

The Philosophy of Friendship

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The philosophers

- Pythagoras (c. 500 BCE)
- Socrates (d. 399 BCE)
- Plato (428–347 BCE)
- Aristotle (384–322 BCE)
- Seneca (1 BCE/4 CE–65 CE)
- Epictetus (c. 50–c. 135 CE)
- Simplicius (6th cent. CE; exiled in 529 CE)

Some vocabulary

- Greek *philia*, ‘friendship.’ Also the related, hard-to-translate verb *philein*.
- Greek *erōs*, ‘love.’

Aristotle: The “Wishing Well” Principle

- Three possible objects of friendship:
 - The Good
 - The Pleasant
 - The Useful
- Some desiderata:
 - Friendship should be mutual.
 - Therefore, we cannot have friendship for anything inanimate.
 - We must have, not just goodwill, but reciprocated goodwill (“wishing the other well”).
 - Both parties should be aware of the reciprocated goodwill.
- “Complete friendship is the friendship of good people who are similar in virtue.” (*EN VIII.3*)
 - Ideal friendship is between (approximate) equals.
 - In true friendship, the friend is genuinely admirable.
- Relationships between unequals?
 - Children to their parents
 - Humans to the Gods
 - Debtors to their creditors
 - Questions of payment & money...
- Applying the three-part typology:
 - Dissolving a friendship?
 - How many friends should I have?

The Stoics: Only the good person is a friend.

- Freedom vs. slavery: What is up to us?
- Every living thing (including humans) is most strongly attached to its own (perceived) benefit.
 - When considering potential friends:
 - Where do they locate their benefits?
 - In what is outside themselves, or in their own power of choice?
 - “If they locate it in external things, don’t call them friends, any more than you call them trustworthy, or reliable, or courageous, or free; indeed, if you have good sense, don’t even call them human beings.” (*Discourses* 2.22; trans. Hard)
- What if our “friends” hold us back?
 - “Choose, then, which you prefer: to be held in the same affection as before by your former friends, by remaining as you used to be, or else become better than you were, and no longer meet with the same affection. For if the latter course is preferable, you should follow it immediately and not allow yourself to be distracted by other considerations, because no one can make progress if he is hesitating between two courses. ... If you’re caught between two paths, you’ll incur a double penalty, since you’ll neither make progress as you ought, nor acquire the things you used to enjoy.” (*Discourses* 2.10, trans. Hard)

Simplicius: Choosing our Relations

- The hook: Epictetus, *Handbook* §30:
 - “The appropriate actions for us to do are usually measured out for us by our relations.”
- Every relation is “a coordination of things in regard to each other.”
- Three axes:
 - Natural vs. voluntary (chosen; “prohairesis”)
 - Similar vs. dissimilar
 - Associative (uniting) vs. disassociative (dividing)

	<i>Natural</i>	<i>Voluntary</i>
<i>Associative of similars</i>	brothers	friends
<i>Associative of dissimilars</i>	father & son	teacher & student
<i>Disassociative of similars</i>	members of unrelated families	enemies
<i>Disassociative of dissimilars</i>	predator & prey	prosecutor & defendant

- Choosing our friends:
 - Similar character.
 - The rule of reason: a single criterion shared by both.
 - What things does the person desire?
 - NOT external things: they’re not up to us, and they are divisible (a zero-sum game)
 - Internal things (“sciences and virtues”) are exempt from these limitations.

- Ending a relation?
 - Voluntary relations were formed by choice, so can be ended by choice.
 - This can be for good (dissolving enmity) or for ill (dissolving friendship).
 - Natural relations were not chosen, so cannot be ended by choice.
- Friendship makes natural relations fully voluntary (and therefore more valuable).
 - Simplicius: “Rational and voluntary things are more elevated than natural things, and approach more closely to the Unity that unifies all things.” (*trans. Brennan & Brittain, modified*)

Recommended Resources

Plato

Plato's most complete discussions of friendship and love are in the *Lysis*, the *Phaedrus*, and the *Symposium*. The same very good translations of all of these can be found in either of the following:

- Plato, *Complete Works*, edited by John M. Cooper. Hackett, 1997.
- *Plato on Love*, edited by C.D.C. Reeve. Hackett, 2006.

Aristotle

Aristotle's justly famous discussion of friendship comes in Books VIII and IX of the *Nicomachean Ethics*; a very readable complete translation, with helpful endnotes, is:

- Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, translated by Terence Irwin. Second edition. Hackett, 1999.

Episodes 44 and 45 of Peter Adamson's podcast, "The History of Philosophy Without any Gaps," situate Aristotle's discussion of friendship within his discussion of excellence and the good life:

- <https://historyofphilosophy.net/aristotle-ethics>
- <https://historyofphilosophy.net/aristotle-friendship>

Epictetus and Seneca

A truly superb translation of Epictetus' complete works, with helpful introduction and notes:

- Epictetus, *Discourses, Fragments, Handbook*, translated by Robin Hard. Oxford World's Classics, 2014.

There are many translations available of Seneca's letters. The two volumes linked below (covering the first two-thirds of the letters) have some slightly archaic language, but also the great virtue of being in the public domain, and therefore free. The Latin original and English translation appear on facing pages.

- Volume 1: <https://archive.org/details/adluciliumepistu01sene/page/n21>
- Volume 2: <https://archive.org/details/L076SenecaTheYoungerEpistulaeMoralesV6692/page/n7>

Peter Adamson's "History of Philosophy" podcast (mentioned above, under Aristotle) gives a nice overview of Seneca and Epictetus in episodes 65 and 66, respectively:

- Seneca: <https://historyofphilosophy.net/seneca>
- Epictetus: <https://historyofphilosophy.net/epictetus>

Simplicius

Even though he was a Platonist, Simplicius' most extended discussion of friendship comes in his commentary on §30 of Epictetus' *Handbook*. The entire commentary has been translated and published in two volumes; the section on relations and friendship is in the volume which covers the second half of Epictetus' text:

- Simplicius, *On Epictetus Handbook 27–53*, translated by Tad Brennan and Charles Brittain. Bloomsbury Academic, 2014 [originally Duckworth, 2002].