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Women and the Virtue of Friendship in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*

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As birth rates continue to decline across the globe, much ink has been spilled on the political, economic, and social problems that arise as populations age. Less, however, has been said about the political ills that grow as fewer women mother. What does a political community lose when women cease mothering? To put the question in positive terms, how do mothers uniquely contribute to the formation of political communities? Aristotle offers answers in his discussion of friendship in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, in which he highlights the friendship mothers have for their children as foundational for the political community. Mothers manifest the particular virtue that belongs to friendship—that of loving regardless of whether or how much one is loved in return—and this virtue makes other friendships within the family, such as that of the father for his children and the children for their parents, possible. In short, motherly friendship holds the political community together.

Aristotle reveals a dark side to a mother's love, however, when he demonstrates her potential for hubris, mistaking herself for the sole cause of her children's being. In loving her children as extensions of herself, she denies them their own, separate existence. Aristotle finds a nobler form of self-love in the noble self-lover,

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whose manly love of his soul prevents him from conflating it with that of a child or friend. Yet the noble self-lover has his own weakness that handicaps him especially in times of misfortune, when he refuses to let his friends share in his suffering, thereby depriving them of an opportunity for nobility. Here, women again serve as an example, as a consequence of their eagerness to share in the sufferings and joys of their friends. Through friendship with one another, Aristotle suggests, men and women might learn from each other's better tendencies, thereby checking their worse ones.

Women in Aristotle's Thought

Many scholars consider Aristotle a sexist, influenced by the prejudices of his time, who, far from seeing in women exemplars of virtue, instead see them as inferior to men and subject to them in the family. Such scholarship cites evidence for this in Aristotle's treatment of women in Book I of the *Politics*, for example, when he claims that the male naturally rules the female, whose deliberative element lacks authority, and that virtue thus differs for men and women, there being "ruling" virtues that belong to the former and "serving" ones to the latter (1260a10–14, 20–24).[1] Taking statements such as these in the *Politics* as their starting point, scholars like William Fortenbaugh,[2] Joseph Karbowski,[3] and Susan Moller Okin[4] argue that for Aristotle women are by nature intellectually, and hence also morally, inferior to men.

Other scholars interpret these same statements as subtly challenging the conventional Greek notion of male superiority, alluding, for example, to Ajax's wife Tecmessa, whose prudent advice her husband foolishly and tragically failed to heed.[5] Scholars like Harold L. Levy and Judith Swanson also see support for exemplary female virtue in Aristotle's biological works, such as *History of Animals*, in which he attributes to women better memory, aptness for learning, and consideration for educating the young.[6] Both Swanson and Darrell Dobbs find similar support in *Generation of Animals*, in which Aristotle's account of procreation reveals complementary contributions from male and female, since each provides a soul principle that together receive the highest part of the soul—intellect, or *nous*—from a divine source external to both.[7]

Dobbs likewise underlines the complementary temperamental differences that stem from these biological differences, with men tending to be more spirited and women more nurturing and, therefore, more temperamentally stable. Stephen Salkever highlights further evidence of complementarity and equality between the sexes in the *Rhetoric*, where Aristotle notes men's superior capacity for courage and women's superior capacity for industry while identifying moderation as a virtue common to both.[8] Although these scholars all contend that Aristotle finds women, especially in their capacities as mothers, capable of moral and intellectual virtue, my account differs from theirs in its focus on mothers' special capacity for the virtue of friendship. Whereas they emphasize the ways in which a mother's love makes her particularly suited to educate her children,[9] or to partake in direct rule of the city,[10] my article investigates the ways in which it makes her a model for friendship in the family and, by extension, in the city.

Moreover, much of the scholarship on Aristotle's understanding of women focuses on the *Politics* and his biological works. Not as much attention has been given to the way he treats women in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, where, as both Harvey Mansfield and Lorraine Smith Pangle have pointed out, Aristotle seems to downplay differences between the sexes.[11] Indeed, his inquiry into the *human* good there, and his attention to virtue, do not distinguish male and female. When Aristotle searches for the human good and the virtues that constitute it, it seems as if he forgets that the human race is divided into men and women. And yet, when he turns to discuss friendship—the only subject in the *Nicomachean Ethics* to which he devotes two whole books—he cites women as exemplars on five different occasions throughout both books. Considering the centrality of friendship to Aristotle's thought in the *Ethics*, requiring, in its highest form, both moral and intellectual virtue, his placement of these references to women seems to draw attention to their particular importance as well.

