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KSENIJA ATANASIJEVIĆ ON ARISTOTLE'S CONCEPT OF FRIENDSHIP

Abstract: In this paper, we examine Ksenija Atanasijević's interpretation of Aristotle's views on friendship, presented in her article "Aristotle's Understanding of Friendship" (*Aristotelovo shvatanje prijateljstva*). We first outline Aristotle's tripartite framework of friendship—based on virtue, pleasure, and utility—emphasizing his view that only the friendship of virtue constitutes a complete, reciprocal bond. The analysis then shifts to Atanasijević's critique, which highlights both the inherent self-interest underpinning most human relationships and the problematic nature of unequal friendships, particularly in gendered contexts. While acknowledging Aristotle's profound psychological insights, Atanasijević implicitly challenges his endorsement of hierarchical, male-dominated relationships. We interpret her deliberate omission of a direct critique of gender inequality as a strategic choice aimed at foregrounding the universal, transformative power of friendship—a concept she believed had the potential to enhance both individual lives and broader social reality.

Keywords: women, human nature, virtue, gender equality, feminist critique

Introduction

Aristotle discusses the concept of friendship in several of his works, including *Rhetoric*, *Politics*, *Eudemian Ethics*, and perhaps most importantly in books VIII and IX of *Nicomachean Ethics*.¹ In her 1928 article

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“Aristotle’s Understanding of Friendship” (*Aristotelovo shvatanje prijateljstva*) Ksenija Atanasijević gives a detailed overview and analysis of these sections of *Nicomachean Ethics*. Her article, originally published in the *Serbian Literary Herald* (*Srpski književni glasnik*), appeared a full three decades before Radmila Šalabalić’s Serbian translation of the *Nicomachean Ethics* in 1958, making it one of the first introductions to Aristotle’s ethical theory for a broader Yugoslavian audience. At the time of Atanasijević’s publication, *The Poetics* was the only one of Aristotle’s works available in Serbo-Croatian, thanks to Croatian translations by Armin Pavić (1869) and Martin Kuzmić (1902). Thus, Ksenija Atanasijević was among the first to translate and interpret a Greek text that had a significant influence on later philosophy and subsequent understandings of friendship.

In the next section of this paper, we will begin by outlining Aristotle’s original framework from the *Nicomachean Ethics* and other works. This section will clarify his distinctions among friendships based on utility, pleasure, and virtue, and set the stage for understanding the ethical and psychological dimensions he ascribes to genuine friendship. Next, we will examine how Atanasijević reads Aristotle through the lens of her own philosophical commitments. We analyze her criticism of Aristotle’s position on the complexities and rarity of genuine friendship, emphasizing the pervasive role of self-interest in human interactions. Further, we consider her response to the unequal nature of certain relationships, especially in the context of gender, where she omits to challenge the patriarchal assumptions underlying Aristotle’s framework. To fully grasp the conspicuous avoidance of a deeper critique of Aristotle’s conception of unequal friendship, we explain the fundamentals of Atanasijević’s philosophy, particularly the ethical foundations of feminism. Finally, we reflect on why Atanasijević refrained from a direct critique of Aristotle’s views on women, proposing that her omission was a deliberate strategy to foreground the universal and transformative power of friendship—one that resonates with the practical purpose of philosophy in improving human and social reality.

Aristotle’s Position, or What Can Be Said About Friendship?

Friendship, as Aristotle describes it in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, is not only necessary but also morally valuable in the life of every individual. Consequently, “without friends, no one would choose to live, even if he possessed all other goods” (Arist. *Eth. Nic.* 1155a). Everyone, whether

In this paper, we use established abbreviations for citing classical works, most of which can be found in the fourth edition of *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*.

happy or unhappy, needs friends. Friendship should be regarded as a special type of love that exists not only in relationships between people but also in the relationship with oneself. It is a reciprocated affection felt mutually between friends, ensuring that this kind of feeling is familiar to both parties involved.

