

Robert Crouse's Tragic Reading of Aristotelian Friendship¹

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It is an honour to be part of this academic commemoration of Father Robert Crouse, and especially to present to you some thoughts on his reading of Aristotle. I first encountered Aristotle in a seminar with Professor Crouse—we read the theological ontology of *Metaphysics* Lambda as the first text in a class devoted to Augustine's *De Trinitate*. Reading Lambda under his guidance, a text which I have heard he called his favourite book, was nothing short of revelatory, though I confess I never fully grasped, as we moved on to Augustine by way of Philo and Origen, why exactly we had started with Aristotle. Only in looking at his very brief comments on Aristotle in preparation for this talk have I come to more fully understand why a class on Trinitarian theology begins with Aristotelian theology. The subject of this brief intervention will be Professor Crouse's brilliant and provocative reading of Aristotle's treatment of friendship. One of the distinctive features of Crouse's reading is how he relates friendship to our contemplation of God, in fact how he sees contemplation as friendship *with* God, and how he relates both friendship and philosophical contemplation to God's self-thinking. I hope by bringing out some of the more remarkable features of his treatment of Aristotelian friendship, I can also bring before us some features of the bigger picture of Professor Crouse's interpretation of Classical Antiquity and its relation to Christianity, since I think this comes out with particular clarity in his treatment of friendship.

Friendship was a prevalent theme in Professor Crouse's work: we are blessed to have his treatment of friendship in Cicero, St. Augustine, Pseudo-Dionysius, Boethius, St. Anselm, St. Bernard of Clairvaux, Aelred of Rievaulx and of course, his beloved Dante. But Aristotle was always the beginning point for the investigation of this theme, having given us "the most complete and systematic account of the theory of love and friendship that we have from

1. This paper was presented to the Academic Celebration of Professor Robert Darwin Crouse, Dalhousie Department of Classics, 14–15 October 2011.

Classical antiquity.”² He insists on two methodological points in approaching the most complete account of friendship in classical antiquity. First, we must begin by suspending a contemporary presupposition about love which will distort our reading of both ancient and medieval approaches to the question: the Greek terminology of *philia*, *eros*, *agape*, and their Latin correlates *amicitia*, *caritas*, *dilectio*, must not be too sharply distinguished—they are, in the ancient and medieval authors, used “more or less interchangeably, or with subtle differences of emphasis.”³ Second, to understand a text like Aristotle’s treatment of friendship, one must avoid looking at his thought “in a vacuum,”⁴ and so Professor Crouse wisely advises us to consider this account of friendship in the context of his teacher Plato’s writings on the subject, especially *Lysis*, *Alcibiades* and *Symposium*. I want to show how Professor Crouse’s reading of the *Ethics* according to these principles opens up Aristotle’s practical philosophy in new and exciting ways far off the beaten path of contemporary scholarship on Aristotle.⁵

For Professor Crouse, the discussion of friendship in the *Nicomachean Ethics* plays a mediating role in that work, between the treatment of the moral and intellectual virtues which conclude in Bk. VI, and the consideration of the happiest lives which culminates in his investigation into the divine life in Bk. X.⁶ In relation to the treatment of *praxis* in the books which precede it, friendship for Professor Crouse, in a wonderfully concise formulation which to me surpasses all other treatments of Aristotelian friendship, “is not just a particular virtue but includes all the rest, as the form in which they have their actuality, their concrete life.”⁷ Importantly, friendship itself opens up onto the political, and beyond the friendship between two individuals, it is in the life of the family and the city that virtue is actualized, which is just to say that the turn to the social relations of friendship in the *Ethics* is completed by its

2. Robert Crouse, “Aristotle’s Doctrine of *philia*,” *Anglican Free Press* 19.4 (2002): 15–18, at 18.

3. Robert Crouse, “Love and Friendship in Medieval Theology: Aristotle, St. Augustine, St. Thomas and Dante,” in *Christian Friendship: Proceedings of the 25th Annual Atlantic Theological Conference*, ed. Susan Harris (St. Peter Publications: Halifax, 2005), 135–58, at 135.