In her scholarship on Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, Ann Ward investigates some of these references to women, arguing that Aristotle's examples of mothers sacrificing for their children suggest both that women are capable of the highest form of friendship and

that their willingness to sacrifice "opens a woman up to and makes her uniquely prepared for the political, ethical, and philosophic life."[12] Although Ward emphasizes Aristotle's allusions to mothers, Mary P. Nichols, in her work on the *Nicomachean Ethics*, spotlights his commentary on the friendship between husbands and wives in marriage, detailing the ways both manly and womanly traits are necessary for friendship.[13] While my article shares both Nichols's and Ward's sense of the importance of Aristotle's use of women as models of friendship, it adds to the conversation by drawing attention to the potential dark side of feminine friendship that threatens to harm the political community as much as it benefits it.

Delight in Loving the Friend

At the outset of Aristotle's discussion of friendship, it seems as though friendship exists between equals who are alike or who at least seek the same things. Aristotle introduces his account by identifying three forms of friendship, distinguished by different things friends might seek. In a friendship based on utility, utility-seekers befriend one another according to their usefulness; in one based on pleasure, pleasure-seekers befriend one another according to the pleasure they provide; and in a friendship based on the good, virtuous persons befriend one another according to their goodness. Only this last form achieves "friendship in the primary and authoritative sense, the remaining friendships being such only by way of a resemblance" (*NE* 1157a31–32). All three forms endure insofar as there is some sort of equality (*NE* 1158b1). As long as useful, pleasure-seeking, or virtuous friends remain equally useful, pleasurable, or virtuous to one another, they remain friends. Once one friend becomes inferior in utility, pleasure, or goodness, though, the friendship dissolves.

Aristotle soon introduces yet another form of friendship, however, based not on equality but on superiority. Examples of this form include "the friendship of a father for a son, and, in general, an older man for a younger, a husband for a wife, and every ruler for one who is ruled" (*NE* 1158b12–13). How can relationships involving superiority be called friendships if it is said that "friendship is equality," as Aristotle quotes (*NE* 1157b37)? Aristotle raises

this very question, but his answer raises further questions. Relationships based on superiority achieve the equality that belongs to friendship through proportional love: "the better person ought to be loved more than he loves" (*NE* 1158b25). In loving the superior friend more than he or she is loved, the inferior friend makes up for his or her shortcomings, and thus "equality somehow arises," which, Aristotle emphasizes again, is "held to belong to friendship" (*NE* 1158b28). While Aristotle does not here elaborate about which spouse holds the superior position in his example of friendship between husband and wife, his wording suggests the husband's preeminence, just as the father, older man, and ruler clearly exceed the son, younger man, and ruled. If this is so, then it would follow, according to Aristotle's formula, that the wife must love the husband more than the husband loves the wife.

Paradoxically, the wife's inferiority would make her superior in exercising the love that belongs to friendship. Would this not make her superior in virtue, or at least in a part of virtue, if, as Aristotle defined it in the opening statement of Book VIII, "friendship is a certain virtue or is accompanied by virtue" (*NE* 1155a4)? Or is the virtue involved in friendship that which is loved by the friend who loves in the friend what he or she lacks? Does the virtue that belongs to friendship, in other words, consist more in being loved than in loving? After all, many "delight in being loved in itself," as Aristotle notes, and this is what in turn makes friendship "seem to be choiceworthy in itself" (*NE* 1159a25–26).

Yet, again, if "friendship is a certain virtue or is accompanied by virtue," and virtue, as Aristotle defines it, consists in activity of the soul, then wouldn't friendship also entail activity as much as or more than receptivity of love (*NE* 1155a4, 1098a16–17)? So Aristotle soon observes. "But friendship seems to consist more in loving than in being loved" (*NE* 1159a27). His evidence for this phenomenon is the love mothers give for their children:

> And a sign of this is mothers who delight in loving: some mothers give away their own to be raised, and though they love them just because they know who they are, they do not

> seek to be loved in return if both are not possible. Rather, it seems to be enough for mothers if they see their children doing well; and they love them even if their children, in ignorance of who their mothers are, may render to them nothing of what is proper to a mother. (*NE* 1159a27–33)

Aristotle here offers a different image of friendship based on superiority. His earlier examples presented a reciprocity in which the superior person—like the father, or the husband, as Aristotle implies—exhibits greater virtue in relation to the son or wife, and in return the superior person enjoys a greater share of the other's love (*NE* 1158b21–27). With his turn to mothers, however, Aristotle provides a model of a friendship in which the better person loves more than she is loved. The virtue of the mother consists in her willingness to sacrifice being loved for the sake of her child's good. Indeed, after examining the love of mothers, Aristotle concludes that "friendship consists more in loving than in being loved" and that for this reason "loving seems to be a virtue of friends" (*NE* 1159a34–35).

