Practical wisdom, virtue of character and friendship in Aristotle’s horizon of the human good

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ABSTRACT
Aristotle’s account of the reorientation from having (the excessive desire and overgrasping of power, honour and money) to being virtuous in character through the use of practical wisdom in the format of personal and political friendship intuitively appeals to many people. In a secular manner it echoes the dicta of “do not desire” and “love they neighbour” found in several different religious and belief systems. The socioeconomic features of postmodern societies, such as high levels of individualisation and a materialist lifestyle, is certainly conducive to the absence of, as well as the need for, such an orientation of being. Academic discourse in postmodern societies rarely entertains questions pertaining to the quality of the common or human good, and the relativism of such discourse leaves many scholars with a feeling of uneasiness. Aristotle’s understanding that the relative manifestation of elements of the human good particular to persons and experiential contexts can manifest itself by way of practical wisdom seems to provide a more personalised relativism that contains some guidelines for practical action rather than the unqualified relativity of relativism itself. Aristotle’s understanding of practical wisdom, ethics and the virtue of individual character represents the backdrop in terms of which his treatises on personal and civic friendship should be understood. It is an important element in his philosophical pedagogy of what constitutes the human good. Given the renewed interest in his ethical thought and his notion of civic friendship by both moral and political philosophers in recent years, it is the aim of this essay to explore and appraise some aspects of Aristotelian ethics and its relation to civic friendship. How and why his thoughts on these matters appeal to some Aristotelian scholars of our time is also briefly attended to in order to appraise the significance of these ancient thoughts for friendship and civic relations in contemporary societies.
1. INTRODUCTION

Academic discourse in modern, and especially postmodern societies, rarely entertains questions pertaining to the quality of the human or common good, a concept with Aristotelian roots. Aristotle’s (384-322 BCE) understanding of practical wisdom (*phronesis*), ethics and the virtue of individual character represents the backdrop in terms of which his treatises on personal and civic friendship (*philia politike*) should be understood. It is an important element in his philosophical pedagogy of what constitutes the human good. Given the renewed interest in his ethical thought and his notion of civic friendship by both moral and political philosophers in recent years, it is the aim of this essay to explore and appraise some aspects of Aristotelian ethics and its relation to civic friendship. How and why his thoughts on these matters appeal to some Aristotelian scholars of our time is also briefly attended to in order to appraise the significance of these ancient thoughts for friendship and civic relations in contemporary societies.

The Aristotelian notion of the human good is understood in many different ways, partly due to the fact that Aristotle does not tell us specifically what it is. In the most general sense it refers to “a good proper to, and attainable only by, the community, yet individually shared by its members” (Dupré 1993: 687). What in most instances prevents the realisation of the human good is injustice in communities and the polis. Injustice results from an excessive overgrasping of external material and psychological goods such as money, honour and power, as well as excessive internal desires for such scarce goods for reasons of self-sufficiency, insecurity and personal gratification among those who do not possess it. For Aristotle the injustices brought about by overgrasping can be countered. To this end he employs *phronesis* and *philia* as both diagnostic and prescriptive tools to argue for a reorientation away from having to being (Smith 1999: 625-630). The orientation of having is the excessive and insatiable desire for external goods that cannot be shared by all, while the orientation of being is to share personally satisfying activities that do not, like external goods, diminish in their sharing among participants. In this essay we focus on the reorientation with regard to being, and specifically how *phronesis* can counter excessive honour by way of virtue in character and moderation. It is moderation that curtails excessive desires and reorients reasonable persons (*epieikes*) not to overreach for external goods which indeed prepares the way for both friendship (*philia*) and political friendship (*philia politike*) in the polis. Like all seminal works Aristotle’s thoughts on the nature of the human good is also contested with regard to meaning.
and significance. During the 20\textsuperscript{th} century its initial prominence was gradually supplanted by liberal theory and the ideas of communitarians\textsuperscript{1}, but in recent times renewed interest by neo-Aristotelian scholars in his thoughts is discernible. They seem to share the conviction that in contemporary societies the virtue of individual character can provide a civic vinculum that will bond citizens together and moderate politics by justificatory claims that are not reliant on “more-or-less \textit{naturalistic} bonds such as family, ethnicity, race, nation, the \textit{Volk}, religion, or a shared origin of humanity” (Chiba 1995: 508).

The stated aim of exploring and appraising the appeal of Aristotelian virtue and political friendship for contemporary circumstances is deceptive and complex; it must be approached with caution and it requires a judgment on at least two aspects. The first judgment is the extent to which we allocate importance to understand textual meaning in terms of the larger textural framework of an author’s own thought, sometimes contained in separate texts. A related but equally important consideration is the historical context of a text, and this includes the extent to which we should or should not understand an author’s thought in terms of thoughts of the author’s immediate predecessors as well as his successors. These considerations may supplement and even alter the literal meaning of a text. The second judgment involves the extent to which largely incongruous historical contexts may be bridged by imputing meaning and significance from the one context to the other. The fact that more than two millennia separate the ancient Greek polis and Aristotle’s ethical and friendship treatises from the present time raises the question of contextual differences and to what extent one can, or can not, transpose ancient ideas to present times under conditions of \textit{ceteris paribus}. This is a

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\textsuperscript{1} The interest of neo-Aristotelians in \textit{philia politike} as a normative model for virtuous citizenship in the liberal state has been opposed by liberal theorists in a number of ways. The best-known example of opposition against \textit{philia politike} is probably the communitarian movement that has found organisational expression in the USA. The movement seeks moral virtue and good citizenship at the level of community and not at the level of the clinical inhospitality of the large and plural liberal state which entertains no substantive moral commitment. It is committed to establishing an ethical public order that emphasises the community, aspects of a shared culture, the common good, reciprocity, trust and solidarity among citizens rather than individual interests stemming from the idea that there is no shared view of the good life in the liberal state. Similar movements are found in many liberal states for example, the Afrikaner settlement Orania in the Northern Cape in SA is a rough approximation of communitarians in the USA. The ideas of writers such as Taylor (1989), Sandel (1998), Bellah et al (1996), Walzer (1983) and Maclntyre (1981) are usually regarded as being supportive of the communitarian movement and critical towards liberal thinkers who emphasise individualistic politics (Irrera 2004: 2). However, within liberal theory and liberalism, the concept of political friendship for heterogeneous states is not an obsolete one. There are a number of non-Aristotelian and non-communitarian views on friendship and citizenship which, for example, argues that pursuing attributes such as empathy, compassion and benevolence could indeed serve as a normative model for good citizenship at the level of the liberal state (Reeder 1998).
controversial matter and much has been written about inter-contextual transferability. These judgments hold several implications, for example, we should be conscious whether our knowledge of the historical context from which Aristotle’s treatise has emerged, the ancient Greek polis, may be relevant in our own ascribing of meaning to the texts themselves. Furthermore, our analysis requires that we understand and appraise the significance of ancient textual meaning in terms of our contemporary contexts, the differing attributes of postmodern liberal societies. Our stated aim suggests that we should be keenly conscious about the apparent incongruous nature of the two historical contexts in an exploration and appraisal of the Aristotelian appeal of philia politike and its associated virtues. How we trade off the innumerable political differences that separate the ancient polis and its associated thoughts on friendship with the interest that it has inspired in contemporary societies, is thus a crucial aspect in ascertaining the contemporary meaning and relevance of philia politike. We should also note that the question whether it is preferable that knowledge of textual content should precede the examination of its context, or whether it is preferable that knowledge of the context of a text should precede the examination of a text itself, is an issue that has not been resolved in a manner that the a priori status of either category can be conclusively demonstrated.

The approach followed in this essay is to first briefly attend to Aristotle’s understanding of phronesis, ethics and the differing virtues of individual character, and in particular the limits within which character virtue makes friendship possible in aspiring to the human good. Thereafter, we sequentially deal with two general meanings of philia politike, namely its possibility as an actuality and its actuality as a possibility, and, to invoke some textual and contextual considerations deemed to be applicable to each of these respectively. The understanding of philia politike as a possibility that can be realised in the present time represents a more literal and autonomous interpretation of Aristotle’s friendship treatises than the second understanding of philia politike being a future possibility that may be realised. The first meaning is thus more reliant on and representative of the text and its own textual context than the second, which interprets the first more literal meaning in terms of anterior as well as posterior historical and contextual considerations. The issue of contextual congruity and intercontextual transferability is subsequently attended to since it is a matter that is directly affected by and dependent on the meaning of philia politike that one subscribes to. In this way, the responses of some contemporary scholars to these two understandings will demonstrate that phronesis and philia politike, as both an intended practice and a political concept relevant
to our time, is to be understood as a category somewhere between the practical and theoretical contexts of anteriority, the present and the future. These responses also reveal to us how similitude and difference in character is understood by some scholars of our own time and how we may understand and use this for assessing the nature of friendship relations with fellow citizens.

