

Kant and Aristotle on Altruism and the Love Command: Is Universal Friendship Possible?

STEPHEN PALMQUIST*

Summary: 1. Aristotle on friendship as a universal need: soulmates and the ideal of virtue; 2. The love command as a religious basis for altruism; 3. The love command as a religious basis for altruism; 4. A reassessment of the Good Samaritan: *be friends with those who show mercy*.

Abstract: This article examines the plausibility of regarding altruism in terms of *universal friendship*. Section 1 frames the question around Aristotle's ground-breaking philosophy of friendship. For Aristotle, most friendships exist for selfish reasons, motivated by a desire either for pleasure (playmates) or profit (workmates); relatively few friendships are *genuine*, being motivated by a desire for shared virtue (soulmates). In contrast to this *negative* answer to the main question, Section 2 examines a possible religious basis for *affirming* altruism, arising out of the so-called "love command" – the biblical maxim that we ought to love others as we love ourselves. Many theologians have cited this maxim to justify altruism, with some (such as Aelred of Rievaulx) explicitly portraying it as a form of friendship. Section 3 examines Kant's view of friendship, arguing that, although at first his position seems disappointingly limited, it actually captures the essence of the only possible form of friendship that could be regarded as a *universal* ideal *without* imposing unrealistic expectations onto friends. The article concludes in section 4 by offering a new, Kant-inspired interpretation of Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan: Jesus' appeal to the love command does enjoin friendship, but not as altruism; rather, love requires a selective form of friendship that is closer to Kant's position.

Keywords: Immanuel Kant; Aristotle; Friendship; Altruism; Good Samaritan

«Pure sincerity in friendship can be no less required of everyone even if up to now there may never have been a sincere friend, because this duty – as duty in general – lies, prior to all experience, in the idea of a reason determining the will by means of a priori grounds».
I. Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, p.408.

1. Aristotle on friendship as a universal need: soulmates and the ideal of virtue

In Books VIII and IX of *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle sets the stage for the whole history of discussing friendship in western philosophy by depicting friendship as a *partnership between equals*, normally formed in order to obtain some mutual pleasure or profit but, in special (rare) cases, formed solely for the sake of mutually advancing each other's virtue.¹ He starts his discussion by observing (*NE* 1155^a3) that "no one would choose to live without friends, even if he had all the other good things." As such, friendship turns out to be "most necessary as regards living." Would it be fair to say,

* Full Professor, Department of Religion and Philosophy, Hong Kong Baptist University (Honk Kong, China).

¹ ARISTOTLE, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. C.D.C. Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2014), pp.136-174. References to specific passages will be embedded in the main text, using the abbreviation "NE" and citing the traditional Bekker pagination, according to which Books VIII and IX are located at 1155^a1-1172^a15.

therefore that Aristotle offers us a vision of *universal* friendship, perhaps even an early example of what might nowadays be called “altruism”?

I will explore this question in what follows by looking at the nature and possibility of universal friendship from three points of view. First, here in section 1, a basic introduction to Aristotle’s groundbreaking philosophy of friendship will suggest an initial *negative* answer to the foregoing question. In section 2, I shall take a step away from philosophy as such and examine the biblical roots of a *religious* basis for affirming altruism, arising out of the so-called “love command” – the maxim that we ought to love others as we love ourselves. Section 3 examines Kant’s view of friendship, arguing that, although at first his position seems disappointingly limited, it actually captures the essence of the only possible form of friendship that could be regarded as a *universal* ideal *without* imposing unrealistic expectations onto friends. Finally, I conclude in section 4 by offering a radical new, Kant-inspired interpretation of Jesus’ parable of the Good Samaritan, as an alternative to the traditional view that Jesus’ appeal to the love command is a straightforward defense of altruism.

Given that for Aristotle all politics rests on *agreement*,² his definition of friendship obviously has political overtones that must not be overlooked. These overtones are most evident in the first two of the three fundamental types of friendship in his theory. These “incomplete” types of friendship are based on the partners’ *usefulness* to each other in one of two senses: friends who agree to be together for the sake of sharing in pleasurable activities can be called *playmates*; those who agree to be together because of the mutual gain they will derive from the relationship can be called *workmates*. Although these are the only types of friendship many people ever experience, Aristotle regards them as inherently unstable, because they can easily break down (or simply fade away) if significant changes occur in the benefits each partner derives from the relationship. I shall refer to these as the “lower” types of friendship, in contrast to the “highest” type, which Aristotle describes as being “complete”.

The two lower types are by far the most commonly experienced and go a long way to fulfilling the universal human need for friendship – playmates being the more common type of friend for children to have and workmates being more common for adults. Nearly everyone – hopefully even after reaching adulthood – has at least a few friends with whom the main shared activities are recreational: playing games, going to the cinema, shopping, and various sports activities are all typical examples of what people normally do with their playmate-friends. As we grow older, the types of profit-oriented partnerships we make gradually change: students may learn more by forming study groups to assist them in doing homework; people employed in almost any kind of job may benefit by

² For Aristotle, anything that has to do with an *agreement* between two or more persons is by that very fact political, though political relationships (agreements) can exist at many different levels. The three levels Aristotle focuses his attention on in *Politics*, for example, are those relating to the family, to business, and to government. For a discussion of how Aristotle’s political theory relates to a possible theory of religious politics, see my book, *Biblical Theocracy: A vision of the biblical foundations for a Christian political philosophy* (Hong Kong: Philopsychy Press, 1993), Chapter One.

forming friendships with their colleagues; parents may save time and increase the social skills of their children by sharing the task of childcare with other parents; and business owners may accomplish much more if they have one or more partners to share the responsibilities. Surprisingly, books on business management rarely refer to the role of friendship in successful business ventures.³ If Aristotle's theory is accurate, this is a big mistake. For the exigencies of human life dictate that a significant portion of our friends, for better or worse, are workmate-friends, friends we "love" *merely* – if we're honest! – because of the utility they provide for us in our job, in our schoolwork, or in other work-related situations.