Aristotle's original perplexity remains, however. If friendship involves equality, and the mother surpasses her child in both virtue and love, can we call the relationship between the two a friendship, as Aristotle defines it? Is the mother a friend to her child, for example, if the child falls short in loving her in return? The extraordinary situation in which a mother must give away her child to be raised indicates an answer. The mother does this not because she wants to be the superior lover who sacrifices being loved in return, but because she longs to see her child "doing well" (*NE* 1159a32). The Greek phrase for "doing well" (*eu prassō*) contains the same ambiguity that the English phrase contains: it can refer to "faring well" or "acting well."[14] The phrase suggests that the mother longs not only to see her child *receive* good but to see her child *do* good. Her love for her child aims for the child's growth in virtue. Should the child succeed in acting well, willing to sacrifice his or her own good for the sake of another, as the mother has done, we might echo Aristotle's earlier comment that "equality [between mother and child] somehow arises" (*NE* 1158b28).

The mother's love therefore offers an alternative model for friendship based on superiority. Moreover, it also shows how superiority in the virtue of friendship, which the mother possesses and seeks to inculcate in her child, might serve the political community. Rather than expecting to be loved more than she loves, the better person lovingly wills the betterment of her beloved, even if the beloved does not love her back nor even recognize her for who she is.[15] It is enough for her to see her child loving others in the way in which she has loved him or her. In this way, the mother's love is oriented to the common good. Perhaps this is why Aristotle moves from the mother's practice of the virtue of friendship to the necessary relationship between friendship and the political community, which "aims not at the present advantage but at that pertaining to life as a whole" (*NE* 1160a23).

Comprehending the Friend

While Aristotle's first reference to the mother as an example of friendship focuses on her relationship to her child, he soon returns to the mother, this time considering her role in the context of the family as a whole, alongside the father who is her husband. Aristotle's return to the mother occurs within a discussion of the relationship between friendship and the political community. Aristotle noted earlier in Book VIII that it seems that "friendship holds cities together," and he now reiterates that "to the extent that people share in community, there is friendship" and that "every friendship, then, involves community" (*NE* 1155a23–24, 1159b30, 1161b11). Both require their participants to seek a common advantage. Aristotle distinguishes between friendships of kinfolk and those of comrades, granting special attention to the former, from which, as he notes in the *Politics*, the city grows.

Friendships of kinfolk appear in many forms, but each seems to depend on the friendship between parents and children (*NE* 1161b18–20). Since we have now learned of the mother's superior love for her child, which includes a willingness to love more than she is loved in return, it is not too surprising to learn that "parents immediately feel affection for those who are born, whereas

offspring feel affection for their parents after a period of time, once they acquire comprehension or perception" (*NE* 1161b25–26). Parents know immediately that their children are their own, and so they feel immediate affection for them, loving them as they love themselves (*NE* 1161b27–28). For children, however, it takes time to develop their capacities to comprehend and perceive. This development requires assistance from their parents, of course, who will teach the children about their family kinship. Comprehension or perception in themselves are not faculties that newborn babies can immediately exercise; but even once they are old enough to do so, comprehension of their kinship to their parents depends on their parents instructing them in this. As we saw with Aristotle's example of the adopted child who does not know his biological mother, comprehension of one's parents must be nurtured in the course of family life.

After establishing that children do not love their parents immediately, because it takes time for them to "acquire" or "receive" (*lambanō*) comprehension or perception, Aristotle adds that, "from these considerations too, it is clear why mothers are more loving [than fathers]" (*NE* 1161b26–27). Fathers, after all, are in a predicament similar to that of children insofar as neither can grasp their kinship to one another without the help of the mother. While mothers experience their children physically coming from them, fathers do not enjoy this kind of tangible assurance. Rather, the father must learn from the mother and trust her knowledge that the child also comes from him. The mother must help him to comprehend and perceive this relationship, just as they both must in turn teach the child.

It is no small thing that the mother is the first to perceive the kinship that unites her family. Her knowledge of her children's relationship to their parents preserves the family, for "what is common holds things together" (*NE* 1162a29). Indeed, in a sense, her knowledge preserves the city, "inasmuch as a household is earlier and more necessary than a city" (*NE* 1162a18–19). The importance of this knowledge is perhaps one reason why Aristotle singles out adultery as intrinsically base (*NE* 1107a9–17), emphasizing its injustice no less than eight times in Book V (*NE* 1129b19–23, 1130a24–32, 1131a5–9,

1132a2–5, 1134a17–23, 1138a24–26). Adultery compromises both the mother's and the father's comprehension of the child's heritage.

The mother's perception of family ties not only makes possible her own growth in virtue, increasing her love for her children, and facilitates her children's growth in doing and acting well, as discussed in the previous section, but also serves her husband's growth in virtue. Her firsthand knowledge of her children's origins is necessary for her husband to increase in perception and comprehension, which Aristotle includes among the intellectual virtues, along with wisdom and prudence, when he introduces the concept of intellectual virtue at the end of Book I (*NE* 1103a5). Then, in discussing the intellectual virtues in Book VI, he identifies comprehension as concerned with "neither the beings that are eternal and unmoved nor with just any or every one of the things that come into being, but rather with the things about which someone might be perplexed and deliberate" (*NE* 1143a5–7). Why would family relations perplex or instigate deliberation? Friendship within the family raises the very questions about friendship based on a superiority that Aristotle has been investigating.

