

Learning Through Conversation: The Role of Friendship

By
Reuben M. Delay



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Theodore Tsukahara, Advisor

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The Goal Is Learning

Knowledge is a fundamental component of human existence. To gain knowledge is a goal we pursue throughout our lives – and according to Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* – it is innate to our very nature. Aristotle said “All men by nature desire to know” (Book I, 980.a22). Knowledge is an ultimate goal we strive towards. The way we reach this goal is to learn. Rather than spend our days desiring knowledge, we actively engage in learning in order to gain the knowledge we desire. Learning is the process in which we make the unknown – known, and understood.

When we encounter something previously unknown to us, we become aware of our lack of knowledge. It is uncomfortable. We recognize this new “thing” as being foreign to our understanding, and we want to be rid of this discomfort. To regain our comfort, we embrace the process of learning. As we learn, we fill the void in our understanding with knowledge. Therefore if we desire to know, we must also desire to learn.

Learning can occur in a variety of environments, through various methods of inquiry. While there are numerous learning environments, there is one that deserves recognition and reflection: learning through conversation. The distinctive aspect of this environment is a conversation between individuals that share the goal of learning. With this in mind, we can focus on determining the ideal method of inquiry for promoting learning.

A common learning method is one where teachers impart knowledge onto students. Lecture-style teaching is an exemplary and conventional approach. As a result, conversation is minimal. If there is conversation, it is mainly shared between teacher and

student. The conversation revolves around the lesson, and any questions or clarifications the students may have regarding their comprehension. This model has merit in appropriate situations among students and teachers. However, this is not the method of inquiry that has the greatest potential for acquiring knowledge. We reserve this description of intellectual inquiry for the type of conversation that students share. Students – who are primarily peers – drive this conversation. There are unique elements present in this conversation that other methods of learning cannot replicate. This essay will be an exploration of conversation-based learning, the advantages of student peer engagement, and how those benefits facilitate and encourage the desire to know.

The Process is Conversation

When we engage in conversation and aim towards knowledge, we are able to improve our opinions. Our conversation can concentrate on various levels of knowledge. As we gain knowledge of the reality we share, we can eventually improve our knowledge to address higher concepts, such as the good. In order to reason with these higher concepts, we must first concentrate on our opinions.

Improving an opinion involves confronting it with various applications, to see if it still holds true. As a result, the opinion will either withstand the battery of investigation, or will require some kind of revision. Alone, this process would not be as productive, for there would be no second opinion – no unbiased review of a newborn thought. To have a conversation and thus a pursuit of knowledge, an interlocutor is necessary. Although we need another person in order to converse and share knowledge, the process of gaining knowledge is not isolated to conversation.

We are capable of forming an opinion independent of company. The challenge lies in improving our opinion. When we share an opinion with another, the task of improving that opinion becomes a joint effort. Thus, we can share both the knowledge and the benefit. Improving an opinion should be a shared goal, because the progress becomes more efficient, and the improved opinion becomes mutually beneficial. We are able to have productive conversations because we base our opinions on similar observations.

When we make observations, we start to form opinions. This is natural in a mind equipped with memory. As we observe, we remember and form opinions in order to recognize those observations at a later time. Once we form an opinion, we may also want to share it with others. The best way to share our opinion with others is to describe it to them. Since we cannot touch, smell or taste an opinion, we must engage with our vocal faculty in order to communicate it to others. This requires language.

Language supports the ability to share an informed opinion. Sharing informed opinions through conversation is actively demonstrated in the classroom, and is vital to learning. In Plato's *Republic*, we see evidence supporting this method of inquiry as a path towards knowledge.

The Cave Analogy: Opinion and Learning Unite

In the seventh book of the *Republic*, Socrates stresses the importance of knowledge, relative to opinion. Namely, he emphasizes the danger of opinion when it lacks knowledge: "Haven't you noticed that opinions without knowledge are shameful and ugly things? The best of them are blind – or do you think that those who express a true opinion without understanding are any different from blind people who happen to

travel the right road?” (Book VI, 506.c). To avoid this opinion divorced from knowledge, we must engage with our opinions and ideas to determine their truth, or lack thereof.

Socrates uses the allegory of a cave to illustrate the process of understanding, and begins with a scene of imprisonment: “Imagine human beings living in an underground, cavelike dwelling, with an entrance a long way up, which is both open to the light and as wide as the cave itself. They’ve been there since childhood, fixed in the same place, with their necks and legs fettered, able to see only in front of them, because their bonds prevent them from turning their heads around.” (Book VII, 514.a). Socrates describes this cave as being devoid of light, save a fire burning behind the restrained individuals. Thus the only sight available to the captives is that which the fire illuminates. Then Socrates reveals that the humans are not alone in the cave.

