Aristotle, Montaigne, Kant and the Others: 
How Friendship Came to be Conceived as it is Conceived in the Western Tradition 

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ABSTRACT

Concepts of inter-personal relations are most elusive. They conceal assumptions, norms, beliefs and various associated notions, and become even more opaque and potent when they transcend the language in which they are used and come to reflect a culture or a tradition. Escaping the critical gaze of those “in” the tradition, these concepts and their theoretical baggage remain largely alien to those outside it. This gap fosters a sense of alienation, if not of exclusion, on the part of those living outside what they often regard as a charmed circle. No doubt, friendship is unlikely to figure on the danger list of such concepts. Yet, the concept is not innocent. It reflects philosophical and social presuppositions accumulated in the course of its long history and bears the weight of the paradigm shifts it underwent. This essay identifies some of these presuppositions built into it, outlines major steps in its development, and offers reasons why this particulate inter-personal relation came to be conceived the way it is conceived in “the Western tradition”.

KEYWORDS

Affection, Aristotle, Care, Choice, Christianity, Derrida, Eudaimonia, Friendship, Greece, Kant, Kierkegaard, Loyalty, Montaigne, Particularism, Pleasure, Rome, Universalism, Utility

INTRODUCTION

Friendship is a familiar notion and a common experience; so familiar and common is it that most people hardly ever bother to give it any thought. The negligence, as will be argued in the following pages, rests on a mistake. Once one begins to go beyond the banalities and common places that all too often pass for thinking, friendship shows itself to be a highly complex phenomenon. Because it is multi-faceted and multi-layered, it resists easy conceptualisation. Because it can be engaged in at various levels of depth, it has ethical as well as psychological norms built into it. Because it involves commitments and makes claims upon those who engage in it, it can give rise to conflicts of interests and moral values.

It is unsurprising therefore that friendship should have attracted much philosophical attention over the centuries. In the West, writers and philosophers started to write about friendship in Greece at the beginning of the fourth century BCE, by which time it had already been studied for several centuries in classical Indian thought as well as in China. Since almost all of these writings have been

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preserved – which is a sure sign that they were valued long after the time they were written - friendship as we understand it, or fail to understand it, has long roots in the respective traditions to which readers of this journal belong. Its past has weighed heavily upon its successive presents. Flouting usage by putting “present” in the plural is justified in so far as the first writings on friendship have continued to be influential upon later generations of thinkers and philosophers. Since it is a characteristic of philosophy as a discipline to include a reflection upon its past, later philosophers found themselves studying, commentating, interpreting and re-interpreting the writings of their forebears so as to make them applicable to their own time and changed circumstances. In the process of studying what had rapidly become layers of canonical texts, successive schools of philosophy added their own views to the volume of existing reflections and altered, ever so subtly, the concept they had received from the tradition. Every layer of reflections on the subject has yielded rich sediments that have, in turn, nourished the next generation of thinkers and writers. And so it is that the modern conception of friendship is the latest addition to a great many layers of past reflections on the subject. It is the latest, but it will not be the last.

Since friendship as a topic for theoretical reflection is a prime example of the way in which history and philosophy interact, all that can be achieved in an essay of this size is to pinpoint some of the most salient aspects of the philosophical writings that have been devoted to friendship over the centuries, bringing them to bear on some “real life” issues that friendship raises for us at the present time. To borrow Foucault’s expression, the task is archaeological in nature.

The essay will be structured as follows. The first section will be given over to a broad-brush examination of friendship as it is now commonly conceived - broad brush but sufficiently detailed all the same to permit of fruitful comparison with the two philosophical accounts that have shaped the tradition, namely those of Aristotle (384-322 BCE) and Kant (1724-1804). In the second section, their respective views will be tested for applicability to present-day situations. In the third and last section of the paper, the main paradigm shift that has affected the concept will be documented and an explanation attempted as to why Christian writers, from the Fathers of the Church onwards, preferred to dissociate themselves from Classical writers. In conclusion, some speculative remarks will be offered on the reasons which caused the topic of friendship to go into eclipse after the Reformation, before springing up again, phoenix like, in the philosophical debates that have taken place in the course of the last fifty years or so.