We have learned, from Aristotle's first reference to mothers, that the superior friend is the one who gives the greater love, since friendship consists more in loving than in being loved. We now see that the love between parents and children requires comprehension, a virtue Aristotle associates with learning in Book VI (*NE* 1143a13–19). It is fitting that Aristotle uses the term *lambanō*, which can mean "to take, grasp, or receive," to explain how affection in the family arises. While children receive comprehension later, mothers receive it first. The mother's passivity in marital relations that Aristotle mentions in Book VII (*NE* 1148b31–35) might be matched, it turns out, by a receptivity to comprehension, a virtue that begins with listening to what another says regarding the human good and judging it in light of opinion, or what appears to be the case (*NE* 1143a14–16). Her receptivity, moreover, prompts her husband's receptivity, in turn, as he relies on her perception to comprehend the family kinship. This comprehension—*sunesis*, which literally means "brought together" or "union"—also points to community.

Laboring for the Friend

There is a dark side to the mother's superior loving and quick comprehension of her own, however. When Aristotle inquires into friendship between benefactors and beneficiaries, he returns, again, to this perplexing phenomenon that we first discovered in the friendship between mothers and children. As we saw with the mother willing to love her child without receiving love in return, benefactors seem to love their beneficiaries more than beneficiaries love their benefactors (*NE* 1167b17–19). Aristotle now further investigates this phenomenon by examining makers, including artisans, poets, moneymakers, and parents (*NE* 1167b34–1168a3, 23–24). In these analogies, far from a superior exercise of virtue and the sacrifice of one's own good that virtue demands, it seems to be self-love—a grasping for one's good at odds with sacrifice—that motivates benefactors and makers to act and to love.

As Aristotle has spent the past eight books of the *Nicomachean Ethics* investigating, human beings innately long for a goodness and beauty that is both beyond themselves but in which they can also partake. Receiving a benefit does not satisfy this longing because benefits serve one's self, and being served does not require one to stretch beyond oneself; if anything, it may even thwart such stretching. In this way, benefits may leave deep longings aggravated or dulled, but not fulfilled. Benefiting another, in contrast, does nourish this longing. By giving something of ourselves to help another, we are drawn out of ourselves, and in denying our needs or desires, however small, we defy necessity and exercise freedom, which is beautiful. The problem is that though benefactors do give something of themselves, they gain participation in the nobility of free giving, and their act simultaneously denies their beneficiaries this same enjoyment (*NE* 1168a11). The benefactor, we now see, may seem to love the beneficiary more than the beneficiary loves the benefactor, but the benefactor loves the beneficiary not for the beneficiary's own sake, but *as* the recipient of the benefactor's noble gift.

The benefactor loves the beneficiary as a creature of the benefactor's activity, just as artisans and poets are fond of their creations. Artisans and poets love their works more than the works, if they

came to life, would love them in turn, because "in his activity, the maker of something somehow *is* the work; he therefore feels affection for the work because he feels affection for his own existence" (*NE* 1168a7–8). A work of art differs from a work of necessity or nature in that its origin lies not in itself but in its maker, as Aristotle explains in his discussion of art in Book VI. "For of the things that exist or come into being of necessity, there is no art, nor is there of those that do so according to nature, for these have their origin within themselves" (*NE* 1140a14–16). Like works of necessity or nature, human beings possess their own origins or starting points in their exercise of choice (*NE* 1139b5), even if they may lose those starting points through viciousness (*NE* 1114a19–21, 1150a3). To the degree that the benefactor resembles the maker or artist, he denies that his beneficiary possesses his own starting point, and in doing so, in a sense he denies his beneficiary's humanity.

In comparing benefactors and makers to parents, first, and then specifically, to mothers, Aristotle reveals a dangerous excess to which parental and motherly love are prone. Like benefactors and artisans, poets "are exceedingly fond [*huperagapaō*] of their own poems and feel affection for them just as if they were their children" (*NE* 1168a2–3). Aristotle's characterization of the poet's love as excessive (*huper*) associates his love and, by extension, the parent's love with vice, for as we have learned through Aristotle's discussion of moral virtue, virtue is a mean between two vices—the excess (*huperbolē*) and the deficiency (*NE* 1106b25–26).

Aristotle soon adds moneymakers and mothers to this group of excessive lovers. These introduce a new factor to the mix in the painful labor they undertake to produce their progeny. Like artisans and poets, moneymakers (and benefactors) love their works as manifestations of their own existence, but their excessive love is further magnified by the pain they endure in the productive act, "for all feel more affection for what arises through painful labor, just as those who have themselves acquired money feel more affection for it than do those who have inherited it, for example" (*NE* 1168a22–24). They experience pain because they have poured more of themselves into their work, making their work an even

greater manifestation of themselves and therefore more lovable to them. "For these reasons too," Aristotle adds, "mothers love their children more than do fathers, for giving birth is of greater pain to them, and they know to a greater degree that their children are their own" (*NE* 1168a25–27).