In the *Rhetoric* Aristotle similarly states that a friend is “one who loves and is loved in return; and people think they are friends when they think they are both this way” (Arist. *Rh.* 1380b-1381a). Friendship, therefore, must be reciprocal, unlike erotic love, where one person may love another without that love being reciprocated in the same way, or at all. If we claim someone is our friend, it goes without saying that this person must also consider us their friend. An important condition, as Aristotle emphasizes, is that friends are aware of their mutual friendship, that is, the intention of friendship must be expressed.

In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle distinguishes three kinds or forms of friendship. “The forms of friendship, then, are three, equal in number to the things that are lovable; in accord with each is a reciprocal love that does not go unnoticed, and those who love each other wish for the good things for each other in that respect in which they love each other.” (Arist. *Eth. Nic.* 1156a). Those forms are a) complete/ideal/genuine/true friendship or friendship of virtue, b) friendship based on pleasure, and c) friendship based on mutual benefit or utility (see also Plećaš 2019). Since reasons for fondness of certain people vary, forms of friendships between individuals also differ, and the object of love can be a) what is good (virtue), b) what is pleasant and encourages enjoyment (pleasure), or c) what is useful (utility).

People who love each other and are aware of that love (the epistemic condition is fulfilled) wish each other well according to the motive of that friendship (Arist. *Eth. Nic.* 1156a). Friendships based on utility endure as long as one person can benefit from the other. Friendships that arise from pleasantness or pleasure and continue for the sake of enjoyment or erotic love are most common among young people. According to Aristotle, both forms of friendship are inherently short-lived and impermanent because, in neither case, is the person loved for who they are, but rather for the benefit or enjoyment they provide to the other. For this reason, such friends are not *truly* friends to each other, and these kinds of friendships “appear not to be friendships” at all, when compared to complete or virtuous friendships (Arist. *Eth. Nic.* 1158b). Complete or ideal friendship exists only between those of excellent (virtuous) character. Such friendships are rare and cannot be sustained with many people (Arist. *Eth. Nic.* 1158a). Aristotle writes:

“Yet friendships of this sort are likely to be rare, since people of this sort are few. Further, there is also need of the passage of time and the good simply and the pleasant simply habits formed by living together; for as the adage has it, it is not possible for people to know each other until they have eaten together the proverbial salt, nor is it possible, before this occurs, for them to accept each other and to be friends until each appears to each as lovable and is trusted. Those who swiftly make proofs of friendship to each other wish to be friends but are not such unless they are also lovable and know this about each other. For a wish for friendship arises swiftly, but friendship itself does not.” (Arist. *Eth. Nic.* 1156b)

Moreover, “a friend is necessarily someone who shares in one’s pleasure at good things and in one’s pains at painful ones, not because of something else, but because of oneself” (Arist. *Rh.* 1381a). Friendships based on utility or pleasure are only like complete or genuine friendship, as good people can both be pleasant to one another and offer mutual benefit. However, true friends in the absolute or complete sense are those who treat their friends as they treat themselves.

“Now, friendships are threefold, as was said in the beginning; and in each case, there are friendships consisting in an equality, others based on a superiority. For those who are similarly good become friends, or a good person befriends a worse one; and those who are pleasant and those who are useful become friends in like manner, whether they are equal in the benefits they confer or different. Those who are equal ought to love each other equally, in accord with the relevant equality, whereas those who are unequal ought to render to each what is proportional given the relevant superiorities” (Arist. *Eth. Nic.* 1162a-b).

Friendships based on superiority occur within families or between rulers and subjects, where justice requires that the superior person be loved more than they love in return. Aristotle considers the friendship between a man and a woman to be one of these unequal friendships.

