it as “a fact or ordinary political life rather than a moral ideal, a source of conflict as well as a means of promoting greater cooperation”³. Unlike Yack, Stern-Gillet argues that political friendship represents a powerful ethical ideal in Aristotle’s thought, and that the reason why he does not attempt to provide a systematic account of the topic is that the nature of political friendship varies too greatly in ways that correspond to variations in the kind of constitutions, so that he would be unable to provide a general account of *politikē philia*, valid for any kind of constitution whatever⁴. Even more, given that wide part of Book VIII of the *Nicomachean Ethics* is devoted to a description of political communities of different nature (*NE* VIII, 1161a10-b12), we might ask ourselves what point Aristotle would have to include a treatment of political constitutions within the context of *philia*, if he did not hold them as forms of friendship.

In the present work I will challenge the assumptions of both those scholars who maintain that political friendship plays only a marginal role in Aristotle’s discussion of *philia* and those claiming that political friendship is just a kind of advantage-friendship which does not involve any moral ideal. By contrast, I propose that
political friendship is an essential notion in his ethical and political theory. I shall explore and re-construct his concept of political friendship (i) by finding out in what sense it might be taken as a proper kind of friendship and how it relates to the concept of justice in the polis; (ii) by illustrating in what respects political friendship resembles/differs from two of the three kinds of friendship identified in sections II and III of Book VIII of the *Nicomachean Ethics*: friendship grounded in utility and friendship grounded in ethical excellence (*aretē*).

My view is that, in Aristotle’s thought, when it comes to good communities, political friendship is a kind of advantage-friendship *sui generis*, where the search for utility does not prevent people from displaying ‘other-regarding’ qualities like cooperation, trust and loyalty, that are typical of friendship according to virtuous individuals. I hope to show that activity according to justice replaces the form of mutual and intimate love that should subsist in a friendship based on ethical excellence, i.e. a kind of love which is not conceivable between citizens who do not know each other personally.

I

In Book VIII of the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle introduces the discussion of *philia* by describing it as a kind of excellence, or something related to it, that is necessary for human life:

it will be appropriate to discuss friendship, since friendship is a kind of excellence, or goes along with excellence, and furthermore is very necessary for living (*NE* VIII, 1155a3-5).
As it might be noticed here, rather than presenting friendship as a kind of relation, he seems to be more keen on stressing its closeness to aretē\(^b\), as though he meant to emphasize the ethical aspect of friendship; it would seem that - on his view - one cannot be friend to another without possessing a virtuous state of character. Secondly, friendship is described as a very necessary thing (\textit{anagkaiotaton}) for human life. The idea of the necessity of friendship with a view to living might make us wonder whether Aristotle is holding friendship to be necessary simply for a ‘mere living’ or, rather, for ‘living well’\(^7\).

As he makes clear in Book D of the \textit{Metaphysics}, ‘necessary’ means both ‘that without which, as a concomitant condition, life is impossible’ (\textit{Metaph}. D, 1015a20-21) and ‘The conditions without which good cannot be or come to be’ (\textit{Metaph}. D, 1015a22-23). It seems to me that Aristotle’s interest is addressed towards the necessity of friendship in the light of the good life rather than in mere living, as he shows at \textit{NE} VIII, 1155a5-9 when he claims that no one would choose to live without friends, even if he had all the other good things; for even the wealthy or those who rule over or dominate others are thought to need friends more than anything - since what use would such prosperity be if they were deprived of the possibility of beneficence, which occurs most, and is most to be praised, in relation to friends?

A similar concern emerges in the \textit{Eudemian Ethics}, when he states that we think a friend to be one of the greatest goods, and lack of \textit{philia} and solitude a very terrible thing, since our entire life and our voluntary associations are with friends (\textit{EE} VII, 1234b31-34). Again, the supposed connection between friendship and the good life is supported by Aristotle’s appeal to the notion of ‘\textit{to kalon}’ which, in the Aristotelian lexicon, is intimately intertwined to aretē. An indicative example of the relationship between friendship and \textit{to kalon} is provided at \textit{NE} VIII 1155a29-31:
It [philia] is not only necessary, but fine as well, for we praise those who love their philoi, and having many philoi seems to be one of the fine things; and, furthermore, we think the very same people are good people and good philoi.

It might be thought that, in the passage at issue, Aristotle is not expressing his own theory of friendship, given that the expressions ‘we praise’, ‘seems’ and ‘we think’ occurring in the passage seem to indicate beliefs generally held by people. On the other hand, it should be reminded that Aristotle often assumes the so-called endoxa as a starting point for the development of his own philosophical views, ending up by interiorizing such general beliefs; therefore, there is no need to suppose that, when it comes to friendship, he rejects such beliefs, not least because Aristotle’s resort to ‘to kalon’ here might evoke the importance held by this notion both in his ethics and in his metaphysical thought. If so, although the idea of friendship as a necessary thing, taken at a face value, seems to be more conceptually connected to advantage than to kalon, its importance with a view to the good life locates it within the framework of human eudaimonia and the choices made with a view to it.

It is interesting that, in his ethical works, Aristotle strives to portray eudaimonia not only as an individual matter, but as a product of political expertise, whose task is to guarantee the good life and make citizens good and obedient to the laws (NE I, 1102a9-10). In that case, friendship, being declared as an indispensable ingredient of human happiness, is not only to be taken as a private and personal bond between two individuals, but also as a relationship involving the whole of the political community. This is confirmed by NE VIII, 1155a22-24, where he claims that Friendship also seems to keep cities together, and lawgivers seem to pay more attention to it than to justice.
We shall have to return to this passage later. At this stage of the discussion, it will be sufficient to see that friendship is presented as the ground of political communities, rather than being introduced as an occasional, unnecessary partnership.

Undeniably, friendship as is fostered by lawgivers presents some degree of expediency, since it is introduced also as a means through which the cohesion of cities can be brought about; yet, this aspect of utility, if connected to the preliminary definition of friendship as ‘a kind of excellence or something related to it’, may suggest that both usefulness and some kind of excellence are involved in the nature of friendship itself. Furthermore, Aristotle’s mention of friendship in relation to lawgivers and political communities might indicate his real interest in its political dimension. As I believe, the idea of political friendship involves much more than isolated interventions on the lawgivers’ part, but, by contrast, requires the active participation of each fellow-citizen.