Whereas Aristotle has commented before on mothers who delight in loving (*phileō*; *NE* 1159a28) and who love (*phileō*) more than fathers (*NE* 1161b27), in this iteration he uses a modified term to characterize mothers' love. He describes it as "offspring-loving" (*philoteknos*). In his earlier accounts, mothers are simply loving; here, in company with other excessive lovers, they are offspring-loving. As their love approximates the excess of poets and possessiveness of moneymakers, it has accordingly narrowed. Excess has, paradoxically, shrunken it.

Excessive love of her offspring can endanger the mother's children as much as it threatens her character. Aristotle has in fact already warned us about this danger in his reference to Niobe. In Book VII, he cautions against excessive love for noble and serious things, offering as an example Niobe, whose excessive love drove her to "fight against even the gods" (*NE* 1148a33). In Homer's *Iliad*, Achilles recounts to a grieving Priam the story of Niobe, who, like Priam, suffered the loss of her children. In defense of their own mother, the goddess Leto, Apollo and Artemis violently killed Niobe's six sons and six daughters after Niobe had "likened herself to Leto of the fair coloring and said Leto had borne only two, while she herself had borne many" (*Iliad* 24.607–8).

Niobe idolized her twelve children as a reflection of her own worth so much that she dared to boast equality and even superiority to a god. In identifying her worth with the existence of her children, Niobe misunderstood her role as a mother, crediting herself as though she were her children's maker, rather than, more modestly, their bearer, receiving in her womb lives over which superior beings rule. In her hubris, she became, not a handmaid in their creation, but a handmaid in their destruction. Her excessive love for her children as manifestations of herself ended up not being love, in the true sense of wishing and willing their good, at all.

The tragedy of Niobe is a warning for mothers and women who take on motherly roles. The very capacity to bear new life that endows mothers with advantages in their pursuit of virtue also comes with a stumbling block—namely, a temptation to hubris destructive of love and life alike. Insofar as they resemble mothers, the benefactor, artisan, poet, and moneymaker ought to similarly beware of this temptation that accompanies any otherwise virtuous gift of self. The mother's example might instruct them not only in what to avoid, moreover, but also in what remedy to seek. After all, in order to bear children, a woman must first love a man who, after initiating marital relations (*NE* 1148b31–35), might father her child, thereby sharing with her and the gods the claim to be the cause of the child's being (*NE* 1161a16, 1162a5–6).

The benefactor, artisan, poet, and moneymaker do not face the constant reminder of their co-ownership of their work or activity that the mother faces in marriage to the father. The moneymaker distinguishes himself from those who have inherited their wealth, for example; and the artist, as we have seen, understands himself to be the sole starting point of his work. In characterizing their love of their works as excessive, however, Aristotle suggests that their claims to self-reliance miss the mark. To avoid this error, they might look to the (good) mother as their model, to remind them that they, too, have coworkers and thus should love their works and beneficiaries not as themselves but as pointing beyond themselves.

Sharing in Suffering with the Friend

Mothers and other benefactors often seem to love their beneficiaries more than they love themselves. Yet this love is at least in part motivated, Aristotle has revealed, by their self-love. Mothers see themselves in their children, and so they love their children as extensions of themselves. In excess, such motherly love can become a hubristic love of self that, in its failure to recognize difference between mother and child, destroys the child, as Niobe's tragedy warns. Do the excessive tendencies of mothers and other benefactors warn against self-love, or is a nobler self-love possible? An ordered self-love that seeks above all the good of the highest parts

of one's soul would require the self-knowledge that Niobe, in her hubris, lacks, and would thus guard against the excesses to which mothers and other benefactors are prone. This leads Aristotle to ask whether one ought to love oneself (in this properly ordered way) most, and whether such noble self-love is not in fact the primary form of friendship. Would a noble self-lover even need friends, or does his virtuous self-sufficiency suggest that the best way of life is more or less solitary? Aristotle's investigation of the noble self-lover brings him, once again, to probe the particular traits that distinguish women as friends and to return in a way to the question that prompted his inquiry: Are those traits good?

Although the noble self-lover in principle could be either a man or a woman, Aristotle implies his manliness when he identifies him with acts of war. His devotion to strengthening and beautifying his soul will prompt him to sacrifice lower goods—his money, his body, his physical life—for the sake of his friends or fatherland (*NE* 1169a20). But such deeds garner honor for the actor, and so the truly noble self-lover would be willing to give up the performance of these noble deeds to his friend, because it would be more noble to forgo noble deeds so that his friend may perform them and receive the corresponding honor and nobility (*NE* 1169a30–34). In refraining from noble deeds, the noble self-lover would gain greater nobility for himself. But could the noble self-lover not take this still a step further? Would it not be even more noble for him to forgo, in favor of his friend, becoming the cause of his friend's noble actions, instead allowing his friend to be the cause of his noble actions? Should the noble self-lover not live by himself, separate from friends and community, nobly giving up the performance of noble actions to others?

