

The Concept of Friendship: History and Implications

Amith K

PhD Scholar, Department of Malayalam, Sree Sankaracharya University of Sanskrit, Kalady.
Kerala, India.

Abstract: This paper deals with the academic discussions on friendship in western philosophy. Starting with Plato, the paper tries to summarize and analyse the views of Aristotle, Emmanuel Levinas, and Jacques Derrida. Through this method the evolution happened in understanding the subject can be known. As we all know, friendship can only be conceptualized within the field of politics. By observing, how the idea of friendship travelled through time, we could get the changes happened historically in the political understanding. This paper marks some of the mile stones in the development of philosophy of friendship.

Keywords: Politics, Friendship, Self, Other, Equality, Justice, Democracy.

I. INTRODUCTION

Academic discussions on friendship have a long history. The topic has achieved the attention of many varieties of disciplines after the post-modern era. From then, it is discussed in the field of history, sociology, international affairs, literature etc. So the topic is important in the national and international scenario. Here we analyse the discussions based on friendship in the field of philosophy by exploring the major works of Plato, Aristotle, Emmanuel Levinas, and Jacques Derrida. The paper uses the conceptual ideas like equality, justice, democracy, and politics. The paper maintains a critical approach towards the works.

II. DISCUSSION

TWO GOING TOGETHER

As an object to think, friendship is defined, classified, and explained in classical Philosophy. What is friendship? , this was the question raised then. *Lysis* and *Symposium* (Plato), *Nicomachean Ethics* (Aristotle), and *On Friendship* (Cicero) have all echoed this question. Friendship was an object to search for in these all contexts and friend was defined as another self. Naturally all discussions were centred on the self.

Two going together is a perfect imagery to explain the classical notion of friendship. The line is quoted by Aristotle in *Nicomachean Ethics* from *Iliad* [1]. What are the significations of this imagery? They are in a journey or simply they are in an act. That journey is important in conceptualizing friendship. It is that act of going together makes friends. Because like familial relationships we don't have already existing friends. Friendship has a life of its own. And another thing is that the two are not simply walking without thinking and communicating. They are together. So they are more capable of thinking and acting. That journey is totally different from a journey alone. And the final point in it is regarding the similarity of the two. Two going together never gives any clues to prove any dissimilarities between them. They are alike and moving like birds of a feather flock. Plato says, "And friends have all things in common, so that one of you can be no richer than the other, if you say truly that you are friends" [2].

Even though classical philosophers looked only at self itself, we cannot say that their concern was not at all political. Because they have always assumed an ideal community. Friendship makes that ideal society just also. So friendship is always a political quest in the history of philosophy. It is a relationship that makes our life more healthy and just.

We can start with Plato. For Plato, utility justifies friendship. “And shall we be friends to others, and will any others love us, in as far as we are useless to them? Certainly not” [3]. So there is something to gain from friends and one should always be wise for getting friends also. But Plato doesn’t end his discussion with utility only. He also says in *Lysis*, “I have a passion for friends” [4]. This love for friends comes from virtue or goodness in human. Thus friendship overtakes worldliness. Friendship was valued more than any prosperities by Plato. Wealth, honour, and liquor are nothing compared to friends. In conclusion, as far as Plato is concerned more than giving benefits friendship leads to a virtuous life.

In general Aristotle is considered as the first philosopher who eminently discussed friendship. Aristotle viewed friendship in the midst of many contraries. Who is God? Who is human? Who is the lover? The beloved? The noble? The ugly? Superior? Inferior? Who are Good people? Who are Bad people? These are already answered questions before Aristotle entering to define friendship. In other words Aristotle discusses friendship above these pre-defined concepts.

Book 8 and 9 in *Nicomachean Ethics* are about friendship. It is such a detailed discussion. For Aristotle the idea of friendship involves virtue and nobility. It is an absolute necessity. Like Plato, Aristotle also places friendship beyond all other goods. He says nobody would choose a life without friendship. He starts with the mutuality of friendship. For him friendship is mutual and derives from rational choice. It is the characteristic of humanity. Because humanity survives by making political relationship. That is why he extends friendship to a relationship that holds cities together and that possess justice inside. “And when people are friends, they have no need of justice, while when they are just, they need friendship as well; and the highest form of justice seems to be a matter of friendship” [5].