2. ARISTOTLE’S VIRTUES AND FRIENDSHIP

The great books in the Western tradition in fields such as theology and ethics as well as legal, moral and political philosophy teach us about many forms of love and friendship. These different and often overlapping ideas include notions such as *eros, philia politike, amicitia, homonoia, hospitium, storge, caritas, agape, cupiditas, compassion, frateritas* and *amor mundi*. These various forms of friendship, and in particular that of political friendship (*philia politike*), have occupied the minds of some of the most prominent thinkers in the Western tradition such as Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, St Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Francis Bacon, Michel de Montaigne, Adam Smith, and more recently, prominent thinkers such as Hannah Arendt, Jacques Derrida and many neo-Aristotelians.

The appeal of especially Aristotle’s notion of *phronesis*, ethics and *philia politike* has captivated the attention of prominent thinkers throughout history and the lure of attaining virtuous friendship of a political nature has endured for more than two millennia. The virtues contained in his character friendship are claimed to be compatible with much of contemporary liberal theory and practices in the secular postmodern liberal state. This is especially the case because of the paradoxical moral dilemma of liberal states not being able, except at the expense of its own liberal nature, to subscribe to a morality of friendship based on one or more of the sociological constituents of its plural nature (Jacobitti 1991: 282 & Chiba 1995: 508). The virtues of character friendship do not invoke divisive constituent-based moralities such as race, religion, language and so on as the source of its justification and is therefore according to neo-Aristotelians potentially less divisive than the former. Aristotle’s thoughts on *phronesis* and *philia politike* are, however, embedded in, and must be understood against the larger

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2 With regard to non-Western friendship - for *ubuntu* (Enslin & Horsthemke 2004; Schoeman 2005); for Confucian thinking on friendship (Hall & Ames 1994); for views on friendship in Indian philosophy (Parekh 1994) and for friendship contained in Islamic thought (Goodman 1996).
framework of philosophical and ethical questions that he addresses in his various works. With regard to philosophy, Aristotle does not take matters for what they are but for what they will become, and such a functionally directed teleology permeates most of his thoughts, including his views on friendship. This is similarly the case with regard to ethical matters which represent the backdrop for understanding friendship as part of his larger concern with moral issues such as right and wrong, good and bad, virtue, justice, and the happiness of the good life (eudaimonia) in the city. It may be argued that Aristotle’s senescent meditations on friendship and ethics represent one of the indispensable elements in the epic discourse on these matters that reaches back to the genesis of the Western philosophical tradition - the time of Plato’s Academy and his own Lyceum in the 4th century BC (Mhire 2002: 2). His views on ethical matters and friendship are generally ascribed to three works, the Nicomachean Ethics, the Eudemian Ethics, and the Magna Moralia. The first of these works, written at around 350 BCE, is the most comprehensive account of his views on friendship and is widely regarded as the quintessential and most authoritative of his friendship texts. It consists of ten books of which three (V-VIII) are shared with the Eudemian, and controversy exists whether the latter preceded or superseded the Nicomachean Ethics. Some scholars nevertheless regard the Eudemian as being “concise and coherent, and a masterful pedagogical dialogue that takes the form of a treatise” in its own right (Mhire 2002: 34). The Magna Moralia devoted primarily to ethics is now generally regarded as not being written by Aristotle but possibly by one of his students.

In his works, Aristotle famously argues that the normative model for good citizenship is political friendship. His work is also the source for the well-known maxim that good lawgivers would pay more attention to amity than to justice because without the former the latter could not exist. In the Nicomachean Ethics (NE) he states that friendship “seems too to hold states together, and lawgivers to care more for it than for justice; for unanimity seems to be something like friendship, and this they aim at most of all, and expel faction as their worst enemy; and when men are friends they have no need of justice, while when they are just they need friendship as well, and the truest form of justice is thought to be a friendly quality” (Aristotle: The Internet Classics Archive, NE Book VIII.1. From this citation it seems that amity (Aristotle’s notion of philia politike; political friendship) is prior to any code of laws. It is indeed a stronger bond of community than law itself and more likely to ensure harmonious co-existence than government and law are able to achieve (Goodrich 2003: 27).
We have mentioned that Aristotle’s friendship must be understood against the background of his concern with ethics and virtue and his views on teleology. We here first attend to his concern with moral issues such as right and wrong, good and bad, virtue, justice, and the happiness of the good life (*eudaimonia*) in the city of which friendship is one of the most important subsidiary parts. His views on teleology are indeed discernible in the section that follows next, but will be more specifically addressed in the examination of *philia politike* which follows after our examination of the virtue of character below.

3. **PHRONESIS, VIRTUE AND FRIENDSHIP**

Our interest in the nature and potential merits of an ancient form of practical wisdom and character virtue that can inform citizen relations and civic friendship in contemporary democracies presupposes the fundamental virtue that lies at the heart of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, as well as elements thereof espoused in other works of Aristotle. While Aristotle’s ethical thought has recently become popular among a number of moral philosophers, it must first be distinguished from the mainstream of contemporary virtue ethics.

3.1 ** Aristotelian ethics and virtue is not mainstream virtue ethics**

According to Buckle (2002: 565) the mainstream of contemporary virtue ethics differs from modern views such as Kantian deontology and consequentialism in that it emphasises the character of agents rather than acts of “what is or is not to be done” and a legalistic conception of ethics, that emphasises obligation (2002: 565). This mainstream interest in Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* can, at least analytically, be distinguished from the interest in it by political philosophers. In general, the latter view it in conjunction with Aristotle’s civic friendship, while the former’s interest in it is primarily whether it is a viable alternative to Kantian deontology and consequentialism. This interest of moral philosophers has been led by Elizabeth’ Anscombe’s influential article *Modern Moral Philosophy* (1958) which argues that virtue ethics should rather focus on a psychologically enriched understanding of the moral agent that warrants a focus on the state of the agent instead of what the agent should or should not do. This argument, in effect, renders obligations and a law conception of ethics to be redundant (Buckle 2002: 567). Of crucial importance here, is that this conception of virtue ethics which views law to be superfluous in moral matters, should not be taken as a substitute
for our understanding of Aristotle’s teaching of ethics, the virtue of human excellences. Irrespective of the merits of this view of virtue ethics, which also invokes the *Nicomachean Ethics* as a source of its inspiration, and in spite of justificatory claims that underlie this understanding of virtue ethics that may partly overlap with our understanding of Aristotle’s ethics, Aristotle never rejected the formative value of good law and the constitution. This is a crucial difference since mainstream virtue ethics in moral philosophy rejects the necessity of a legalistic dimension. If the *Nicomachean Ethics* is read in conjunction with Aristotle’s *Politics* it becomes abundantly clear that to be bound by good law stemming from *phronesis* does not imply loss of freedom; it is not oppressive (Buckle 2002: 570). For Aristotle the virtues of character and good law are complimentary. Concerning the separation of the moral from the political in the deontology of virtue ethics in modern moral philosophy, Buckle (2002: 571-2) writes:

For it is Kant’s insistence on the over-riding significance of respect for each other as ends that underpins his thought that it is a *moral* truth that human beings possess an ‘unsocial sociability’, and which therefore licenses a *separation* of moral and political domains. For Aristotle, in contrast, no such separation is fully legitimate. Rather, the moral and the political must be regarded as aspects of a single enquiry. This is because, as he puts it, ‘the state is a creation of nature, and man is by nature a political animal [*homo anthropos phusei politikon zoon*].’

Thus, what Buckle (2002: 575) essentially draws our attention to is that “Aristotle’s ethics is not to be confused with modern virtue ethics in mainstream moral philosophy; this in spite of the fact that the latter also claim him as their patron saint. Aristotle does not argue, or even suppose, that we should live according to virtues rather than rules or obligations, nor that focus on the character of agents can replace, or avoid, reference to acting rightly or wrongly.”

For Aristotle the nature of character virtue emanates from the fact that human nature is a mixture of rational and non-rational elements as well as god-like and material elements. In line with his well-known understanding that the precision of objects is determined by the very nature of its subject matter, the materiality of human nature renders it to be one of imperfection; it is not god-like and perfect as those of the Platonic forms. Good persons, for Aristotle, do not define standards; they strive after them and in doing so they represent the best practical standard, not “the best standard *simpliciter*” (Buckle 2002: 569). Unlike the
mainstream of modern virtue ethics, Aristotle recognises the place and role of law and the
constitution in politics, as well as the fact that a human being is only capable of being
imperfectly rational; a human being is not a god (Buckle 2002: 594-595). Neo-Aristotelians do
not seek virtuous citizenship in an overdue emphasis on the character of agents only, nor do
they seek such in an impersonal reliance on legal prescripts, or, like the communitarians, seek
it at the level of community that emphasises group oriented identities such as culture, religion,
language and so on. Rather, neo-Aristotelians prefer to seek a vinculum in philia politike at the
level of the virtue of individual character. In doing so they avoid the relativism inherent on
agent emphasis, the alienating distance between citizens who rely excessively on virtue found
in legal prescriptions, and the fragmentation brought about by an excessive reliance on finding
moral virtue in group oriented approaches. Neo-Aristotelian thinkers attempt “to shed the
Aristotelian conception of some of its infamous masculinist, elitist, and xenophobic
connotations, arguing that citizens of modern societies can maintain a close approximation of
Aristotelian civic friendship based on a relatively thin consensus regarding toleration, mutual
recognition of rights, and a universal value of care” (Scorza 2004: 105).