The noble self-lover offers a stark contrast to the motherly friend to whom Aristotle has turned throughout the friendship books. The mother is characterized by receptivity and relationship. By nature passive in marital relations, a woman's body is also open to the life and growth of new human beings, and this physical receptivity privileges her with keener and quicker perception and comprehension of human relationship than her male counterpart

enjoys. Her connectedness allows for the extension and expansion of herself, and this fruitfulness makes political community—and, with it, human flourishing, since human beings are political animals—possible. Yet while this flexibility might incline her to love more than she is loved, it also might incline her to mistake her beloved for herself, thereby denying her beloved's existence as a separate human being with his or her own "starting point," as Aristotle calls the human capacity for choice. Feminine fertility and flexibility open the door to tyranny.[16]

The noble self-lover, by contrast, is characterized by self-sufficiency and detachment. His care for his character and intellect corresponds to his knowledge of the worth of his soul, and this self-knowledge prevents him from mistakenly locating his worth in his children, beneficiaries, or works of art. Unlike the mother, benefactor, or poet, then, the noble self-lover is keenly aware of his separateness from others. It is his awareness of the intrinsic goodness of his singular existence that, paradoxically, Aristotle now reveals, moves the noble self-lover to friendship with others. To live as a human being is to experience oneself as a limited being separate from others.[17] Hence, the friend is not only another self or an extension of oneself but a *different* (*heteron*) self (*NE* 1169b7, 1170b7), and, "just as one's own existence is choiceworthy to each, so also is the existence of a friend, *or nearly so* [*paraplēsiōs*]" (*NE* 1170b7–8; emphasis mine). That the existence of a friend is only *nearly* as choiceworthy as one's own existence highlights the difference, or separateness, from others that living entails.

Living is good in itself in part because it is determinate—limited, defined, and separate from others—or, in other words, because it is our own. But if this is the case, how much more clearly could one perceive and experience this determinateness than through life with another, who is separate from oneself?[18] There is, of course, the risk that life with a friend might obscure one's own separateness rather than highlight it, as we witnessed in the story of Niobe. Aristotle underlines this risk when he calls the friend both "different" and "self." It is crucial, therefore, that friends understand one another as *different* selves, as the noble self-lover

models. Friendship requires a recognition of difference as much as it requires a recognition of a common good. Perceiving a friend's life, which is different from one's own life but in which one can nonetheless participate, could allow one to better enjoy living—both one's friend living his life and oneself living one's own life—as a separate, finite thing.[19] In this way, living together with friends—which for human beings means sharing in a community of speeches and thought—would enable one to live more fully by more fully enjoying one's own existence and friends' individual existences as separate, determinate beings who are good for one another but also good in themselves (*NE* 1170b10–19).[20]

We get a deeper look into the character of the noble self-lover's friendships when Aristotle turns to the effects of good and bad fortune. Friendship is nobler in good fortune than in misfortune, for in misfortune one risks imposing pain and suffering on one's friends. In such a friendship, the friend down on his luck would lack the resources necessary to nobly give of himself for his friend, and the consolation his friend might offer would deprive him of the opportunity to strengthen his soul by bearing his misfortune on his own. Furthermore, "to perceive a friend's being pained by one's own misfortunes is itself a painful thing" (*NE* 1171b5). Hence, he who is "manly by nature" does not allow his friends to mourn with him, "since he himself is not given to lamenting" (*NE* 1171b7, 10). In this he is different from "women, and men of such a sort," who "delight in laments, and they love their friends as friends who share in their suffering" (*NE* 1171b11–12). Thus Aristotle concludes: "But it is clear that one ought to imitate the better person in everything" (*NE* 1171b12–13).

At first, "the better person" seems to refer to the manly friend. His unwillingness to grieve his friends or even to indulge in grief himself seems noble, since it requires him to give up the relief that might come from a friend's presence for the sake of his friend. By prioritizing his love of the noble over his feelings of pain, the manly friend resembles the noble self-lover who loves and cares for the highest part of his soul above all. On closer examination, however, we might question how noble the manly friend's self-seclusion really is. After all, the first reason Aristotle gives us for his avoidance of friends

during misfortune is that "to perceive a friend's being pained by one's own misfortunes is itself a painful thing" (*NE* 1171b5). The manly friend forbids his friends from sharing in his suffering primarily out of a concern for his own pain. In doing so, moreover, he deprives both his friends and himself of something noble, for, Aristotle now emphasizes, "it belongs to a friend to do some good, especially for those in need who do not expect it: for both parties, this is nobler and more pleasant" (*NE* 1171b22–23).