Aristotle divides friendship into three categories. They are friendship of utility, friendship of pleasure, and friendship of virtue. The motive behind the relationship is the criterion of his division. The first two kinds of friendship are temporary. In such friendships there should be something to gain from the other. It could be a service or a pleasure. After getting what is good for themselves or what is pleasant for themselves that relationship naturally breaks. But friendship of virtue exists between two good people and lasts as long as they are good. This is the complete friendship for Aristotle. Good people are similar in terms of virtue they are having. He also discusses about the number of friends a person can have. The complete friendship is rare. It needs proper time to develop since people should know each other. And also good people are rare. According to Aristotle, friendship is impossible for women and slaves. They were considered as self-less people then, not real men. They are not equal to the men whom Aristotle has conceptualized.

One important question is, do we love others for the sake of ourselves or for the sake of others? One thing is the good friendship exists between good people who are similarly virtuous. Mutually they wish the greatest goods to the other. Aristotle writes, “Friendship seems to consist more in loving than in being loved, as is indicated by the enjoyment a mother finds in love” [6]. But this is not fully concentrated on the other. What are the requirements of friendship, what is ones happiness, what is the virtue in someone these questions are really dealing the matters of the self.

THE WAY TO THE OTHER

The discussion on friendship in the field of Philosophy enters in a different level through Levinas and Derrida. In the history of philosophy friendship is defined as the relationship between two individual subjects. But as we have already seen the definitions and explanations were establishing the self and seeking the recognition of the self. Levinas is against this notion. And his thought was about how to break the shell of the self and how to go beyond the self. His works like *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being* are exploring this.

He talks about the responsibility for the other. “A responsibility that goes beyond what I may or may not have committed, as if I were devoted to the other man before being devoted to myself” [7]. This responsibility for the other makes the self completely open. Hence, friendship becomes an ethical relationship. Derrida actually follows this path.

Derrida's *The politics of friendship* is considered as one of the best academic works on friendship published in the recent years. Derrida identifies similarity as the main idea that decided the concept of friendship in the history of western philosophy. Derrida argues that this kind of friendship conception has roots in Christian Philosophy and it consider the bond among men only. This is nothing but a fraternity. It has influenced even our concept of democracy. This phallogocentric concept of friendship is the main topic discussed by him. "So, even the idea of democracy, the way it was defined in the beginning, had to agree with the presuppositions of this concept, with the privilege granted to man, to brotherhood. What does brotherhood mean? It means of course the family, the familial schema, filiation, it means brother

instead of sister and there are a number of texts in which sister is simply a case of brother, no different, and it makes no difference" [8].

Derrida talks about the hospitality of the self to the other. One should accept the other as he or she is. Let the other be free or let the other come to us freely. Then, what would be the border between the self and the other? This border is definitely problematic. Is crossing of this border possible? As far as Derrida is concerned, the way to the other never ends but we always travel towards the other. And thus, it is impossible to cross the border between the self and the other. There Derrida marks the possibility of the impossible as a special feature of friendship. Here we can ask about the border of hospitality. This border is also problematic. Derrida says, "As though the inhabitant himself were always staying in the inhabitant's home, the one who invites and receives truly begins by receiving hospitality from the guest to whom he thinks he is giving hospitality. It is as if in truth he were received by the one he thinks he is receiving" [9]. Who is the guest then? Who is the host? We can just conclude that there is no predetermined limit or boundary for the self. The self is forever opened for the other.

III. CONCLUSION

Understanding of friendship in western philosophy changes through time. But the concept of friendship is always a political concept. In classical philosophy the concept of friendship is centred on the self. At present, the concern for the other is the main thing and the other is conceptualized as an infinite possibility. So the border between the self and the other never ends.

REFERENCES

- [1] Aristotle, "Nicomachean Ethics", Editor. Roger Crisp. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, pp.144.
- [2] Plato, "The Dialogues of Plato 428/27 - 348/47 BCE", Transl. Benjamin Jowett, E-text asschers@aia.net.au. 1875, pp. 854.
- [3] Plato, "The Dialogues of Plato 428/27 - 348/47 BCE", Transl. Benjamin Jowett, E-text asschers@aia.net.au. 1875, pp. 856.
- [4] Plato, "The Dialogues of Plato 428/27 - 348/47 BCE", Transl. Benjamin Jowett, E-text asschers@aia.net.au. 1875, pp. 857.
- [5] Aristotle, "Nicomachean Ethics", Editor. Roger Crisp. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, pp.144.
- [6] Aristotle, "Nicomachean Ethics", Editor. Roger Crisp. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, pp. 153.
- [7] Levinas, "The Levinas Reader", Editor: Sean Hand. Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd, 1989, pp. 83.
- [8] Derrida, "The Politics of Friendship", Trans. Geogry Collins, London: Verso, 1997, pp. 4.
- [9] Derrida, "Aporias", Trans. Thomas Dutoit, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993, pp. 10.