He explains that there are other things present in the cave that are somewhat visible to the prisoners: “Then also imagine that there are people along the wall, carrying all kinds of artifacts that project above it – statues of people and other animals, made out of stone, wood, and every material.” (Book VII, 514.c). Whenever these objects come in range of the fire, their image is projected as a shadow on the wall of the cave, and thus in the constrained view of the captives.

As these strange shadows appear on the wall, the natural desire for knowledge will inspire the captives to form and use language. For through language, they can identify the objects by using a common name, and communicate their opinion of the object to their fellow prisoners. By recalling their memory, they may also recognize a familiar shape on the wall, and ask their neighbors to confirm the accuracy of their identification. This need for communication as a means of understanding is a foundational reason for language. I have experienced this need on a personal level.

When I was born, my mother had recently emigrated from Italy and thus spoke minimal English. As I learned to speak, it was out of a necessity to communicate with my mother that I learned her native language. The educational relationship we shared as student and teacher was amplified by our personal relationship. This bond created a desire for knowledge that cemented itself into my understanding in a way I could not replicate in the classroom. As with the prisoners in the cave, the desire to identify the same object as a group was a motivator. As they conversed with each other in order to identify the objects in their view, they began to come to conclusions.

They begin to form opinions of what they are seeing, and hold them as true. However, their opinions are based on mere images of the real objects behind them. This can create complications when objects with similar shapes are paraded before their eyes. For example, a basketball, a plate, and a watermelon can all cast a similar shadow of a circle. These are clearly not the same object, although they may appear on the wall as indistinguishable to the captives. In order to accurately behold the objects, a captive must acquire a new perspective.

A prisoner is only able to gain a new perspective by experiencing freedom: “When one of them was freed and suddenly compelled to stand up, turn his head, walk, and look up toward the light, he’d be pained and dazzled and unable to see the things whose shadows he’d seen before” (Book VII, 515.d). The newly liberated individual is faced with a harsh reality. Having gazed upon the tangible objects, he sees them in their true physical forms. The two-dimensional images have transformed into three-dimensional objects with color, texture, and all manner of distinguishing characteristics. This realization rightly causes some shock, as he reflects on what he considered as true, only moments before. He has made a significant discovery, but he is still confining his

knowledge to the cavernous realm. To gain further knowledge he must continue his journey out of the cave, even if some encouragement is needed.

Learning Requires Trust

To escape from the cave is a difficult proposition. Even the free man does not accept new truth of his own free will: “And if someone dragged him away from there by force, up the rough, steep path, and didn’t let him go until he had dragged him into the sunlight, wouldn’t he be pained and irritated at being treated this way?” (Book VII, 515.e). Just because the prisoner is free to walk around and inspect the cave, does not mean that he will willingly thrust himself into the unknown. The unknown is frightening to the mind. It is for this reason that he needs someone to inspire his intellect, and join him in braving the unknown.

The freed captive has someone who strongly encourages him to pursue the unknown that lies outside the cave, and accompanies him along the passage. Once they reach the outside, they experience new thought-provoking observations. Up until his escape, the prisoner’s opinions were based upon the images and objects that were observed by the fire’s light. Thus, both his eyes and his opinions have an awkward transition to make. His eyes have known nothing but darkness his entire life. Now he is prompting them to rapidly adapt to the full glory of natural sunlight. His opinions have been isolated to repetitive images, capable of affording limited information to the senses. Now a myriad of stimuli and sensations bombard his observation. As the senses adjust to their surroundings, his observations are able to reconcile his cave-born opinions based on images, with the wealth of knowledge available outside the cave.

In the cave, the former prisoner may have seen the shadow of a vase projected on the wall, illuminated by the light from the fire. Now that he is out of the cave, he can observe the actual vase, and appreciate the knowledge he can gain from it. Previously the vase was merely a shadow, with no indication of depth or volume. Now he realizes that the vase is both a three-dimensional figure, as well as being hollow on the inside. The light by which he observed the vase has also changed. The fire in the cave burned incessantly. Outside of the cave, the sun is the light source – and it seems to move through the sky! These observations have brought into question his opinions concerning both illumination, and the objects he has in view.

All these new observations affect his understanding. He realizes that there is more knowledge available outside the cave, than the shadows he has been staring at for the majority of his life. He appreciates this new knowledge. Since he sees the value this knowledge brings to his understanding, he imagines it could provide same benefit to the captives that remain in the cave.

He engages in this self-reflection, and remembers his fellow captives back in the cave: “What about when he reminds himself of his first dwelling place, his fellow prisoners and what passed for wisdom there?” (Book VII, 516.c). He resolves to return in order to help them see the same truth of reality. His fraternal determination to share this knowledge with his fellow prisoners is a demonstration of the friendship they cultivated together before his departure. They engaged with each other in dialectic conversation in order to gain knowledge of the images, and form opinions together. The value of conversation as a means of attaining knowledge through a group effort is the same value he recognizes as his perception of reality changes. In order to communicate with them in the name of knowledge, he must venture back into the cave.