The detachment and self-sufficiency that characterize the manly and noble self-lover risk depriving others of the beauty of living with and for others. In caring for his soul above all, he seems to treat his soul as a sort of cosmos, as Aristotle suggests the magnanimous man conceives of his own magnanimity (*NE* 1124a1). In this he seems no less erroneous than the mother who sees her beloved as one with herself. While the woman's receptivity risks mistaking the rest of the cosmos as identical with herself, the man's detachment risks his mistaking himself for the cosmos.

Whom ought we to imitate? When one's friend suffers misfortune, one ought to "go eagerly," "without having to be summoned," imitating the women who eagerly share in the sufferings and joys of their friends (*NE* 1166a5–10, 1171b20–21). Such friendship requires the quick perception and keen comprehension characteristic of the mother and possibly her willingness to love more than one is loved, should one's unfortunate friend refuse aid, as the manly by nature are prone to do (*NE* 1171b26). Conversely, when suffering misfortune oneself, one ought to be "slow to request being done some good," imitating the manly, who are "cautious of making friends share their grief" (*NE* 1171b25, 7). Such caution requires the detachment characteristic of the manly and noble self-lover. Through friendship with one another, perhaps, men and women might learn from each other's better tendencies, thereby checking their worse ones.[21] As Aristotle soon concludes his friendship discussion, decent people "seem to become better by engaging in activity together and by correcting one another, for they take an imprint from one another of the qualities they find pleasing" (*NE* 1172a12–14). It is this kind of friendly imitation that Aristotle calls us to embrace.

Conclusion

Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* begins with his famous disagreement with Plato about the nature of the good. Although Plato, or at least the thought attributed to him, considered the good to be a universal "idea," Aristotle wondered whether such an account neglected the particularity inherent to the human good. Just as the idea of a human being as such would recognize no difference between any given human being and the idea of a human being, so too might the idea of the good as such obscure the richness present in the great variety of human goods (*NE* 1096a35–b2). How can a universal idea, for example, capture Aristotle's singular love for his friend Plato? As always, Aristotle's emphasis is on the particular human being. No universal idea can fully comprehend the identity of Plato himself, nor of Aristotle, for that matter.[22]

It is fitting, then, that toward the end of his inquiry Aristotle investigates one of the primary ways in which particular human beings differ: by sex. In turning toward women—first praising their characteristic perceptiveness of particularity, then warning against their tendencies to obscure difference by identifying too closely with their beneficiaries, and finally highlighting the ways in which men and women can learn from one another—Aristotle reminds us once again of the complexity of the human good, the human work, and, indeed, human happiness.

Notes

1. Citations of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* are from *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Robert C. Bartlett and Susan D. Collins (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), with emendations, hereafter cited as *NE*; and those of his *Politics* from *The Politics*, trans. Carnes Lord, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), with emendations, hereafter cited as *Pol*.
2. William W. Fortenbaugh, "Aristotle on Women: *Politics* i 13.1260a13," *Ancient Philosophy* 35, no. 2 (2015): 395–404.
3. Joseph Karbowski, "Slaves, Women, and Aristotle's Natural Teleology," *Ancient Philosophy* 32, no. 2 (2012): 323–50.
4. Susan Moller Okin, "Woman's Place and Nature in a Functionalist World," in *Women in Western Political Thought* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979), 73–96.
5. See, e.g., Mary P. Nichols, *Citizens and Statesmen: A Study of Aristotle's Politics* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1992).

6. Harold L. Levy, "Does Aristotle Exclude Women from Politics?," *The Review of Politics* 52, no. 3 (1990): 397–416. See also Judith A. Swanson, "Women, the Public, and the Private," in *The Public and the Private in Aristotle's Political Philosophy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992), 44–68.
7. See Swanson, "Women, the Public, and the Private"; and Darrell Dobbs, "Family Matters: Aristotle's Appreciation of Women and the Plural Structure of Society," *American Political Science Review* 90, no. 1 (1996): 74–89.
8. Stephen G. Salkever, "Women, Soldiers, Citizens: Plato & Aristotle on the Politics of Virility," *Polity* 19, no. 2 (1986): 232–53.
9. See Levy, "Does Aristotle Exclude Women from Politics?," and Salkever, "Women, Soldiers, Citizens."
10. See Levy, "Does Aristotle Exclude Women from Politics?," and Nichols, *Citizens and Statesmen*.
11. Harvey C. Mansfield, *Manliness* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), 208; Lorraine Smith Pangle, *Aristotle and the Philosophy of Friendship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 90–91.
12. Ann Ward, "Mothering and the Sacrifice of Self: Women and Friendship in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*," *thirdspace* 7, no. 2 (Winter 2008): 32–57 (54).
13. Mary P. Nichols, "Both Friends and Truth Are Dear," in *Natural Right and Political Philosophy: Essays in Honor of Catherine Zuckert and Michael Zuckert*, ed. Ann Ward and Lee Ward (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013), 67–96.
14. Cf. Bartlett and Collins's translation note for *NE* 1095a20: "The expression Aristotle here uses (*eu prattein*) means in the first place 'to act well,' but carries the extended meaning 'to fare well,' with the implication that those who act well will indeed fare well: Aristotle's investigation of happiness emphasizes the centrality of good action to happiness" (5).
15. Dobbs, in his exploration of differences in temperament between the sexes, notes in "Family Matters" that women's nurturing disposition also inclines them towards modesty: "Serenity and modesty will adorn the woman, who is naturally suited to the function of vigilant preservation rather than acquisition" (82). The mother's willingness to love with no recognition in return showcases this modesty.
16. In much of the scholarship investigating the difference between men and women in Aristotle's thought, men are cast as more prone to tyranny than women. Levy, e.g., after contrasting men's inclination toward anger, vengefulness, hope, and love of reputation to women's inclination toward softness, pity, pessimism, secretiveness, and love of children, concludes

