

2021

Frodo and Sam's Relationship in the Light of Aristotle's Philia

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Recommended Citation

Juričková, Martina (2021) "Frodo and Sam's Relationship in the Light of Aristotle's Philia," *Journal of Tolkien Research*: Vol. 12 : Iss. 1 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://scholar.valpo.edu/journaloftolkienresearch/vol12/iss1/2>

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FRODO AND SAM'S RELATIONSHIP IN THE LIGHT OF ARISTOTLE'S *PHILIA*

Introduction

When I read *The Lord of the Rings*, I got a striking feeling that more than anything else, it is a story of friendship. Not magical devices, or fantastical creatures, or the perpetual battle between good and evil, but friendship lies at its core. Even the subtitle of the first volume, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, suggests it. It is friendship based on mutual love that binds the members of the semi-military company together in loyalty and makes it a fellowship. Moreover, towards the end, friendship, especially that of Frodo and Sam, turns out to be essential for the completion of the quest. Of course, no one doubts it now; many fans share the same view, and the power of friendship is what has made the book so appealing to so many generations of readers for sixty years. In addition, the importance of friendship is also acknowledged by prominent Tolkien scholars, but back when I was working on this paper, my knowledge on all things Tolkien was not as broad as it is now.

But can Frodo and Sam's relationship really be regarded as an example of *perfect* friendship? Or is it friendship at all, when they obviously represent different social classes and many philosophers have claimed that in such situations, friendship is impossible? There is something atypical about their relationship, and that is the degree of their intimacy, which is not usually found in the master-servant bond. So this is what I wanted to analyse, hoping to introduce a new insight on their relationship and on the interpretation of friendship as the major underlying motif of the novel.

And there comes the second major question: *how* to assess it? I chose to compare the depiction of their relationship against Aristotle's philosophical definition of friendship as presented in books VIII and IX of his *Nicomachean Ethics*. I opted for it not because Tolkien would have had any direct relation to Aristotle's teaching—there is no documented mention of him being consciously inspired by the ancient philosopher. I chose it simply because his is the first recorded attempt to discuss friendship philosophically, being written down at about 340 B.C. In his book the philosopher used the Greek term *Philia* [φιλία], usually translated as *friendship*, for various kinds of relationships, just as was common for his contemporaries. Aristotle's analysis, however, concentrated on more intimate forms of friendship, and it is definitely the most important description of this phenomenon, because most of the following philosophers derived their accounts of friendship from this one.

As far as my research is concerned, I examined the nature and development of Frodo and Sam's relationship in three different stages of their acquaintanceship. The first one is the time before Frodo set off from the Shire; the second represents the time while they were on the journey; and the last one lasted from when he returned home after the completion of the quest until he left Middle-earth.

Their relationship before the War of the Ring

We do not actually have much information about Frodo and Sam's relationship before the events described in the book. But we can get some hints of what it was like from what we know of the relationship of their families, which doubtlessly had a big influence on it, and from the talk of the other hobbits, Merry and Pippin. My analysis showed that the nature of their relationship was perceived differently by each of them.

If we try to apply Aristotle's ideas to Sam's feelings towards Frodo in this phase, it could be best described as a friendship of pleasure, or at least this kind is closest to it in many aspects, though not all. Aristotle claims the pleasure friendship arises from selfishness and as the naming signifies, it is based on pleasure and beauty. It is born of physical or intellectual attraction and dies when the friend changes or ceases to be pleasant or nice to look at. The self-centeredness of such friendship means that I enjoy myself more when I am with my friend. Pleasure friendship is most closely tied to emotions. It is characterized by a quick start and a quick end. It is typically maintained by young people who are easily driven by their momentary feelings (Aristotle, 2009).

It is the love that Sam already bears for Frodo which makes his relationship something more than just an ordinary master-servant relationship and on account of which it can be classified as friendship. Moreover, his admiration for Frodo is very similar to present-day worshipping of the leaders of certain social groups by young people, and that is an exact example of friendship of pleasure as understood by Aristotle. The philosopher says that within this kind of friendship, people make friends with others because "they find them pleasant" (Aristotle, 2009, 8:3¹). Likewise, Sam loved Frodo because his personality attracted him. He even thought him the wisest and kindest person in the world (Tolkien, 2011, p. 640). He enjoyed serving him, because seeing Frodo happy made him happy, too. However, the relationship has not been put through any struggle yet to test its strength and seemed rather one-sided, so it

¹ The reference in the case of *Nicomachean Ethics* is given to book and chapter instead of page, so numbers 8:3 then mean book VIII, chapter 3.

cannot yet be classified as perfect friendship. Moreover, Sam's love to Frodo sometimes seemed almost blind, for he considered him to be perfect, which is in contradiction to the characteristic of true friends, who view each other objectively, taking into consideration both their good and bad qualities. Therefore, the friendship of pleasure definition fits Sam's feelings at this stage better.