The expression politikē philia is rarely mentioned in Aristotle’s ethical and political works, and the scarce textual occurrences do not allow us to outline directly a proper description of its prominent features. One of these occurrences is at NE IX, 1167b2-3, where Aristotle, speaking of homonoia, describes it as a politikē philia, for it has to do with the sumpherōn, i.e. what is advantageous, and ta eis ton bion, which Rowe translates as ‘what affects people’s lives’.

Similarly, at EE VII, 1242a7-10 politikē philia is claimed to be based mostly on utility:

Civic friendship has been established mainly in accordance with utility; for men seem to have come together because each is not sufficient for himself, though they would have come together anyhow for the sake of living in company.
It is undeniable that the passages above considered focus on political friendship as the ground of activities concerned with human needs and the search for advantage; however, its nature will become clearer only after having illustrated the systematic distinction drawn by Aristotle between three different kinds of friendship.

Since friendship concerns the ‘lovable’ (to philēton), and the lovable can be good (agathon), pleasant (hēdu) or useful (ehrēsimon)\(^{14}\), a corresponding kind of friendship will subsist for each kind of lovable things, given that, as Aristotle states at NE VIII, 1156a9-10, these things,

\[
\text{those who love each other wish good things for each other in the way in which they love.}
\]

As we see here, the three kinds of friendship are identified on the basis of (i) the nature of the object of love; (ii) the way in which friends love (tautōs filousin). These two aspects seem to be deeply intertwined; undeniably, the nature of what is loved will end up affecting the way of loving.

To which of these three kinds of friendship does political friendship belong? My view that a stable and good politikē philia is a kind of friendship grounded in utility, which, nevertheless, will promote in the community values like love of the other, living together, trust and reciprocal reliability on the citizens’ part. In other words, if my idea is reasonable, political friendship - in Aristotle’s theory - would consist of a sort of shared-advantage friendship in which people behave according to some degree of ethical excellence.

A first objection that might be raised is that it is quite difficult for us to imagine a civic association composed only of virtuous people and based on mutual well-wishing as though people knew each other and wished them well for their sake. As a matter of
fact, a political community includes a wide range of people of different characters, and political ties are doomed to link virtuous citizens with people of inferior worth. It might be wondered if a friendship grounded in some degree of excellence is conceivable even in such a variegated frame. As we are going to see, Aristotle believes that friendship between virtuous people is a rare phenomenon in so far as goodness is a prerogative of just a few individuals\textsuperscript{15}, which suggests that such a friendship in the political community is impossible to actualise (not least because, not even in an ideal polis where each citizen, hypothetically, behaves in a virtuous way, would every citizen know all her fellows personally).

One possible reply is that, in some cases, the many and their lack of goodness - as Aristotle conceives it - might not prevent virtuous men from acting according to complete excellence in the affairs of the \textit{polis}, as long as the less virtuous people abide by the established norms of justice. Respect for the laws in force might exist even if not all the citizens were intrinsically good, for instance if they were afraid of punishment or if they considered that through activity according to justice they would get their personal share of goods. Even in those cases, to some extent, would justice be a means to the preservation of political stability and to the avoidance of conflicts within the community.

A legal system set up by just people (especially people who are ‘inherently’ just) in order to yield political harmony may create some form of reciprocal respect between citizens\textsuperscript{16}, which might be intended to replace the intimate love proper to friendship that cannot be realised in the \textit{polis}. As far as political friendship is concerned, reciprocal loving is not to be understood as an intimate feeling between people, but rather as some form of legal, virtuous respect: in good political communities, obedience to the laws on the citizens’ part will be supported by their
intrinsic disposition of character which makes them act justly; in less virtuous cities, instead, people might abide by the established laws simply to escape punishment or, more generally, for the sake of personal advantage, without being authentically virtuous people themselves.

However, it might be supposed that even in this case will some friendship subsist among fellow-citizens, insofar as some degree of justice is preserved and people are not damaged by their fellows’ behaviour. Justice, then, would provide the necessary political bonds of reciprocity and proportional equality among all the members of a community, both virtuous and less virtuous, so replacing in this way the love and the trust typical of virtuous friends. Since justice, like friendship, seems to hinge on some sort of reciprocity, each individual will act in relation to his fellows’ needs and expect a proportionate return from them. People who are not equipped with a suitable level of ethical excellence may act according to it simply by subscribing to the norms of justice imposed by external prescription, once they have realized that adapting themselves to it will bring about greater advantage to them. This does not necessarily mean that people without noble inclinations will become virtuous and perform noble acts for the sake of the fine just by acting according to law (especially if the law is not devised with a view to the common advantage), but only that, at least, they may contribute to the well-being of the polis without being an obstacle to those who wish to pursue a virtuous kind of life.

II

In the sections that follow I propose to show that politikē philia is a real kind of friendship, corresponding to a peculiar kind of advantage friendship. Before
undertaking such a task, however, we need to stress a main problem emerging in Aristotle’s account of *philia*. Aristotle seems to exhibit an ambiguous attitude towards utility- and pleasure-friendships. On the one hand, when he points to the existence of three different kinds of friendships, he seems to legitimate utility and pleasure as the grounds of real forms of friendship; on the other hand, in more than one single occasion he presents such friendships as friendships *incidentally* (*kata symbebēkos*)\(^17\), as though he meant to stress their inferior quality in relation to friendship between good people, which seems to be taken as a relationship that truly deserves the title of “friendship”; such a friendship, in which people are “friends most of all” (*malista philoi*; *NE* VIII, 1156b10) is called “perfect” (*teleia*; cf. *NE* VIII, 1156b7; 1156b34), since, as Cooper says, “it exhibits fully and perfectly all the characteristics that one reasonably expects a friendship to have”\(^18\). Aristotle’s emphasis on both the difference between the three kinds of friendship and the perfection of friendship between good people might raise doubts as to whether friendships of utility and pleasure really deserve to be called friendships\(^19\).