4. Robert Crouse, “Aristotle’s Doctrine of *philia*,” *Anglican Free Press* 19.4 (2002): 15–18, at 15.

5. One notable exception is Aryeh Kosman’s excellent treatment of friendship in Aristotle. Kosman’s reading also brings the theological significance of Aristotle’s doctrine of friendship to the fore. See Aryeh Kosman, “Aristotle on the Desirability of Friends,” *Ancient Philosophy* 24 (2004): 135–54.

6. How the two treatments of pleasure which themselves bookend the two books on friendship fits into the schema is not made explicit by Crouse in his writings.

7. Robert Crouse, “Aristotle’s Doctrine of *philia*,” *Anglican Free Press* 19.4 (2002): 15–18, at 17.

sequel, the *Politics*.⁸ For all practical activity is essentially relational, and the virtues we develop are only actively exercised in our relations with our fellow human beings—it is here that the potentiality of the characters we have acquired get their most explicit actualization. Our being, the character we have become, is put into act through our being friends with one another in all the different relations we can have to each other, and Aristotle exhaustively (and exhaustingly) outlines these various forms of relation. What is implicit but wonderful in Professor Crouse's insight about the place of friendship in the argument of the *Ethics* is how it is made possible by his two methodological principles. When we take into account that we should not oppose the love of *philia* to the love qualified as *eros*, we can see that giving *philia* this mediating role is a thoroughly Platonic insight, for here as in Plato's *Symposium*, love is defined as a *daimon* mediating between human and divine.

Much could be said about both *Lysis* and *Alcibiades* and their connection to Aristotle's doctrine of friendship, but for reasons that will become clear, I would like to focus on the connection between the *Ethics* and Plato's *Symposium*. Both *Symposium* and *Ethics* have as their chief goal defining what is the happiest human life. At the heart of *Symposium* is the opposition between two alternative views of happiness: one which the dialogue will qualify as the perspective of *comedy*, which sees our happiness as lying in human, finite, sensual, practical pursuits or ends, and the other as the perspective of *tragedy*, locating human happiness not at all in multiple finite ends but in the theoretical pursuit of the divine, infinite, intellectual, supra-sensible end, the Good itself or the Beautiful itself. *Eros* is the solution to this otherwise unbridgeable divide between the practical secularity of comedy and the theoretical and theological direction of tragedy. At the end of the dialogue, when Socrates discusses the question with his tragedian and comedian companions about whether the same man can write both tragedy and comedy—this should be read as posing the question of whether and how one life can unite a practical immersion in and appreciation of the multiplicity of natural, sensible finite goods with a theoretical elevation to the unity of the supra-natural, immaterial Good beyond goods.

The possibility that Professor Crouse opens up here is reading the *Ethics* as a whole, and the treatment of friendship in particular, as the philosophical sequel to the *Symposium*—I would say that Plato is at his most Aristotelian in that dialogue. To my mind, this is the most important question of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, perhaps chiefly occupied with understanding the question of happiness and the relation of the two happiest lives: the life of

8. On friendship as the ground of political associations, see *Nicomachean Ethics* VIII. 1155a22–30; *Politics* II.4 1262b7–13 and III.9 1280b29–1281a10.