3.2 Aristotle’s virtues, exemplary character types and ensuing horizons of the good

Ten virtues of character are dealt with by Aristotle in the Nicomachean Ethics, in order
manliness (andreia) and moderation, both concerned with “feelings”; four virtues concerning
the external goods of money and honour: liberality (eleutheriotes) in matters of small sums of
money, magnificence (megaloprepeia) regarding great sums, a nameless virtue that is a mean
between lack of ambition and love of honour in matters of small honours and dishonours, and
greatness of soul (megalopsuchia) where large-scale honours and dishonours are concerned;
one virtue again concerned with a feeling, this time anger (orge), a “nearly nameless” mean
between irascibility and slavishness that Aristotle proposes to call “gentleness” (praotes); and
finally, three virtues having to do with “logoi and actions in communities”: truthfulness (as
opposed to self-deprecating irony and boastfulness), wittiness (as opposed to boorishness
and buffoonery), and affability (as opposed to grouchiness and obsequiousness (Salkever
2007: 204; Aristotle: The Internet Classics Archive NE).

Aristotle’s pedagogical method is to use fictitious exemplary figures to explain the
different virtues, each animated by different visions of the human good. These figures are the
manly man (andreios), the great-souled man (megalopsuchos), the just man (dikaios), the
decent man (*epieikes*), the friend, and, the theoretical man. The first two figures take the Periclean good of freedom, honour and greatness as their horizon, while the third and fourth base their vision on the public good. The fifth and sixth figures go beyond politics in dealing with human good as a goal in itself. The theoretical man attempts to transcend humanity in aspiring to adopt Aristotle’s understanding of *theos* as the ultimate measure for virtue in man (Salkever 2007: 204). Taken as a whole, the sequence of virtues described in his treatise has variously (but with teleological undertones) been described as portraying the growth of civilisation in moving from the need for manliness, sex and war to civility, and alternatively as resembling virtues that increasingly make use of practical wisdom (*phronesis*) to a way of life that seems to be beyond *phronesis* (Salkever 2007: 203). As stated above, our concern in this essay is with the human good as a goal in itself.

3.2.1 Perfection and imperfection in *phronesis*: the megalopsuchos and Socrates

While all the virtues outlined above are directly or indirectly linked to friendship, we here deliberately use the fictional figure of the great-souled man (*megalopsuchos*) to illustrate not only the flaws in an excessive desire for honour, but also the importance of *phronesis* in virtue for friendship as well as the indispensability of the latter for enriching the former. Aristotle’s *megalopsuchos* described in Book IV of the *Nicomachean Ethics* consciously possesses the highest excellence of soul and his virtue exceeds by far that of all other men. This magnanimous man is also aware that the city owes him the highest possible tributes and honour for the attributes that he possesses, yet he displays intolerance to criticism and a disdain for the common man. Like Holloway (2007: 354) we may thus question why we “as citizens of a modern democracy, turn our attention to premodern accounts of a virtue that is alien and even repugnant to democratic sensibilities and beliefs?” While attention to the *megalopsuchos* may not be to our taste and preference, it is useful to do so if we want to gain an understanding of Aristotelian virtue, its relation to friendship, and how the true *megalopsuchos* that emerges from the larger Aristotelian corpus is a magnanimity that is Socratic in nature; one that simultaneously possesses the attributes of being vain and self-depreciating. This aspect of Aristotle’s thought on virtue is not only complex, it is also highly contested and we here follow the excellent analysis of Howland in his 2002 article entitled *Aristotle’s Great-souled Man*. We thus undertake this to better contextualise Aristotle’s friendship treatises given the subtleties of his writing and the interconnectedness of his various
works. The two figures that emerge from the *Nicomachean Ethics* represent two poles within which friendship finds its place, the *megalopsuchos* being immune to friendship, a tragic figure excised from friendship, and the Socratic *megalopsuchos*, the Aristotelian paradigmatic friend.

Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* is devoted to the search for *eudaimonia*, happiness, which is the ultimate goal of human life, its *telos*. He writes that:

> … we state the function of man to be a certain kind of life, and this to be an activity or actions of the soul implying a rational principle, and the function of a good man to be the good and noble performance of these, and if any action is well performed when it is performed in accordance with the appropriate excellence: if this is the case, human good turns out to be activity of soul in accordance with virtue, and if there are more than one virtue, in accordance with the best and most complete (Aristotle: The Internet Classics Archive, *NE* Book I.7).

According to Howland (2000) this general description provides an orientation according to which one could gauge the extent to which individuals display excellence (*arête*), as well as the degree of perfection of individual virtues that make up virtue as a whole. Following this, Aristotle’s subsequent introduction of the *megalopsuchos* whose greatness of soul (*megalopsuchia*) promises us not only his understanding of pre-eminent excellence, but also a conception of what is great in each individual virtue since these are all attributes of the *megalopsuchos*. While greatness of soul, according to Aristotle, seems to resemble a type of ornament (*kosmos*) of individual virtues, Howland on this score cautions us that Aristotle’s depiction of greatness of soul, and therefore virtue, lies not in affirming what it is, but what it seems to be (2002: 278).

With regard to the relation between individual virtues and virtue as a whole Howland (2002: 30) writes that “Philosophical inquiry into ethics requires a kind of double vision: one must see each virtue in its own terms, and also as a part of the whole of virtue and of our shared, political life. It would be a moral as well as an intellectual error to consider virtue in only one of these ways”. He furthermore points out that for Aristotle it is the attribute of *phronesis* that makes such an understanding possible. *Phronesis* represents an exceptional understanding of what is morally appropriate in practical contexts, and simultaneously provides understanding of the relationship between the virtue of a particular practical context and the other parts of virtue as a whole. Aristotle thus avoids pronouncements on virtue as
such since it would not “recognize that our common life is sustained, and sometimes saved, by the less than - extraordinary virtues of our fellow citizens. Because these virtues - courage, public - spiritedness, generosity, honesty, decency, and politeness, to name a few - ordinarily exist apart from an understanding of the whole of which they are parts, it is an act of phronesis to attempt to understand them in their own terms” (Howland 2002: 30; Aristotle: The Internet Classics Archive, NE Book VI.13 & Book II.6). Practical wisdom is, however, less than complete virtue for it only understands the partiality or incompleteness of every virtue, including that of its own and it can therefore not grasp the nature of the entirety of virtue as a whole. The man of practical wisdom (phronimos) can, in principle, therefore sympathetically and figuratively enter the concreteness of human life and determine the means relative to the situation that is required. And even if it could be postulated that a person somehow could “cultivate all of the virtuous dispositions at once, his virtue would still be incomplete in another sense, for he would not cease to depend for his life and well-being upon the virtuous action of his fellow citizens” (Howland 2002: 30-31). For Howland (2002: 31) it is indeed the duality of phronesis that affords us the double vision to view the megalopsuchos as he sees himself through the eye of the city, and simultaneously through the eye of phronesis that takes in the whole of virtue. Moreover, it is the key element with which the (im)perfection of the virtuous dispositions of the megalopsuchos is exposed since for virtue itself he remains ever dependent on the virtue of his fellow-citizens, and this also exposes the indispensable connection of interdependence between virtue and friendship. How this allows us to understand the emergence of a Socratic megalopsuchos, rather than the perfect one sketched in the Nicomachean Ethics, is crucial to the pedagogy of Aristotle’s thoughts on virtue and it is this contested aspect that we now briefly attend to in further following the scholarship of Howland on the matter.

The megalopsuchos outlined in Book IV of the Nicomachean Ethics is, according to Howland (2002: 31-32) an extraordinary embodiment of virtue. He performs the most noble of deeds and is fundamentally a political man that displays a philosophical detachment from politics. While greatness of soul (megalopsuchia) is normally not regarded as a theoretical virtue, the great-souled man is in one sense philosophical in character; he is a lover of virtue, not honour. He seems to understand the inadequacy of honour and that virtue is the end of political life. What seems to be is, however, qualified by the megalopsuchos’ lack of philosophical insight and self-knowledge as Howland explains:
As we know from Plato's *Symposium* (216a-b), this is the same momentous lesson that Alcibiades, whom Aristotle cites as an example of a great-souled man at *Posterior Analytics* 97b, failed to learn from Socrates. Yet while the *megalopsuchos* of *EN* 4.3 has in one respect surpassed Alcibiades, he, too, turns out to be unable to complete - and in a certain sense, even to embark upon - the path of philosophical development to which Socrates attempted to introduce his honor-loving companion (Howland 2002: 32; Aristotle: The Internet Classics Archive, *Posterior Analytics PA* Book II.13).