Friendships grounded in utility and in pleasure are regarded as friendships *kata sumbebēkos* mainly because, as Aristotle points out at *NE* VIII, 1156a10-12, those who love *dia to chrēsimon* or *di’ hēdonēn* do not love their friends for themselves (*kath’ hautous*), i.e. by reference to the way the person loved is (or, in Cooper’s words, “in recognition of his goodness of character”\(^20\)), but, principally, in so far as some good or pleasure accrues to each of them from the other. By contrast, only friendship between good people, i.e. those resembling each other in *aretē*, is a *teleia* friendship, i.e. friendship in the full sense, because they love their friends for themselves (*kath’ hautous*), i.e. for their inner qualities (*NE* VIII, 1156b7-9).
True loving seems to be an exclusive prerogative of the latter kind of friendship. As Aristotle claims, according to a generally shared view, friendship demands well-wishing for the friend’s sake (see *NE* VIII, 1155b31); it might seem then, that even on his personal view does well-wishing for the sake of one’s friend ensure a real kind of friendship. In the *Rhetoric*, for instance, *to philein* is described as wishing for him what you believe to be good things, *not for your own sake but for his*²¹, and being inclined, so far as you can, to bring these things about (*Rhet.* II, 1380b36-1381a1).

Again, in the *Eudemian Ethics* (*EE* VII, 1241a1-14) Aristotle denies that *eunoia* exists in pleasure- and advantage-friendships at all, precisely on the ground that *eunoia* is not for the sake of the well-wisher himself, but for that of the person to whom one wishes well²².

Provided that friendship is described any relationship characterized by mutual well-wishing and well-doing out of concern for one another, how can it be combined with the idea that, of the three different kinds of friendship detected by Aristotle, two kinds do presuppose principally concern for one’s own sake rather than that concern for one’s friend? On my view, in order to solve the problem we need to consider that advantage- and pleasure-friendships are described as ‘friendships’ by virtue of some sort of similarity to friendship between virtuous people:

They also seem both to be and not to be friendships, by virtue of similarity and dissimilarity to the same thing: in so far as they resemble friendship in accordance with excellence, they look like friendships (for one of the two has the attribute of the pleasant, the other that of the useful, and the friendship of excellence also has these), but in so far as that friendship is immune to slander, and
lasting, while these kinds change quickly, and differ from the other in many other respects, they do not look like friendships, because of dissimilarity to the other kind (NE VIII, 1158b5-10).

What does Aristotle have in mind when he claims that they are friendship *kata homoiotēta*? The idea of ‘friendships *kat’ homoioteta’ presents a high degree of complexity, which would deserve a wide and detailed treatment. However, in the present work I will not examine the issue in depth; it will be sufficient to stress that different approaches to the notion of resemblance between friendships are provided in both the *Nicomachean* and the *Eudemian Ethics*.

At *NE* VIII, 1157a1-2 Aristotle tells us that the kinds of friendship that exist because of the pleasant or the useful have a resemblance to friendship grounded in goodness, since the good too are pleasant and useful to each other. A different approach to the issue of resemblance is offered instead at *NE* VIII, 1157a30-33, where friendships of utility and pleasure are claimed to resemble friendship of goodness in so far as also a relation of mere utility or pleasure brings something good; in other words, *both the pleasant and the useful are good in the eyes of those who love them*.

Differently from *NE* VIII, 1157a1-2, in which the utility and pleasure are described as inner components of virtue, in the latter passage the useful and the pleasant are not regarded as deriving from what is good *haplōs*, i.e. the good in absolute. Although Aristotle is saying here that friendships of pleasure and utility resemble in a way the friendship of goodness, nowhere does *NE* VIII, 1157a30-33 suggest that all resemblances must be mediated through the friendship of morally good men, that is that their being useful or pleasant is not dependent on the first kind of friendship.

I believe that the two approaches to the issue of resemblance introduced above can be regarded as perfectly compatible, as long as we keep in mind that, in the first case,
Aristotle is speaking of what is good haplōs, whereas, in the second case, he seems to be stressing an analogy between the perfect goodness of virtue and the goodness of utility and pleasure, which are not necessarily grounded in what is objectively good. I suggest that, in order to explain in more general terms the resemblance of the inferior kinds of friendship to the superior (without resorting to either of the two Aristotelian approaches), we might say that advantage- and pleasure- friendships resemble the friendship of goodness in so far as they manage meet some basic requirements (as I am going to show in the next section of this paper) like reciprocity, awareness of the friendship and, mainly, eunoia, i.e. well-wishing.

It is true that, in the already mentioned EE VII, 1241a1-14, eunoia is not claimed to exist in friendships of utility and pleasure; still, it might be replied that, in the passage at issue, Aristotle’s main concern is to stress the particular eunoia that lies at the basis of friendship between virtuous people, in the light of which every other kind of friendship appears devoid of well-wishing. The eunoia at the basis of virtue-friendships depends on recognition of the virtuous nature of the friend, rather than springing from the expectation of the utility or the pleasures that a possible friendship might produce. By contrast, if some form of well-wishing were admitted in pleasure- or advantage-friendships, this would be only consequent to one’s recognition of the advantage or the pleasure that such friendships can offer; when it comes to such ‘inferior’ forms of friendship, no eunoia would subsist independently of the established relationship. In that case, when in the passage in question Aristotle mentions eunoia, he does not seem to have advantage- or pleasure-friendships in mind, but, rather, perfect friendship. This might find a confirmation in the following lines (EE VII, 1241a12-14), where he describes well-wishing as archē philias, i.e. as
the starting point for friendship; in fact, only in friendship between virtuous people will *eunoia* be antecedent to the establishment of a given partnership.