One of Aristotle's main reasons for thinking of these two types of friend as being incomplete is that if the pleasure or profit we gain from a relationship with a playmate or workmate ceases, then the friendship also ceases. These lower types of friend are what Badhwar calls a "means friendship":⁴ if we are friends with someone only because we gain some "end" for ourselves through the relationship, then when the relationship stops serving as a means to that end, we simply move on to another relationship that will give us what we want. For this reason, workmates and playmates are inherently *replaceable*: if we lose touch with a playmate or workmate – perhaps because they move to a distant location, or because they break the relationship after becoming angry or disappointed in response to something we have done (or not done) – we may be sad at first; but the sadness is more a result of *our own* loss (i.e., the loss of a valuable means to an end we desire) than for the person as such. As soon as we find another person to play tennis with, or someone to fill the empty chair in the office or in the study group, the former loss of a friend is hardly noticed. As such, these two types of friendship do not qualify for the status of "universal"; although they may be so common that they are experienced by virtually everyone, they do not advocate or instantiate "universal" friendship, if by this we mean anything close to altruistic love.

The same drawback does not hold for the third and "complete" (or *highest*) type of friendship in Aristotle's theory: what he sometimes describes as a "true friendship" (NE 1157^a23) is a relationship based not on the utility of pleasure or profit, but on the pure goodness of virtue. A true friend loves me entirely *for my own sake*, not for any benefit he or she may derive from the relationship. This kind of friendship is very rare, Aristotle tells us, because it can be experienced only by two virtuous people, and virtuous people are rare (1156^b24). If just one partner is virtuous, then he or she is likely to be exploited by the one who is not virtuous. This is why Aristotle thinks *all* forms of friendship succeed only when they are shared between equals. Two thieves can become very close friends, because their friendship will always remain, by mutual consent, at the lower level (e.g., bound by the utility of workmates). But if

³ But cf. Sam KEEN, *Fire in the Belly: On being a man* (New York: Bantam Books, 1991), p.64.

⁴ Neera BADHWAR, "Friends as Ends in Themselves", in Alan SOBLE (ed.), *Sex, Love, and Friendship: Studies of the Society for the Philosophy of Sex and Love 1977-1992* (Atlanta: Rodopi, 1997), pp. 333-352.

a virtuous person – perhaps someone motivated by a commitment to altruistic love – tries to befriend a thief, the latter will eventually misuse the good will of the former; in the absence of *mutual* participation, the friendship will collapse.⁵ True friends, by contrast, want to be together (whether in work or in play) for the mutual good of both, as well as for the good of others. This highest expression of friendship may involve aspects of the lower forms of friendship: either shared pleasure or shared profit (or both) might come as a *by-product* of the friends' efforts to practice virtue. But such by-products will never be the relationship's goal; their absence can therefore never be cited as a legitimate reason to end the friendship. Moreover, when a person loses a true friend (what Badhwar aptly calls an “end friend”), that friend is *irreplaceable*.⁶

As such, this highest form of friendship enjoys a crucial feature absent in the lower forms: it presupposes a level of virtue in the two persons forming the friendship that *deserves* the label “universal”; yet it, too, suffers from a problem, if we wish to make this the basis for altruistic love. For altruism is normally regarded as a selfless or at least self-giving form of love; yet, as we have seen, even Aristotle's ideal of true friendship cannot be extended between non-equals. If the ideal of “universal friendship” implies an openness to love *all* human beings, as most who defend altruism portray it as being,⁷ then Aristotle's philosophy of friendship does not seem to support the pursuit of this altruistic ideal.

Although most people *believe* they have one or more “true friends”, this highest form of friendship is actually the rarest form of human love, because very few people achieve the level of personal growth that merits being called “virtuous”. For those few who do, and who are lucky enough to find a like-minded partner, such a friend functions as what Aristotle calls a “second self”, or “another self” (e.g., *NE* 1166^a31-33). The idea here, also promoted by Cicero in *On Friendship*, is that a true friend expands our self-knowledge by helping us see ourselves through the eyes of another. As Diogenes Laërtius famously described Aristotle's position: a true friendship constitutes “one soul abiding in two bodies”, so it follows (almost by definition) that “a friend to all is a friend to none”.⁸

An interesting feature of this third type of friendship is that it usually does not require a vow or a promise, or any other kind of guarantee that the partners will remain faithful to each other. The lower

⁵ An interesting point to note here is that Aristotle believed the gods have no need of friendship. Unlike human beings, they are self-sufficient. While many Christian theologians have viewed God in a similar way (i.e., God is impassable, unable to be influenced by any human behavior), this contrasts significantly with the New Testament account of God as coming to earth in the form of Jesus specifically for the purpose of spreading the gospel of love by befriending human beings for a mutual partnership in virtue. See section 2, below.

⁶ See BADHWAR, *op. cit.*; I discuss Badhwar's theory of friendship in Lecture 30 of my book, *The Waters of Love: A course of introductory lectures on love, sexuality, marriage, and friendship* (Hong Kong: Philopsychy Press, 2003); the discussion of Aristotle's theory of friendship in this section is adapted from Lecture 29.

