

Friendship and Appropriate Actions

One of our most useful texts on ethics from Late Antiquity is a commentary on the *Handbook* of Epictetus, written by Simplicius, one of the last Athenian Platonists, who was exiled together with Damascius and the other philosophers in 529.¹ Commenting on §30 of the *Handbook*, in which Epictetus explains that “the appropriate actions for us to do are usually measured out for us by our relations,” Simplicius offers a framework for classifying relations, and an extended discussion of friendship, as situated within that framework. It’s worth noting that Epictetus himself doesn’t mention friendship at all within §30. For Epictetus, this section deals with how to correctly apply our power of choice (*prohairesis*) to “natural” relations between human beings. §31 of the *Handbook* deals with our relations to the Gods, and only in §32 (in the context of the appropriate use of divination!) does Epictetus himself get around to mentioning friendship.

Following Simplicius, we can consider five parts to the topic: (1) how to classify friendship among “relations” more generally; (2) the power of friendship to transform other types of relations; (3) criteria for the selection of friends; (4) the appropriate ways of behaving, to maintain a friendship; and (5) the goods which come from friendship.

I

Simplicius begins by framing the problem:

We should first grasp what a ‘relation’ is, and then attend to its different kinds. Well, to put it generically, a relation is a coordination of things towards each other. [...] A relation is a mean between the things which have it, and they possess each other by the relation, or rather are maintained by each other, so that even when they are discriminated and become different from one another they are not completely torn apart, but remain each other’s *relata*. (83,31–41)

He then classifies relations along three axes:

1. Whether the relation is natural or prohairetic. “Prohairetic” is a technical term, indicating something which involves the faculty of choice, or the exercise of our power of choice (in Greek, *prohairesis*). This concept of prohairesis is central to Epictetus’ ethical theorizing.
2. Whether the relation is associative or disassociative. That is, does the relation draw the *relata* together harmoniously, or does it drive them in opposing directions through conflict or opposition?
3. Whether the *relata* themselves are similar or dissimilar in kind.

Combining these three binaries yields eight categories into which a relation can fall. We can summarize Simplicius’ examples of each of the eight kinds in the following chart:

¹ Simplicius’ commentary is translated in the *Ancient Commentators on Aristotle* series, in two volumes, by Tad Brennan and Charles Brittain. The section on friendship is in the second volume. All quotations are taken from this translation; page and (approximate) line numbers are those of Dübner’s 1840 edition of the Greek text, as they appear in the margins of Brennan and Brittain’s translation. All parenthetical remarks in the quotations are the translators’ rendering of Simplicius’ own text; square brackets indicate my own additions or corrections.

	Natural	Prohairesic
Associative of similars	brothers	friends
Associative of dissimilars	father & son	teacher & student
Disassociative of similars	members of unrelated families	enemies
Disassociative of dissimilars	[predator and prey] ²	prosecutor & defendant

There are also intermediate cases:

The relation between husband and wife, however, seems to be a sort of mean between the natural and prohairesic coordinations (since it participates in both), which renders appropriate actions in accordance with the dissimilarity between them (since the husband is the husband of a wife, and the wife the wife of a husband). The relation of neighbors is also a mean, although they render appropriate actions according to the similarity between them. The relation between ruler and ruled is partly natural (since it is always and everywhere natural for the superior to rule the inferior), and partly prohairesic (when the rich rule and the poor are ruled in virtue of this coordination), or partly mixed (when they choose the wiser people to rule by common consent). (84,28–38)

II

For our purposes in thinking about friendship, the natural/prohairesic distinction is the most important. Simplicius explains that prohairesic relations have a greater value than merely natural ones. But this is not just that there is a special value in employing our prohairesis deliberately and intentionally (though Simplicius would certainly say that this the case). Even more importantly, there is a special class of prohairesic relations which, unlike all of our natural relations, improve or benefit the soul. By contrast, Simplicius suggests that all natural relations (and implicitly, some prohairesic ones, too) benefit only our bodies or our material goods—which, in Platonic terms, are our soul’s possessions, and the possessions of our possessions, respectively.³

So, our parents, insofar as they are parents, give life to our bodies, and provide us with material goods. But our teachers, insofar as they are good and genuine teachers, improve our souls by leading us toward virtue. Simplicius explains:

The appropriate actions towards teachers of good things are, in a way, the same as those towards parents. But these actions are perhaps charged with an additional intensity, because teachers are nurturers and care-givers not of our bodies, but of ourselves, and they act not by natural necessity (like parents among both irrational animals and human beings), but by a good prohairesis that imitates the divine Goodness in leading souls fallen into the realm of generation back up whence they came. Appropriate actions towards teachers largely concern the requirement to follow their orders unhesitatingly, as if [a] God were giving commands. (A teacher of

² Simplicius’ example is “things which are divided by spatial or temporal intervals,” which is accurate, but perhaps a bit challenging. By comparison with his example of a prohairesic disassociation of dissimilars, we might consider “predator and prey” as an example which would also fit into the natural class, and be a bit more clear for the modern reader.

³ According to Platonic philosophy, each of us is a soul, who merely *has* a body.

what is naturally fitting will not order anything that does not tend to this aim.) But if our parents happen to be teachers of good things as well, then since the two relations have been combined, we should render to them the appropriate actions according to both relations: we should revere them as a model of the divine because, like [a] God, they have become the causes both of our being and of our well-being. (86,2–19)

Importantly, the activity of choosing our relations is ongoing: not something which happened in the past, when the relation was first established, but something which we continue to do for the duration of the relationship. This, too, will reflect in time the way in which the Gods act eternally.

We can see this from a concern that the translators raise about the naturalness of relations between family members. Simplicius reminds the reader about Plato's account of the choice of lives that each soul makes prior to birth:⁴

Even if your brother is unfair, you must preserve the natural coordination to a brother entailed by the relation, and you must preserve the agreement you made with the universe when you chose to come to these rather than to some other parents, brothers, or relatives. (85,37–41)

Commenting on this passage, Brittain and Brennan claim that “The line between natural and prohairetic relations gets a bit unclear if after all we chose our relatives,” suggesting that the crucial distinction is “not the natural/prohairetic split, but rather the “reversible/irreversible split (or revocable/irrevocable)” (p. 136, n. 80; parentheses in original).

We must consider, however, whether the translators' note misses the point in a way that illuminates something important about Simplicius' view of prohairesis. In the passage just quoted, Simplicius is reminding us of a choice made in the past, as a means of ethical encouragement in the present. But the encouragement works precisely because that choice is over-and-done: while its effects persist into the present, the choice itself belongs entirely to the past, and for that very reason, the relation which resulted from that choice is no longer, considered in itself, subject to our prohairesis. A relation based on such a past, but now immutable, choice is for Simplicius an entirely natural relation. Prohairetic relations, by contrast, are chosen in the present, in a consistently ongoing way. We are actively choosing our friendships at every moment that we continue to maintain them—a theme to which we'll return in part IV below.

III

How then does Simplicius advise us to select our friends?

One must make the selection first by looking at the similarity of the two characters involved, since dissimilar characters are unsuitable for friendship, even if both are of good repute (milder and more stable characters don't fit with excitable and fiery ones). (86,26–30)

Secondly, we should consider how a potential friend treated previous friends. But most of all:

⁴ Plato discusses this choice of lives most explicitly in the “Myth of Er” at the conclusion of the *Republic*.

The third thing, which is also the beginning, middle and end, is whether he is ruled by his irrational emotions, or reason has control in him to any extent. Following on this, one must examine his desires, to see whether they are moved to fine and good things (or things praised by good people) or to pleasant and shameful things (or things praised by trashy people) – and still more, whether his desires and aversions are well-controlled and easily persuaded by right reason, or intense and unbridled, preferring what seems pleasing to themselves. Desires like that, which force everything to do what they decide, are not suitable for the unity of friendship. And desires that place their good in external things – in possessions or bodies or political reputations – these are also unfit for friendship. For since such things are divisible, someone who desires them very intensely and takes the larger share inevitably leaves the smaller share, so his friend can no longer get an equal share. This is obvious in the case of possessions and bodies, but it's also true of those who thirst for reputation: they inevitably want to be the only one with a reputation. The goods of the soul, however – the sciences and the virtues – are not diminished in one person by another person's having them, since they are undividedly present in the people who have them. In fact, they are actually increased, since they are roused and blaze up together in the souls of the people who have them, and are multiplied by being shared around, and a single light of truth and good life shines out (as it does from sticks rubbed together). (86,32–87,4)