Defining Friendship – The Modern Concept

Friendship is an interpersonal relationship between human beings; it is subject to choice and it belongs to the private sphere. Let us take these three defining properties in turn. That friendship is an interpersonal relation is largely uncontroversial – only in a metaphorical sense can one be said to be friends with oneself. Whether one can be friends with animals and, if so, which ones, is a complex issue, which will be ignored for the present. So, without further ado, let us turn to the second characteristic, which raises more directly relevant issues.

Friendship is subject to choice in two ways. First, it is not necessary for survival - one can choose to attempt to survive without it. Second, it is subject to choice insofar as it is not a relationship into which one is born, as one is born into a family. As a well-known saying has it, we choose our friends, but do not choose our relatives. While one can never cease to be someone’s daughter, nephew or cousin, one can decide to break one’s friendship with a particular other or, more simply, let it run its course without regret.

Let us take these points further. If friendship is not, strictly speaking, necessary for survival, does it follow that it is an expendable bonus, a superfluity, a luxury even, which one can choose to do without? Strictly speaking, the answer is “yes” - one can choose to lead a friendless life, although very few people do. To choose to dispense with friendship altogether, one either must be blessed with a rare level of self-sufficiency, so rare as to be practically awe-inspiring, or one has to be so single-minded in the pursuit of an overarching goal as to see the deliberate formation of human
bonds as an obstacle to the accomplishment of that goal. However, if it is just about possible to lead a friendless life, someone might ask, would it be good to do so, taking “good” here in the sense of “psychologically healthy” or even “morally sound,” whatever “moral” may turn out to denote? Most people believe that it would not be. While they may admire the self-sufficiency of, say, a hermit or a cloistered contemplative nun, they tend to regard those who are friendless by choice as socially inadequate, embittered, terminally stand-offish or just plain misfits. We tend to endorse Aristotle’s view that human beings are social by nature and agree with his conclusion, that, although it is possible to lead a solitary life from adulthood onwards, such a life would be comparable to that of “an isolated piece of draughts (or chess piece)” (Aristotle, Politics, 1253a) As he repeatedly argued, a friendless life would not be the best life for a human being to lead since it could not secure for them the ultimate goal of eudaimonia or well-being: “no one”, he wrote, “would choose to live without friends, even if he had all the other goods.” (Nicomachean Ethics, VIII 1, 1155a5). Aristotle’s position on that point has never been fundamentally challenged. Montaigne (1533-1592), whose own essay on friendship, written some twenty centuries later, became canonical, echoed Aristotle’s view when he wrote: “There is nothing to which nature seems so much to have inclined us, as to society.” (Montaigne, Essays, XX). Demanding as friendship often proves to be, it meets a deep-seated need in human nature.

If friendship is freely chosen while family ties are imposed upon us, and if love cannot be commanded, it follows that family love need be no more than a matter of convention or indeed exist at all. To be sure, in the best of cases, convention and inclination go hand in hand, but they need not do so. While there would be nothing conceptually odd in claiming that one dislikes such and such a relative, it would be paradoxical in the extreme to profess a dislike for one’s friends. To say, for instance, “Jimmy is my friend but I don’t like him” would almost be self-contradictory – except possibly on one particular conception of friendship, which will be examined later. This suggests that affection or, at least, some degree of fondness, is built into the very definition of friendship while it is not assumed to be so in family relationships: we love/like our friends, not because they are related to us, but for what we value in them or, better still, for what they are in themselves. As Montaigne wrote: by how much these are friendships that the law and natural obligation impose upon us, so much less is there of our own choice and voluntary freedom; whereas that voluntary liberty of ours has no production more promptly and properly its own than affection and friendship. (Montaigne, Essays, XXVII)

To recap: as opposed to relationships governed by law and natural ties, friendship is a relationship entered into and sustained by choice and involving a variable degree of reciprocal affection and caring. A corollary of the definition is that friendship cannot be forced: nobody can be my friend unless I freely welcome them as such and I cannot be friends with anyone who does not freely consider me as such. Friendship is by nature reciprocal and consensual.