As for Frodo's understanding of their relationship, it mostly resembles the friendship of utility. The utility friendship is based on usefulness. A man makes friends with someone when he needs something from him. Its aim is primarily profit. Therefore, such friendship lasts only while the other person provides one with what is needed. Aristotle says that this type of friendship is most typical for young children or old, weak people, who cannot care for themselves on their own and need others to help them (Aristotle, 2009). However, it is not restricted only to these ages. It can, of course, occur in other periods of human life, too.

That Frodo's relationship to Sam is based on utility is obvious, since Sam is his servant. Frodo needs or merely accepts his services, even though some of them are things he would be able to do on his own. Sam is a useful help for him. Described in Aristotle's words, Frodo liked Sam because of the good he was getting from him. The philosopher exemplifies this kind of friendship by the relationship of host and guest (Aristotle, 2009, 8:3), which is like a short-term equivalent of the master-servant relationship. The utility friendship is the lowest and most selfish kind of friendship, therefore Frodo did not need to acknowledge Sam's status as his friend. But in spite of his somewhat cooler attitude, Frodo already showed some deeper concern about Sam, as he did for his other friends, which would not be expected from a master towards his servant were their relationship only formal. For instance, he did not want to expose him to any danger, even if Sam was willing to come (Tolkien, 2011, p. 87). Well, after all those years spent with him around and knowing what a big affection Sam had for him, it was natural that his relationship to him emerged into something more than only utility friendship.

Is it true friendship?

Naturally, on the journey and after all they went through together when they had to rely on each other, their relationship changed, evolved. Perceptively, it got deeper, closer, and more intimate; it reached a new dimension. But what did it become? Did the nature of it change? Can it now be labelled as true friendship? Does it meet Aristotle's definition?

There are some general characteristics of true friendship within Frodo and Sam's relationship that need not be discussed in much detail, because they are obvious. Such as the

fact that their friendship was based on free choice. Neither Sam nor Frodo were compelled to it. Nor did anyone command them to like each other. It was Sam's own will to adore Frodo and Frodo's own will to accept it. And it was again their free-will choice to remain in the friendship, although for certain periods of time it was not very beneficial, especially not for Sam. Their friendship also involved having similar personal characteristics; for they are both hobbits and all hobbits are much alike, preferring peaceful life and being often obstinate and unexpectedly courageous. They also had some common interests, for instance liking food and adventurous tales and stories about foreign countries and peoples. And later they both had a shared aim to destroy the Ring. Next, according to the "greatest marks of friendship" (Aristotle, 2009, 8:6), they were also good-tempered towards each other and enjoyed each other's company. They delighted in each other and enjoyed spending time together.

But there are some distinguishable characteristics of true friendship that are not so easily identifiable within the relationship of these two hobbits and require a longer comment. First of all, an indispensable feature of the friendship of virtue is that a man loves his friend for the friend's sake, not for any advantage he may get from him. This seems to be true about Frodo and Sam's relationship as well. It may be objected that in the beginning, their attitudes to each other represented the lower kinds of friendship inspired by usefulness, which contradicts this essential characteristic. But it is actually in concord with Aristotle's ideas. For, as he said, a friendship requires familiarity, which, in turn, requires some time for the friends to know each other. And as they become more acquainted with each other, their relationship can develop into a higher form of friendship. And this is what happened to Frodo and Sam. After nearly 30 years in close company, they became so familiar with each other, that most of the time Sam was even able to guess Frodo's thoughts accurately. And it was only during the quest that it became apparent that he loved Frodo for his own sake. It was definitely not any longer for pleasure, because the journey gave him none, apart from visiting the Elves. He also derived no advantage from going with Frodo; only struggle, pain, and the threat of death. Were the reasons for his friendship with Frodo different, he could have more easily stayed home and married Rosie. But it was his love for Frodo that prevented him from deserting his master. And similarly, if Frodo loved Sam only because of the help he provided for him, he would probably not have tried to deter him from following him, but rather forced him to it. But even earlier, when they lived in peace in Hobbiton, Frodo did not really need Sam's help. Most of the things Sam did for him, Frodo could do on his own as well, so he was not dependent on Sam. This and Frodo's later declaration, that he would not bear it if anything bad happened to Sam, signifies that he loved him for his sake and not for any benefit.

The help and pleasure they provided to each other was then just a natural result of their friendship. It is because once you love someone for his sake, you wish him well-being and aim for that. It is a person's natural urge to contribute to one's friend's well-being by helping and pleasing him. For "friendship depends more on loving" (Aristotle, 2009, 8:8), on giving love rather than getting it, and so making one's friend happy makes the other person happy, too. We see that Sam did exactly this. But the case of Frodo's attitude was a bit more complicated. Of course, he cared for Sam. But his friendly deeds were not as numerous as Sam's, which may imply that his love was weaker. Moreover, it seemed to violate another important characteristic of true friendship, and that is equality.

