Educating in friendship based on Aristotle’s Ethics

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The study of friendship in the Aristotle’s Ethics implies its presence in moral education. The priority that Aristotle concedes to friendship as the greatest external good, and the necessity of this virtue in order to be happy, should be addressed in an adequate fashion in secondary school programs. Aristotle distinguishes three types of friendship, but only perfect friendship helps to acquire virtue. Reciprocity is the condition for the existence of friendship: this is the most important thing to be taught in the education of this virtue. Relationships between young people through social networks distort the understanding of friendship as a virtue. However the virtue of friendship is necessary to grasp politics as a service and human love as a stable relationship. A proposal is made to introduce education in friendship at secondary school according to this conception of ethics. This teaching should include a theoretical part about what friendship and character are, how to share time, to appreciate the good that exists in friends’ actions and to promote wishing good to others; but this is not enough, because education in virtue also requires practical knowledge. Also needed to complete friendship are two virtues: forgiveness and humility in order to learn self-forgiveness.

**Key words**: friendship, happiness, virtue, reciprocity, secondary school.

1. **Friendship, the key virtue in Aristotle**

   Friendship is a special virtue in the Aristotle’s Ethics. He states that friends are the greatest of external goods (NE, 1169, b 10) and considers friendship to be a key virtue; he also affirms: “it is an excellence or implies excellence and it besides most necessary with a view to living” (Aristotle, NE, 1155 a 2-4). Friendship is not the principal virtue, but is the most necessary one, because it is not possible to live without friends. Likewise, friendship is relevant because Aristotle dedicates two books of the Nicomachean Ethics to explaining it. In this sense, Macintyre (1984) points out that Aristotle’s conception of friendship as a common project to conserve the life of the polis has disappeared because it has been relegated to private life.

   Aristotle specifies that friendship is a kind of love. He distinguishes three things that are lovable: the useful, the pleasant and the good. Using this distinction he proposes three types of friendship: to “love each other for their utility” (NE, 1156a 10-11), to “love for the sake of pleasure” (NE, 1156a 13-14), and the third, the “friendship of men who are good, and alike in excellence; for these wish well alike to each other qua good, and they are good in themselves” (NE, 1156b 7-9). The first two are accidental; the third is the perfect friendship that is naturally “the surest, the most abiding, and the finest form” (MM, 1209b 13). The question about the connection of the three types of friendship is studied by Price (1990), but he states the difficulty of establishing if they are “focally connected”, because Aristotle never defines the conditions of the focal connection.

   The consideration of friendship as the greatest of external goods implies the relevance of explaining it. Aristotle underlines three reasons. First, because nobody wants to live without friends, so it is desirable for everybody. In this sense, Aristotle explains that sometimes people consider prosperity to be the most valuable thing in life, but it is useless if people do not have the opportunity of doing good. But friendship makes possible to do good to others. In this point Wadell indicates that “we cannot have the moral life without them (friends)” (p. 55). The second reason is that everybody wants to feel accompanied by the friend when there is
mishap, because in moments of misfortune friends are a refuge to overcome them. In this context Plato (Lysis, 211 e) also affirms that friendship is the most desirable thing. However, we can add a third motive: in the relation that Aristotle establishes between justice and friendship, he indicates the necessity of friendship in order to become just. He justifies this point since the practice of justice requires friends so as to be just with them. Besides, friendship is also indispensable in relation to happiness, because the happy man needs friends.

It is also relevant to note that friendship is a necessary condition in order to attain happiness, because everybody wishes to have friends. This desire for friends should consequently be included as something necessary to become happy: nobody is happy without friends. The explanation of this point facilitates understanding the relation between good and happiness; because someone who is has many friends has more possibilities of doing good to them. At the end, Aristotle focuses on the idea that in order to achieve the good, the proper object of the will, it is necessary to have friends, because without them it is not possible to help anybody.