**Moral Norms and Values**

In the background of the definitional issues and conceptual clarification that have so far taken centre stage in the discussion lurk assumptions over norms and values. These ought now to be identified, traced back to their source and analysed. What are the moral norms and societal values inscribed in friendship? To get a grip on the question, let us turn first to Aristotle’s distinction between three kinds of friendship and to Kant’s contrast between moral and empirical friendship.

**DEFINING FRIENDSHIP PHILOSOPHICALLY: ARISTOTLE**

It would be no exaggeration to say that friendship as a philosophical topic owes its existence to Aristotle’s analytic treatment of it in his ethical treatises. So much so is this the case that his writings on the subject constitute a veritable philosophy of friendship, from which all subsequent treatments of friendship derive.
The ancient Greek concept of friendship (philia) was semantically much wider than ours; it encompassed a large and diverse field of personal and social relationships compared to which the semantic extension of the modern concept is restricted. Following a method that had served him well in other, more scientific, subjects, Aristotle (384-322 BCE) took care of this dimension of the subject by first describing the various practices of friendship he observed amongst his contemporaries. He explained how and why they chose their friends, identified the values they invested in the bond and detailed the obligations they took it to entail. Having described what he called the “views of the many,” he turned to the properly philosophical task of clarifying, refining and developing the conception of friendship he found exemplified in his society, all the while providing a carefully argued justification for the new and vastly more sophisticated conception that he was in the process of working out. Philos (friend), he pointed out, could designate the members of one’s family, one’s fellow citizens as well as all those whom we, moderns, might not call “friends,” even in a very extended sense of the word. Excessively broad as his definition appears to us, it helpfully situates the concept within the wide spectrum of community:

*Men address as friends their fellow travellers on a voyage, their fellow soldiers, and similarly also those who are associated with them in other kinds of communities. Friendship is present to the extent that men share something in common, for that is also the extent to which they share a view of what is just.* (Nicomachean Ethics, VIII 9, 1159b27-31)

In these lines Aristotle blends descriptive and evaluative notions: having noted that friendship flourishes in all sorts of communities, he draws attention to its potential to contribute to the political stability and well-being of the city-state. Accordingly, he complemented his analysis of private friendship with arguments destined to highlight the function that friendship, conceived as a political concept, fulfills in the city-state:

It is clear then that a state is not a mere society (koinōnia), having a common place, established for the prevention of mutual crime and for the sake of exchange. These are the conditions without which a state cannot exist; but all of them together do not constitute a state, which is a community of families in well-being, for the sake of a perfect and self-sufficing life. Such a community can only be established among those who live in the same place and intermarry. Hence there arise in cities connexions, brotherhoods, common sacrifices, amusements which draw men together. But these are created by *friendship, for to choose to live together is friendship.* The end of a state is the good life, and these are the means towards it. And the state is the union of families and villages in a perfect and self-sufficing life, by which we mean a happy and honourable life.” (Politics, III 9, 1280b33-40)

As for his highly systematic account of friendship in the private sphere, it enabled him to address in advance, so to speak, some of the problems that would bedevil later philosophers. His first step was to distinguish three kinds of friendship, the friendship of pleasure, the friendship of utility and the friendship of virtue, which will now be briefly taken in turn.