However, upon his return his eyesight must again adapt to the darkness of the cave. Thus any attempt to impart knowledge of the shapes on the wall would be impaired by his ocular transition. His former prison-mates would scoff at his failed attempts to accurately recognize the shapes on the wall. His good intention may originate from friendship, but convincing those who are steadfast in their opinions is no easy feat.

How is one expected to change the mind of another? The aversion to original thought is the crutch we limp on as we clutch to our stubborn opinions. To accept a new reality is difficult, and our mind considers it to be full of risk. We need something to help mitigate this fear – or rather, someone. Someone led the freed man out of the cave. Since the freed man vigorously resisted this painful journey, there must have been something that compelled him to follow his fellow traveller.

Trust is the bond that can grease the gears that influence a change in opinion. If the freed prisoner had developed a relationship of trust with his fellow inmates before departing, his opinion would have carried more influence. Developing this trust is heavily reliant on conversation. Through conversation, we cultivate our understanding of the conversers, and by extension we improve our own understanding of their opinion. During his time with the other inmates, the freed man would have engaged them in conversation numerous times concerning the identification of the objects. Over time, his fellow inmates would recognize in him the ability to articulate his opinion, as well as ask them about theirs. This sustained conversation would strengthen their relationship, as well as their trust.

The more they trust in each other, the more willing they are to change their opinion. If a total stranger came into the cave and tried to convince them of their flawed opinions, they would just about laugh him out of the cave – much less take him seriously.

On the other hand, if a trusted friend were to come and offer them an opinion that was closer to the truth, they would hear what he had to say. Trust is key to conversation, because it facilitates learning through shared opinion, in a shared environment. Herein lies the importance of conversation with the aim of furthering knowledge. The classroom setting represents this importance effectively.

Conversation in the Classroom

If students are not focusing their attention on each other in conversation, then their attention is directed at some other focal point of learning. This could be some kind of prescribed lesson. In this scenario, the teacher positions the students in the classroom in such a way that they can all experience the lesson within their field of view. Like the prisoners in the cave, they are discouraged from letting themselves be distracted from the topic at hand, by averting their gaze. The ideal student in this case, is one who absorbs the lesson with full, unwavering attention. This student is – for all intents and purposes – restrained in his desk, fixing his eyes on the material he intends to learn.

This method of learning formats the subject material for observation and comprehension, rather than open discussion. The teacher provides the material to the students as a means of providing information. Therefore the trust a student has in his teacher is different than the trust he has for his peer. A student enters into discussion with his peer because they share the same interest of knowledge. A student trusts that his peer is joining him in this pursuit in order to gain knowledge. When a student is receiving information from his teacher, he trusts that the teacher will not lead him astray, or give him false information. It is a trust of judgment, rather than a trust of friendship.

This method of learning is reminiscent of the objects projected on the wall of the cave. For as the shadows are cast in the view of the prisoners, they observe the shapes and memorize what characteristics they can. In similar fashion, the educational materials are available to the students for retention and compliance. This is a method of learning that the freed man does not accept, for he seeks true knowledge.

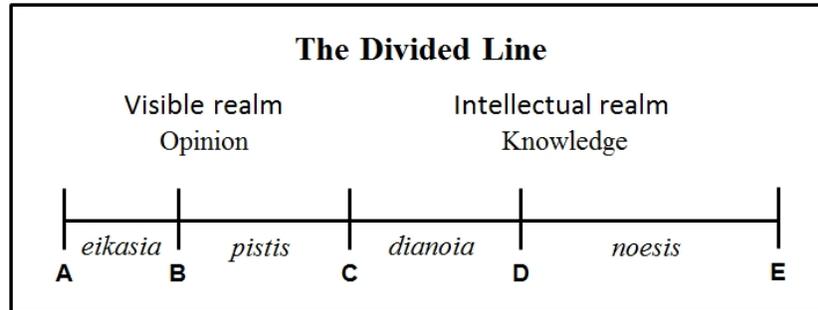
The freed man wants to challenge the opinions others hold as true. He wants them to question their opinions and seek a more complete knowledge, rather than accept what lies in front of them. In order to do this, he must engage with their opinions and challenge them. Together, they share their opinions and observe whether they stray from the path of truth. It is all-together possible that this attempt to improve their opinion should fail – that they are both in fact, blind.