With respect to the question of how we can become a friend of others, it is right to say that at the beginning people can make friends for utility or pleasure, and can do good things to them. Aristotle explains that the first and second types of friendship can be exercised by people who are not virtuous, but perfect friendship can only be between virtuous people. The statement that the acquisition of virtues is necessary to have friends should be explained. Good is always done to others, but if people do not have friends it is more difficult to do good because good is primarily done with respect to friends. Thus we may conclude with Aristotle that friends are necessary to do good; this also explains the impossibility of being happy without friends.

Aristotle affirms that friendship for utility or pleasure does not make us better in the order of good: only perfect friendship does so. Therefore, the condition for this friendship to be possible is that both friends must be virtuous. Consequently, the bad man is incapable of perfect friendship for three motives: because he is unable to take pleasure in the good; because he cannot esteem it in others; and because he is incapable of being esteemed himself as good person, because he is not (Polo, 1999). Thus, Aristotle underlines, those who have virtuous friends can become more virtuous and as a consequence can be happy.

Another important point is the question about when a relation between two people is true friendship. Aristotle says: “goodwill is a friendly sort of relation, but it is not identical with friendship” (NE, 1166b 30); he adds, nevertheless, that “goodwill seems, then, to be a beginning of friendship, as the pleasure of the eye is the beginning of love” (NE, 1167a 3-4). Friendship based on pleasure is the same as friendship beginning with a good feeling. Therefore, friendship requires, as a previous condition, to wish the good to those for whom one feels goodwill. This is helpful to understand how people should be educated to acquire friendship and, following Aristotle, how we must begin by encouraging good desires between persons. However, this is not perfect friendship because it is based on a relationship between superior and inferior arising from sympathy, “that is, from wishing good to someone” (MM 1210 b 24-25).

Aristotle also determines that love for others starts by love for oneself, “for sharing and the wish for a thing’s existence and for its well-being and everything else are found in this” (MM 1211a 3-4). He thus indicates that in some way the capacity to love others requires that each one loves oneself. This love is not selfish, because it is based on loving the good in
ourselves, so before we can wish the good for others, it is necessary to wish it for oneself. However, the condition of friendship towards ourselves is the harmony between our passions, “when the reason and the passions are in accord”, as Aristotle explains: “when it [the soul] has become one there will be friendship toward oneself” (MM 1211a 33-35).

Happiness in Aristotle’s philosophy is totally different from the Platonic theory of happiness as a supreme idea of good, outside of human nature, placed in the world of Ideas. Aristotle defines happiness as “a certain kind of activity of soul” (NE, 1099b 26) and it should be permanent and in accordance with complete excellence (NE 1098a 18). But what is the excellence to Aristotle? He distinguishes two classes of excellence, intellectual and moral:

intellectual excellence in the main owes both its birth and its growth to teaching (for which reason it requires experience and time), while moral excellence comes about as a result of habit, whence also its name is one that is formed by a slight variation from the word for habit (NE, 1103a 14-18).

At this point Aristotle clarifies that the passions and faculties cannot be excellent because they are not acts coming from the will, so that they are not the result of human acts. Habit is acquired by the repetition of good acts according to human nature; passions and faculties, however, are not a consequence of habit.

Next, Aristotle says that moral excellence is virtue. The relation between virtue and happiness explains what friendship is, because friendship is a key virtue and thus education in this virtue is absolutely essential in order to explain what happiness is. Thus to understand how it is possible to be happy the virtue of friendship is necessary.

In conclusion, education requires us to recover Aristotle’s theory of friendship as an adequate way to be more virtuous. We consider that it would be inappropriate to confuse perfect friendship with the other two. Friendships for pleasure or utility are not perfect because they do not need virtue to be exercised: they are possible between people who are not virtuous. In addition, perfect friendship is necessary for certain activities organized by people to make this world better. Friendship should be present in many relationships between people, and this is another reason for underlining the importance of this virtue in Aristotle.

2. The necessity of education in friendship at secondary school

After explaining the essential points of Aristotle’s theory of friendship, it is important analyze why is necessary to introduce this question into secondary school education. Aristotle considers that friendship is not only a key virtue but even a condition to be happy. We can, then, see the appropriateness of including instruction about friendship in the education of young people. In addition, adequate teaching in this virtue could improve relations between young people, and as a result they could become better persons.