⁷ In section 2, I will discuss two prominent examples of Christian defenses of altruism.

⁸ See Diogenes LAEËRTIUS, *The Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers*, trans. C.D. Yonge (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1853), Book V, §XI. In this translation, the second of these oft-quoted phrases reads: “The man who has friends has no [true] friend.”

types of friendship often involve such contractual arrangements: when a relationship between two friends becomes intimate and they share (or want to share) sexual pleasure together, for example, they typically do make some kind of agreement regarding what their commitment to share such intimacy entails;⁹ likewise, classmates or co-workers who are asked to join a group to work together on a joint project will typically agree to divide up their work in a mutually beneficial manner. But true friends will be less concerned with such political formalities – political inasmuch as they entail agreements (see note 2). As virtuous persons, they will leave each other free to fade in and out of the relationship as circumstances dictate, without any thought of “breaking up” (as in a romantic relationship) or “being laid off” (as in a work relationship).

Part of this attitude of mutual freedom in a true friendship will be a total lack of jealousy toward the partner’s other friendships. Lower level friendships, by contrast, often involve pangs of jealousy, as when we discover that a favorite playmate has more fun playing with someone else, or that a favorite workmate now regards another colleague as more helpful. Friendships of virtue exhibit what I call “polyfidelity” (i.e., they allow and even encourage multiple concurrent friendship commitments), placing no predetermined limits on one’s ability to enjoy parallel relationships with other friends. As a result, true friends can regard their love as “eternal” (or at least, *unending*), in the sense that the *potential* for furthering the relationship will always remain open (at least as a desired hope) for both partners, even if their life circumstances cause the friendship to experience an extended hiatus over a long period of time.

An important insight brought out by Aristotle’s theory is that friendship is a *moral* issue, even though most people do not regard it as such. Moral philosophers should be as interested in understanding the mechanics of good (virtuous) friendships as lovers typically are in understanding the mechanics of “good” (pleasurable) sex; and we should all work as hard at learning how to establish and preserve good friendships as we do at learning how to establish and preserve good relationships with our colleagues at work (or with classmates). According to Aristotle, one of the first requirements for developing successful friendships is to be highly selective in choosing friends, especially those with whom we hope to develop a deep (true) friendship. With each friend we meet, we should assess how much of our affection (i.e., emotional commitment) that person deserves to receive, and use this to determine how much of ourselves we should share with that person. Although polyfidelity may be a key principle for all true friendship, this does not mean we should be careless in deciding how much energy to devote to each friend. Some will deserve more of our time and effort than others.

Although Aristotle’s theory of friendship is quite straightforward, some additional clarity may be gained by mapping it onto a triangle, as shown in Figure 1. The two lower types of friendship form

⁹ Even so-called “friends with benefits” typically take care to agree in advance something to the effect: “now, we’re not going to be *falling in love* with each other just because we’ve agreed to fondle each other in this way!”

the base of the triangle, with the two opposing vertices representing the utilitarian goals of shared pleasure and shared profit. The apex of the triangle then depicts the highest type of friendship, based on the shared virtue of two souls:

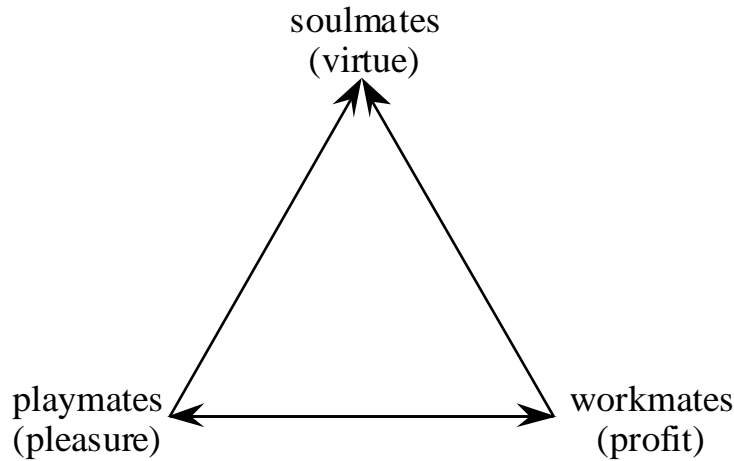


Figure 1: Aristotle's Three Types of Friendship

This triangle aptly depicts how friendships of virtue, based on the “two bodies sharing one soul” metaphor, incorporate and synthesize aspects of the lower types of friendship, but go beyond them to a higher level. The arrows indicate that these three types of friendship do not represent absolute differences of kind, but gradual differences of degree. Any specific friendship could therefore be depicted as occupying a position somewhere on the interior of the triangle, perhaps conforming more closely to one ideal type, but without totally excluding the others.