Recognizing a wrong opinion is part of the learning process. It is our responsibility as students to improve our awareness of mistakes, and correct them. This process is effective when it originates from the active participation of students, rather than passive compliance. A teacher's mandate includes the correction of mistakes. However, correcting an opinion does not necessarily result in a gaining of knowledge. The student must take an active role in his or her own learning. When they face an error of judgment, an empowered student expands the sphere of the conversation to allow knowledge to converge with opinion. The process of reevaluating an opinion is similar to its conception: it is the reunification of knowledge and opinion. This process involves an initial assumption that provides the foundation for a logical demonstration. Geometry is a science that operates in a similar fashion. Therefore we can apply our process of understanding to the logical motion geometry exhibits.

Divided Line Analogy: Visible and Intellectual – The Understanding

Euclid begins each book in his *Elements of Geometry* with definitions. These are initial assumptions that lay the foundation for the later geometrical proofs. For example, he begins his fifth book with definitions regarding ratios: “Definition 3: A ratio is a sort of relation in respect of size between two magnitudes of the same kind.” and “Definition 6: Let magnitudes which have the same ratio be called proportional.” (Elements, Book V). These assumptions must be agreed upon at the outset, for they are the laws to which the following demonstrations adhere. Assumptions are made in order to logically reason through a demonstration. Therefore, geometrical assumptions are similar to the role of opinion, in the pursuit of knowledge. We make assumptions by forming opinions, and use these opinions as the foundation for reasoning towards knowledge. Therefore we can define understanding as this pursuit of knowledge that begins with opinion.

In the sixth book of the *Republic*, Socrates uses the analogy of a divided line to illustrate the process of understanding: “It is like a line divided into two unequal sections. Then divide each section – namely, that of the visible and that of the intelligible – in the same ratio as the line.” (Book VI, 509.d).



This divided line illustrates our movement from opinions in the visible realm, to knowledge in the intelligible realm. The construction and magnitude of the divided line is as follows: we begin with two lines of unequal magnitude ($AC < CE$). AC represents the visible realm of opinion, and CE the intellectual realm of knowledge. It is already evident that the realm of the knowledge is greater than the realm of opinion. Socrates instructs us to divide each of these two line segments in a ratio proportional (Def. 6) to the original ratio between AC and CE. We are left with four line segments (AB, BC, CD, and DE).

Since we cut line segments AC and CE in a proportional ratio, then the line segment AB is to BC, as CD is to DE. Therefore BC and CD are equal. Also, it is important to note that the ratio between line segments AB and BC (part to part) is proportional to the ratio between line segment AC and the full line AE (part to whole). This same relationship that is found in the visible realm (AC), can likewise be found within the intellectual realm (CE). The importance of these ratios will become clear as we begin to understand each segment according to Socrates.

This line that is divided in ratio represents a process. As conscious beings, we operate within these lines when we participate in cognition. Ideally we move across the line in search of the segment with the greatest magnitude – the understanding (noesis). However, we cannot begin there. Often times, we start at the first segment of the divided line: the image. “And by images I mean, first, shadows, then reflections in water and in all

close-packed, smooth, and shiny materials, and everything of that sort.” (Book VI, 509.e). This segment represents our opinion of images that we perceive, and is the lowest form of understanding. Within the line segment AC representing the realm of opinion, the image is the lesser of the two magnitudes divided in ratio. This segment of the line represents the perspective of the prisoners in the cave. Their understanding is of the lowest form because their opinions are based merely on the shadows that appear on the wall in front of them. It is not until the man becomes free that he advances into a higher form of knowledge.

The second segment of the visible realm is the physical thing. “In the other subsection of the visible, put the originals of these images, namely, the animals around us, all the plants, and the whole class of manufactured things.” (Book VI, 510.a). An opinion of the physical thing is closer to knowledge than an opinion of its image or reflection – which may prove misleading. The freed man learns of his misinformed opinion when he first stands up and observes the physical objects. The realm of opinion is thus divided in ratio to include these two types: *eikasia* (images), and *pistis* (things) – where the latter is greater in magnitude and closer – on the divided line – to the *noesis* (understanding).

The line segments that represent the intellectual realm are divided in the same ratio as the line segments present in the visible realm. “In one subsection, the soul, using as images the things that were imitated before, is forced to investigate from hypotheses, proceeding not to a first principle but to a conclusion.” (Book VI, 510.b). This segment is the *dianoia*- or reasoning. Socrates describes this segment as being contingent upon the immediately previous segment (*pistis*, things). We use reasoning to form conclusions based on our opinions of physical things. Therefore this representation is apt considering that, due to the laws of geometry concerning ratios, the two segments are in fact equal. Within

the intellectual realm, we have left to speak about the final and most important segment for our purpose: Noesis.