The character feature of the great-souled man that exposes the *megalopsuchos*’ tragic shortcoming of self-knowledge is ironical. The *megalopsuchos*’ saving of the entire community by way of a heroic, superhuman deed best exemplifies his god-like virtue. In the eye of the community this deed is the *sine qua non* of all goods and such virtue has absolute value. But, as Howland (2002: 32) points out:

To read *EN* 4.3 in the light of the *Ethics* as a whole, however, is to see that the great-souled man's self-understanding is defective just to the extent that he uncritically absorbs the community's estimation of the absolute value of his saving virtue. While the great-souled man has overcome the love of honor for its own sake, he is with respect to self-knowledge still a slave to honor. In regard to virtue, he understands himself to be perfect and therefore self-sufficient, but he is neither.

For Howland Aristotle’s implied criticism of the great-souled man in Book IV.3 of the *Nicomachean Ethics* thus points to Socrates as the true *megalopsuchos*. The section in question recalls Aristotle’s discussion of *megalopsuchia* in his *Posterior Analytics* since it presents a *megalopsuchos* modelled on the virtue of Socrates (Howland 2002: 32). It is important to bear in mind that Aristotle writes on the greatness of soul not only in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, but also in his *Politics*, *Rhetoric*, and important here, his *Posterior Analytics*. In the latter he compares traits in five characters in order to arrive at an understanding of *megalopsuchia*. In this he considers two fictional characters, Achilles and Ajax, and three actual historical figures, Socrates, Alcibiades, and Lysander (Howland 2002: 33 & Aristotle: The Internet Classics Archive, *PA* Book II.13). What distinguishes Socrates from all four of them is the fact that he is indifferent to criticism and does not share the trait of love for honour and intolerance for dishonour. What indeed distinguishes Socrates from the four great-souled men in both the *Posterior Analytics* and the *megalopsuchos* of the
Nicomachean Ethics is “the gift of well-intentioned criticism. … the ‘small thing’ that Socrates tells Theaetetus is the only thing he knows, namely, how ‘to take a speech from another who is wise and accept it in a measured way” (Howland 2002: 32 &48).

The megalopsuchos of the Nicomachean Ethics, in contrast to the Socratic megalopsuchos, thus suffers from a tragic lack of self-knowledge, an inability to realise that practical wisdom (phronesis) itself cannot be an ordered whole (kosmos) of the virtues. He thus commits what Aristotle calls the tragic error of hamartia, an inability to understand that the whole of virtue is never the possession of a single human being, but that the true kosmos of the virtues resides in the political community, the polis as a whole. Thus, the man who possesses the resources to save an entire city may not possess the resources to save himself. His sense of self-perfection, that he represents the embodiment of perfect virtue (arêtes pantelous), and that he is entitled to honour and not merely tributes to his virtue, is to confuse his own esteem with that of the gods for honour is a form of praise that belongs to the gods, and the gods only (Howland 2002: 42). “In sum, even the best of men are not perfect with respect to virtue, and will need friends to keep them on occasion from hamartia. To be helped by a friend's good advice, however, one must be able to accept criticism. And this is something that the great-souled man cannot do” (Howland 2002: 53).

3.3 The horizon of the human good: what matters most is often noted least

From the very brief exposition of aspects of Aristotelian virtue in the Nicomachean Ethics and the Posterior Analytics above, we can take the lesson that what matters most but is often noted least, is that modesty and friendship is the greatest external good; it absorbs justice since the pinnacle of living together (suzên) is to enter into and share discourse and to articulate through speech (logos) our thoughts (dianoia) to other persons. Without well-intentioned criticism friendship is not possible, and without friends we cannot, according to Aristotle, actualise our excellence (arête) (Salkever 2007: 209 & Aristotle: The Internet

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Hamartia, the Greek word for error or failure, is used by Aristotle in his Poetics (4th century BCE) to designate the false step that leads the protagonist in a tragedy to his or her downfall. The term has often been translated as “tragic flaw”, but this misleadingly confines the cause of the reversal of fortunes to some personal defect of character, whereas Aristotle's emphasis was rather upon the protagonist's action, which could be brought about by misjudgement, ignorance, or some other cause (http://www.answers.com/topic/hamartia).
Classics Archive, NE Book IX.9). The *Nicomachean Ethics* thus suggests that perfect virtue (*arêts panteleous*) without critical self-knowledge distorts the very nature of practical wisdom (*phronesis*) and therefore virtue itself, and that in contrast, the Socratic notion of virtue is qualified by the very imperfection of *phronesis* itself. It can therefore not grasp the partiality or incompleteness of every virtue and the nature of the entirety of virtue as a whole. The exposition above also sheds light on the horizons of the fictitious figures that were outlined at the beginning of this section, namely the horizon of the Periclean good of freedom, honour and greatness represented by the manly man and the great-souled man, the horizon of the public good represented by the just man and the decent man, and the horizon of going beyond politics to the very nature of the human good represented by the friend and the theoretical man. In terms of Aristotle’s pedagogy it suggests to us (Salkever 2007: 210) that human freedom is outranked by the horizon of human law, that human law is outranked by the horizon of human beings, and that human beings are outranked by the horizon of being as such. In a sense the character types of Aristotle’s exemplary figures also stand in a particular relation to one another with regard to virtue. The manly man is outranked by the *megalopsuchos*, the just man outranks the *megalopsuchos*, the decent man the just man, the friend the decent man, and the philosopher, the theoretical man is superior to the friend. Salkever points out that the ordering of horizons and figures implied by Aristotle do not displace or supersede each other in a Hegelian sense. He writes (2007: 210):

> Given the unique and immense variety and contingency of human life, and given that we do not and cannot know or choose in advance the challenges our lives will set for us, each of them (as well as their relative rank order) must be kept in mind as a theoretical guide to the prohairetic life.

Salkever (2007: 210-11) further points out that the relationship between the various horizons does not imply that the man of practical wisdom (*phronimos*) should stop caring about any one of the horizons, or to treat some things as the only good things; in a manner these things are all good by nature. For him Aristotle’s intention in ranking the virtues, their horizons and the exemplary figures are threefold: (1) to rank the goods and horizons relative to the standard implicit in the activities of being; (2) to warn that we should not take any one too seriously, or not serious enough, and (3) to make clear that theory cannot go beyond the first two points and that persons and communities must decide about the best mix of goods that is optimal.
and appropriate for them, such decisions not informed by philosophy but primarily by *phronesis* that engages philosophy.

The pedagogical and philosophical lesson outlined above is in essence profoundly simple, but its implications for virtue and friendship are simply profound. With this in mind, we now turn to the Aristotelian horizon of going beyond politics to the very nature of the human good represented by the exemplary figures of the friend and the theoretical man. Our emphasis is primarily on the exemplary figure of the friend, political friendship (*philia politike*) and the role of *phronesis* that represents and actualizes its required virtue of character, but the second contextual understanding of this horizon below indirectly also invokes the theoretical man, the virtue of Socrates.

### 3.4 A textual understanding of *philia politike*: possibility as an actuality

The first and more popular conventional view of Aristotle’s friendship is one that “requires a grasp of how friendship emerges from its possibility into actuality, and what stands revealed in actuality” (Bryan 2009: 765). This view of Aristotle’s *philia politike* is also the one that neo-Aristotelians most readily transfer to the politics of our own time in a prescriptive sense. The view holds that Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* explains to us three types of friendship, that of utility, that of pleasure, and that of virtue. The first is a type of companionship that is mutually advantageous in that it is based on a mutually related activity whose purpose is advanced through such an association. The second type is an acquaintance characterised by the mutuality of pleasure derived from it, such as enjoying someone else’s presence in a conversation. The third type, virtue friendship, Aristotle regards as proper friendship. In *the Nicomachean Ethics* he states:

> For those who are friends on the ground of virtue are anxious to do well by each other (since that is a mark of virtue and of friendship), and between men who are emulating each other in this there cannot be complaints or quarrels; no one is offended by a man who loves him and does well by him – if he is a person of nice feeling he takes his

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* The first two paragraphs in this section (3.4) as well as the paragraph of section 3.5 are taken from my recent article (Faure 2010: 13-6; 16-30) which does not contextualise *philia politike* in terms of *phronesis* as expounded in the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Posterior Analytics* and which does not explore the appeal of *phronesis* in terms of all the scholars and considerations used for this article.
revenge by doing well by the other. And the man who excels the other in the services he renders will not complain of his friend, since he gets what he aims at; for each man desires what is good (Aristotle: The Internet Classics Archive, NE Book VIII.12).

Such friendship entails arête (the property of excellence), an individual attribute, but simultaneously also an attribute that responds to a call for excellence or by that which brings out the excellence in other individuals. It is indeed the polis that makes virtue friendship possible and especially so if the constitution is of a friendly quality seeking justice and the good for all of the community. Although not all citizens possess the quality of virtue (the element of arête that calls one to excellence), just laws would provide the necessary political bonds of reciprocity and equality among all the members of a community, both virtuous and less virtuous, replacing in this way the love and the trust typical of virtuous friends where it is not present. For this view of philia politike the threefold taxonomy of friendship also suggests a progression from the first instance of convenience and advantage that utility friendship offers through the pleasures of friendship to the fullness of happiness when arête actualises itself. “Virtue” friendship is, for Aristotle, “proper” or “true” friendship because it is what orients us to what is required of us by those we love and who love us. Proper friendship, where the telos of friendship has been reached (insofar as this is possible at all), is commonly interpreted as both involving arête and being one (Bryan 2009: 758; Irrera 2004: 1-14).