When a friendship of virtue begins to approach the apex of the triangle, we commonly refer to the two persons involved in such a relationship as “soulmates”. Some people speak as if each person has one and only one soulmate who is out there somewhere, waiting to be made complete by finding the one person who is exactly matched to oneself. But this is an improper confusion of the traditional romantic ideal (i.e., the myth of the “perfect match”) with a concept that properly belongs to the realm of friendship. A virtuous person may have several soulmates, especially (though not only) if the relationships develop at different points in his or her life. And a soulmate is not necessarily or even usually a person of the opposite sex. Indeed, Aristotle thought a soulmate could *only* be someone of the same sex – though I think this is an inappropriate restriction nowadays, one that conflicts with the experience of many people.¹⁰ His view should serve as a reminder that a soulmate *can* be a partner of

¹⁰ Aristotle himself believed it is difficult, if not impossible, for men and women to be friends at all. Why? Because males and females *are not* and, due to the basic biological (and in his day, political) differences between the genders, never *can be* equals. Aristotle's claim was not that women are inferior, but only that the typical differences between men and women make it nearly impossible for them to treat each other entirely as equals – which in the *biological* sense, at least, is probably true.

the same sex, and that romance and sexual attraction too often weigh down relationships with the opposite sex, making it extremely difficult to transcend utility-based reasons for being together. What Aristotle's view neglects, though, is that same sex relationships have a tendency to be weighed down in a very similar way, by lower-level concerns over shared *profit*. Soulmates transcend such self-centered concerns in the service of each other's personal growth.¹¹ But even when corrected for these possible weaknesses, what seems clear is that Aristotle's philosophy of friendship does not provide the basis for anything that resembles the kind of universal friendship typically known as *altruism*.

2. The love command as a religious basis for altruism

The foregoing overview of Aristotle's philosophy of friendship yielded results that should not be surprising, given that altruism (understood as the view that we should love everyone equally, *especially* those who are weaker or less advantaged than ourselves) is generally assumed to have its primary basis not in philosophy but in religion, especially in the Judeo-Christian tradition. What is commonly called the "love command", the admonition "love your neighbor as yourself," is found in numerous biblical passages, both in the Jewish and in the specifically Christian scriptures.¹² It is arguably the core content of Christian ethics, insofar as the latter is based on Jesus' teaching. But does it entail altruism? Or could the love command itself be read as an admonition to practice something along the lines of what Aristotle called "true friendship"?

A valiant attempt to affirm *both* options is made by a medieval monk named Aelred of Rievaulx (1109–1167), in his book, *Spiritual Friendship* – one of the clearest and most influential expressions of the view that Christian love is altruistic, yet *also* a form of friendship. Written in dialogue form, as a conversation with his friend, Ivo, the book develops a Christian version of Aristotle's theory, drawing on the Bible for most of its inspiration. Thus, Aelred distinguishes between true friendship and two lower, "sinful" types:¹³ namely, "carnal" (i.e., fleshly or *pleasure-oriented*) and "worldly" (i.e., *profit-oriented*) friendships. Aelred views Christ as the perfect model of what a friend should be: someone whose love is unconditional and eternal, to the point that he is willing to die for those he loves. A true friend is a "guardian of the spirit" (*SF* 20), who should be willing to share all possessions with his or her friends (28; cf. Acts 4:32). Near the end of Book I, Ivo asks Aelred (*SF* 69): "Shall I say of

However, due to the radical changes in the *political* status of women since Aristotle's day, women do enjoy an increasingly equal status today; the more equal men and women are in a particular society, the more likely it is that true friendships between men and women can develop.

¹¹ As Sean (played by the late Robin Williams) says to Will in the film, *Good Will Hunting*: "A soulmate is someone who challenges you, who opens up your soul to you in ways you never expected."

¹² The exact expression, "love your neighbor as yourself" occurs nine times (Lev. 19:18; Matt. 19:19; 22:39; Mk. 12:31,33; Lk. 10:27; Rom. 13:9; Gal. 5:14; and Js., 2:8), but the idea behind it is repeated over and over throughout the Bible.

¹³ AELRED OF RIEVAULX, *Spiritual Friendship*, trans. Eugenia Laker (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1974); §38. Hereafter abbreviated "*SF*", cited (as here) by section number.

friendship what John, the friend of Jesus, says of charity: ‘God is friendship?’ Aelred warns that this goes beyond the literal meaning of “God is love” (a quote from 1 Jn. 4:8), yet he admits it is justified by the way the context (i.e., 1 John 4) connects charity so closely to friendship (i.e., “brotherly love”) between fellow believers.

The key distinction in Aelred’s book is between three interrelated expressions of love, which he calls “charity”, “benevolence”, and “spiritual friendship” (see Figure 2). *Charity* corresponds to what we now call “altruism”: the positive regard or heartfelt care (*caritas* in Latin) that Christians are to have for *all* human beings – friends and enemies alike. It is rooted in the “agape”¹⁴ that comes from God and is only possible in and through God. *Benevolence* refers to actual good deeds, especially toward those in need (*SF* 15), and corresponds to the Bible’s “love your neighbor” command (e.g., Matt. 5:43; 19:19). When Jesus says “love your enemies” (Matt. 5:44), he is therefore not asking us to *make friends* with them, but only to have a God-like concern for their well-being (*SF* 32). *Spiritual friendship* itself is a higher-level love intended only for those “to whom we can fearlessly entrust our heart and all its secrets.” On this point Aelred quotes Proverbs 17:17 (*SF* 21): “A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity.” The two parts of this proverb portray friendship as a spiritual form of kinship (i.e., *brotherhood*), where the “bond” is not one’s own blood, but the blood of Christ, who died so that all human beings would have a spiritual basis for becoming friends. Charity animates spiritual friendship by supplying it with four guiding principles, based on the cardinal virtues (49): in “such friendship prudence directs, justice rules, fortitude guards, and temperance moderates.”