However, it seems to me that a degree of well-wishing towards one’s friends will subsist even in those friendships resembling the perfect one, after all, as Aristotle explains at *NE* VIII, 1156a9-10, in any kind of friendship whatever will friends reciprocally wish good things, precisely in the way in which they love each other. In other words - I suggest - Aristotle does not mean to say that no *eunoia* exists between friends by utility or by pleasure, but, by contrast, that the nature of the object of love will affect the quality of the *eunoia* existing between friends. Furthermore, that even in friendships by resemblance is something good wished for might be entailed by Aristotle’s argument at *NE* VIII, 1155b21-27, where he introduces the possibility that the good which people love does not coincide with what is really good for themselves. At *NE* VIII, 1155b27-28 he concludes that it will make no difference, presumably because the intensity of love will not depend on the knowledge of the real good, but on the strength of the belief (true or false) that something is good for oneself. When people engage in advantage-friendships or in pleasure-friendships, they do so because they regard advantage or pleasure as good for them, even when such a good is not the good *haplōs*. It is their wishing for what they believe to be good for them that makes their loving a real form of concern, not only towards the object of their desire (i.e. advantage or pleasure), but – as I believe - also towards the friends through which the specific good they seek for is achieved.

On my view, it is plausible to assume that the pursuit of personal profit is not completely at odds with some form of well-wishing towards one who is able to provide a friend with some advantage; provided that the particular kind of concern is specified, the tendency to love one’s friend in utility- and advantage-friendships will
not appear so unnatural. It might be suggested, then, that even where personal interest is prevailing will the well-being of the other be wished for to some degree.

The idea that friendships kath’ homoiotēta presuppose a degree of well-wishing will be preliminary to the examination of political friendship, conceived as a real kind of friendship. I will now try to identify the conditions which make political partnership a kind of philia.

III

In order to define the domain of political friendship, we have to establish first in what respect it satisfies the general conditions of friendship laid down by Aristotle in the Nicomachean Ethics. In the Nicomachean Ethics Aristotle does not provide any explicit definition of friendship, but he confines himself to putting forward some basic conditions without which no form of relationship will be regarded as friendship. As we have seen, the inner core of philia appears to be eunoia, i.e. well-wishing. One cannot be friend to another unless one wishes another well and shows some kind of concern for him, even when such a concern does not spring from the inner qualities of the friend; so we can plausibly assume well-wishing in general as the main condition of friendship, even of those friendships kata sumbebēkos.

A second, indispensable feature of friendship is reciprocity of love. When at NE VIII, 1155b27-9 Aristotle explains why there cannot be friendship with inanimate objects, he underlines the absence of both eunoia and antiphilēsis, i.e. reciprocal loving. Good will, Aristotle holds, will not be friendship if it is not reciprocated:
Those who wish good things for someone else like this are said to have good will towards him, if the same is not forthcoming from the other party as well; friendship, people say, is good will between reciprocating parties (NE VIII, 1155b31-34).

Furthermore, in order to become friendship, reciprocal love should be accompanied by awareness on the reciprocating parties’ side, otherwise people would never either realise a life in common or even do anything together. At NE VIII, 1155b34-1156a5 Aristotle wonders:

Or should one add, good will that one is aware of? For many people have good will towards those whom they have not met, but suppose to be decent, or useful; and one of these might in fact be in the same position in relation to them. Good will, then, is what these people evidently feel towards each other; but how could one call them friends, if they are not aware of their mutual feelings? If there is to be friendship, the parties must have good will towards each other, i.e. wish good things for each other, and be aware of the other’s doing so.

As we can see, a third condition emerges here: awareness of mutual feeling and of the subsisting relationship.

Having established the three main conditions of friendship, i.e. well-wishing, reciprocity and awareness of the reciprocal loving, let us go to political friendship, and try to find out in what respects it meets these general requirements. As far as political friendship is concerned, reciprocity might represent an essential condition of it just in so far as every citizen is involved in the life of the community, which must be based on interchanges and reciprocal interactions, both in the economical and in the political sphere. Mutual well-wishing needs to exist in every community, although people do not know each other, since each of them is supposed to play a particular role in the city, and the impersonal reciprocity of functions relies at any rate on reciprocal good-will on the part of those who exercise those functions, with a view to supplying mutual deficiencies. Reciprocity, thus, should be at the basis of the
fulfilment of a chain of needs allowing each citizen some degree of a good life. Moreover, well-wishing must not be hidden, but it has to be shown openly and, possibly, put into practice, both in the properly political affairs and in the preservation of a virtuous behaviour in accordance to the laws of the community.

In section I of this paper I have asked myself how mutual benevolence may exist among people who do not even know each other. What allows their display of mutual and aware well-wishing? I suggested that a plausible answer might be a constant activity according to justice. Aristotle’s account of justice and his well-known distinction between universal and particular justice present deep complexities, which I will not be able to treat here. However, it is worth saying that in Book V of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, justice is described both as a form of excellence which presupposes a relationship with other individuals and in terms of a set of principles of organization underlying the well-functioning of the *polis*.

In order to promote the well-being of the community, justice must be reciprocal and involve all the citizens in a relationship, more or less impersonal, which cannot remain unreturned. Besides this, justice, by reminding the contracting parties of their reciprocal role in the friendship, also promotes awareness of the relationships established, without which individuals could eschew their own contributions and fail to acknowledge the advantages yielded by life in the community.

As for awareness, lack of it would prevent people from realising a common ground of action and of life; awareness of reciprocal loving seems to be at the basis of particular justice, which can be either distributive or rectificatory. Perhaps more than in distributive justice, the necessity for aware interactions emerges in the rectificatory, in that, as Aristotle explains at *NE V*, 1130b30-1131a9, when he draws a distinction within the sphere of particular justice into distributive and rectificatory, the latter operates in interactions between one person and another. In particular, given that the relationships involved in justice of the rectificatory kind are divided into voluntary, which include activities such as selling, buying and so forth, and counter-
voluntary ones, such as theft, adultery etc., voluntary relationships will be those more fitting our context.