In this conventional view, the true friend is seen as the “other self”, a view which acknowledges the separateness of individuals, but simultaneously the distinctive ways in which all concerned realise the good life. The relationship between the “self” and the “other self” is generally regarded as the element in Aristotle’s philia politike which constitutes a vinculum or civic bond of friendship that ties citizens together. As a result of the mutual awareness of liking and possibly emulating one another, much controversy underlies the understanding of this aspect of his thought, especially with regard to the elements of narcissism, egotism, altruism and excessive benevolence that may be inferred from it (Annas 1977; Derrida 1988; Stern-Gillet 1995; Van der Valk 2004-2005). The controversy pertaining to the interpretation of the “other self” in Aristotle’s friendship has many facets. Amongst others, it raises questions such as whether philia politike is indeed also an advantage friendship such as that between individuals, or whether the utility that it seeks (the common good) makes it virtue friendship. While some neo-Aristotelians subscribe to the latter interpretation, others such as Van der Valk (2004-2005) see complete virtue friendship (teleia philia) as something
which develops beyond *philia politike*. Thus, how the relation between the “self” and the “other” is interpreted, is crucial in that it raises the question whether *philia politike* is indeed virtuous from the outset or whether and at what stage it may become virtuous when the *telos* of such friendship is reached. For some scholars, such as Derrida, Bryan and Arendt (1958), this seems to be understood as a possibility rather than something which can be actualised. The happiness of the good life (*eudaimonia*) is not possible if others do not enjoy it as well and shared happiness thus “entails the rational capacity for jointly promoting common ends as well as the capacity to identify with and coordinate separate ends” (Sherman 1987: 589). In his *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle writes:

> For without friends no one would choose to live, though he had all other goods; even rich men and those in possession of office and of dominating power are thought to need friends most of all; for what is the use of such prosperity without the opportunity of beneficence, which is exercised chiefly and in its most laudable form towards friends? (Aristotle: The Internet Classics Archive, *NE* Book VIII.1).

The good life implies self-sufficiency, meaning that it lacks in nothing and the addition of no other good will contribute to making it more desirable. However, since friends and friendship, among other goods, make self-sufficiency, the happiness of the good life itself possible, such a life is by definition an interwoven life of well-being (*kath’ heteron*). It is not a life in isolation; the good life is a relational one, only a god can be self-sufficient in his own well-being (Sherman 1987: 595-596). The Aristotelian adult friend, the “other self”, is equally an “another self” and a “separate self”, each will possess specific but also shared ways of being virtuous as informed by *phronesis*. The virtuous character of the self and the other must, however, preexist to realise any friendship based on virtue. Sherman (1987: 607) writes:

> This entails that such friends promote each other’s good in a privileged way (as only another self can), but in a way that is nonetheless mindful of the mature rational agency of each. So, given the similarity of character friends and the exclusivity of the relation, each is in a position to know how best to help the other, and how to help in a way that most reassures and pleases. In those cases where decisions are not joint, intimate knowledge of each other’s abiding interests puts each in a position to offer counsel and support for the sort of choices that give real shape to each other’s lives. Yet within this extended and interwoven life, the individuals nonetheless retain their separateness.
This, in a compressed format, is Aristotle’s notion of philia politike as derived textually and understood conventionally. The virtues implied by character friendship are subsidiary but compatible with his larger concern of happiness (eudaimonia) and justice in the city as contained in The Nicomachean Ethics. As referred to above, contemporary scholars do acknowledge the effect of teleological causation in the unfolding of virtue friendship referred to briefly in The Nicomachean Ethics, but more extensively so in the larger textual context of Aristotle’s works, such as his Posterior Analytics (PA Book I.X1). In this understanding of philia politike, unlike the teleological understanding that follows below, teleology is not understood to be such an omnipotent future cause that it excludes philia politike from the realm of what is realisable.

3.5 A contextual and teleological understanding of philia politike: actuality as possibility

The second interpretation of Aristotle’s notion of friendship, amplified by especially the work of Derrida (1988 & 1997) and Bryan (2009), is more abstract, complex, even radical, and is one that can only be understood in terms of a teleology that permeates most of Aristotle’s thought on the one hand, and the philosophic-historical context of his treatises on the other hand. Such a perspective can be inferred indirectly in the thought of philosophers that preceded and succeeded Aristotle. It is thus found not in the text or the textual context of his own works, but in the broader historical and philosophical context of his thought. Several authors address this issue, but here we may use Bryan (2009) who presents it in a recent article entitled Approaching Others: Aristotle on Friendship’s Possibility. Bryan skilfully invokes the memory and the stature of a moral and virtuous Socrates (469-399 BCE) as a precious and idealised “friendship in memory”, and Diogenes Laertius’ (3rd CE) account of Aristotle’s thought, respectively decades before and centuries after Aristotle’s life, as historical signposts to ascribe meaning to philia politike. For Bryan Aristotle’s nostalgic longing for a virtuous past “friendship” personified by Socrates, and the nostalgia contained in Aristotle’s often repeated anecdote “My friends, there are no friends” as reported by Diogenes in his Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers, is the key with which the teleological meaning of philia politike can
be unlocked (Bryan 2009: 772; 754-755; Diogenes http://classicpersuasion.org)\(^5\). This is an intriguing contextual way of inferring the meaning that *philia politike* essentially represents a yearning for or a vision of the possibility of a righteous, virtuous and friendly body politic in the unseen future as inspired by a nostalgic longing for what once was. Several other authors (Derrida, 1988, 1997) also attach importance to Diogenes’ anecdote in this sense and taken with the depiction of Socrates by Aristotle in his own work as one of the most virtuous men, as well as Aristotle’s leaving of Plato’s Academy and Athens (Chroust 1967) may all be considered as contextual issues that are potentially important in understanding Aristotle’s thought on friendship in this teleological manner.

4. INCONGRUOUS CONTEXTS: TEXTUAL TRANSFER AND VARIANCE IN MEANING

In her book *Perfecting Friendship* Schweitzer (2006: 28, 32) argues that the question whether similitude, or difference, or both, among persons ought to form the basis of constituting a political community is one of the most profound and enduring questions of political thought and action. How we politically respond to this question is crucial for the nature of a *koinonia*, a community, the rights of persons that constitute such a community, and whether we can have equality or equity within difference and difference within equality in such a community.

It could be stated that the premodern period is, in general, characterised by masculine similitude in friendship relations and that this has excluded the accommodation of difference and the issue of gender equality in such relations in many different ways. By the beginning of the modern era, Aristotelian sameness (the mirror-image of oneself), despite it being variously understood and adapted at different points in time, was still the preponderant model for friendship in Western thought. The element of equality contained in the notion of sameness

\(^5\) In this source the anecdote is translated as follows: “The man who has friends has no friend”. Derrida (1988: 632) understands Diogenes’ phrase to be “Oh my friends, there is no friend”. Dynes’ view is that Derrida and other authors understand the matter incorrectly. He writes that “The mistaken ascription to Aristotle goes back to Diogenes Laertius’ “Lives of the Eminent Philosophers,” a compilation from the third century CE. In this text (V, 21-22), the saying goes as follows: “He who has friends can have no true friend”. This was ostensibly reported by one Favorinus. It is found, Diogenes tells us, in the seventh book of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*. That citation is doubly misleading, for the remark seems to be a garbled rendering of a remark in the *ninth* book of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. “Those who have a great many friends and greet anyone familiarly are felt to be friends of nobody”. For his part, Aristotle is simply reporting this notion as conventional wisdom; he does not necessarily endorse it” (Dynes, http://dyneslines.blogspot.com).
implied that it was understood as a prerequisite for virtuous friendship relations in both private and public matters. As a prerequisite for friendship relations equality was thus dependent on how sameness was understood; it did not result as a consequence of friendship relations based on difference. In all of this, masculinity remained to be the pre-eminent necessary condition for understanding sameness and practising virtuous friendship relations. The advent of the modern era and especially the period after the great wars of the 20th century up to the present is one that increasingly questioned the wisdom of old and entrenched privileges and practices, and in particular, moral issues that pertain to social and political relations in democratic societies. Some examples that reflect and signify the questioning of the rationale of the old moral order are the legal and political emancipation of women via franchise, the increased sensitivity in which many governments deal with minorities, cultural diversity, ethnicity, individual, language and group rights, the sexual revolution of the sixties, the so-called new morality, the alternative press, alternative music, the so-called counter-culture movement, the practice of abortion and euthanasia, the growing influence of feminist movements in advancing gender equality in both private and public matters, the challenging of the doctrine of ex Cathedra Catholicism and the legalising of new formats of homosocial relations such as civic unions (Faure 2006: 31).