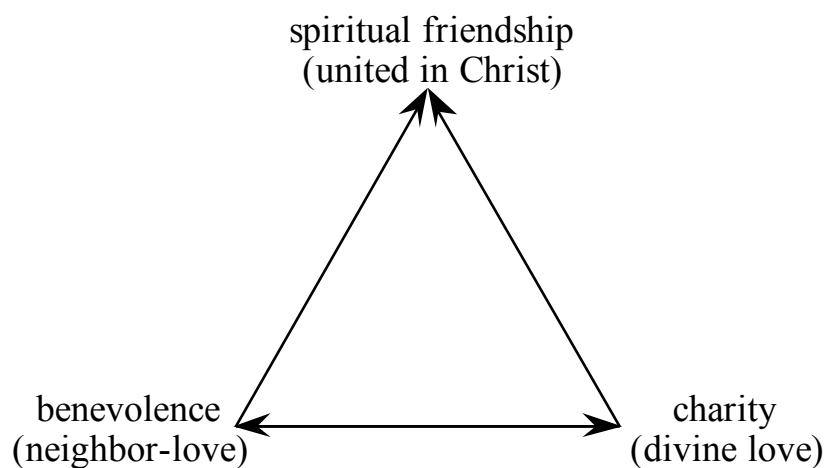


Figure 2: Aelred’s Three Types of Christian Love

Because he links it so closely to charity (viewed as supernatural love that God gives to

¹⁴ The main Greek word for love used in the New Testament, “*agape*”, is normally taken to refer to self-sacrificial love, in contrast to Plato’s “*eros*”, which refers to desire-based love. For a thorough discussion of the differences between these two types of love, see *Waters of Love, op. cit.*, Lectures 4-6; the discussion of spiritual friendship in this section is adapted from Lecture 31.

Christians, enabling them to care altruistically about *every* human being), Aelred claims that friendship in this new, spiritual sense is no longer limited to only a few virtuous people, as Aristotle believed; rather, it can be shared between *all* believers (*SF* 28). The key feature distinguishing it from charity and benevolence is the *intimacy* Christians are able to have with each other, merely by virtue of their unity in Christ. This intimacy arises out of a synthesis of charity and benevolence. As Aelred puts it (46), “spiritual friendship... is a mutual conformity in matters human and divine united with benevolence and charity.” If we regard charity as an agape-inspired form of Aristotle’s “workmate” type of friendship (whereby a person somehow profits in a spiritual way by assisting others to profit materially), and benevolence as an eros- (i.e., desire-) inspired form of Aristotle’s “playmate” type of relationship (whereby a person paradoxically experiences pleasure by self-sacrificially pleasing others), then Aelred’s ideal of spiritual friendship functions as a synthesis that corresponds directly to Aristotle’s concept of true or virtue-based friendship. Given the central role of Christ (the ideal friend) in his account of how ordinary (i.e., Aristotelian, or “sinful”) friendships are transformed into true (i.e., Christian, or “spiritual”) friendships, Aelred’s highest form is more extreme than Aristotle’s, for *without* Christ as one’s model and as the vessel for transmitting God’s love to human persons, *nobody* would be capable of attaining the virtue necessary to be a *true* friend. Why? Because in our natural state (i.e., before we come face to face with the love command) we have a tendency to *hate* ourselves, seeking friends as a means of making up for our own *lack* of pleasure, profit, or virtue, whereas the love command requires us to love ourselves *first*, as the basis for loving our neighbor (*SF* 35). This becomes possible, according to Aelred, only when a person experiences the liberating love of Christ as the ultimate Friend.

The greatest of all Catholic theologians, St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), examines the nature of charity in greater depth, including the role of self-love in it. His massive *Summa Theologica* adopts the format of a public debate: for each of the many topics he addresses, he begins by proposing a question and defending a particular answer; he then raises objections and offers replies, concluding with a re-affirmation of the proposed claim. This highly rational style makes the book appear to be extremely philosophical, especially because he bases many of his crucial arguments on Aristotle; however, his final authority on all issues is *Scripture* rather than reason, so his work is properly regarded as theological more than philosophical. Thomas agrees with Aelred, that agape requires Christians to extend a form of friendship to “sinners, whom, out of charity, we love for God’s sake”.¹⁵ Most essentially, charity “is a kind of friendship of man for God” (*ST* 23.5; see also 13.1): “God is the principal object of charity, while our neighbor is loved out of charity for God’s sake.” Christian love is therefore not directed to or attracted by what is good in a particular person; rather (25.1), “the aspect under which our neighbor is to be loved, is God, since what we ought to love in our neighbor is that he may be in God.” The proper response to the recognition of good in another person is *honor*, but the only *universal* good, common to all our neighbors, is God. “Consequently, we love all our neighbors with the same love of charity.” Here we see a clear defense of altruism as, at least for Christians, the proper – or at least, the highest – form of love.

St. Thomas regards self-love as “the form and root of friendship” (*ST* 25.4), not only because the Bible commands us to “love your neighbor *as* yourself” (see note 12), but also because Aristotle

¹⁵ St. Thomas AQUINAS, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: McGraw Hill, 1947), §23.1. References cite (as here) the question and answer numbers in Part II-II. Hereafter abbreviated “*ST*”.

defends a position very similar to the biblical love command (cf. *NE* 1166^a1ff [=IX.4]): “the origin of friendly relations with others lies in our relation to ourselves.” Rational self-love is therefore also a form of charity, requiring a person “to desire for oneself the good things which pertain to the perfection of reason.” Of course, if self-love desires things that are *bad*, then it is no longer a genuine form of love. Along these lines, Thomas distinguishes between three types of self-love (*ST* 25.7): the desire for self-preservation that is common to everyone; the love of one’s own *internal* (rational) goodness; and the love of one’s own external (sensible) goodness. Of these, the second refers to love of one’s true self and should be a characteristic of all good persons, while the third refers to love of one’s false self and will be a characteristic only of bad persons. Because the first two (good) forms of self-love serve as the “model” for all neighbor-love, Thomas argues that, if self-love and neighbor-love are not equal in their intensity, then the former should actually be *stronger* than the latter (26.4): “the model exceeds the copy. Therefore, out of charity, a man ought to love himself more than his neighbor.”