Friendship is very valuable for young people; they have a strong desire to “spend their days and lives together; for it is thus that they attain the purpose of friendship” (NE, 1156b 4-6). This underlines the interest in this virtue and the importance of providing a good education in it. However, a significant point in Aristotle’s teaching is that young people become friends quickly (NE, 1158 a 5) and this friendship is based on pleasure, so it is not permanent because young people constantly change the object of their pleasure. Nevertheless, it is a difficult
question because if friendship is seen by young people as a superficial relation it means ignoring an essential way to acquire the virtues. Aristotle is clear on this point and underlines that only perfect friendship contributes to growing in virtue, so it is important to teach young people the meaning of perfect friendship. This is probably not an easy issue, because they do not know how to help to their friends. It is essential that this be taught at secondary school because teaching how to do good to others is the way to acquire the virtues; and they should start by helping their friends because, as Aristotle points out, it is easier to do good to one’s friends.

Another important contribution of Aristotle is his emphasis on the help one receives from a friend, because when we are wrong, it is usually a friend who keeps us from error (NE, 1155a 11-12). This happens because the friend understands that to correct a friend is to wish him well. But now there is a significant risk because the relations that social networks promote are not friendship. Aristotle said that to be a friend of another person it is necessary that each of them knows the other, but the relationship generated by social networks does not imply a previous knowledge between those who are getting in contact. The relations fostered by social networks spread the message that it is good to have many “friends”, so that the principal aim of social networks is simply to accumulate such “friends”, even though they are not known in reality. This is a serious mistake, because it means turning friendship into a superficial relation, not including an authentic preoccupation for the other, and lacking in virtue. This kind of friendship is accidental because it is not lasting and is not useful for gaining virtue. There is another problem added to this: Aristotle (NE, 1157 b 19-20) says that friendship requires sharing and in the relations of social networks there is no real coexistence. On this point Cooper (1980) makes an important comment when he says: “friendship requires, at a minimum, some effective concern for the other person’s good (including his profit and his pleasure) out of regard for him” (p. 316). It is rare that “friendship” on social networks is begun because we wish good to others. Finally, Aristotle (NE, 1158 a 26-27) underlines that it is preferable to look for friends who are good, not just pleasant.

Aristotle (NE, 1157 a 10-12) indicates that compatibility of character tends to strengthen friendships. He affirms that when someone looks for friendship he desires to find some quality that he wishes to possess, and it is easier to discover it in someone who has an affinity of character with him. It thus makes sense to consider that if a special education in friendship for young people should be taught at secondary school, it should include teaching about character. This would include two points: first, knowledge of what character is and how many different kinds of it exist; second, an understanding what the character of each one is and how to recognize people who have a similar character. This teaching is not common in secondary school programs, and it needs to be taught because in order to learn how to live charity with others, we need first to understand what friendship is. Aristotle points out the key of the virtue of charity because he says that love between two persons starts with friendship.

The friendship in young people has another characteristic: Aristotle comments that “they live under the guidance of emotion, and pursue above all what is pleasant to themselves and what is immediately before them” (NE, 1156a 32-34). In general, young people want friends to spend time with them and look for them because they feel comfortable with them. However, Aristotle explains that friendship is not a feeling related to the pleasure of having friends. So in teaching friendship we must not confuse friendship with emotions or feelings, even though Aristotle notes that pleasure always accompanies friendship.
Secondary school teachers should present this theory of friendship because of the connection it makes with other virtues: in this way, Araiza (2005) affirms that friendship implies the possession and actualization of all the ethical virtues. Aristotle notes that a friend wishes good to his friend and thinks how he can help him because friendship consists precisely in this; but this capacity is only present in the one who is virtuous. Therefore, keeping a friendship implies acting to help one’s friend. Thus friendship includes two actions: to think how to help the other, and also to do the good to them. Both of these are part of perfect friendship. However, the desire to do the good others is benevolence, but it does not automatically suppose activity and does not contribute to the acquisition of virtues, although it does facilitate it. Rodriguez (2000) sums up this point when he says that education in virtues demands the practice of friendship. He affirms that a friend helps his friends to know themselves better and also to exercise prudence in a more effective manner.