practical virtue and activity and the life of theoretical contemplation. In other words, the *Nicomachean Ethics* seen as a sequel to the *Symposium* is primarily occupied with the question of the relation of comedic *praxis* to tragic *theoria*. But what would surprise most readers today is the way Crouse shows Aristotle to be concerned with a theological question in a discussion of human love which seems distinct from Plato's discussion in how human-focused it is. In this light we can see how, in the best kind of friendship, a good person loving another good person for their character, something of the divine principle, where the best thing in the world thinks the best thing in the world—God as self-thinking thought—is reflected in the summit of human relationships. The perfectly single, simple, and self-related activity of divine self-thinking is in some sense present in our friendships, since the awareness of one's friend is akin to self-awareness, given that the true friend is another self. In this best friendship, which is most voluntary, least compelled from without, and most enduring, a friendship between equals, where the beloved is just like oneself, the good's love of the good through loving awareness of another just like itself, we have *in human practicality* a thoroughly practical and hence relational image of the wholly self-relational activity of the divine nature, which is thought thinking itself. This perfection of our practical life itself even leads into the life of theory, since the consciousness of his friend "comes about through their living together and sharing in speech and thinking. For this would seem to be the meaning of 'living together' for human beings, and not as for animals feeding in the same place."⁹ And while the most common friendship of utility treats the other as means to my personal end, while the friendship based in pleasure remains only so long as the friend is a source of pleasure for me, only the friendship of goodness of virtue relates to the other person as an end in him or herself. Here we are on the way towards *theoria*, the disinterested relation to an object as it exists in itself. Hence our love of friends, like all our loves, like all our activities, like all the activities we or any being do by nature, are ultimately desires for God, the single, simple activity of immobility which moves the world as the beloved (ἐρώμενον).¹⁰ As with Plato, we cannot understand human love, natural love, and love for God as separate—putting the discussion of friendship in this light is I think the great interpretative insight of Professor Crouse's reading of Aristotle.

The key move in Crouse's interpretation of friendship is the characterization of the life of contemplation, which has as its ultimate object God and whose activity is itself a participation in the pure thinking of God, as a divine friendship, a friendship between the human and God. Rather than

9. *Nicomachean Ethics* IX.9 1170b10–14. Except where noted, all translations are my own.

10. *De Anima* II.4 415a26–415b7; *Metaphysics* XII.7 1072b3–4.

leaving the discussion of friendship behind after book IX in the treatment of the contemplative life, Aristotle is understood to be moving the discussion towards its logical culmination, by articulating the aspiration and limitation of the highest form of friendship. This is confirmed in a passage not cited by Professor Crouse where that one who cares for and preserves the activity of his mind is said to be θεοφιλέστατος, most of all a friend to the gods.¹¹ Yet when Aristotle makes his point about how friendship requires the relative equality between friends by drawing a contrast between this equality and God's radical superiority over any human, Crouse understands this claim about the impossibility of divine-human friendship as a claim about the impossibility of a stable active union with God through contemplation. "When one party is removed to a great distance, as God is, the possibility of friendship ceases," Aristotle writes.¹² For Crouse, this is confirmed by the Aristotelian insight into the life which contemplates God, that "such a life is too high for man."¹³ It is too high because we are compound beings with desires and minds, with bodies and souls, and consequently we are cut off from that being whose activity is simple, a mind apart from body and desire. In the light of these passages Professor Crouse is able to conclude that Aristotle articulates "the tragic conclusion of the Hellenic doctrine of *philia*,"¹⁴ and argues that it is only through the Christian redemption and transformation of the finite human that this "nobly tragic Hellenic doctrine"¹⁵ can be actually united to its deepest longing for divine union.

Aristotle himself seems to recognize in his discussion of friendship that what is required for there to be a real friendship of radical unequals would be a form of condescension on the part of the best towards the worst side of the relationship. Aristotle *does* acknowledge the possibility of unequal friendships, using as examples the friendship between a king and his subjects, the friendship between a father and his child (or extending further into the past, of long-past ancestors and descendents). The king works for the good of his subjects, caring for them in order that they might do well, as a doing good in pre-eminence (ἐν ὑπεροχῇ εὐεργεσίας).¹⁶ Even more radically, the father or ancestor causes the very being of the child, its preservation through nurture and its improvement through education—in both the political and

11. *Nicomachean Ethics* X.8 1179a24.

12. *Nicomachean Ethics* VIII.7 1159a, cited in Robert Crouse, "Aristotle's Doctrine of *philia*," *Anglican Free Press* 19.4 (2002): 15–18, at 18.

13. *Nicomachean Ethics* X.7 1177b26–7.