The relationship between reasoning (dianoia) and understanding (noesis) is proportional to the relationship between images of (eikasia), and opinions about physical things (pistis). In that, as our understanding of physical things is founded on images, so is our understanding based on reasoning. “In the other subsection, however, it makes its way to a first principle that is not a hypothesis, proceeding from a hypothesis but without the images used in the previous subsection...” (Book VI, 510.b). While the visible and intellectual realms are unique and self-contained, there is a link between them. The bridge between the visible and intellectual realms connects the segment of reasoning to the segment of physical things. Thus our hypotheses in the first segment of the intellectual realm rely on the opinions of physical things found in the visible realm. However, upon reaching the final segment of the divided line we no longer rely on opinion, for we are in the intellectual realm. Instead, the conclusions that result from the segment of reasoning provide the foundation for understanding.

Socrates offers this metaphor to illustrate the process of understanding. While each segment of the line is fundamental to the process, there is a common unifying method of inquiry that is exemplified in the segment of the dianoia (reasoning). This method is known as the dialectic. Plato’s version of the dialectic is seen in the sixth book of the *Republic*: “by the other subsection of the intelligible, I mean that which reason itself grasps by the power of dialectic. It does not consider these hypotheses as first principles but truly as hypotheses – as stepping stones to take off from, enabling it to reach the unhypothetical first principle of everything.” (Book VI, 511.b). The power of Plato’s dialectic method is seen in the development of hypotheses, and the deductive reasoning

that supports them in the understanding. Through use of the dialectic, hypotheses are investigated to reveal their claim to truth. Thus, the dialectic facilitates the connection between knowledge and opinion, with knowledge being the ultimate goal of the method. What we have yet to consider, is that the dialectic is not just a method of logical introspection, but of active conversation.

Active Conversation

I use the term active conversation to emphasize the participation of each individual. This is distinguishable from a passive conversation, which is more like a guide to knowledge. For example, in the *Meno*, Socrates sets out to demonstrate the power of conversation as a catalyst for learning. He claims that through conversation, a slave boy previously unversed in the laws of geometry can be made to demonstrate a proof and understand it: “Now observe closely whether he strikes you as recollecting or as learning from me.” (*Meno*, 82.b). Socrates starts to question the boy concerning this proof, and several times the boy strays from the truth and is startled by his lack of knowledge.

This is where the passivity of the conversation becomes apparent, albeit among repetitive declarations from Socrates claiming that he does not teach him: “Now you should note how, as a result of this perplexity, he will go on and discover something by joint inquiry with me, while I merely ask questions and do not teach him”. (*Meno*, 84.d). While it is true that they are involved in a joint inquiry, there is an element missing – the lack of which seems to define the conversation as a type of guidance: shared perplexity. Socrates is not at all astounded at the incorrect answers given by the youth. On the contrary, he alerts the youth when he errs, and more importantly he confirms the correct answer. This kind of discussion does little to benefit the student. At the completion of the

dialogue, the student may have gained only a modicum of truth for he has been guided through the conversation, rather than joined. Therefore this type of passive conversation is not an example of a shared inquiry aimed at knowledge. An ideal discussion involves the active participation of all its members.

We are able to opine and draw conjectures in our own company, but this is only part of the process. We need to reason through our hypothesis and more importantly – evaluate it. This method of inquiry requires cooperation. We need another party that is willing to discuss and evaluate a hypothesis together if we are to come to any definitive conclusion. In order to effectively participate in a discussion such as this, we must share a common goal of knowledge. This method of inquiry with a shared interest of knowledge seems applicable to a classroom setting, where opinions are shared and hypotheses are constructed. To be truly effective in this endeavor, we must surround ourselves with a specific class of individuals.

Thus far, our description of a fellow interlocutor is what Aristotle would define as a companion: “Now all forms of community are like parts of the political community; for men journey together with a view to some particular advantage, and to provide something that they need for the purposes of life...and they call just that which is to the common advantage.” (*Nic. Eth.* VIII §9, line 1160a.9). Therefore the main intent of political community focuses on the common good. In this sense, we associate with each other in conversation as a means of gaining knowledge. For gaining knowledge is a common good. This example applies to the classroom discussion, since the assembly of students aim at the common knowledge.

The goal of common knowledge is unlike the goal present in other types of associations that have a particular advantage in mind: “for example sailors combine to

seek the profits of seafaring in the way of trade or the like, comrades in arms the gains of warfare, their aim being either plunder, or victory over the enemy or the capture of a city” (VIII §9, line 1160a.15). These are examples of associations that provide a specific advantage to its participant. Since this advantage is finite, the companionship is likewise finite. The aim of this participant is to exact a desired benefit.