The friendship of pleasure, he uncontentiously noted, is guided by the pursuit of what is pleasant to oneself and readily to hand. Since it requires little effort, it is quick to form and equally quick to dissolve when either or both parties take up different interests or move to other sources of pleasure. It is an inferior form of friendship since the friend is not loved in and for himself, but for some superficial property that he happens to possess, and which matches an equally superficial property in the other. Aristotle concludes, this time somewhat contentiously, that such a friendship is characteristic of the young and immature. Whether he is right in this opinion is a moot point since the young do not have a monopoly on superficiality and rapidly shifting pastimes. As for the alleged inferiority of that form of friendship, one could retort that, although superficial, it is nonetheless harmless. There is no reason, therefore, to avoid it provided that it does not take the place of more demanding, hence more fulfilling, relationships. Although of restricted scope, the friendship of pleasure excludes neither mutual goodwill nor equality between the partners, which are two defining characteristics of friendship.
The friendship of utility is a different matter. “Those who love each other for utility love the other not in himself,” Aristotle writes, “but in so far as they gain some good for themselves from him ... Hence these friendships are coincidental, since the beloved is loved not in so far as he is who he is” (Nicomachean Ethics, 1156a10-16). To our modern, post-Kantian minds, this friendship seems less harmless than the friendship of pleasure in so far as it is likely to involve treating the other as a means to one’s own ends rather than a person who is an end in himself and has goals of his/her own. However, if relationships of utility are often one-sided, they need not be. While the cultivation of influential friends who are in a position to advance one’s career is clearly one-sided, the exchange of useful skills and competencies is a more acceptable way of securing benefits. It is more acceptable because it is reciprocal. In the first case the parties are not equal, one party being more powerful than the other while, in the second case, the mutual use value that each party has for the other ensures equality, albeit at a superficial level. Furthermore, although the friendship of utility need not exclude goodwill and mutual regard, it does exclude both when, as not infrequently, it is a one-sided way of obtaining goods and advantages. As in the friendship of pleasure, each partner is chosen, not for himself, but for his possession of some property or good useful to oneself. Such friendship is unlikely to last since usefulness, be it one-sided or mutual, is generally of limited duration. Lastly, the friendship of utility, as that of pleasure, is open to the wicked as well as to the good.

Not so the third kind of friendship, namely the friendship of virtue or primary friendship, which Aristotle regards as the yardstick by which all other kinds of friendship are to be measured. It bonds together virtuous men who have enjoyed a long acquaintance with each other, in the course of which they have become familiar with each other’s interests and achievements. As a result, the two parties have come to love/like each other for what they are. So conversant with each other’s mind and character are they that it would be no exaggeration to say that they are as transparent to each other as two human beings can ever be. Such, at least, is the point that Aristotle meant to convey when he described them as “other selves” to each other. Although the phrase is puzzling, if not oxymoronic, to modern minds, it was not so to Aristotle, who used it repeatedly. Since there is no evidence to show that it puzzled his contemporaries, the reason cannot but be that their concept of selfhood radically differed from ours. We take the self to be, by definition, unique to the person whose self it is, so that no one could have another self apart from their own. This being so, readers of Aristotle inevitably ask themselves how one person can become the self of another and how two people can be each other’s “other self.” The problem is complex and requires lengthy investigations into early and classical Greek literary and philosophical tradition as well as comparison with later concepts of selfhood, notably those of Aquinas and Descartes. Detailed investigations on such issues were carried out earlier and elsewhere (Stern-Gillet, 1995) and cannot, for reasons of space constraints be reproduced here. Briefly summarised, their results are as follows. In Aristotle’s philosophy of mind, self-awareness is generated indirectly, through the activities of sensing and thinking. Using one’s sense organs to perceive and one’s mind to think, one becomes indirectly aware of oneself as perceiver and thinker. While self-awareness is satisfying in itself, the level of self-fulfilment that one derives from one’s mental activities is directly proportional to the quality of these activities. It is more fulfilling, for instance, to apprehend oneself as engaged in skilled professional work than in mundane domestic tasks. The more complex the activity and the object apprehended as a result, the more self-fulfilling the apprehension of one’s own self as so engaged is. The principle that John Rawls called “Aristotelian” because it echoes views expressed in the Nicomachean Ethics, runs as follows:

... other things being equal, human beings enjoy the exercise of their rational capacities (their innate or trained abilities), and their enjoyment increases the more the capacity is realized, or the greater its complexity. (Rawls, 1971: 426)

Primary or perfect friendship is a friendship that, unlike the friendships of mere pleasure or utility, engages the beings of the friends at a deep level. The closeness between the friends and the
frequency of their interaction ensure that each party has occasions to be acquainted with, or even participate in, his friend’s higher level mental activities. To be aware of, or to participate in, one’s primary friend’s higher level mental activities, therefore, provides each party with a unique source of self-actualisation.

In so far as Aristotle’s philosophy of friendship has no need to invoke the “mysterious” forces and “unfathomable attraction” that later became the bread and butter of writers seeking to identify the cause of friendship, it carries considerable explanatory power and is open to fewer objections than other theories that were to be formulated later. Even so, it has had its critics. It is prone to seem highly or even overly “intellectualized” to modern minds, the most frequently levelled objection against it being that it is “elitist” in so far as primary friendship is confined to a moral and intellectual elite. While such an objection is not groundless, it may be countered by pointing out that primary or virtuous friendship is a demanding relationship and that not everyone is capable of it. Furthermore, we may reflect that if our intuitions in matters of friendship somewhat differ from Aristotle’s own, the reason may be that, in the intervening centuries, we have become heirs to a different tradition, Christianity, which had a different way of construing friendship. We shall return to the issue.

DEFINING FRIENDSHIP PHILOSOPHICALLY: KANT

Kant’s writings on friendship are modest in size and lack the philosophical weight of his great works, but they are nonetheless important in so far as they called attention to aspects of friendship that had remained implicit in Aristotle’s ethical treatises. His main contribution to the subject was to contrast friendship as “an idea of practical reason” and friendship as an “empirical phenomenon” (or “friendship of disposition”). As he wrote in The Metaphysics of Morals:

Friendship (considered in its perfection) is the union of two persons through mutual love and respect. It is easy to see that this is an ideal of each participating and sharing sympathetically in the other’s well-being through the morally good will that unites them.6 (Metaphysics of Morals, II, para. 46)

As Kant recognised, the definition sets an ideal unattainable in practice. It is meant to constitute a model or archetype by comparison to which all forms of “empirical friendship” are to be assessed. In spite of being inevitably defective, “friendships of dispositions” are subject to norms in so far as the parties involved have “a duty set by reason” to aim at the ideal or “to strive for friendship (as a maximum of good disposition toward each other).” Kant further introduced two notions that are foreign to Aristotle, namely duty, as seen in the above-quoted lines, and self-disclosure, a strikingly modern concept whose relevance to friendship modern readers immediately recognise.

How applicable in practice are Aristotle and Kant’s respective account of friendship? Let us examine two “real life” situations. If it is assumed that friendship is a reciprocal relation between equals, does it follow that medical practitioners cannot be friends with their patients, professors with their students, and lawyers with their clients? The question arises because the relationship is hierarchical and hence not fully reciprocal. The balance of power, which is always tipped on the side of the professional person, generally rules out full disclosure of information and confines one party to be subject to the advice and/or the decisions of the other who, in turn, is subject to a rule-governed code of practice. The mutuality condition is not fully met either since neither party is chosen in and for themselves, each party having a different reason for choosing the other. The association between professionals and those who put themselves in their hands, which is a clear example of what Aristotle called a friendship of utility or of need, cannot, therefore, be considered to be friendship in the full sense of the term, although, as Aristotle recognised, it does not rule out the development of friendly relations.