4.1 The post-war period

Contemporary liberal states all harbour various degrees of plurality, the identity markers of the latter including aspects such as race, culture, religion, economic and income disparities, educational differences including rising rates of illiteracy, differences in the degree of secularisation and so on. Many of these societies have also, in some way or other, experienced mounting violence, an increase in racial tensions, the disintegration of traditional familial relations, an increase in drug dependency and homelessness, burgeoning tendencies of xenophobia, the gradual loss of social cohesion, fragmentation and the rise of various formats of chauvinistic nationalism (Schwarzenbach 1996: 99). In contemporary societies with populations of which segments claim to be modernist and so-called postmodernist in their thinking and customs, the legacy of liberalism with its emphasis on individualism and relativism seems as incapable to address these problems as the procedural democracies which characterise their political systems. In academic discourse these conditions have prompted some scholars to a rethinking of our own political situation in a fundamental way and
entering a radically different world and mode of thought to that prevailing in our own time. In this some scholars have again turned to Aristotle’s thoughts on phronesis, ethics and civic friendship in seeking answers to the meaning of human life and the human good, thereby avoiding what has been described as modernism’s “scientistic deductive systemicity and postmodernism’s distrust of attempts to articulate truths about the meaning of human life” (Salkever 2007: 213-214). However, this renewed interest in Aristotle’s thoughts imply that entertaining phronesis as the underlying mode of thought for virtue and philia politike within post-war political practice in democratic states, could no longer be based on strict notions of similitude such as gender, race, religion, and so on. In these states the socio-political context had changed irrevocably and post-modern scholarly discourse and socio-political practices seem to be in total denial of Aristotelian thinking. While disillusionment with habits, customs and practices associated with citizen relations in the public realm of liberal states indeed contributes to the search for alternative notions of the human good, we should understand the irreconcilability of the two modes of thought before we can turn to the way in which neo-Aristotelians respond to the matter.

4.2 Postmodernism and phronesis: superficial similarities and fundamental differences

The postmodern knowledge condition has been described in many ways, and its very nature seems to require a never-ending narrative about such a condition itself. In general it could be stated that it is a condition of paralogy that does not subscribe to metaparadigmatic criteria that can resolve conflicts between paradigms, and therefore, a metatheory that allows for a direct comparison of such conflicts. Gallagher (http://pegasus.cc.ucf.edu) judges it to be a relativistic scientific condition that only concerns itself with local narratives and local games, “in commensurabilities, undesirables, conditions of incomplete information, fracta, discontinuities, and paradoxes. The recourse to metanarratives is closed off -- no more theological systematisation, no more philosophy of Spirit, no more hermeneutics, no more Enlightenment ideology of emancipation” (Gallagher, http://pegasus.cc.ucf.edu). Postmodern relativism is therefore a conviction that all fundamental concepts that were previously understood to be relative to a conceptual scheme, theoretical framework, paradigm, form of life, society, or culture must be rejected as there are a nonreducible plurality of such conceptual schemes.
Superficially such a depiction of contemporary scientific discourse seems totally alien to the ancient Aristotelian notion of phronesis, but the matter requires more careful consideration.

Contrary to the perfectionist Platonic understanding of the good, Aristotelian phronesis - not unlike postmodernism - does not require a metanarrative for legitimating its authority. It is a prescriptive mode of judging without an appeal to an a priori theoretical criterion. It is an individual prudence that seeks the good and justice without recourse to models of such. Phronesis does not represent a discourse or a notion on the essential features of the good itself. Phronesis is a dialectic of moving from practical case to practical case, each being unique without external considerations to guide what the mean is for each case. In a sense the practical wisdom entailed by phronesis is a moral insight that works out the rules for ambiguous moral situations. It does not require knowledge of universals beforehand since the rules worked out for the mean in each situation will expose how the particular invokes generalities for the particular case (Gallagher, http://pegasus.cc.ucf.edu, par. 5 & 22). So in a sense, just as Aristotle objects to those who escape Plato’s cave to raise their consciousness in favour of common experience, postmodernists similarly object to elitist starting points in favour of common experience (Duska 1993: 228). This commonality of phronesis with postmodernism is well-captured by Duska (1993: 228) in stating:

The attempts of Deontologists and Utilitarians to ground ethics in their respective principles are seen as the last ditch efforts of modern philosophers to save the objectivity of ethical theory within the parameters of the modernist position. According to Aristotelians and Postmoderns alike, those ethical theories at worst, fail, and at best, provide an empty set of formal requirements necessary for any society to exist.

In spite of some similarities with postmodern thinking, Aristotelian phronesis indeed differs from the former in a fundamental way. In his works Aristotle develops and defends an ethics that emanates from the proper use of phronesis, but postmoderns, in general, eschew or reject ethics as such whether it be derived foundationally or otherwise including that of Aristotle. Aristotelian ethics based on phronesis is probabilistic and foundational in nature; its ethics is of a certitude that can vary from situation to situation and from individual to individual while its foundationalism is grounded in a teleology of human nature, society and history. The antifoundationalism of the majority of postmoderns clings to a transcendental approach and a non-negotiable relativism (Duska 1993: 229).
5. SOME NEO-ARISTOTELIAN RESPONSES

We can here only refer to a few examples in the briefest of terms, and in the last example outline in some more detail the conditions that decry the effects of postmodern living on the search for friendship and the human good.

The first example is Hannah Arendt. Her thoughts on amor mundi (love for the world, her notion of political friendship) were developed in the aftermath of the German genocide more than half a century ago. While she never devoted a book or treatise to specifically phronesis or political friendship, she at a stage seriously considered to give her magnum opus, The Human Condition (1958), the title of Amor mundi. In recent times some of her interpreters (e.g. Jacobitti 1991; Chiba 1995) have drawn her thoughts on morality and friendship from passages in her works and lecture notes together so that a clearer understanding of these matters emerges (Faure 2010: 27-34). Her thoughts on these matters must count as one of the most perceptive and wide-ranging accounts of how the ancient Aristotelian notion of philia can serve as a format in which individual moral virtue can pursue the realisation of a righteous, fair and friendly body politic somewhere in the unseen future (Chiba 1995; also see the teleological understanding in 3.5 above).

Arendt’s criticism of a political morality underpinned by Judeo-Christian transcendental principles is well-known, and in the place of it she conceives of an individualistic, secular and nontranscendental moral virtue found in especially the meditations of Socrates, but also in historical examples where individuals stood up to resist evil excesses in politics. The virtue inherent in such a morality does not depend on divine sanction since friendship is taken from its moral and religio-ethical context and transformed into a secular principle for constituting the plurality of the public world. This secular principle entails a virtue that moderates the courage and thinking that underlies the emergence from the private into the public domain and to assume responsibilities in the latter. It further requires a deep respect for the other and that engaging others be guided by moderation and a willingness to forgive transgressions and to keep to promises. The possibility of a civic vinculum between citizens that can develop from such a secular virtue also requires that adherence to any moral absolutes be forfeited and that one should never claim to know what is best or morally good for others, and that the temptations of hubris be resisted at all costs. That this secular virtue corresponds to the Aristotelian phronesis outlined earlier, should be readily apparent; hubris and moderation
echoing the dangers of the megalopsuchos’ perfect virtue and Socrates’ willingness to accept criticism respectively. Arendt’s *amor mundi* and Aristotle’s *philia* are thus not a matter of difference in substance but rather an extension of its scope, as broadening and elevating it to a more genuinely political form, so that it may cope with differences, diversities, and “heterogeneities among friends” (Chiba 1995: 507). Arendt thus envisages the contextual requirements of *phronesis* that can realize *amor mundi* somewhere in the unseen future.

Further examples that warrant brief mentioning are those neo-Aristotelians which transpose and adapt Aristotle’s texts on *phronesis* and friendship to the contemporary contexts of modern liberal states (see also the textual understanding in 3.4 above). This includes the thoughts of scholars such as Schwarzenbach (1996, 2009), Ward (2008), Schweitzer (2006) and Derrida (1988, 1997).

Schwarzenbach’s (1996: 109-12) arguments for dispelling some of the considerations that allegedly rule out the use of *philia politike* in modern societies are compelling. She argues rather convincingly that the issue of geographic and population size of the modern state as well as the far reaching effects of the Protestant Reformation, the legalising of individual rights and the rise of modern market economies in such states indeed signify major differences compared to the ancient polis, but that they do not rule out the contemporary utilisation of *philia politike* as a matter of principle. In short, Schwarzenbach argues that much of the controversy pertaining to the matter of incongruity can be ascribed to a gross misunderstanding or conflation of Aristotle’s notion of *philia politike* with that of “personal friendship”, “friendship politics” or a “thick brotherhood” where all is held in common on the basis of Plato’s *Republic* (Schwarzenbach 1996: 110). Both modern states with populations ranging from a few million to hundreds of millions and the small population of a Greek polis, do not require that all citizens know each other or are emotionally attached to one another as a prerequisite for *philia politike*. Aristotle never argued for this but instead for a limited consensus and commitment to a non-personal but virtuous concern for the happiness and well-being of others, an attitude in the everyday lives of citizens that works via the willingness to uphold the legal and social norms of the constitution. Willingness to uphold such civic relations with others is far superior to the meting out of fair justice by way of force. It is for this reason that Aristotle considers the cultivation by the legislator of unanimity and friendship in a population to be more important than cultivating even justice itself. According to Schwarzenbach (1996: 109) the legal and social norms pertaining to the treatment of persons,
the “public norms of concern for each citizen (the normal way citizens experience each other’s goodwill) can equally well apply to any modern state as to the ancient polis”.