We now have two ways in which we can classify the companionship of classmates. These two options share a common goal: knowledge. One places the advantage of knowledge to the group as a whole, and the other is focused on personal gain. Since the pursuit of knowledge is a community-supported endeavor, I am inclined towards the former. Yet, there still seems to be an element missing. The glue that holds the community of the classroom together is more than a common interest of knowledge for the group. There is something that happens on the interpersonal level that has yet to be expounded upon. There is a bond that enables the progress from opinion to knowledge, and allows it to develop smoothly and effectively. This bond is friendship.

Friendship Requires Trust

Aristotle launches into the eighth book of his *Nicomachean Ethics* with an exploration of friendship: “After what we have said, a discussion of friendship would naturally follow, since it is a virtue or implies virtue, and is besides most necessary with a view to living” (VIII §1, line 1155a.1). For Aristotle then friendship must also be most necessary with a view to learning, for life and learning intertwine. Our interaction as peers in an academic sense within an academic conversation is unique in that we engage in a similar pursuit of knowledge. Thus our cooperation in the classroom can be a source

of friendship. When peers that engage in academic life are friends, would Aristotle identify them as friends?

There must be something that triggers the graduation from companions to friends. Aristotle ascribes this evolution to the desire for good: “For not everything seems to be loved but only the lovable, and this is good, pleasant, or useful” (VIII §1, line 1155b.18). Of these lovable things, we either desire them for ourselves, or for others. Aristotle posits three reasons why we desire friends: utility, pleasure, or goodness. The former two types of friendship are weak, and bound to dissolve with time. The source of their weakness is the foundation on which the friendships are developed. These two types of friendship arise from a desire to benefit one’s own self. Thus the friendship relies on what the individual has to gain from the friend. It is for this reason that a friendship based on utility or pleasure is so prone to dissolution. The instability of these two forms of friendship again comes into question when we apply it to a learning environment.

Let us first examine the desire for utility. If the foundation of a friendship between peers depends on how useful they are to each other, then their learning is in peril. Say a student engages another in conversation primarily to have his comments heard and affirmed by the other. The student pays no attention to how the conversation may benefit his peer, but focuses on himself and meeting his own needs. This instance of peer interaction is unstable not only because it does not facilitate learning, but also because this desire for utility is constantly changing according to Aristotle.

If the friendship between peers centers on a fluctuating utility, conversation is difficult to maintain. Peers engage with each other until they met their individual needs, or until those needs change. Either way, this impacts the conversation and therefore – their learning. Their conversations are dependent on and limited by their usefulness to

one another. This is not conducive to learning. Conversations are not born from a desire to fulfill one's personal goals. This dependence on self-gratification does not facilitate a good friendship. In fact, it is not friendship. A friendship based mainly on pleasure is similarly unstable.

Suppose we enter into a conversation with our peers on the grounds that we find them amusing. Again, this is not an instance of a reciprocal friendship – if we engage in conversation with peers simply because peers amuse us. Our attention does not focus on the other conversant, or even the conversation itself. Our satisfaction is what takes priority. We remain focused on how the conversation affects us, and how much pleasure we obtain from it. When we base a friendship on pleasure we will value any interaction we have, based on the amusement it provides. Pleasure is an object of desire, and like utility, it is subject to change. Pleasure cannot be the only foundation for learning, in conversations between peers.

Aristotle likens pleasure-driven friendship with youth: “this is why they quickly become friends and quickly cease to be so; their friendship changes with the object that is found pleasant, and such pleasure alters quickly” (VIII §3, line 1156a.34). If peers were to only act like pleasure-seeking youth, learning would be impossible. Individuals would be pursuing conversations based on what their peers had to offer them in terms of amusement. Establishing any common ground for discussion would be hopeless as well. All of their conversations would be directed towards themselves. That is not the purpose of friendship. That is not the purpose of learning through conversation.

Learning is a process that implies time. Developing interactions that focus on self-effacing cooperation is no simple feat. It will take time for a friendship to mature past the need for gratification. In this ideal friendship, we are able to seek the answers to questions

with a collective curiosity, free from self-centered motives. Put simply, an individual's search for knowledge through conversation must come from a desire for mutual growth. Perhaps we can find mutual growth through friendship when it is based on goodness.

Friendship Based on the Good

Aristotle defines friendship based on the good as the truest friendship. This type of friendship does not focus on the good for the self, but the good for the friend. When individuals base their friendship on the good, they also participate in pleasure and utility, for the good contains them. The major distinction is that now the friendship has a new focus. Previously, an individual took a more passive role regarding his friend's benefit. It was not his prime objective. An individual that concentrates on the good for the friend maintains an active friendship.