The equality condition would appear also to stand in the way of the development of inter-generational love and affection into full friendship, especially when the parties are closely related. Parents can be friends with their children only “in a sense.” There are two reasons for this. First, the very nature of the relationship renders it necessarily unequal for a not inconsiderable part of its duration: parents bring up children and children, in their turn, support elderly parents, if and when
the need arises. From the start and owing to its close nature, the relationship is defined in terms of protection, duty, care, and respect, all of which spell inequality. Furthermore - and the point is crucial – inter-generational friendship is likely to be hampered by reticence on both sides to share a range of feelings and emotions. Full self-disclosure is rare between parents and children.

The concept of self-disclosure and the role that it plays in friendship repay close attention. Kant took it to be hallmark, main motive and bonus of the best form of empirical friendship. The notion is post-medieval, making a first timid appearance, so far as I know, in the writings of Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499). It is a thoroughly modern notion, which closely corresponds to a common intuition, according to which the true friend is the recipient of our confidences, the springboard on which we first sound our ideas and the shoulder on which we cry in times of sorrow. To appreciate the significance of Kant’s views of self-revelation - telling the truth about oneself - requires placing them in the context of his rigorous views on truth-telling. Lying, in the sense of making false declarations, he famously argued, is morally wrong per se, even if the lie is told to save a life or to achieve some ulterior good. Although the many criticisms that his uncompromising views on the issue attracted never caused Kant to change his mind, they induced him to reflect on a range of concepts associated with truth-telling, particularly sincerity and candour.

Candour, understood as the readiness to disclose one’s thoughts to others, was of particular interest for him. The word itself comes from the Latin for “white” (candidus) and initially meant white, hence pure, hence innocent, an innocence often taken to be child-like in character since children are often thought to be guileless. How the word evolved semantically, from being white in colour to being open and frank in one’s dealings with others, is easy to understand. By the time Kant came to write about friendship, candour denoted the disposition of character that leads people, not only to be frank and honest with each other, but also to be readily disposed to apprise others of their feelings, views or states of mind. In so far as candour precludes lying, Kant classified it as a duty. However, unlike the duty not to make false declarations, which admits of no exceptions and thus binds us absolutely, candour is a duty of wide obligation. As such, it admits of exceptions, one such being in the interest of confidentiality. Although one should be candid as a matter of principle, he explained, one needs not be candid to the extent of divulging information likely to cause pain or embarrassment.

Candour is the quality of mind that makes true friendship possible. It is so, Kant held, because there are two contradictory impulses in human nature, the one to share one’s thoughts and feelings with others, the other being to keep them secret for fear of being betrayed or taken advantage of. Only in the closest of friendships, he concluded, can the two contradictory impulses be reconciled. True friends, he wrote, let one another into their inner self; with a special other, they can drop their guard, overcome their natural propensity to keep private their thoughts, feelings and emotions and thus give way to their need of communion with another human being. Only in true friendship, which makes self-disclosure possible, can human beings enjoy the intrinsic good of a communion of minds:

... if we can free ourselves of this constraint [our distrust of others], if we can unburden our heart to another, we achieve complete communion. That this release may be achieved, each of us needs a friend, one in whom we can confide unreservedly, to whom we can disclose completely all our dispositions and judgments, from whom we can and need hide nothing, to whom we can communicate our whole self. On this rests the friendship of dispositions and fellowship.8 (Lectures on Ethics, trans. Louis Enfield, pp. 205-206)