3. Kant’s synthesis of Aristotle and the love command: balancing respect and love

The possibility (i.e., logical consistency) of viewing friendship in the radical way advocated by Jesus, in both his teaching and his practice (at least as interpreted by Christian theologians such as those discussed in section 2), has been questioned by some philosophers on the grounds that love cannot be commanded. Probably the best example is Immanuel Kant, who assumed that “love” normally refers to a form of feeling (i.e., a pleasurable affection or liking, causing a person to enjoy being with the beloved). In books such as *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785), he treats the notion of *commanding* someone to love as nonsensical, because commands belong to the practical (moral) standpoint, whereas feelings belong to (what I call) the judicial (experiential) standpoint.¹⁶ In order to make sense out of the Bible’s “love God” and “love your neighbor as yourself” commands, Kant therefore translates them into language he thinks is more suitable for moral understanding.

Kant believes his defense of the moral law, or “categorical imperative” (i.e., the basic moral principle requiring us to base our actions on universally valid maxims that encourage respect for other persons and promote mutual autonomy in our personal relationships), can be interpreted as a defense of a practical version of the love command. Whereas we cannot meaningfully command someone (including one’s own self) to *feel* pleasant feelings about another person, we can command people to obey a moral principle that requires us to *respect* all human beings. His point is that a person should not be expected to *like* doing good in order to be counted as having done the right thing. Indeed, he goes a step further and argues that someone who does good even though he or she does *not* like doing so is more worthy of praise than someone who derives a great deal of enjoyment out of doing good. The

¹⁶ I provide a general introduction to these two standpoints and how they relate to Kant’s theoretical standpoint, where knowledge is produced, in my book, *The Tree of Philosophy*⁴ (Hong Kong: Philopsychy Press, 2000[1992]), Lectures 8, 22, and 29. For a more in depth account, see chapters II-IV of *Kant’s System of Perspectives: An architectonic interpretation of the Critical philosophy* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1993).

latter person can merely follow his or her natural inclinations in order to love a disagreeable neighbor, whereas the former person must struggle mightily against feelings that would otherwise lead one to avoid (if not also to hate) the neighbor. From the point of view of moral philosophy, Kant argues, a person who struggles against inner evil is more praiseworthy than one who simply complies with a natural inner good, because the former is a much more difficult task; the pleasure gained by the latter person, whenever he or she does good, is its own reward.

Going a step further, Kant claims *each of us* is the former type of person: “virtue” (i.e., the willingness to do good even when we do not enjoy it) is the most we can expect out of human beings, because its alternative, “holiness” (i.e., the ability to do good all the time, as an expression of one’s natural inclination), is a characteristic of God alone. With this distinction in mind, we should note that Jesus himself (e.g., in John 15) also connects love directly with obedience, never requiring his followers to *enjoy* loving others. Likewise, the fact that Jesus extends the love command so that it applies even to the way we treat our *enemies* (Matt. 5:43-44) implies that the love Jesus has in mind does not require affectionate liking. Indeed, when Jesus knows he is about to come face to face with the religious leaders who want to kill him – i.e., with the greatest enemies of his own ministry – the Bible portrays him as not at all “liking” the idea of having to die: he spends his last night in a garden, praying that God’s will might be accomplished in some *other* way, while his friends (for whom he is about to die) sleep soundly nearby (26:36-44). Such passages indicate that Kant’s moral interpretation of the love command is not too far-fetched; yet most people would agree that Jesus’ powerful message does lose some of its force when translated into such a refined philosophical theory.

Perhaps there is a way out of the dilemma posed by Kant that does not require us to follow the extreme path proposed by Aelred and St. Thomas.¹⁷ While affirming that Kant is right to see a close connection between moral duty and the love command, and even affirming that various Christian theologians may be right to see God’s agape as encompassing and fulfilling all human loves, we need not thereby regard the ordinary manifestations of human friendship as any *less* legitimate (as implied by Aelred’s use of the word “sinful”). On the contrary, I believe the message of the Gospels is that they *are* legitimate, to the extent that *friendship* is to be viewed as the essential feature of the Way that Jesus forged. Whereas *ordinary* friendships must remain free and therefore cannot be commanded, the special form of Christian friendship, together with the altruistic neighbor-love that inspires it, *can* be commanded because (as Kant rightly saw) it transcends the realm of human (eros-based) affections and (as various Christian theologians have rightly seen) rests on an (agape-based) ideal. But did Kant think the latter type of friendship is actually *possible*? The passage quoted at the beginning of this paper

¹⁷ An even more extreme account of the Christian position is defended by Kierkegaard in his *Works of Love*. For an account and assessment of that position, see *Waters of Love, op. cit.*, Lecture 32; my account of Kant’s position, here in section 3, is adapted from the account given in Lecture 32.

suggests a significant degree of skepticism here, regarding the *real plausibility* of anyone expecting true friendship, even though he affirms the need to hold it up as a formally possible *ideal*.