14. Robert Crouse, "Aristotle's Doctrine of *philia*," *Anglican Free Press* 19.4 (2002): 15–18, at 18.

15. *Ibid.*

16. *Nicomachean Ethics* VIII.11 1161a13.

domestic examples we have friendships where one naturally rules and the other naturally is ruled, and where there is a complete asymmetry in terms of the goods conferred. Later on in the book, Aristotle explicitly compares the parent-child relation to the god-human relation: “The *philia* of children towards their parents, and of men towards the gods, is a (*philia*) towards what is good and above us.”¹⁷ The ruling side gives all manner of goods to the ruled, and what is returned is ultimately just honour and service. In stressing the possibility of friendship between a ruling cause or source and what it produces and sustains, is Aristotle not here suggesting the possibility of a religious piety towards a generous divinity which might unite the most asymmetrical of relations, that is, between god and human?

It is important to see that for Aristotle, this condescension of God to the human has already occurred in one qualified form: in the fact of God’s being the cause of the ordered structure of nature. This is not only the fact that this world *exists*, but also the fact that it is so remarkably intelligible to us, both in the way each part can be understood in itself, as well as the way divine being is manifested in and through each part and the relation of these parts to one another. As Aristotle says in a discussion of why it is philosophically worthwhile to think about the parts of animals,

in each (kind of animal) there is something natural and beautiful. For absence of haphazard and conduciveness to some end exist in the works of nature, and there most of all. And the purpose or end for the sake of which they have been constituted and have come to be reaches the zone of the beautiful (τὴν τοῦ καλοῦ χώραν).¹⁸

The good or the beautiful is present in nature through nature’s rational intelligibility. For Aristotle, that this is so follows from Plato’s argument in *Timaeus* that the gods cannot be jealous¹⁹—to speak in a Crousean mode—a god is by its essence a friend. For Aristotle, the non-jealousy of the god means it is essentially self-revealing—it does not reserve contemplation of itself to itself, but by necessity produces a world through which we can come to share in this contemplation of the good or beautiful.²⁰ It would be disgraceful for us not to strive towards this end, for although it is in a way beyond our compound nature and only truly possessed by God, it is, perhaps paradoxically, also what we are, and what we are for. Here, in the theoretical life as in the practical, I see not tragedy, but the reconciliation of the comic and the tragic.

17. *Nicomachean Ethics* VIII.12 1162a4–5.

18. *Parts of Animals* I.5 645a23–27.

19. *Timaeus* 29e1–2.

20. *Metaphysics* I.2 982b28–983a5.

Although I want to stress this condescension of God to us through nature in Aristotle, one cannot deny Professor Crouse's basic point, that one cannot move without awe and wonder from Aristotle to the Biblical account of John 15, in which Christ, as we heard last night, says "Henceforth I call you not servants, for the servant knoweth not what his lord doeth, but I have called you friends, for all things that I have heard of my Father I have made known unto you."²¹ At the same time, it seems not quite adequate to qualify the argument of the *Ethics* as tragic, as demanding but not fulfilling the desire for comedic immanence of the Good, having this as an impossible beyond. Just as Socrates in *Symposium* seems to unite the tragic and the comic in his being bathed and wearing beautiful slippers while lost in contemplation of the Beautiful itself, the last man standing who can out-drink everyone while articulating a complex philosophical argument about the relation of humanity to divinity, I take it that Aristotle also articulates a reconciliation of comic and tragic both in the practical life and in the theoretical life. Practical life, and the friendships and political associations in which this life has its concrete actuality, is both complete in itself and aspiring unconsciously to the contemplation of the highest things beyond itself; theoretical life is both what we are and beyond what we are. I find it difficult to place either of these comfortably on the side of the tragic.

It is a comfort, even if we put aside the question of friendship between mortal humans and immortal God and restrict ourselves to relationships between human beings, that friendships are possible between intellectual and moral unequals, between those alive in the present and their ancestors who have died, between individuals and those who are the source of their being what they are. For most of us here today, that is how we stand to the Reverend Dr. Robert Darwin Crouse, one of the founders of the distinctive intellectual enterprise that constitutes the life of the Dalhousie Classics Department. To a friend like this, the debt cannot be repaid, and what we give back cannot be equal to what we have received. But devotion to his intellectual pursuit of understanding the continued relevance of ancient truth and beauty, and recollection of what he has taught us about this tradition through his teaching and writings, provide a way for us of maintaining a true *philia* with him.

21. John 15.15 (King James Version).