The dispelling of masculine similitude from Aristotle’s *philia politike* is a striking example of how neo-Aristotelians have adapted textual meaning to suit conditions in contemporary contexts. In some instances this adaptation hinges on a reappraisal of the attribute of *phronesis*, and especially its espousal and practice by women. As outlined earlier on, the history of friendship and its practice in the Judeo-Christian and Western philosophical tradition is generally regarded as being masculinist, patriarchal, xenophobic, and elitist in nature (Goodrich 2003: 32). In our time this presents itself as an issue pertaining to the bridging of incongruous contexts. In the ancient Greek polis women, foreigners and slaves were not granted the same political privileges as citizen men and it is against this background that Aristotle wrote his friendship treatises. His *philia politike*, the perfect virtue friendship based on the excellence of character excludes women and confines their friendship and love to the family, the love between husband and wife, mother and child. This double exclusion of women from political participation as well as from friendship relations has been used to accuse Aristotle of being pro-slavery and a misogynist, and that his treatises, including that on friendship, confirm his bigotry (Internet, *Feminist History of Philosophy*, http://plato.stanford.edu) par. 4). In some feminist circles it is thus argued that a friendship conceived under such conditions and which contains such exclusions is nothing else than an anachronism and has no place in the contemporary enlightened liberal state. In these circles such exclusions of women by Aristotle, in addition, imply a devaluation of the practical thinking (*phronesis*) acquired from the practice of mothering and the care for children (Ruddick 1990: 6, 9, 13-15). In addition, many new liberal states have only recently started to break down the many remaining gender and racial prejudices in the aftermath of recently obtained legal and political emancipation of women in such societies. Neo-Aristotelians, on the other hand, do not find the historical prejudices that prevailed in ancient times and Aristotle’s presumed degradation of women in his friendship treatise of such importance to warrant the jettisoning of *philia politike* and, significantly, this includes feminist scholars as well (see for example Schwarzenbach 1996, 2009 and Ward 2008). These scholars differ from their co-feminists on especially how the *phronesis* (knowledge acquired by the practice of mothering and care) should be appraised for the purpose of virtue friendship, essentially a difference of opinion on how Aristotle should be interpreted. Schwarzenbach (1996: 125) finds Aristotle’s treatment of reproductive *praxis* or *phronesis* in his friendship treatise as containing moral and ethical virtue
of particular significance. His assigning of this attribute to women, an attribute for which they are uniquely equipped as a result of their historical role in love, mothering and care, affirms a unique potential of women to contribute to the good via practical reason (Aristotle: The Internet Classics Archive. NE Book VI). Unlike the calculation and deduction of episteme and the skill of techne (the modes of thinking that inform the male dominated production centred modern state) practical reason requires from its practitioner the attribute of moral virtue (arête); it is not a science, but cognitive experience gained through the “habitation of the emotions (pathe)” which can directly affect our notions about fellow citizens. This Aristotelian mode of moral reasoning does not, like Kant, equate moral judgments with rational decisions that are not affected by sensuous and emotional considerations. Nor does it, like Hume, accord sympathy a moral status which is devoid of any cognitive content (Schwarzenbach 1996: 125; Aristotle: The Internet Classics Archive, NE Books VI & II). Ward (2008: 44) echoes this when she writes:

Aristotle’s example of the self-sacrifice of mothering causes a truly selfless form of feminine friendship to come into view. It suggests that Aristotle believes it is possible for human beings, or within their nature, to act out of love for another that transcends the self. Moreover, it seems that for Aristotle the uniqueness of mother-love shows that women are capable of an altruism that points toward their participation in a perfect form of friendship that equals or is even truer than the friendship between good men.

This reassessment of women’s place in Aristotle’s friendship is significant, given that for centuries it was viewed as belonging to the private sphere and restricted to feminised forms of sympathy and affection. Schweitzer (2006: 67) offers some perspective on this when she writes that “research indicates that the role of women and differences of race, class, and sexuality became issues for philosophers of friendship only in the last quarter of the twentieth century, if at all”. Equalling out masculine privilege by acknowledging the theoretical parity of women in Aristotle’s philia politike is of course significant, but many issues still characterise this aspect. Among these, for example, are questions such as the following: Does theoretical equality with men not reinscribe masculine norms that ignore differences, whether naturally or socially constructed, that characterise the reality of women’s circumstances? Is it not possible to define equality in this respect as a parity or equity that hinges “fluidly or contingently” on difference rather than similitude? Is the element of reciprocity in philia politike amenable to a
disproportional rupture in its presumed symmetry so that it can accommodate women’s differences to men as being part of sameness and equality, and so on? (Schweitzer 2006: 69). To the extent that this incorporation of women into *philia politike* may become possible, its implications will be far-reaching and profound. In concurring with Derrida on this, Schweitzer employs his eloquence and writes that “Including ‘the double feminine’ in a vision of democratic politics freed from ‘the homo-fraternal and phallogocentric schema,’ then, can occur only under the sign of radical ‘heterology, asymmetry, and infinity,’ which runs counter to the ‘homology,’ ‘symmetry,’ ‘immanence,’ ‘finitism, and politicist concord’ of classical friendship” (Schweitzer 2006: 69; Derrida 1988: 643-4).

The underlying thesis of Goodrich’s thought is that the philosophical tradition and discourse on friendship as well as that of common law turns the attention away from analysing the imperfections and complexities of living friendships. The tradition serves as an ideal, one never to be realized in practice. His analysis and appraisal of how living friendships in the public sphere are suppressed by prohibitions, injunctions, vulgarities, passions, and laws is a vivid depiction of the paradox in which amity is caught up between memory of the past and its actualisation in the present and the future (Goodrich 2003: 22, 30). He points out that all of the great meditations on friendship were occasioned by the death of a friend and that “choosing friends according to their likeness to the self” is important because it is “only that similarity, that homophilic predicate of amity that will maintain the perennial, the eternal constancy of friendship”. This constancy is grounded in the criterion of similitude that first attracted friends to one another, and in its most abstract form it finds its purest expression in death. Constancy is assured by fatality, the spectre of memory, the image of the friend with no exterior, “no possibility of being other than the self same”.

Common or imperfect actual relationships, in other words, must always fail to achieve their concept or ideal. While it can of course be argued that the ideal of friendship is simply a form of call to the (impossible) attempt to be friends, and a recognition of the inevitable failure of all efforts at self-presence, its practical effect has been to subordinate the practice of friendship to the analysis of the after-life of relationship, its memorialisation, in the legal records of a life. The philosophical flight from the vulgarity of living friendship towards death, towards the juridical forms of epitaph or eulogy, leaves the life of amity either secreted in the private sphere or discounted as negative (Goodrich 2003: 44).

Unlike the Renaissance lawyer, Fullback, who pronounced that it is “better to abandon friendship, to love God and live as a hermit”, Goodrich (2003: 47) challenges the indefinite
postponement of facing and engaging real living friendship as a consequence of the tradition of idealised and unattainable friendship based on sameness. He argues for such engagement in a manner that resembles the features of *phronesis* by stating that criticism, which includes self-criticism, is most important in overcoming affection for familiarities and the fear for differences in friendship relations. True criticism in friendship is not hole-poking, fault-finding or nit-picking; it also, and especially, involves the “art of appreciation and specifically to the elaboration and sensuous apprehension of differences” (Goodrich 2003: 48). Friendship is not a matter where being important is more important than friendship itself. Goodrich (2003: 49) suggests that like friendship, political friendship is political work; it is labour of both an intellectual and an emotive nature. Like all forms of human relationship it is characterised by conflict and moments of violence, but also by “ecstasy or shared insights derived from ‘grappling together’”. He likens the learning to love a friend with learning to love music by suggesting that, only by listening to music over and over and over until the melody is known, when we understand it, when we are accustomed to it, when we expect it, then one realises that one would miss it if it were not there - if it were lacking. This is exactly how we have come to love everything that we love (Goodrich 2003: 49).

The philosopher, Lemke, contemplates how the use of Aristotelian *phronesis* can be used to restore the art of postmodern living to a vision of an aesthetic utopia for individuals to serve as a horizon for the human good. He starts with the modern history of utopian thinking; attempts at realising freedom in the aesthetic. The project of revolutionary macropolitics epitomised by Marxism does not afford - in fact negates - the individual the dignity and freedom of autonomous life shaping. The latter is dependent on the antagonistic dynamic within capitalistic production to produce a revolutionary subject from the ranks of the proletariat that will enforce collective utopian freedom. In contrast, the realisation of freedom in the micropolitical tradition of aesthetic and utopian thinking depends on the political ethics of the individual. For Lemke, as it is for Schiller and Foucault, such a personal ethics allows for immediate and autonomous life shaping, unlike the Marxist project which depends on a proletarian revolution and the transformation of political and economic orders before the realm of aesthetic freedom can be entered. This individual autonomy must, however, be qualified for conditions prevailing in the so-called postmodern society (Lemke 1995: 1-2).