A friendship which makes such communion possible, he concluded, “is man’s refuge in this world from the distrust of his fellows.” (ibid.) In this touchingly revelatory passage, Kant describes the human yearning to be both known and loved, to be loved for what one truly is rather than for the protective veneer by which one is prone to clothe one’s vulnerability. Once achieved, such a bond runs deep and plays a central role in the lives of the individuals concerned; it is the shield that provides both parties with the safe haven in which to retreat in times of vulnerability.
However, it might be pointed out, Kant’s model of self-disclosure in friendship would not be to everyone’s taste. There are many who, whilst not objecting to the Kantian model itself, would not wish it to be applied to themselves. This might take the form of accepting the confidences of the other whilst not reciprocating the compliment, not indeed out of mistrust but out of natural reticence. Although the objection is not without strength, it is easily countered. Not only did Kant not make self-disclosure a *sine qua non* condition of true friendship, but he also peppered the above-quoted lines with occurrences of “can”, “if we can free ourselves”, “if we can unburden,” “a friend from whom we can and need hide nothing.” His repeated use of the modality of possibility shows that he was aware that self-disclosure is not part of everyone’s model of friendship. Lastly, he might well have thought to reassure the reticent friend when he wrote, somewhat archly, that self-disclosure should never be total since “we have certain natural frailties which ought to be concealed for the sake of decency, lest humanity be outraged.” (ibid., 206) The best retort to the objector would be that the yearning Kant describes is very widely shared.

Kant’s account of the best kind of empirical friendship, for all its virtues, has problematical implications. To see what they are, a circuitous route will now be taken.

In so far as the forging of so profound a bond requires from both parties exceptional powers of introspection and empathy, it is likely to be a rare achievement, restricted to an elite possessing sufficient leisure, moral interest and psychological resources. A first reason for unease is that, once formed, such a bond might lessen each friend’s capacity for individual self-sufficiency. Providing a “refuge” from a world in which distrust is the more common coinage, Kantian friendship might lock the friends in a relationship likely to be achievable with one or, possibly, two friends at a time, and result in the formation of isolated pockets of intimacy, which might be open to the charge of being examples of *égoïsme à deux*. Consisting of enchanted enclaves of candour and trust, mostly confined to the private sphere, these would be likely to relegate to the periphery of people’s lives, if not conflict with, more open types of relationships such as prevail between compatriots, fellow religionists and members of restricted communities.

An obverse problem might arise for the friends themselves. How immune would their secrets be, not only to possible indiscretions on the part of the friend, but also to clashes with duties prescribed by the principle of universalizability, as enshrined in the categorical imperative? If friendship entails duties of wide obligation, does it not follow that empirical friendship at its best provides exceptions to the principle of universalizability? May I not lie to keep the secrets of my friend? “You may not,” Kant would reply, who had taken care to build safeguards around the principle. In the *Groundwork*, he ruled out any condition that would limit the application of the categorical imperative in favour of inclination (*Groundwork to the Metaphysic of Morals*, 4:421). While friendship is the source of duties of wide obligation, it cannot, therefore, conflict with the strict duty that enjoins every rational being to “Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.” (Ibid.)

In The Metaphysics of Morals, having anticipated the above objection, he sought to counter it by arguing that friendship cannot generate precise determinant maxims:

... pragmatic friendship, which burdens itself with the ends of others, although out of love, can have neither the purity nor the completeness requisite for a precisely determinant maxim; it is an ideal of one’s wishes, which knows no bound in its rational concept but which must always be very limited in experience. (The Metaphysics of Morals, p. 472)

Conflicts of duties may well be avoided that way, but where does that leave the person who has revealed his subversive political leanings to his (Kantian) intimate friend who is about to be interrogated by the police? “Always inquire about the philosophical commitments of your friends before confiding in them” may be sound practical advice. Or, as Kant put the matter: “a judicious and trusted friend be also bound not to share the secrets entrusted to him with anyone else, no matter how reliable he
thinks him, without explicit permission to do so.” (Ibid.). It is difficult not to conclude that Kant may have failed to realise that there are circumstances in which duties of wide obligation (friendship and confidentiality) will have to give way to duties of strict obligation (truth-telling).