Friendship is also important in the polis. Aristotle indicates that there is a relation between friendship and justice, indicating that the polis is the place where friendship can be exercised. He notes that politics is the noblest human activity, for it consists in serving others. Specifically, a politician should provide for the good of the citizens; but this requires thinking what others need and how to give it to them. This double approach is the same as that which exist between friends, and so Aristotle suggests that “the student of politics, then, must study the soul, and must study it with these objects in view” (NE, 1102a 22-23). This knowledge of the soul is part of friendship, because a friend should study everything related to the soul in order to understand how he can help to his friend. Thus teaching about friendship is fundamental for young people who want to dedicate themselves to politics.

Nowadays education in transferable skills is especially present at secondary school. One of these skills is teamwork, which is seen as vital in order to be more efficient and to improve productivity. This skill would grow if it was founded on friendship, for teamwork is understood by friends as a part of the object of their friendship; in the same way, cooperative learning is easier if it is between friends because friendship implies cooperation. Again, education in friendship would enable young people to develop these skills of teamwork and the cooperative learning.

Reciprocity is a condition for the existence of all three types of friendship. On this point Aristotle clearly shows that friendship requires benevolence accompanied by reciprocity: “goodwill when it is reciprocal [is] friendship” (NE, 1155b 33). This explanation is significant for education in friendship: because friendship consists in wishing good to others or doing good to others, it is evidently important for growing in goodness. When reciprocity is absent there is no friendship; indeed, this necessity of reciprocity also underlines the fact that friendship is a virtue and not only a good feeling. Reciprocity also implies activity: that is, friendship is acquired by doing good to one’s friends. In this sense, Polo (1999) contends that the action of the will is an activity and on this account friendship is more excellent in whose will is more active.

This point helps us to understand the human love between two people who desire to constitute a family, because this requires reciprocity. This love only lasts while it is exclusive and reciprocal, and these are precisely conditions for this love to last. Education in friendship, which requires teaching the importance of reciprocity, is thus an excellent training in order to understand human love. It is moreover convenient to concentrate on perfect friendship, because reciprocity demands equality between friends (EE, 1241b 11-12). Human love is
similarly based on wishing the good to the person one loves, while the love among young people, when it is centred on passion, easily fades. It may also be noted that a friend never complains that he loves more than his friend; and this is fundamental to preserve love in human relationships requiring stability, such as the family. Thus friendship is one of the keys to a lasting matrimony.

Aristotle said that friends are chosen, and this indicates that reciprocity is a condition for perfect friendship, whereas the other two friendships arise from passion. The choice of the people that one loves is the most important choice in life, and it requires an adequate apprenticeship because it is not innate knowledge: but this is not usually taught at secondary school. This relationship of friendship should be stable as a condition to raise a family, an institution necessary to safeguard the unity of society. The stability that characterizes perfect friendship is the same that a family should have. Thus human love as an exclusive self-giving between two people who love each other necessitates understanding friendship as Aristotle explains it.

The intention to do good to others requires us to know what friendship is, because in order to do good it is always easier to start with friends. In general, friendship is necessary in human relations; so an adequate education about it would improve many of the activities in which people work together. The great relevance of friendship underlines the convenience of teaching it at secondary school.

3. Introducing Aristotle’s conception of friendship in moral education at secondary school

Education in the virtues is part of moral education, so an instruction in friendship should be part of the moral education program, particularly at secondary school. Adolescence is the age when people develop serious relationships, and it is advisable to give an appropriate formation in friendship to young people at this stage. Aristotle’s conception of friendship could be a key part of this necessary instruction.