As it seems, voluntary interactions, among which commercial transactions are included, might be extended to political ‘exchanges’ in general, which is confirmed by the idea expressed at NE V, 1132b31-1133a2 that reciprocal action is the basis of the city’s unity:

In commercial associations, however, the parties are bound together by a form of the just that is like this, i.e. what is reciprocal in proportional terms, not in terms of numerical equality. For it is reciprocal action governed by proportion that keeps the city together. Either people seek to return evil for evil, and if they don’t, it seems like slavery; or they seek to return good for good, and if they don’t, there is no giving in exchange, and it is exchange that keeps them together.

At any rate, both distributive and corrective justice must rely on a ground of reciprocity, and the latter form of justice seems to be the basic condition of the well-functioning of the polis, just insofar as it puts people in relation to one another, although not necessarily in personal and intimate terms. So much for reciprocity and awareness of mutual loving; in the next section I will discuss the issue of well-wishing. I am going to treat it as a separate matter in that, as I believe, such an issue is preliminary to the description of the respects in which political friendship resembles both the friendship rooted in utility and the friendship of ethical excellence.

IV

Having argued that political friendship is a real kind of friendship, let us try to find out what kind of friendship it is, or, in other words, in what way friends in political communities wish each other well. My view is that, in some respects, the well-
wishing proper to civic friendships is akin to the well-wishing of friendships grounded in utility, as Aristotle himself openly declares, whereas, in other respects, it might be compared to friendships grounded in *aretē*.

Let us now see in what respects political friendship might be taken as a friendship of utility, and in what sense it seems closer to friendship between inherently good people; as we have already seen, friendships grounded in utility are described as relationships which are not caused by the inner characteristics of the friend, but only by the advantage that can be drawn from him. That the individual is not loved for the sake of himself seems to be the main reason why friendships based on utility get easily dissolved. Were a friend loved for her inner qualities, friendship would be something lasting, as it might be entailed by Aristotle’s pronouncement on the stability of *hē prōtē philia* at *EE VII*, 1237b9-10:

friendship seems something stable, and this alone is stable.

By contrast, utility-friendships are dissolved when the parties become different, so that, if they cease being pleasant or useful, their friendship terminates (Aristotle, *NE VIII*, 1156a19-21); the useful, as Aristotle explains,

is not something that lasts, but varies with the moment; so, when what made them be friends has been removed, the friendship is dissolved as well, in so far as it existed in relation to what brought it about (*NE VIII*, 1156a21-24).

We might wonder whether political friendships possess the contingent and transitory character which is proper to utility-friendships, and also if they are friendships *kata sumbebekos*. My answer to both hypothetical questions is negative.
Although it is true that in political friendships friends do not love each other haplōs and they join in political communities for the sake of the advantage, they do not get dissolved so easily. Although Aristotle shows his realistic concern with the reasons why political constitutions often change and rebellions take place, as he does for example in Book V of the Politics, the friendship at the basis of a political organization gets dissolved only when the reciprocal relationships among the citizens hinge on an extremely low degree of justice; for instance, when fellow-citizens do not conform themselves to the legislative system in force in their community or in case the established laws fail to attain the common advantage. Aristotle’s concern for the causes of political change does not seem to be a matter of mere historical curiosity, and might reveal his eagerness to spread the need to reflect on the measures to be adopted in order to keep constitutions safe. For this purpose, political friendship would not be unessential to the community, especially if we think that friendship keeps cities together (NE VIII, 1155a22-23).

Political friendship seems akin to utility-friendships because it is founded on the continued and shared expectation, on the part of each citizen, of personal advantage as emerges at NE VIII, 1160a9-11, where it is claimed that people make their way together on the basis that they will get some advantage from it, and so as to provide themselves with some necessity of life.

In political communities people join together without knowing each other, and they are mainly related in so far as the association is a convenient way to get an advantage. In this respect, utility-friendships are surely prone to recriminations (NE 1162b16-21; 1163a9-16; EE 1243a2-b38); however, in constitutions of good quality, it seems reasonable to assume that their degree of stability will be higher than in a crude kind.
of utility-friendship. Although advantage is the first mover of civic friendships, we should not forget that the aim of expert lawgivers is to promote the highest good, and that the state, as we have already seen at Pol. I, 1252b28-30, does not seek after the mere life of its members, but rather it aims at a good life. Even more, that at Pol. II, 1262b7 friendship is openly pronounced to be “the greatest good of states” seems to imply that co-operation between fellow-citizens, although pursued in view of self-interested goals, engenders some good-will and stability within the state.

Another aspect of friendship grounded in utility is that utility-friendship is not characterized by living together, and people engaged in such a kind of friendship do not even feel each other pleasant, as Aristotle makes clear at NE VIII, 1156a24-31 when he introduces the example of friendship among old people, On the one hand, civic friendship resembles this kind of relationship in so far as people do not live together in the community except in a broad sense, and in most cases they do not even know each other; on the other hand, Aristotle sometimes observes that the bonds linking citizens each other are not the same as those linking different cities: so, for example, mere alliances, as e.g. at Pol. III, 1280b7-12:

Any polis which is truly so called, and is not merely one in name, must devote itself to the end of encouraging goodness (aretē). Otherwise, a political association sinks into a mere alliance, which only differs in space [i.e. in the contiguity of its members] from other forms of alliance where the members live at a distance from one another.

What Aristotle is saying here is that a real state must pay attention to ethical excellence. He points out that, without such a concern, law would be simply a covenant, instead of being a rule of life which contributes to making the members of a polis good and just. In this respect, political friendship resembles the kind of
friendship which involves a display of ethical excellence more than it does friendship of mere advantage.

More than in any other kind of friendship, the activities involved in primary friendship allow the exhibition and the actualisation of human potentialities\(^{41}\); citizens can act on the basis of a stable disposition of character, i.e. justice, which is even more solid if grounded on friendly feelings among them. If justice is more than obedience to a mere set of rules shared in as an external imposition and is a proper disposition of character, reciprocal trust and cooperation between just citizens will rest on a safer ground. But if justice is established by virtuous lawgivers, even when it is not an inner disposition of character possessed by all the citizens will stability be secured within the *polis*, provided that they confine themselves to sticking to the laws. Only if a *polis* falls short of justice, either legal or based on inner excellence or both, will friendship be dissolved, in so far as the citizens are mostly advantage-seekers and do not love each other for their own sake.