Moreover, it is self-evident to Aristotle that no one would choose to live alone, no matter how self-sufficient or happy, because friendship is founded on community (Arist. *Eth. Nic.* 1159b). People form associations for various reasons, and each type of community corresponds to a particular form of friendship, with a distinct principle of justice governing each. Aristotle considers the friendship between a man and a woman to be *aristocratic* in its form. In an aristocracy, virtue is the distinguishing standard, meaning that the better or superior member (in this case, the man) holds

a larger share of the goods and, as the more virtuous, exercises authority over the woman in matters where he is more competent. When the man insists on deciding everything, the relationship between spouses becomes *oligarchic*. Conversely, in households where everyone does as they please, the relationship resembles a *democracy* (Arist. *Eth. Nic.* 1161a). Interestingly, this dynamic—whether aristocratic, oligarchic, or democratic—exists regardless of the state's political system. Even in democratic Athens, Aristotle maintains that the relationship would remain aristocratic because men and women are not considered equals. Thus, government in the house belongs to one person (the man), or as Aristotle says, "household management is monarchy (for every household is run by one alone), while political rule is over free and equal persons" (Arist. *Pol.* 1255b). Finally, friendly relations are most evident in a democracy, despite it being the least ideal form of government, because in a democratic system, male citizens, as equals, have much in common (Arist. *Eth. Nic.* 1161b).

Therefore, Aristotle believed that there are several forms of friendship based on various human relationships, with complete or ideal friendship being possible *only* among a few virtuous and equal individuals. Unlike Socrates and Plato, Aristotle also recognized the value of relationships between people whose moral character is less than perfect. However, like Plato, he maintained that the highest form of friendship—complete friendship—requires exceptional moral character and equality.

Aristotle's Position Through the Lens of Ksenija Atanasijević

In accordance with the general principles of her theoretical framework, Ksenija Atanasijević opens the article with a somewhat idealized portrayal of ancient Greek society and philosophy while simultaneously critiquing the intellectual climate of her own era. This is unsurprising, given that her conception of philosophy and the role philosophers should play in society was largely shaped by ancient Greek thought (Petrović, 2011, p. 103). As she introduces the reader to the context of Aristotle's discussion on friendship, she rightly references other ancient Greek philosophers and philosophical schools. After all, Aristotle builds on the works of his predecessors, including philosophers like Plato and Heraclitus, as well as to varying degrees on ancient Greek poets such as Homer, Hesiod, and Euripides (Murr, 2020, p. 567). Among the philosophers, besides Plato, the Pythagoreans are noteworthy for their emphasis on the idea that "friends have all things in common" and that "friendship is equality," or that a friend is "another self" (see Diog. Laert. 8.1). Atanasijević also high-

lights this point, emphasizing that “a moral human being treats the one they love as they treat themselves” (Atanasijević, 1928, p. 361).

Most of the text is dedicated to a systematic presentation of Aristotle’s words. The author meticulously conveys her arguments, section by section, offering only occasional commentary of her own. Since the key tenets of Aristotle’s understanding of friendship have already been outlined in the previous passage, we will not repeat them here. Instead, the remainder of this text will focus on Atanasijević’s commentary—why she criticized Aristotle’s conception of friendship and what aspects she chose not to critique in this text.

1) On the Occurrence of Friendship or Why Does Atanasijević Criticize Aristotle?

Atanasijević credits Aristotle with deep psychological insight, though she also finds him at times wanting. She considers him naive for believing that even a person of low morality “does not love himself, because there is nothing in him that can inspire affection” (Atanasijević, 1928, p. 361). Furthermore, she argues that Aristotle is mistaken both in failing to recognize friendship as one of life’s great rarities and in categorizing relationships based on utility and pleasure as friendships at all.

She criticizes Aristotle’s view that virtue and benevolence are the foundations of human relations (Atanasijević, 1928, p. 358), as she believed friendship is not a fundamental attitude that individuals naturally adopt towards one another. This perspective aligns with her broader pessimism about human nature. Central to her philosophy is the belief that selfishness, rather than goodwill, defines interpersonal relationships and that conflict and competition, not harmony, shape human interactions (Atanasijević, 2011, p. 29). In her view, it is evil, not benevolence, that characterizes human connections, and the pursuit of self-interest—not altruism—primarily motivates human actions (Atanasijević, 2011, p. 41). Contrary to Aristotle’s idea that community arises from humans’ social inclinations, Atanasijević contends that mutual affection is not an innate aspect of human nature (Atanasijević, 2011, p. 31). Instead, she suggests, individuals come together purely out of self-interest, forming communities as a means to more effectively advance and protect their selfish goals (Atanasijević, 2011, p. 29).