For Lemke the societal transformation from modernism to postmodernism is, amongst others, characterised by a ubiquitous aesthetisation of the outward appearance of material goods. In postmodern societies, wherever “you look: household equipment, furniture, cars,
cosmetics, architecture of shopping and city centres, restaurants and pubs, etc. - you find the same phenomenon of a general prioritization of the aesthetic value of things and commodities” (Lemke 1995: 2). This form of aesthetics, however, reflects an increase in wealth, but not an increase in aesthetic and utopian freedom brought about by individuals who can autonomously attempt to realise these attributes. The ornamentalised material life is a purchased life-style and is dependent on the amount that one earns under economic and labour conditions over which the individual has no control (Lemke 1995: 1-2). Further conditions of postmodern life that complicate autonomous life shaping of the individual’s search for aesthetic freedom and personal well-being, are the following: The high degree of individualisation and its effects on customary bonds of sociality; the emancipation of women from the pregiven, socially conferred and patriarchically imposed roles of wife, mother and housewife; an increase in single parent families, and, the increasing prevalence of use or utility friendships resulting in narcissistic forms of sociality in which the pursuance of personal interests for subjective reasons seem to be the preferred format of relations with which one can cope with the economic and social conditions of the postmodern world. The traditional family customarily provided “caring for affection, self-confidence, feelings of security, relaxation, physical and psychological health, personal identity” and the associated experiential sense of well-being (Lemke 1995: 65). With its increasing demise the absence of the traditional family produced strong feelings of existential loneliness and anxiety which, paradoxically, manifest an element of human nature namely “the need for social closeness, emotional security and certainty of trust” which “reveals itself to be essentially the need for the Others as the (re-)source of one’s own well-being” (Lemke 1995: 6).

For Lemke (1995: 6-7) the high levels of democratisation and individualisation in many postmodern formats of living, therefore opens up the possibility of pursuing and realising the aesthetic freedom of personal well-being, and especially so in the format of true friendships. The need for personal well-being is thus the starting point from which individuals can pursue the utopian quest of autonomous life-shaping in realising aesthetic freedom under the suppressing conditions of postmodern society. Unlike the aesthetic appeal of material goods that can be purchased, and the instrumentalist narcissistic forms of sociality that are imposed by postmodern conditions; feelings of personal well-being cannot be bought or necessarily acquired with or without effort. Whether individuals want to pursue such a quest is entirely up to them; nobody can decide this for anyone else. For Lemke (1995: 7) such true friendships are not unattainable, as Kant and Schopenhauer thought, and they are neither reserved for
the so-called virtuous amongst us, as Cicero and Montaigne believed. Notwithstanding this, Lemke is under no illusion about the difficulties that beset the realisation of true friendships as well as the sacrifices that it requires from those who pursue its advantages.

For Lemke shaping such true friendships as an end in itself requires what Aristotle called *praxis* where “the end of action is the performance (*Vollzug*) of this very activity, it has no end beyond its performance. In contrast to that Aristotle calls *poiesis* those actions whose goals are the enforcement of an end or a work, that is itself external to the performance of those actions” (Lemke 1995: 8). True friendships as an end in itself, what Lemke calls *selbstzweckhafte Tätigkeit*, is thus a form of *praxis*, a purposeful activity which shares requirements and conditions common to all types of end-in-itself actions (Lemke 1995: 8). Among these, the first is a voluntary decision to engage in the appreciation of the end or purpose itself. It thus entails a readiness to commit to effort, as well as constancy in the commitment itself. True friendships, by their very nature, demand patience in establishing virtuous relations, but the possibility of failure in these efforts can never be ruled out completely since success is not entirely dependent on individual investment in the end itself, but also outer conditions over which the individual may have little or no control whatsoever (Lemke 1995: 8-9).

Apart from the foregoing requirements of *praxis*, friendship also requires practical knowledge and prudence that can be called *phronesis* which entails a type of theoretical knowledge. It is dual in consisting of knowledge implicit to *praxis actions* themselves, as well as an explicit theoretical preoccupation with the *praxis* of friendship itself. The amount of explicit knowledge, however, does not have a necessary bearing on the success of the *praxis* itself in any instantaneous manner, but discussion of such knowledge with others is significant since it advances self-understanding of the *praxis* itself. It is not without significance that in postmodern living there is little talk about such explicit knowledge itself. Lemke writes that “currently there exist little literature and reflections of friendship at all” and “this lack of concern with friendship is that in everyday life we are always talking with friends and about friends but seldom about friendship and the way of our praxis of friendship, although everybody knows that communications about relationships are once in a while extremely clarifying” (Lemke 1995: 10).

The complexities and difficulties involved in realising good friendships are manifold. Lemke emphasises that it is what Aristotle called *eupraxis*, the constant good practising, that distinguishes an end-in-itself activity such as friendship from instrumental activities that can, in
principle, realise good friendship. It is indeed eupraxis informed by phronesis that can realise philia in binding together participants in a democratic manner, each with equal rights to criticise, object, agree and making decisions with regard to the in-between of their relationship. The relationship of friendship is extremely delicate and it always faces possible conflicts such as suppressed weaknesses, misunderstandings, unfulfilled expectations and so on. Lemke describes this enclosed (eingegrenzten) praxis as being a mimetic dramaturgy in which each participant responds to the freedom of the self and the other. It is indeed this feature that distinguishes it from an instrumentalist social narcissism that makes it an autonomous life-shaping activity in search of personal well-being and the human good. Lemke suggests that despite, or even because of its very pragmatism, the realisation of true friendship often seems to be a wonder. Yet, for him it is not an unattainable ideal, a romantic fantasy driven by naïve humanism (Lemke 1995: 9-14). He writes:

From Pythagoras to Nietzsche from Augustinus to Bloch, from Montaigne to Foucault one can trace the repetition that friendship is a free and autonomous way of living and that its shape results out of its democratic praxis. Friendship thus is neither a particular praxis activity nor one relationship between others but a special attempt to live one’s social life as an end-in-itself. In other words: by practising friendship relations it becomes possible to combine the care for one’s good life and the realization of personal freedom (Lemke 1995: 11).

6. CONCLUSION

Aristotle’s teaching on the good life has inspired successive generations of scholars in different ways and for different reasons and the renewed interest of neo-Aristotelians in postmodern times is no exception. His works are not written in the format of systematic philosophy, and many of his texts are most likely lecture notes made for use in his Lyceum. This as well as the interconnectedness of his various works account for many difficulties in ascertaining the meaning and understanding of his thoughts rendering these to be disputed and contested. Yet, in spite of these considerations, his teaching in general contains an elegant simplicity and it mostly represents a credible realism.

Aristotle’s account of the reorientation from having (the excessive desire and overgrasping of power, honour and money as well as the excessive desire for such goods) to
being virtuous in character through the use of *phronesis* in the format of *philia* intuitively appeals to many people. In a secular manner it echoes the dicta of “do not desire” and “love they neighbour” found in many different belief systems. The socio-economic features of postmodern societies, such as high levels of individualisation and a materialist lifestyle, is certainly conducive to the absence of, as well as the need for, such an orientation. In academic discourse the absolute relativism of postmodernism leaves many scholars with a feeling of uneasiness. Aristotle’s understanding that the relative manifestation of elements of the human good particular to persons and practical contexts can manifest itself by way of *phronesis*, seems to provide a more personalised relativism that contains some guidelines for practical action rather than the unqualified relativity of relativism itself.

Finally, Aristotle’s horizon of the human good poses questions to liberal political theory as well as to communitarians of which we can only cite two examples here. Liberal political theory’s neutrality with regard to alternative notions of the human good often conceals the possibility that, if given the choice, most people would “prefer comfortable self-preservation to any viable alternative”, thereby rendering the rhetorical question about the human good as no longer being self-evident and exposing the neutrality of liberal theory itself (Smith 1999: 634). Aristotle’s notion of the human good also implies the questioning of the ideas of anti-liberal communitarians. He refrains from spelling out exactly what it is, but lays down strenuous conditions for achieving it, suggesting to communitarians the dangers of seeking it before attempting to achieve it. The communitarians’ objection that liberal society creates clinical and anonymous atomistic individuals may be valid, but seeking the human good in a qualified context may lead to factionalism in the broader sense and the danger of destroying “what is good by weeding out what is bad” insert space (Smith 1999: 625, 635).

Aristotle’s ethical teaching suggests to us a lesson that is profoundly simple, namely that the origin of injustice must be ascribed to our inability or our unwillingness to be other-regarding, the quality of “graspingness” or “overreaching” (*pleonexi*); literally “having more”) (Smith 1999, 626). The challenge of overcoming injustice through Aristotelian *phronesis* and *philia* remains to be simply profound, but it has not and will not detract many who strive after it.
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