in "Does Aristotle Exclude Women from Politics?": "At worst, fierce striving for their own preeminence tempts men to tyranny, as fearful preoccupation with their own troubles tempts women to servility" (405). Dobbs admits in "Family Matters" that women's nurturing tendencies can also be prone to excess, but maintains that excessive spiritedness in men nonetheless poses a graver threat: "Civilization has more to fear from the wrath of Achilles than from the apron strings of Mrs. Portnoy" (85). Aristotle nonetheless seems to suggest that the threats posed by excessive maternal love are indeed grave.

17. In his book *Retrieving Aristotle in an Age of Crisis* (New York: Suny Press, 2013), David Roochnik explains this determinateness with a view to Aristotle's other works, especially his *Metaphysics*: "That the finite is prior and superior to the infinite also is reflected in one of Aristotle's basic metaphysical principles: 'For one man and a man are the same, and being a man and a man are the same' (*Metaphysics* 1003b22). To be is to be this or that; it is to be determinate or singular. To be, in the fullest sense—that is, in actuality—is to be finite" (74).
18. In *Aristotle and the Philosophy of Friendship*, Lorraine Pangle helpfully points out the danger of self-deception in even this form of friendship: "Life's finitude, when faced squarely, provides an impetus to enjoy it to the utmost, and seeking out friends can be a sensible way of doing just this; but this same mortality, when glimpsed but not quite accepted, tempts us to try to escape its grip by escaping ourselves altogether. . . . If it is wise to cultivate friendship to heighten the intensity of life, this is wise only so long as we remember who we are, and that it is only as mortal and ultimately separate individuals that we are capable of happiness" (191).
19. In her book on Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, Ronna Burger helpfully explains why it is not simply contemplation of another that is necessary for one to better perceive and contemplate the goodness of one's own existence but dialogue with another: "Yet in the contemplation of action, the friend seems to be nothing more than a mirror for the self; only in speaking together is it possible to discover the differences that individuate us. The friend was first designated 'another self' (*allos autos*; 1166a32), suggesting the replication of oneself in another individual; as a partner in dialogue, he becomes an 'other self' (*heteros autos*), forming a pair with oneself precisely because of the difference that makes him genuinely other. Participation, through dialogue, in what might be thought the nonpersonal or anonymous activity of mind, looks like the way to discover what is uniquely one's own" (Ronna Burger, *Aristotle's*

Dialogue with Socrates: On the Nicomachean Ethics [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009], 182).

20. Leon Kass suggests that, just as friendship is essential to self-consciousness, which is essential for happiness, Aristotle's book, like a deed of friendship, points us toward self-consciousness and therefore toward greater happiness: "If the book works on us, we have really come to understand these words, when they are spoken, because it has been the deed, the *ergon*, of the book to bring us to this point. The deed and the speech come together—action and thought have given rise to self-awareness, and to the delights of self-awareness" (Leon Kass, "Professor or Friend? On the Intention and Manner of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*," in *Athens, Arden, Jerusalem: Essays in Honor of Mera Flaumenhaft*, ed. Paul T. Wilford and Kate Havard [New York: Lexington Books, 2019], 26).
21. In "Both Friends and Truth Are Dear," Nichols highlights Aristotle's concluding remark that "being with friends is to be chosen in every case" (1171b29): "One cannot of course choose to be with friends in their good fortunes and in one's own misfortunes unless one is willing to receive benefits from one's friend. Friendship requires the latter as much as it requires an eagerness to give. The different inclinations that Aristotle attributes to men and women are both necessary for friendship" (80-81).
22. For further discussion of Aristotle's response to Plato's thought, and especially his response to Plato's idea of the good, see Nichols, "Both Friends and Truth Are Dear," and Burger, *Aristotle's Dialogue with Socrates*.