Equality in friendship can be understood in two senses. First, it is meant as equality regarding their social statuses. Aristotle says that true friendship is very unlikely between persons who are not on the same hierarchic level (ibid.). That explains why at the beginning Frodo and Sam perceived their relationship differently: one basing it on utility and the other on pleasure. Being master and his servant, they were contraries, according to Aristotle, and pursued different aims in their mutual interaction. But during the journey, the social differences between them blurred. In an unfamiliar environment where no one knew them and where everyone they met could be their possible enemy, living exactly the same lives of tramps and undertaking the same troubles, they became still more and more similar, which reflected also on their social roles. Frodo stopped considering Sam as only a servant and treated him rather as a good friend. For example, when they met Faramir, he presented him as "*Samwise son of Hamfast, a worthy hobbit in my service*" (Tolkien, 2011, p. 657), providing his whole name, not only the shortened version, and using the phrase "*in my service*" instead of merely naming him "my servant", which accentuates the respect he gave him. It is that, what caused Faramir to address Sam as Master Samwise. Furthermore, both being hobbits, they appeared to everyone equally strange and amazing. And without having them introduced, people could hardly tell they were not equals, because Frodo's behavior to Sam provided no sign of his superiority. So it was that they were treated equally. It happened for the first time at Elrond's feast a day before his council, when Sam was not allowed to serve Frodo, but recognized as "*a guest of honour*" (ibid., p. 227). And after the accomplishment of the quest, they were both celebrated as the greatest heroes of the war. But the most relevant proof of the fact that they have by the end of the story become socially equal is Sam's residing in Bag End as its co-owner. After the scouring of the Shire, Sam was no longer a gardener, but a respectable person who would eventually become a Mayor, re-voted six times. So by this time their relationship met even this test of true friendship.

But the second sense of equality is more important for true friendship. This other sense

represents the same quantity of friendly deeds on both sides and reciprocity. This means that “if we can we should return the equivalent of what we have received” (Aristotle, 2009, 8:13); or in other words, that every good one receives from his friend he should repay in equal merit. But we clearly see that in the case of Frodo and Sam’s relationship, this merit was highly unbalanced. Sam did for Frodo a great deal more than Frodo did for Sam. So at this point their relationship fails to meet the demands of true friendship. However, in certain situations even such non-reciprocal behaviour can be excused. Michael Stocker, a professor of Ethics and Political Philosophy from Syracuse University², explains it: “For those other things include many complex psychic structures, such as those of interest, energy, and mood. These structures can, if in certain states stop a friendly person from acting out of friendship. For example, when emotionally drained, or suffused with a general hatred, or filled with self-doubt, ... a friendly person may only too naturally not act out of friendship for even a very good friend” (published in Badhwar, 1993, p. 259). And this is the reason that constrained Frodo from appropriately repaying Sam’s affection. It was because of the possession of the Ring, which tries to subdue his mind and which he must fight. The power of the Ring grew the nearer they travelled to Mount Doom, until it became the only thing Frodo could think about. The Ring and the Eye, the potency of which beat upon him and dragged him to the ground as if he were loaded with an unbearably heavy burden (Tolkien, 2011). By the end of the journey, he was totally psychically ruined, drained of all life, moving mechanically just because he had to. In such state, he can be pardoned for not being conscious enough of his moral duty as a friend to return Sam’s careful concern. But what he could not repay during the quest, because at that time he was not able to do so, he made amends for when he transferred all his property to Sam as his heir.

So Frodo’s lack of performing friendly deeds for Sam was not in direct contradiction to the definition of true friendship. Instead, another significant characteristic of this kind of friendship is observable within his behaviour, which manifests his goodwill towards his friend. While he could not do any good for Sam, could not make him happy, at least he avoided making him sad by not confessing about his own suffering. For in true friendship “every one shuns being a cause of pain to his friends” (Aristotle, 2009, 9:11). Therefore, as long as it was possible, he showed no signs of how much his burden tormented him and seldom spoke about it even when its weight reflected visibly on his physical condition. Similarly, for that reason, Sam concealed that he was giving almost all his share of food and water to Frodo, starving himself,

² A professor studied in classic as well as contemporary philosophies, with his own works dealing with emotions, friendship or love. (<http://thecollege.syr.edu/profiles/pages/stocker-michael.html>)

not wanting to trouble his master with such “unimportant” things, because he knew it would make Frodo feel sorry for him. For the main goal of friends is to comfort each other, not to grieve each other. And comforting is what Sam was especially good at, since his hope for the success of their quest never died and he always cheered Frodo up.