However, as previously noted, Aristotle refers to friendships based on utility or pleasure as friendships *in name only*. In this sense, both he and Atanasijević ultimately agree that genuine, complete friendship is rare. While Atanasijević criticizes his categorization of lesser relationships as friendships, Aristotle himself distinguishes them from genuine friendship,

emphasizing that only virtue-based friendships embody the highest form of human connection. Thus, Atanasijević's critique that Aristotle fails to recognize friendship as one of life's great rarities does not hold, because, according to Aristotle's thought, genuine friendship is the rarest form of friendship.

2) On Unequal Friendships or Why Should Atanasijević Have Criticized Aristotle?

Although Aristotle acknowledges that there is love and a certain degree of virtue even between spouses, he views men as superior. Spouses can be friends in the *basic* sense, as they are members of the same family and share some mutual responsibilities, but they are not *equals* in a political or intellectual sense. A woman is a friend in much the same way that a slave or a daughter can be a friend—since they are all members of the same household, under the care and authority of the man, the *pater familias*. Of course, we could be benevolent toward Aristotle, arguing that he was merely describing the societal norms of his time. In this view, Aristotle might simply be pointing out that a woman was considered a political minor compared to a man, as she could not participate in the political community in the same way, especially compared to a full-fledged Athenian male citizen. From a legal perspective, a woman had neither a public voice nor the ability to act actively in political life (even though certain women did influence Athenian politics, though they were not citizens of Athens themselves; see Plečaš, 2021). However, we might also take a less benevolent interpretation of Aristotle. After all, he explicitly claims that women lack a sufficiently developed intellect (Arist. Pol. 1260 a-b; Plečaš, 2021, p. 27). Moreover, from Aristotle's perspective, it seems that a woman is incapable of ever fully developing her intellect.² Aristotle describes the friendship between spouses in the following manner:

“The friendship between a husband and a wife seems to be in accord with nature. For a human being is by nature more a coupling being than a political one, inasmuch as a household is earlier and more necessary than a city and the begetting of children is more common to animals. Among the other animals, then, community exists to that extent; but human beings live together not only for the sake of begetting children but also for the sake of the things that contribute to life, for the tasks involved are divided immediately, those of the husband being different from those of the

2 Aristotle grounds his argument for political inequality between men and women in physiological differences, asserting that these distinctions arise as early as the fetal stage (see Petrović, 2023, pp. 105–106).

wife. They assist each other, then, by putting their own things in the service of what is in common. For these reasons, both what is useful and what is pleasant seem to be found in this friendship, though there would be such a friendship also on account of their virtue, should they be decent. For there is a virtue belonging to each, and they would delight in a person of a comparable sort. Children too seem to be a common bond; hence childless couples break up more readily, since children are a good common to both parents, and what is common holds things together.

How a husband must live in relation to his wife, and, in general, a friend in relation to a friend, appears no different a thing to inquire into than how it is just to do so, for the just does not appear to be the same thing for a friend in relation to a friend as it is in relation to a foreigner, a comrade, or a schoolmate.” (Arist. *Eth. Nic.* 1162a)

Surprisingly, Atanasijević dwells only briefly on Aristotle’s discussion of unequal friendships. She provides a rather dry and uncritical summary, merely restating Aristotle’s words. Atanasijević notes that these friendships are characterized by the supremacy of one person over another, reflecting the hierarchical structure between a ruler and the ruled. She also references Aristotle’s examples, including friendships between father and son, older and younger individuals, and between a man and a woman. Given her broader critique of gender inequality, it is safe to assume that Atanasijević did not share Aristotle’s view that women are naturally subordinate to men. Atanasijević explicitly argues that within the family, husband and wife should be equal: “Man’s methods of rule within the family have proven problematic, as have all forms of coercion. Hence, the demand for woman to be a fully equal member of the family, as she bears responsibility of raising both spiritually and physically healthy offspring” (Atanasijević, 2008, p. 22). Although she is less direct in her criticism of Aristotle here, she subtly challenges his stance by describing the distinction between equality in legal relationships and friendships as “inconspicuous” (Atanasijević, 1928, p. 359).