With reference to perfect kind of friendship, at the already mentioned *NE* VIII, 1156b7-9 Aristotle states:

However, it is the friendship between good people, those resembling each other in excellence, that is complete; for each alike of these wishes good things for the other in so far as he is good, and he is good in himself.

Intrinsic goodness prompts love between similar people, in so far as their excellence leads them to establish friendly ties with individuals provided with the same characteristics as their own. This induces Aristotle to claim that the friend is ‘another self’ (*allos autos*)\(^{42}\). As Irwin believes, “The virtuous friend is ‘another self’ because he is a virtuous person, sharing the aims and pleasures of his friend because they are
both virtuous". In political communities it is not always possible to recognize any fellow-citizen as similar to oneself, especially because not any individual can be good in an community; nevertheless, this does not exclude that even less virtuous persons may feel love towards eminently virtuous ones, for instance when friendship based on superiority is at stake.

As I have already suggested, in political friendship intimate relationships are not practicable, nor do fellow-citizens love each other for their inner features, not least because many of them do not have good dispositional traits. Only friends resembling each other in excellence want to live together, contrary to the needy, who just want some help; in order to spend their time together, friends must enjoy the same things (NE VIII, 1157b19-24); still, such a kind of intimate friendship cannot take place when friendship involves an entire citizen body, provided that it is not possible to be a friend to many, just as it is not possible to feel erotic desire for many people at once (NE VIII, 1158a10-12). The kind of love people can feel for each other in a political community hardly fits the idea of intimate love; certainly it is a kind of impersonal love, which we could identify as a form of respect; but reciprocal respect, guaranteed through the excellence of justice, assures mutual reliability and the possibility of living without fear of continuous recriminations.

In political communities people do not choose their friends, but they can be good towards each other to the extent that they are respectful of the established laws, even if their behaviour is not dictated by an intrinsic excellence. However, if some degree, even a minimal one, of aretē is maintained within the polis, political friendship can be something lasting, just like friendship between good individuals.

Reciprocal trust is surely a typical feature of friendship grounded in goodness. At NE VIII, 1157a20-24 Aristotle says:
The friendship of the good is also the only kind that is immune to slanders; for it is not easy to give credence to anyone about a person one has scrutinized oneself over a long period; also trust exists between them, and the thought ‘he would never have treated me unjustly’, and all the other features that one expects of a friendship that is truly friendship.

In order to have a civic friendship grounded in excellence, trust is required. However, trust in a polis cannot exist regardless of the existence of unjust individuals, in that their search for personal advantage can create conflicts. To this it might be replied that justice should be displayed in order to resolve disputes, and laws themselves established in order to prevent irregularities and consequent conflicts. By acting according to shared norms of justice, good fellow-citizens will establish a reciprocal bond of trust and loyalty between themselves, just as in the “virtue-friendship”. In this respect, the might be thought of as living together, just in so far as they belong to the same community and share in the same network of laws, although their community of life turns out to be impersonal.

The connection between friendship, trust and stability might also explain the reason of Aristotle’s belief that lawgivers pay more attention to friendship than to justice (NE VIII, 1155a23-24). Unlike sheer justice, which does not necessarily involve forms of affections and intimacy, friendship, conceived in its perfect form, is a better guarantee of trust and stability; in fact, to be friends implies to behave justly to one another, so that good friends will not need rules of justice (NE VIII, 1155a26-27). That friendship between fellow-citizens, although being a kind of shared-advantage friendship, might have an ethical character is confirmed by the fact that, even within utility-friendships, a basic distinction can be drawn between nomikē and ēthikē philia, the former
depending on rules and expecting returns proportional to outlay, the latter proceeding from character and involving a certain amount of trust. The more ἔθικη is the friendship subsisting in political communities, the more justice will resemble a disposition of character. Justice as mere lawfulness differs from justice as an ethical disposition. Nevertheless, I think that, in both cases, justice may be regarded as a plausible substitute for excellence, even when it is mere lawfulness, although it is not practised for the other’s sake. Behaviour according to laws of justice can promote the well being of each citizen without this being the outcome of a conscious purpose. If love cannot be felt towards unknown people, nevertheless respect can be taken as a form of well-wishing, maybe less personal and more formal, but capable of replacing the reciprocal love typical of virtuous persons.

V

Let us now time to draw some conclusion. In this paper I have tried to sketch a general description of political friendship, and define its boundaries through the analysis of resemblances to and differences from both friendships based on ethical excellence and friendships grounded in utility; what emerges from this investigation of political friendship is a picture whose distinguishing features are reciprocity of virtuous acts and useful benefits. Πολιτική φιλία appears as a system of bonds established so as to produce both individual advantage and the advantage of the whole of the community. No kind of political organization will work without the employment of some degree of ethical excellence, given that individual advantage pursued without any respect for other people’s needs turns out to shake the
foundations of the political community: lawfulness, trust and equality of opportunity according to worth.

Political friendship in non-ideal communities involves people of different sorts, among whom there will be many who are not provided with the inner dispositional traits typical of virtuous individuals; still, the adoption of norms of justice seems to supplement the lack of virtuous inner features and to promote mutual advantage according to excellence. Political friendship is neither a mere advantage-friendship, nor a pure friendship grounded in goodness; in any case, it is plausible to assume that it is a friendship consisting in some reciprocity of roles and functions and involving ethical excellence with a view to the well-being of the community.

Political friendship will never be exclusively based on authentic goodness, not even in its most ideal condition, since the intimate well-wishing proper to such a friendship cannot take place among many people who do not know each other; moreover, justice may not be practised for its intrinsic nobility, but simply for the sake of advantage. However, in any political community advantage will never mean exclusive and personal utility: rather, mutual cooperation which supplies reciprocal needs will require some degree of respect for the interest of one’s fellow-citizens.