Further, their attitude to each other is a perfect example of perceiving a friend as one's other self or mirror, which is a feature detectable only within true friendship. Only thus could Sam's almost parent-like affection and teenage-like admiration to Frodo be explained. He loved him and cared about him as he would for himself, or even more. So Frodo represented Sam's other self. And on the other hand, Sam functioned as Frodo's mirror, because knowing him so well, he was able to precisely guess his mind. And despite his near worship, Sam saw some of Frodo's personal characteristics more objectively and could point out his unwise decisions in hopes of opening his eyes, as in the case of Gollum's companionship. In addition, they learnt much from each other and brought out the good characteristics in each other, for instance courage, kindness, mercy, and persistency.

Yet another feature typical for true friendship, which is also inherent for Frodo and Sam's relationship, is steadfastness. The willingness to remain friends in good and bad fortune—as well, as one of the highest signs of virtue—does not occur within any other kind of friendship described by Aristotle. But for Frodo and Sam's relationship, it was essential, which indicates that their relationship was unmistakably a friendship of virtue. Or more accurately, Sam's relationship to Frodo was of such a nature, since Frodo has no opportunity of showing his loyalty to Sam. They have been warned of the great danger long before the journey, but it did not prevent Sam from going with Frodo. Nor did he leave him when the struggles got really hard. But their steadfastness also manifested itself in their rather calm, moderate interaction, never showing any negative shift of their affections, apart from two cases when Frodo screamed at Sam because of his addiction to the Ring, which he was reluctant to give to anyone else (Tolkien, 2011, p. 911, 937). And this is in concord with Aristotle's opinion that true friends seldom quarrel even if they may disagree about some things (*ibid.*, 8:13). Indeed, a good friend is a source of trust, as Sam was for Frodo, and never lets his friend do wrong; therefore, even Frodo held Sam back from killing Gollum.

Moreover, true friendship involves generosity. Not only generosity in performing friendly deeds, but also in the material aspect of life. For friends, as the other self, “have all things in common” and “[furnish] what a man cannot provide by his own effort” (Aristotle, 2009, 8:9, 9:9). While Sam was better regarding the friendly deeds, the advantage of Frodo, being the richer one, was sharing his wealth with his servant. From the very beginning, Sam

was at home in Frodo's house, and it is likely that he was also allowed to use many of Frodo's possessions freely, such as books to read or barrels of beer to drink.³ He might probably have been having meals with his master. Later, during the journey, they shared food and water. And after Frodo was captured by the orcs and then freed by Sam, he wore Sam's elven-cloak, and Sam in turn used Frodo's sword. Yet the greatest deed of generosity was done by Frodo transferring all his possessions to Sam and making him the new master of Bag End.

Lastly, the perfection of their friendship towards each other is also signalled by the amount of self-sacrifice they undergo. Though again in this aspect Sam was better than Frodo, whose sacrifices were performed for the sake of all the Hobbiton and Shire folk, not specifically and solely for Sam. On the contrary, as has been explained, Sam's sacrifice was motivated directly by the needs of his friend Frodo.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the friendship of Frodo and Sam seems to follow Aristotle's ideas about true friendship. And according to his definition, it even satisfies the condition that friendship of such kind can be felt only by few people, for neither Sam nor Frodo have any other friends who are as close, since it is very demanding on the mutual devotion of the persons involved. Consequently, based on all the characteristics already examined, it is evident that Sam's relationship to Frodo is on a slightly higher level than that of Frodo to him, but this is caused by the circumstances they get into. So it can be generally said that under these conditions, their friendship can be recognized as friendship of virtue and can be understood as an almost perfect example of it.

As for the validity of this approach, it is unprovable that Tolkien would deliberately develop the relationship of these two hobbits based on Aristotle's teaching about friendship. There is no evidence for it, even though it is more than likely that he was familiar at least with some elements of Aristotle's philosophy, due to his education in classic languages. He might have even come across the *Nicomachean ethics* and these particular chapters, but even if he was partially inspired by it, he never openly acknowledged any of his philosophical sources. On the contrary, he was almost certainly inspired by the relationships within his own circle of friends, mainly the Inklings⁴, and the many friendships he witnessed being built during his service time

³ Like a moment before their departure from Bag End (Tolkien, 2011, p. 70).

⁴ Or the essay on the nature of friendship written by one of his fellow Inklings and his once best friend, C. S. Lewis. For more information on the parallels between Tolkien and Lewis's understanding of friendship, see my article *Lewis, Tolkien, and Philia* (2018) <https://chalcedon.edu/resources/articles/lewis-tolkien-and-phia>

in the WWI trenches.

Therefore, this paper does not aim to present the interpretation of the hobbits' friendship in terms of Aristotle's philosophy as an indisputable fact, but merely as one of the possible approaches to the topic and show the applicability of classical philosophy in Tolkien's writing (or vice versa).

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