Atanasijević is equally reserved in analyzing sections X and XI of Book VIII, where Aristotle draws parallels between classifications of political systems and their corresponding relationships. Aristotle explicitly argues that what is just and “in accordance with virtue” in a friendship between a man and a woman is for the man, who is “the better,” to receive “more of what is good” (Arist. *Eth. Nic.* 1161). Instead of providing a more detailed analysis or a serious critique, Atanasijević simply dismisses his discussions

in these sections as “witty comparisons” that “do not contain any significant thought” on the topic of friendship (Atanasijević, 1928, p. 360).

Atanasijević does not further problematize Aristotle's views on women, even though she strongly believed that women, like men, are equally capable of forming friendships and that these friendships should be understood as equal rather than unequal (see Atanasijević, 2008, pp. 167, 177; see also Plećaš, 2021). Nevertheless, in the following section, we will examine the feminist position Atanasijević maintained throughout both her theoretical and activist work.

Atanasijević's Perspective on Women and Their Intellectual Potential

In *The Ethical Foundation of Feminism* (*Etička podloga feminizma*), Atanasijević argues that it is “absurd” to believe one sex should rule over the other (Atanasijević, 2008, p. 22). One of the most important ontological and ethical premises of her philosophy is that all human beings are equal by nature, as they all possess identical souls; therefore, the personhood of both men and women must be equally respected (Petrović, 2021, p. 106). Men and women share the same essence and moral capacities, meaning there can be no difference in the virtues or flaws they can possess (Atanasijević, 2008, p. 30). Like Aristotle, Atanasijević acknowledges significant differences in both the moral and intellectual capacities of individuals, but she firmly rejects the idea that such differences could be based solely on gender, as men's and women's psychological capacities are equivalent (Atanasijević, 2008, pp. 30–31).

“Thinkers of the ancient world, almost without exception, attributed to women a different and lower nature than that of men, and on this basis assigned them to a subordinate rank in social and family life. Many venomous epigrams remain, in which poets maliciously ridicule women's traits and cruelly exaggerate their flaws. Nearly all the views of Greek philosophers on women are negative and hostile. Only Plato, the greatest mind of antiquity, held an opinion entirely contrary to the prevailing beliefs of his time—an opinion so far-sighted that even today it remains interesting, progressive, and relevant.” (Atanasijević, 2008, p. 82)

Ksenija Atanasijević possessed extensive knowledge of ancient philosophy and literature and was well acquainted with the status of women of the time. A significant portion of her work was dedicated to analyzing

female figures in Greek tragedies, portraying esteemed women of the time, and examining attitudes toward women within ancient philosophy itself. In this regard, she pointed to Plato and Musonius Rufus as rare voices holding a more progressive view of women.

Atanasijević asserts that men and women are equal in their nature, sharing the same essence. Women possess the same strengths and weaknesses as men, with the only difference being physiological. In other words, Atanasijević believes that both women and men have an equal capacity for morality and moral action. This perspective was also advocated by the Stoic philosophers during antiquity, particularly in the Hellenistic period (see Atanasijević 2008, pp. 163–165; Plećaš, 2021; Plećaš, 2023). Musonius Rufus explicitly argues that women should be educated and are capable of virtue, just like men:

“When someone asked him if women too should study philosophy, he began to discourse on the theme that they should, in somewhat the following manner. Women as well as men, he said, have received from the gods the gift of reason, which we use in our dealings with one another and by which we judge whether a thing is good or bad, right or wrong. [...] Moreover, not men alone, but women too, have a natural inclination toward virtue and the capacity for acquiring it, and it is the nature of women no less than men to be pleased by good and just acts and to reject the opposite of these. If this is true, by what reasoning would it ever be appropriate for men to search out and consider how they may lead good lives, which is exactly the study of philosophy, but inappropriate for women?” (Muson. 3)

In other words, we can say that women are as rational as men, and that “gender does not play a role in whether and to what extent we can attribute rationality to someone” (Plećaš, 2023, p. 66). This is the main reason why Atanasijević praises this Stoic philosopher. Furthermore, in her article “Female Poets and Philosophers of Ancient Greece” (*Pesnikinje i filosofkinje stare Grčke*), Atanasijević unequivocally recognizes certain women as philosophers and poets, thus equating them intellectually with their male counterparts (Atanasijević, 2008, 115–116). Among these women are Sappho, the Pythagoreans, the Cynic Hipparchia, and Hypatia of Alexandria (see Deretić, 2016).

Finally, in her article discussing women’s education from 1935, “Considerations on the Upbringing of Women” (*Razmatranje o vaspitanju žena*), Ksenija Atanasijević argues that there are two distinct standards for educating male and female children. Male children are raised to prepare

for an independent life, with the goal of developing their natural dispositions as fully as possible. In contrast, the upbringing of female children, as a subordinate and dependent part of humanity, focuses on making them obedient and submissive. This approach erases the “original moral principle that a woman is also a human individual who, like a man, has the right to free expression and the development of her being” (Atanasijević, 2008, p. 35). Yet, Atanasijević believed that women are entirely equal to men in spiritual, moral, and social terms. For this reason, she implicitly criticizes Aristotle's notion that women are intellectually inferior (a belief still prevalent in the political reality of her time—recall that women in Yugoslavia gained the right to vote only after the Second World War), while explicitly praising Plato and the Stoics for their emancipatory ideas. Emancipation, after all, means liberation from guardianship—in this case, male guardianship (see Plećaš, 2023; Krstić, 2022). And although much remains to be done for the full emancipation of women, it is essential to believe in ideals and norms so that they may one day become our reality.

Concluding Remarks or Why Did Atanasijević not Criticize Aristotle?

The question naturally arises as to why Atanasijević—otherwise notably outspoken and unequivocal in her feminist views—did not more sharply critique Aristotle's understanding of friendship, particularly his stance that women cannot form ideal friendships. It is more than evident she did not share his views on women having lesser intellectual capacities than men, making her refrain from directly critiquing his views seem inconsistent with her established philosophical stance that emphasizes the equality of men and women.

One possible answer to this question might come from understanding that Atanasijević's notion of philosophy greatly aligns with the idea that philosophy is not only a formal discipline or discourse, but also a *way of life*, as the ancient philosophers believed (see Sellars 2009; Hadot 1995). She believes that the purpose of philosophy is to “reexamine human existence and make everyday life better, more valuable, and humane” (Petrović, 2021, p. 104), thereby improving both human and social reality. This would suggest that answer to the question asked at the beginning of this section has to do with the practical purpose of the article. Rather than engage in a lengthy analysis of unequal friendships, Atanasijević chooses to emphasize the importance of friendship, as one of the most precious connections a person can form (Atanasijević, 1928, p. 363)

Her deliberate omission appears to be a strategic choice aimed at highlighting the universal aspects of friendship—unity, mutual respect, and genuine human connection—rather than engaging in a direct confrontation over gender biases. In her analysis, Atanasijević even praises Aristotle, noting that “no new words of the coming times” will capture the essence of friendship as he did, and that neither medieval nor modern thinkers have surpassed his insights (Atanasijević, 1928, p. 363). This admiration underscores her intent to leverage Aristotle’s authority to resonate with her contemporary audience and emphasize the enduring relevance of his thoughts on friendship.

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