Education in friendship is not a technique: it is a moral virtue and cannot be exercised without the activity of the will. Learning how to make friends is not simply an intellectual knowledge, because it requires the participation of the will. In the same way, the acquisition of virtue is practical knowledge: education in virtue demands being virtuous in order to teach it well, so that the one responsible for this education becomes a model for the pupil. This also means that the one who is more of a friend of his friends will be able to explain better what friendship is and to educate adequately in this virtue. However, this contrasts with Aristotle’s affirmation that it is not possible have a lot of friends (NE, 1171a 6-7), because friendship demands that we spend time rejoicing and grieving in an intimate way with our friends. Thus Blum (1980) says that: “the caring within a friend is built up on a basis of knowledge, trust and intimacy” (p. 69). Nevertheless, this is not an impediment to education in friendship; Steutel and Carr (1990) indicates that Aristotle compares the acquisition of virtue to the mastery of skill, although for them the intervention of the judgment of wisdom means that it is impossible to assure the acquisition of virtue by mere mechanical adherence to general rules or precepts. According to Aristotle, the teaching of virtue involves education of the character and in this context it is essential to pay attention the feelings of ones students (Arthur, 2003).
Nevertheless it is insufficient, because to become the friend of another it is not enough to wish to be his friend.

Regarding who is the most convenient person to teach how acquire virtues, there is a striking difference between Plato and Aristotle in the opinion of Sherman (1989). She indicates that Plato considered that this duty was the responsibility of an expert in ethics; Aristotle, on the other hand, stated that the parents are those most responsible for ethical education. Children see their parents as models to emulate, and parents are also best people to attend to the specific needs and requirements of their children; they also have more authority to educate their children in the acquisition of virtues. On this point it is worth commenting that Aristotle considers that virtues are taught by emulation or mimesis, and for this he gives special importance to the character of the people responsible for teaching virtues. Steutel (2004) points out that the role of educator in this teaching is essential, even more so than Aristotle would be inclined to say.

Castillo (1992) specifies two reasons to start education in friendship at secondary school. First, it helps each student to know himself better; second, friendship requires having friends for putting all the virtues into practice. However, after studying Aristotle’s concept of friendship we would have to say that there are some other important points that should be present in education in friendship.

1. To know what friendship is. One manner to achieve this is suggested by Noddings (2002): she proposes that students can learn what friendship is by reading different stories about relations between friends and examining what these characters give to the friendship.

2. To learn what character is and how to recognize that another person has the same character as oneself. The basis of this is the equality that friends should have, as Aristotle says. On this point it is important not to confuse friendship with enjoyment, because someone who has friends only for pleasure does not achieve virtue.

3. To understand how to share time with others: Barachi (2008) says: “spending time together is essential to the coming to be of friendship in its most accomplished enactment” (p. 277). Aristotle affirms that distance does not break friendship; it is an absence of constancy that does this.

4. To promote the disposition of wishing good to others. This has two facets: to promote a good feeling with others and to avoid all that might damage it. Aristotle is very clear on this point: those “who are friends on the ground of excellence are anxious to do well by each other” (NE, 1162 b 6-7). This characteristic is attributed to those who are friends with perfect friendship. On this point, Barachi (2008) comments that friends share their disposition toward the good because they are similarly interested in love for the good.

5. To learn from the good actions of others. The educator in virtue must be virtuous, because this is what this knowledge implies; for Stern-Gillet (1995), it arises “the love that Aristotle claimed to characterize primary friendship stems not only from affection but also, and more importantly, from a proper appreciation of the moral stature of the other” (p. 40).

These five points are the starting point for education in friendship, but they are not enough because without reciprocity friendship does not exist. Education in friendship should therefore focus on promoting reciprocity, not only as a desire but also as an activity, since friendship is a virtue and so increases when it is exercised. A condition to live reciprocity is love
for oneself, so this too must be included in any education to promote friendship. On this point, it is important to know what it means to be a “friend of oneself”; it is to love the virtue that is present in oneself. This love not is selfish: it would only be so when love for oneself is greater than the love for others.