That Aristotle insists on the characteristics of stability, trust and mutual love typical of friendship of goodness rather than sheer justice seems to imply that endorsing authentic friendship in political communities amounts to fostering a justice of higher quality than mere ‘prudential’ obedience to the established laws. In this respect, friendship becomes a source of inspiration for a good life in the polis.

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**Notes**

2 See J.M. Cooper, ‘Aristotle on the Forms of Friendship’, Review of Metaphysics 30(1977), pp. 619-48, p. 645. However, it is worth noticing that Cooper deems the topic of friendship to be “of decisive significance for an understanding of Aristotle’s moral theory” (p. 648).


4 See Stern-Gillet, Aristotle’s Philosophy of Friendship, pp. 153-154: “The answer to these perplexities [i.e. those upon the relevance of political friendship in Aristotle’s thought] lies, I submit, not in Aristotle’s unconcern with civic friendship but in his assumption that civic friendship is but the reflection, in the lives of individuals, of the constitution of the state. Considered in itself, civic friendship is neither noble nor pettily contractual, neither disinterested nor manipulative, neither stable nor unsteady. It is the constitution of the state which, to a large extent, determines not only the nature and the extent of the civic bond but also its moral worth. Like the criteria of good citizenship, those of civic friendship, according to this interpretation, will vary with the constitutions. While sound constitutions encourage all citizens to have regard for each other, defective and deviant ones prompt rulers to be solely concerned with securing a balance of power [...] There is little in common between the kinds of civic friendship that these constitutions generate”.

5 Tr. Rowe, in S. Broadie-C.J. Rowe (eds.), Aristotle. Nicomachean Ethics. Translation, Introduction, and Commentary (Oxford, 2002), from which all the passages of the Nicomachean Ethics quoted in this paper will be taken.


7 In more than one case Aristotle implies a conceptual distinction between ‘mere living’ (zēn) and ‘living well’ (eu zēn); see for instance Pol. I, 1252b29-30, where it is said that the polis ‘grows for the sake of mere life’, but ‘it exists for the sake of a good life’ (Tr. Barker, Aristotle. Politics (Oxford, 1948)); cf. Pol. III, 1280b33-35); see also Pol. I, 1253b24-25 (with reference to the art of acquiring property Aristotle says: ‘it is impossible to live well, or indeed to live at all, unless the necessary conditions are present’).

8 My italics.


11 The notion of *to kalon* occurs many times in Aristotle’s ethical works, especially in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, where he repeatedly stresses that acting according to each ethical excellence is a fine thing (see for instance *NE II*, 1109a29-30, where it is said that getting the intermediate in actions and passions is a rare thing and something fine; see also its relationship with voluntariness of actions at *NE III*, 1113b).

As for the employment of *to kalon* in Aristotle’s metaphysical thought, see *Metaph. Δ*, 1013a20-23, where *to kalon* (alongside *to agathon*), is mentioned as principle of knowledge and movement; see also *Metaph. Λ*, 1072a27-30, where the object of desire, which coincides with the object of *nous*, is what appears fine to us, and the primary object of *boulēsis* is what is objectively fine (*to on kalon*); again, at *Metaph. Δ*, 1074b24, it is said that the divine *nous* thinks *to kalon* rather than any thing whatever; finally, see *Metaph. Μ*, 1078a31-b5, where Aristotle claims that *to kalon* can be found not only in actions, but even in immovable things, and its supreme forms are orderly arrangement (*taxis*), proportion (*symmetria*) and definiteness (*to òrismenon*).


14 *NE VIII*, 1155b18-19.


16 See Annah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Garden City (N.Y.), Doubleday, 1958), p. 218. Arendt defines respect as “a regard for the person from the distance which the space of the world puts between us”. The same passage is quoted by Yack in *The Problems of a Political Animal*, p. 113.

17 The expression ‘*kata symbebēkos*’ is often employed in Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* as distinct from expressions employed to qualify *ousia*, like ‘*to kath’ hauto*’. See for instance *Metaph. Δ*, 1017a7-8, where he claims that Being (*to on*) can be said ‘accidentally’ or ‘for itself’; cf. *Δ*, 1015b16-17; see also *Γ*, 1003b32-33; *Γ*, 1007a29-32. When Aristotle applies the notion of ‘*kata symbebēkos*’ to friendship, he seems to be referring to his idea that “only character friends are essentially and without adventitious qualification” (Cooper, *Aristotle on the Forms of Friendship*, p. 636).


The treatment of resemblance between perfect friendship and friendships *kata sumbebēkos* in the *Nicomachean Ethics* seems to differ greatly from that provided in the *Eudemian Ethics*. See A.W. Price, *Love and Friendship in Plato and Aristotle* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1989), p. 131: “It is characteristic of the *Eudemian Ethics* that it offers a more logical theory, or presentation of a theory, than does the *Nicomachean* about the relation between the varieties of friendship”. In the *Eudemian Ethics* friendship of goodness is described as “primary” (see for instance EE VII, 1236b2: *prōtē philia*), presumably in accordance with the meaning of “primary” at EE VII, 1236a19-22: “The primary is that of which the definition is implicit in the definition of all, for example a surgical instrument is an instrument that a surgeon would use, whereas the definition of the instrument is not implicit in that of surgeon” (cf. *Metaph.* Z, 1028a34-6; M, 1077b3-4). As is claimed at EE VII, 1236a17-20, different kinds of friendships are defined exclusively with reference to one kind of friendship, i.e. the primary (*pros mian [philian] [...] kai prōtēn*). This kind of comparative analysis, has lead Owen to claim that friendships of utility and pleasure appear to be “focally related”, even in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (see G.E.L. Owen, *Logic and Metaphysics in Some Earlier Works of Aristotle*, in I. During and G.E.L. Owen (eds.), *Aristotle and Plato in the Mid-Fourth Century* (Göteborg, 1960), pp. 163-190, p. 169); cf. R.A. Gauthier and J.Y. Jolif, *L’ Éthique à Nicomaque. Introd., Traduction et commentaire* (Louvain, Publications Universitaires, 1970), pp. 669 and 686). By contrast, Annas claims that no trace of focal meaning, so prominent in the *Eudemian Ethics*, can be found in the Nicomachean account of friendship (see J. Annas, ‘Plato and Aristotle on Friendship and Altruism’, *Mind* 86(1977), pp. 532-54. p. 547). I tend to agree with Annas, although, on my view, a ‘focal’ approach might be tracked down in *NE* VIII, 1157a1-2, similarly to *EE* VII, 1236a17-20.
Cf. NE VIII, 1156b19-23, where Aristotle points out that “every kind of friendship is because of some good or because of pleasure, either without qualification or for the person loving”; and that “the good without qualification is also pleasant without qualification”.