IV

Once he has explained how to select our friends, Simplicius goes on to explain how to behave toward them, so as to preserve and strengthen that friendship:

Such is the selection of friends. Their treatment and preservation, however, will be correct by one set of rules: Treating our friends as we want them to treat us. Always minimizing in our thoughts the goods they get from us, and magnifying the ones we get from them. (And the opposite for oversights: minimizing their mistakes, and regretting ours as greater.) Not supposing that we have anything private which doesn't belong to our friends even more than to ourselves. Being first to yield with pleasure, as if you were yielding to yourself, given that a friend is another self according to the ancient saying. But since you are both human beings and will necessarily err against each other at some time, you ought first to preserve the ethical disposition of friendship with all your might, and only then set about correcting oversights, gently, and in obedience to that genuinely golden precept which says: "Don't make an enemy of your friend for a minor wrong while you can avoid it." (87,14–33)

Can we see how this specific practical advice is directly based in Simplicius' general theory of relations, and in the prohairetic character of friendship?

In addition to maintaining the friendship for its own sake, Simplicius also sees these appropriate actions as helping to form our habits and character in a more general way—which was a central concern of Hellenic ethics:

If someone gets practice in these actions toward his friends which is easy to bear, and becomes accustomed to them painlessly, owing to the sympathy of friendship,

he will apply them quite happily, when occasion calls, to other people as well, in accordance with what is appropriate for each person. It's worth realising that even in the case of natural relations, friendship makes rendering the appropriate actions welcome and sympathetic and worth enthusiasm. For even if brothers, parents, children, and husbands and wives do obey Epictetus and render what is appropriate to their natural relation, if they are not friends, they don't do it enthusiastically or with joy, or even altogether voluntarily. Rather they do it as if they were compelled in some way, taking themselves to be supplying a kind of imposed service, and neither rejoicing in its results nor welcoming them as primary goods, but treating them [merely] as necessary for the completion of what is appropriate.

The explanation for the great power the relation of friendship has is that it is brought about by prohairesis. For while things deprived of prohairesis are bound together by natural relations, prohairesis has something greater than a natural bond — prohairesis — because rational and prohairesis substances are more elevated than natural substances, and approach more closely to the One that unifies all things. (88,39–89,1)

V

Once he has shown us the sort of person with whom friendship is even possible, Simplicius can present the goods which come from friendship. Though he gives passing mention to nine different types of human goods, it is the first of these which is the most illuminating:

Both friends will have two souls and two bodies (it's clear that their external possessions will be shared too). And if there are more such friends, each of them is multiplied in souls and bodies and external possessions. Thus, in the investigation of existent things, a great light of truth reveals itself in souls united in this way; and in the practice of virtue, when the advantages of each individual are pooled in common and exercised together, a single complete virtue easily comes about, shared by them all, and in each of them individually — and one which is illuminated by our superiors owing to its perfection. The counsels of many such friends will also be safe, and their actions un stumbling, because they are performed through a wealth of both wisdom and power. (87,52–88,12)

Even more than these great human goods, however, friendship is uniquely suited to the philosopher's goal of "becoming like a God, insofar as possible for a human being."⁵

But the greatest and most divine of its properties is [...] that pure friendship, because it leads the friends' souls to unity, is the finest practice for unity with God. (It is impossible to achieve unity with something superior prior to unity with souls of the same kind.) (89,11–15)

This, more than anything, Simplicius suggests, accounts for the supreme importance of friendship, and makes clear why friendship is only possible between people who are actively cultivating the virtues:

5 This definition of philosophy comes from Plato, *Theaetetus* 176a.

So the Pythagoreans rightly honoured friendship above the other virtues, and called it the bond of all virtues, because if any single virtue is neglected friendship won't develop. How can anyone unjust, intemperate or cowardly — or, even worse, thoughtless⁶ — receive the good of friendship? So anyone who wants to be a friend must purify himself to the extent he can from the irrational emotions of his soul, and then seek someone like himself, and embrace him once he's found him, believing that he has found half of himself according to Aristophanes' story.⁷ (89,15–26)

6 These four vices parallel the canonical list of four cardinal virtues—justice, temperance, courage, and wisdom —which are found throughout Plato's corpus and the later tradition.

7 Cf. Plato, *Symposium* 189c–193c.