A friendship is passive when man focuses on what he receives from the other person. Therefore, it cannot be considered friendship at all. He sees it as a one-way street, expecting to benefit from the good things available in the friendship. Although he may invest in the friendship in various ways, his perception is one of gain from his friend, rather than goodwill towards his friend. This becomes detrimental to the friendship if he does not receive a return on this investment, or if there is a change in the type of return he desires. A passive approach to friendship is not only selfish and unstable, but it departs from the importance of friendship. The fundamental bond of friendship is a common goal that friends can reach together and be equally satisfied.

An active friendship places the friend in the proper sphere of intention. The individual's activity is geared towards his friend's benefit, which he progressively learns more about as he shares in their company. This individual does not wait and expect good

things from his friend. He endeavors to facilitate good things for his friend's benefit. He will also share in this good by experiencing his friend's happiness. This is the reciprocal nature of good-friendship that Aristotle prizes.

For Aristotle, a determining factor between active and passive friendship is perception. A good friendship is evaluated based on how the individual perceives his interaction with his friend. It is the difference between perceiving good towards the self (for the sake of the self) and good towards the self of the friend (for the sake of the friend). It is the ability to perceive the self of the friend as having an equally valuable experience. This is the turning point that departs from utility or pleasure based friendships, in search of the active friendship based on the good. For Aristotle, activity is important throughout life, as well as friendship. In the ninth book of his *Ethics*, activity – and the perception of activity – is what defines life.

It is imperative for a friendship based on the good, that man perceives. Aristotle describes man as having the power to perform activities that are essential to life: “Life seems to be essentially perceiving or thinking” (IX §9, line 1170a.19). Aristotle uses this premise to lead us toward the conclusion that being conscious of our activities (perception and thought) is pleasant. These activities define existence, and we relish the awareness of our own existence. Therefore the act of perceiving our own existence is pleasant to us. What remains, is to attribute this same pleasure of perceiving life, to the friend.

To extend this pleasant perception of life to the friend, we must first understand what it is we are extending towards. Aristotle leads us to our consciousness of life, because it is a self-reflection. We are conscious of our own activity of perception. We are conscious of our sight when we read, of our hearing when we listen, and of our touch when we feel.

We are conscious of a self – our self. Although it remains ours, it is the self that fascinates us. It is a thing of power, capable of cognition and expression in a myriad of ways.

If the self is the object of our respect and desire, then it can easily be a self that is not our own: “if as the virtuous man is to himself, he is to his friend also (for his friend is another self): – then as his own existence is desirable for each man, so, or almost so, is that of his friend.” (IX §9, line 1170b.5). Just as we hold our ability to perceive our actions in high esteem, we can do the same for our friend. We can perceive that he enjoys pleasant things the same way we do. We can perceive that he wonders about the unanswered questions the same way we do.

We recognize in him the same ability that is native to us: to act, and be acted on by our environment. For example, the prison mates in the cave recognize in each other the shared ability to perceive, wonder, and make assertions regarding the shadows on the wall. This is an ability that we cherish. It is available to us and we make use of it, because it is a fundamental part of our existence. Therefore it is existence that we so greatly value. By positing existence as the source of desire, Aristotle allows for a love of self, regardless of whose self it is.

Although he grants that one might always desire his own existence slightly more than anyone else, he maintains that a love of existence is universal. “In loving a friend men love what is good for themselves; for the good man in becoming a friend becomes a good to his friend.” (VIII §5, line 1157b.32). This activity in friendship is what makes it good.

Friendship is an activity that requires maintenance. Simone Weil offers a succinct argument that highlights the appropriate attitude that a friend should adopt: “To wish to escape from solitude is cowardice. Friendship is not to be sought, not to be dreamed, not

to be desired; it is to be exercised (it is a virtue).” (*Gravity and Grace*, p.67). To befriend someone is courageous. To maintain an active friendship for the good of the friend is virtuous. When we exercise this friendship, we become aware of the self – both our own, and that of our friend.

Now that we are attentive to the self that is our friend, we understand that if something good can benefit our self, it can also benefit the self of our friend. As we enjoy these benefits and are conscious of our enjoyment, it pleases us to reflect on the ability to enjoy – which is common to all humans. Understanding the universality of this ability is a fundamental aspect of goodwill.

Partners in Learning

When we want our friend to experience and enjoy the same good things that we enjoy, friendship becomes equal and reciprocal. For we desire to facilitate those good things for our friend to enjoy. It is an active feeling of bestowing benefit. This happens most often between good friends, for they perceive the mutual goodwill shared between them. This active reciprocity can also happen in the same way between peers in conversation.

When peers desire to be good for each other, they facilitate learning. Their conversation no longer seeks direction or motivation from a desire for personal gain. Instead, they seek the good with their peer. Conversation becomes mutually beneficial, because their questions have a different incentive. The goal becomes learning, rather than our own learning as a separate and isolated fragment. When each conversant has the other’s learning at heart, an individual knowledge becomes a unifying knowledge. It is a pursuit of knowledge that can benefit the individual as well as his friend.