See footnote above.

See Walker, Aristotle’s Account of Friendship in the Nicomachean Ethics, pp. 185-190.

See Cooper, Aristotle on the Forms of Friendship, pp. 642-643. With reference to NE VIII, 1167a13-14 he claims: “So what Aristotle denies here is that εὐδοκία precedes, and possibly turns into, a friendship of one of the derivative sorts; he does not deny that once such a relationship has begun eunoia develops within it”.

Aristotle’s main intention here is that of showing that eunoia is not a sufficient condition of friendship.

That well-wishing for the friend occurs in all the three kinds of friendship identified by Aristotle is the thesis maintained by Cooper in Aristotle on the Forms of Friendship; however, I do not agree with Cooper when he claims that Aristotle really makes general well-wishing and well-doing out of concern for the other person’s good a condition of any kind of friendship, even of advantage - and pleasure-friendships, without specifying the particular way in which friends reciprocally love themselves. His point is that Aristotle “does not maintain that friendships of the derivative kinds are wholly self-centered: pleasure- and advantage- friendships are instead a complex and subtle mixture of self-seeking and unself-interested well-wishing and well-doing” (p. 626). Criticism against Cooper’s view, to which I subscribe, is lodged by Kahn in C.H. Kahn, ‘Aristotle and Altruism’, Mind 90(1981), pp. 20-40, p. 21, footnote 1. Kahn thinks that the evidence provided by Cooper is inconclusive.

See Stern-Gillet, Aristotle’s Philosophy of Friendship, p. 38.


At *NE* V, 1129b30-3 it is claimed that universal justice prescribes complete excellence of character to the highest degree, since the person who possesses it exercises his excellence in relation to other people, and not just by himself; such a view finds support in the common belief that justice is an *allotrian agathon* (see *NE* V, 1130a2-5). On the notion of *allotrian agathon*, see G. Zanetti, *La Nozione di Giustizia in Aristotele* (Bologna, il Mulino, 1993), p. 21: “La giustizia universale si differenzia dalle altre virtù grazie al suo costitutivo rapportarsi all’*altro*: essa rappresenta dunque il fondamento intersoggettivo della virtù, la fondamentale interazione presupposta da Aristotele nella sua concezione della giustizia come virtù sociale, ponte teorico fra ciò che in epoca moderna sarebbero stati definiti come ambiti dell’etica e della politica”. Cf. R. Bodéüs, *La Véritable Politique et ses Vertus Selon Aristote* (Leuven, Éditions Peeters, 2004), pp. 109-12.

See *NE* V, 1130b30-1131a1.


Cf. Aristotle, *Pol.* III, 1280a31-32; 1280b32-5. Irwin, *Aristotle’s First Principles*, pp. 399-406. See in particular p. 402: “Since the city is comprehensive, seeking to plan for everything that is needed for the complete good, a rational agent has good reason to want to share in its deliberations. This argument implies that a virtuous person does not value the city simply because of its general concern with the expedient (Cf. EN 1160a9-14). Aristotle suggests that essentially political activities are themselves part
of the complete and happy life. If the city provides only the instrumental resources needed for a complete and happy life, it is not clear why the virtuous person values just action for its own sake”.

40 See Stern-Gillet, Aristotle’s Philosophy of Friendship, p. 45.

41 Ibid.

42 I will not treat the issue in detail; however, the notion of friend as *allos autos* has often been thought to represent “the crucial concept which permits Aristotle to pass from virtuous self-love to an altruistic concern for the interests of others” (Kahn, Aristotle and Altruism, p. 29). It might also be taken as implying that the virtuous person’s attitude towards herself might serve as a normative paradigm for her attitudes towards her friends (see Whiting, Impersonal Friends, p. 4), in other words, that relations of *philia* to others derive from one’s relations to oneself (see Annas, Plato and Aristotle on Friendship and Altruism, p. 539). The idea of friend as ‘*allos autos*’ casts a new light on the relationships egoism and altruism. It seems that, on Aristotle’s view, there is some compatibility between egoism (as involving rational desire towards what is good in absolute, e.g. ethical excellence) and altruism (conceived as a form of concern for the welfare of others for their own sake). See for instance T. Nagel, The Possibility of Altruism (Princeton (NJ), Princeton University Press, 1970). See also J.L. Mackie, Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1977), p. 132, who speaks of “self-referential altruism”, i.e. a “concern for others who have some special connection with oneself”; cf. pp. 84 f. (he has adopted this terminology from C.D. Broad, ‘Egoism as a Theory of Human Motives’, Hibbert Journal 48(1949-50), pp. 105-114). The logical priority of egoism over altruism is stressed by Kahn, Aristotle and Altruism, p. 26 (cf. Stern-Gillet, Aristotle’s Philosophy of Friendship, pp. 70, 76 and 103).

43 Irwin, 2002, p. 398. Cf. Kahn, Aristotle and Altruism, p. 31: “The excellence and pleasure of the good life partially consists in the observation of moral activity; but we are better placed to observe the actions of others; hence the happy man will need others around him, who are like him in goodness and bount to him in friendship, so that he can observe their actions as aking to his own (1169b30-70a4)”.

44 Cf. Stern-Gillet, Aristotle’s Philosophy of Friendship, p. 41.

45 See Aristotle, NE VIII, 1156b10-2.

46 Cf. EE VII, 1237b10-13, where it is claimed that there is no stable friendship without confidence.

47 See S. Stern-Gillet, Aristotle’s Philosophy of Friendship, p. 150.