In the section of his *Lectures on Ethics* devoted to friendship, Kant offers an insight that might help to resolve this dilemma. After pointing out that human action has two conflicting “motives”, self-love (the desire for one’s own happiness) and love of humanity in general (the respect for persons that forms part of the basis for the moral law), he argues that friendship is the only type of human love that successfully resolves this conflict in a way that is both personally satisfying and morally good.¹⁸ For in an ideal group of friends (*LE* 201), “the happiness of each would be promoted by the generosity of the others. This is the Idea of friendship, in which self-love is superseded by a generous reciprocity of love.” That is, I take a risk by sacrificing my own self-love in order to give first priority to the happiness of my friends; but if the friendships are all genuine, this sacrifice does not create a problem, because my friends will do the same for me in return. In this way, each person in a group of friends is able to act morally (i.e., on the basis of their general respect-love for humanity) and yet also have his or her self-love satisfied (by the others in the group). When the moral implications of friendship are seen in this way, the idea that love as *friendship* can be *commanded* begins to make more sense.

Unfortunately, Kant sees a major flaw in this way of resolving the moral dilemma caused by self-love: all real “examples of friendship are extremely defective” (*LE* 202). People who take the risk of obeying the love command by being friendly to others are often disappointed: their generosity may *not* be returned; indeed, they may even be betrayed.¹⁹ For this reason Kant prudently warns us to be cautious with our friendships, only entrusting to and expecting from each friend what that particular relationship can bear (208): “We must so conduct ourselves towards a friend that there is no harm done if he should turn into an enemy.” Rather than focusing all our energies on a few special friends, we must (206) “guard against shutting out from our heart all who are not within the charmed circle.” This, he thinks, is the true spirit of the love command. And it is the key to transforming society from a group of “savages” into a community of free and moral persons: “The more civilized man becomes, the broader his outlook and the less room there is for special friendships; civilized man seeks universal pleasures and a universal friendship, unrestricted by special ties” (207).

¹⁸ Immanuel Kant, *Lectures on Ethics*, trans. Louis Infield (London: Methuen, 1979), p.200. Hereafter abbreviated “*LE*”.

¹⁹ In *Religion within the Bounds of Bare Reason*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2009), p.33 (German pagination), the very first example that Kant gives, in his “long melancholy litany of charges against humanity” that illustrate our evil nature is the “secret falsity even in the most intimate friendship, so that moderation of trust in reciprocal openness by even the best friends is included in the universal maxim of prudence in [social] intercourse”. Hereafter abbreviated “*Religion*”. Quotations from *Religion* are taken from the revised version of Pluhar’s translation, presented in my *Comprehensive Commentary on Kant’s Religion within the Bounds of Bare Reason* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2016).

4. A reassessment of the Good Samaritan: *be friends with those who show mercy*

To conclude this study of altruism and universal friendship, I shall explore a possible biblical basis for Kant's cautious advice. As we saw at the end of section 2, St. Thomas surprisingly responded to the speculative (and typically scholastic – i.e., ultimately unanswerable) question of whether or not we should love our own self *more* than our neighbor, by claiming that we *should*. By taking a closer look at the biblical story that is usually regarded as *the* paradigm case of neighborly (i.e., altruistic or true) friendship, the story of the Good Samaritan (Lk. 10:25-37), we should be able to assess his claim, together with Kant's warning against revealing too many of our private thoughts and opinions to others. While this is only one of nine passages where the love command appears in the Bible (see note 12), it is surely the passage that is regarded as most clearly defining the *core* message of the love command.

Luke's account opens with Jesus being questioned by a theologian (i.e., an expert in the Jewish religious law, the Law of Moses) about how to obtain eternal life. Jesus asks him which law is the most important, and the man replies by quoting from the Jewish scriptures: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind" and "love your neighbor as yourself" (Lk. 10:27, quoting Deut. 6:5 and Lev. 19:18). When Jesus congratulates the man for giving the correct answer, the theologian slyly asks Jesus (10:29): "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus replies by telling the parable of the Good Samaritan:

A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii [i.e., the typical wage for two days of labor] and gave them to the innkeeper. "Look after him," he said, "and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have."

After telling this parable, Jesus asks the theologian which person was a "neighbor" to the man who had been attacked, and the theologian answers not by *identifying* one of the characters as such, but by giving a description (10:37): "The one who had mercy on him." Jesus then *agrees* and admonishes the man: "Go and do likewise."

In this simple conversation, Jesus proposes a revolutionary new definition of "neighbor" – one that presumably also applies to "friend". Contrary to Aristotle, Jesus' notion of a friend (according to the traditional way of reading the foregoing parable, as presented by Aelred, Thomas, and countless

other Christian interpreters) no longer has to be a “good” person who is equal to oneself in virtue, but is rather *anyone* who needs assistance. After all, we are told nothing about the moral status of the man who was attacked by the robbers. In the Old Testament, where the love command first appears (Lev. 19:18), the word “neighbor” clearly refers to “one of your people” (i.e., it means: love your fellow countryman); yet Jesus intentionally chooses a *foreigner* (a “Samaritan”) to represent the neighbor, thus openly challenging this traditional Jewish interpretation of what that religious law implies. As we have seen, Jesus elsewhere takes his new concept of love to an extreme by going even further than merely redefining who our neighbors are: “You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matt. 5:43-44). Although Aelred thinks this kind of love refers only to charity, not to the highest expression of love (i.e., not to spiritual friendship), the text does not justify such an assumption. Jesus here uses exactly the same neighbor metaphor, so he does not appear to be referring to a different type of love. Instead, he seems to be commanding his followers to take friendship to its most paradoxical extreme, given that “friend” and “enemy” are direct opposites of each other. He seems to be redefining “love your fellow countryman” to mean *befriend those who are at war with you!* When the latter passage is taken together with the traditional interpretation of the Good Samaritan passage, neighbor love does seem to imply a type of universal friendship that might go by the name “altruism”.