The distinction made between individual and shared knowledge is in the incentive of the conversation. When friends initiate a dialogue solely with the intent of personal gain, there is no balance in the conversation and there is no balance in the friendship. That is not a conversation based on goodness. For balance to exist in the conversation, each interlocutor must have goodwill towards the other. To have goodwill in conversation is to approach inquiry with the aim of uncovering truth for the benefit of the friend. For if growth in our own knowledge is a good, then we can likewise see it as a good for others. This frame of mind enables strong friendships and productive questions.

Good questions start good conversations. The type of friendship shared between peers can limit an academic conversation. If the individual does not have the good – or in this case the learning – of his friend in mind, the questions become very one sided. The individual imposes a limit on the conversation because he focuses on the good that he stands to gain. Thus, he selfishly places a limit on the potential of the conversation.

He creates the limit because he is looking to gain something in particular from the engagement with his peer. Once he receives or arrives at that good, the conversation has met his expectations, and ceases to be useful or pleasant. These conversations do not last long, and they rarely distribute their benefits to both sides. A way to promote a more balanced conversation without this limit is to approach it in the same way as a good friendship.

When he focuses instead on the good for his friend, there is no clear limit to the good, because he does not fully understand the good in terms of his friend. While he may acknowledge this ‘self outside his self’, and have goodwill towards his friend, this does not readily allow him to understand what a good for his friend is. This prompts inquisitive interaction with his peer in conversation. As interlocutors, we can perceive how a

conversation can benefit our self, but we cannot perceive another's perception – so we ask.

We ask this other self, and engage it in conversation so as to foster its good, and better understand it. This type of conversation is mutually beneficial. The individual learns how to support a good for his friend, and this becomes a greater benefit for his friend. Perceiving the happiness in his friend is the recognition of man's ability to perceive good things. The individual is conscious of this ability, and understands that these benefits are equally available to him as a human. Conversation is vital to making this discovery: experiencing the good is a shared ability between friends.

Without conversation, we cannot be the good friends Aristotle has in mind. If we do not communicate with our friends, then it becomes nearly impossible to have a clear concept of what is good for them. A conversation with our friends allows us to learn more about them as an individual, and what is good for them. Yet not all types of conversations confer the same benefits. The lesser forms of friendship based on utility or pleasure are an example. Those conversations are limited because each self is striving to reach its own good, so little learning occurs. To become friends that have good will towards each other, their shared learning must be the combined aim of each self, striving for the good of the other. This is possible when the individual identifies in the self of his friend, the shared potential for activity.

As we acknowledge our shared potential to perceive as humans, we understand that since our time in the womb, we have perceived the world in a way that is completely unique to our self. Our knowledge is based on a unique set of experiences. Appreciating this fact leads to the conclusion that given any new experience, each individual will be conscious of how they perceive this new experience, and how that may be different than

others. To appreciate this phenomenon, is to approach conversation with an open and inquisitive mind. As an interlocutor, this opens the door to curiosity – a desire that is not tied to the self, for it is aimed beyond the boundaries of the self.

Curiosity motivates conversation. For conversation is an activity aimed at something external to the self. Man has a desire for a good that is not yet known to him. Understanding that his friend has the same capacity for curiosity, he sees the process of learning through conversation with new eyes. The good is knowledge, and the pursuit of knowledge is a good that benefits the self. A good friend knows that this good can benefit the self that is his friend's, just the same as it could benefit his own self.

The Freedom to Learn

A mutually beneficial conversation is most akin to Aristotle's ideal friendship. Although he says that this friendship takes time to cultivate, maintaining goodwill ensures that it is, in fact, a friendship. Those friendships founded on utility or pleasure alone will not stand the test of shifting interests. True friendship – like good conversation – is sustainable through mutual good intentions.

A mutually beneficial conversation is most akin to Aristotle's ideal friendship. Although he says that this friendship takes time to cultivate, maintaining goodwill ensures that it is in fact, a friendship. Friendships founded on utility or pleasure alone, will not stand the test of fluctuation. Good conversation – like friendship – can be sustainable through mutual good intention. Participants that have good will towards each other create an environment that is most conducive to learning.

Learning involves community. We join others in a learning environment in order to gain knowledge. What we have explored is a specific type of learning environment that

may not necessarily work for everyone. It requires an acceptance of freedom and the courage to appreciate the unknown. These are two elements that exist in unison within this learning method. It requires the student to face these challenges on a daily basis with an open and curious mind. It is for these reasons that I am invested in this method of learning. Perhaps others may find the same benefits in their preferred learning method. Students that join in a learning environment that promotes the exchange of informed opinions will benefit from the freedom to choose what they learn.

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