6. To teach how to increase reciprocity between friends. As Aristotle says, this reciprocity is activity, so this cannot be promoted only by different activities that help one to think of others. The growth of reciprocity implies necessarily to be virtuous: there is no other way to achieve it. As Curren (2000) indicates, “only the virtuous can let themselves be known to each other, trust each other, and be liked for themselves” (p. 96). This is important in order to understand the relation between friendship and all other ethical virtues.

These six points indicate that reciprocity must be taught as part of education in friendship, because it is the condition not to lose virtue and indeed to continue growing in it. This means that education in friendship implies teaching that virtues are acquired in order to help friends—this, at least, is what Aristotle says. A serious analysis of reciprocity can help us to understand why it is that the virtuous person does not stop loving his friends even when these do not return his love. In this situation, there is no friendship in the absence of reciprocity, but it is important to teach that a friend should not stop loving someone who is not his friend any more. This comes from the truth that it is better to continue loving a person because it will facilitate befriending others. The virtuous person does not forget his former friends and always desire his good.

All of these proposals can be deduced from Aristotle’s theory of friendship. However, there are two important points we need to add to education in friendship that Aristotle does not explain. The first is learning to forgive others. Rivas (2011) explains that Aristotle understands forgiveness in a double sense, as both indulgence (“forgiveness is, when one does what he ought not under pressure which overstrains human nature and which no one could withstand”: NE, 1110 a 23-25) and compassion (“for it is on these that both pity and forgiveness depend, since the person who is ignorant of any of these acts involuntarily”: NE, 1111a 1-2). But this is insufficient: in fact, forgiveness is part of the reciprocity that there should be between friends. It is essential to teach others to forgive, but this requires starting to forgive oneself. This point is related with the virtue of humility, which is essential for education of young people and is not usually present. It is interesting to note that Aristotle does not consider humility as a virtue, as can be seen from his reference to it in his Ethics:

The man who thinks himself worthy of less than he is really worthy of is unduly humble, whether his deserts be great or moderate, or his deserts be small but his claims yet smaller. And the man whose deserts are great would seem most unduly humble (NE, 1123b 9-12)

Humility is connected to love for oneself and we need to learn how to be forgiving with ourselves. This issue should have an important role in education in friendship, because only the humble person understands what forgiveness is; to forgive others, one needs to be humble.

4. Conclusion
The Aristotle’s conception of friendship is hardly present in secondary school programmes. However an analysis of his theory reveals the importance of friendship and the reasons that Aristotle argues to consider it in a special way. Friendship is the greatest of external goods, and is needed in order to be happy and to acquire other virtues. Aristotle distinguishes three different types of friendship, but only perfect friendship makes us better. This friendship is the love of a friend because he is virtuous and we love the good that exists in him. All three kinds of friendship start with desiring the good for our friend and this good can be utility, pleasure or virtue. This wish must be reciprocal between friends, because this is a condition of friendship. Aristotle also affirms that love for oneself is a condition to love others; obviously this should not be confused with selfishness. In addition, friendship is necessary for the growth of other virtues.

The relationship between justice and friendship that Aristotle proposed has disappeared, but it would be beneficial to recuperate it, because friendship is essential in many circumstances of young people’s lives. This helps us to understand that relations maintained through social networks are not friendship, because do not fulfil the conditions for the existence of friendship: this is something that young people need to know. Young people dream of entering politics, but for this they need to understand what friendship is, because it is the way to value politics as a service to others. In the same way, friendship is present in teamwork and cooperative learning because is easier to develop them between friends. The love that exists between two people that want to start a family is based on perfect friendship.

Following Aristotle’s Ethics, we propose an education in friendship as an essential part of the moral education in the virtues. Aristotle specifies that only virtuous can teach virtue and this is mainly a responsibility of parents, but this teaching is also opportune at school. On this point some ideas have been proposed: to know what friendship is; to know what character is and how to recognize the character of others so as to identify people with a similar character; to promote desiring the good of others; to learn to share time and gain knowledge of the virtues that others have. We have to help students make friends, living reciprocity with their friends; and this is a practical exercise, because friendship is a virtue. There are two important virtues to complete the theory of friendship: forgiveness and humility, so as to learn to forgive oneself.

Bibliography