Perhaps in one sense Jesus’ love command, like Kant’s categorical imperative, *is* meant to portray altruism as the ultimate moral requirement for all human relationships.²⁰ But when he shares the parable with the theologian, Jesus’ focus is more prudent: the man already knows the altruistic *principle*, because (as Kant would put it) *reason itself* commands it; yet he wants to know to what extent he is to *act it out* in the *real* world. Although Kant’s notion of universal friendship probably seems rather cold and unnecessarily prudent to most readers, it actually turns out to be deeply religious at its core, if we see it in connection with Jesus’ *application* of the Good Samaritan story. For Kant argues in *Religion within the Bounds of Bare Reason* that ethical principles such as the love command point beyond morality to religion: at least at the start of their moral development, human beings lack virtue at their very core, and this fact gives rise to the need to believe in a higher moral being who can graciously regard our best efforts to be good as if they were equivalent to the full realization of ideal goodness.

What, then, *is* our best effort, when it comes to friendship? Although Kant does not explicitly say so in his lecture on friendship, we can regard the caution he recommends in dealing with our friends as a necessary safeguard against reversing the proper order of the Great Commandment’s two parts: Jesus tells us *first* to love God *unreservedly* (i.e., “with all your heart and with all your soul and with

²⁰ In my article, “Four Perspectives on Moral Judgement: The Rational Principles of Jesus and Kant”, *The Heythrop Journal* 32.2 (April 1991), pp.216-232, I argue that the moral principles of Jesus and Kant are complementary, each requiring the other in order to be complete.

all your mind” [Matt. 22:37]) and only *then* to love our neighbor *reservedly* (i.e., “as yourself” [22:39]). If we promote a few of our friendships to a level of importance that is even close to what God alone deserves – i.e., if we pretend to love them *more* than we love ourselves – then the *universal* friendship that is the heart and soul of the Gospel message will be compromised, and we will be unable to obey the love command in any significant way.

As we have seen, Christians often interpret the love command in terms of “brotherly love”, viewing it as a form of religious kinship that applies mainly (if not exclusively) to other Christians, and sometimes only to members of one’s own denomination – i.e., to people who share the same narrow set of doctrinal *beliefs*. Yet, the parable of the Good Samaritan clearly indicates that this was not Jesus’ intention. Jesus uses that parable to convince a Jewish theologian that the love command is not meant to encourage people to form safe special interest groups, as the priest and Levite in the story had obviously done, and as all too many religious organizations do nowadays. What is rarely recognized by interpreters of the love command is that Jesus uses this parable to define “neighbor” not as “a person in need of help” (as the standard, altruistic interpretation of the parable would require), but as *someone who shows mercy to those in need*.

One need not be a traditional religious believer in order to appreciate the significance of this radical claim. Far from admonishing people to “love everyone”, Jesus’ parable implies that one should *avoid* befriending (or “neighboring”) people who behave like the influential religious officials, simply passing by someone who lay dying on the road. For if you befriend *them*, they may well pass *you* by, when you are in need! Instead, Jesus’ brief conversation with the theologian, after telling the parable, implies that we are to select as our friends people like the Samaritan in the parable, even if they are not members of our preferred religious, political, or cultural “neighborhood” – indeed, even if they belong to a group that our (lower-level) friends would label as “the enemy”. Whereas Jesus’ teaching in the Gospels might be construed as recommending altruism in some other contexts, or as an ideal to aim at, the proper lesson to be drawn from the parable of the Good Samaritan, as Jesus tells the theologian, is that the love command *requires* preference to be given to those who show mercy. That is, “love your neighbor as yourself” *means*, first and foremost, “select as your closest friends, your *true* friends, those who have demonstrated that they are merciful persons.”

Although Luke’s account of this parable is usually interpreted to mean that Christians are to treat *everyone* as a neighbor, this ignores the priority clearly given in the text to the merciful foreigner as being *more* worthy of our friendship than those influential religious leaders who refuse to show mercy. Taking this important point into consideration, we can interpret Jesus’ radical reapplication of the love command as positing a hierarchy of three levels: first, we are to have spiritual love for God (i.e., what Kant calls “respect for the moral law”, the altruistic ideal), but (since God *is* love, and since this love is the agape of unending mercy) we can best express such love by being merciful to those in need, just as

the Good Samaritan does; second, we are to have neighborly love for those who are merciful (just as we naturally tend to be merciful to ourselves),²¹ for in so doing we will be practicing the true friendship that is possible (as Aristotle rightly argued) only between persons of goodwill; finally, those who do not show mercy are not worthy of being treated as neighbors (i.e., true friends), though we should still have a basic human (respectful) love even for those “enemies” who “persecute” us (see Matt. 5:43-44) and who may masquerade as our friends. This is essentially the same insight Kant defends in the Third Piece of *Religion*, where he portrays the “true church” as being made up of *all* good-hearted people who join together to assist each other in doing good; but exploring *that* implication is a task for another occasion.²²

²¹ As Kant says in *Religion*, p. 68: “nowhere does one deceive oneself more easily than in what favors a good opinion of oneself.”

²² This paper was originally written for and presented as a lecture given on November 13, 2014, at the University of New Orleans, as part of a lecture series on Philosophy and Political Economy, sponsored by the Alexis de Tocqueville Project in Law, Liberty, and Morality. My thanks to Chris Surprenant for organizing the lecture and for all those who participated, whose feedback was much appreciated.