The problem would not arise in the context of a different conception of moral reasons and agency, such as particularism, according to which moral reasons are to be responsive to the particularities of agents and circumstances. According to those conceptions, the status of someone as a friend entitles him/her to a depth of moral consideration that is not due to those who are not friends. Moral particularists would allow that human beings are under a greater obligation to their nearest and dearest, genuine friends included, than they are to those unconnected to them by particular ties and obligations. On their conception, the closer the tie, the greater the moral obligation involved. (Dancy, 1983 and 2004)

INTERLUDE: DERRIDA AND THE ABSENT-MINDED COPYIST

How many friends should one have? Common intuition and philosophers mostly agree in holding that the fewer friends one has, the deeper and more fulfilling the relationship is likely to be. An ancient doxographer, Diogenes Laertius, reports Aristotle to have said: ‘he who has many friends has no friend.’ (Diogenes Laertius, Lives of Eminent Philosophers, V.21)\(^9\). The epigram was destined to have a long and far from illustrious history. At some point in the middle-ages, it had, almost certainly, the misfortune of being misread or misunderstood by some medieval copyist, who put a soft breathing instead of a rough one on the omega on the first word and thereby totally changed the meaning of the sentence. Instead of reading “He who has many friends has no friend,” it read “O my friend, there is no friend,” which is both self-contradictory and inconsistent with genuinely Aristotelian views, as expressed in the ethical treatises. Unfortunately, this particular manuscript survived and became the source of further copies. As a result, the absent-minded (or ignorant or, indeed, inane) copyist’s textual corruption was reproduced in later manuscripts and eventually found its way into a printed text, which Montaigne read and discussed in his own essay on friendship. Some two centuries later Kant\(^6\) and, following him, Nietzsche, upon reading Montaigne, gave further currency to the corrupted version of the Aristotelian tag. The story did not end there since the same erroneous version provided Jacques Derrida with an occasion to write his 2005 long and ponderous monograph on The Politics of Friendship.\(^9\)

Friendship and Other Loyalties

Kant may have been able to eliminate the possibility of conflicts between the (imperfect) duties of friendship and the (perfect) duty of acting in conformity with maxims sanctioned by the categorical imperative. What he could not do was obliterate the possibility of conflicts between duties of wide obligation. These are the conflicts that have received the most attention in the literature, the favoured example being conflicts between private obligations, on the one hand, and, on the other, commitments to a cause or to the state of which one is a citizen. In most of the cases discussed in the literature, the resolution appears to owe more to the writer’s temperament or political leanings than to finely articulated arguments.

In Sartre’s well-known example, a young man is torn between his obligation to look after an aged dependant, whose sole source of support he is, and his desire to serve his country by joining the resistance movement in occupied France. To help with the decision-making process, the young man consults Sartre, who wisely points out that in choosing his advisor, the young man has already made his own decision. This case notwithstanding, there appears, over the fast few centuries, to have been a tendency to resolve such conflicts in favour of private attachments over public commitments.

In ancient Rome, in the last years of the Republic, Cicero (106–43 BCE) had come firmly in favour of the view that that duties to the State ought always to take precedence over duties to particular others:
Let this law be established in friendship: neither ask dishonourable things, nor do them, if asked. And dishonourable it certainly is, and not to be allowed, for anyone to plead in defence of offences committed in general and especially of those against the State, that he committed them for the sake of a friend. (De Amicitia, XII, 40)

With the growth of individualism in the West, the opposite view began progressively to make itself felt. Dante (1265-1321), for example, placed in the lowest circle of hell those who, like Judas Iscariot and Brutus, had betrayed their friend:

“That soul there, which has the worst punishment, Is Judas Iscariot,” my master said, “With his head inside, and kicking his legs.” Of the other two, who hang upside-down, The one who hangs from the black face is Brutus; See how he twists and says not a word. (The Divine Comedy, Inferno, canto XXXIV: 61-66).

Some seven centuries later, in 1938, just before the outbreak of WW2, E.M. Forster made it a virtue to choose friendship over country: “If I had to choose between betraying my country and betraying my friend I hope I would have the guts to betray my country.” (Forster, 1952, p. 66) Even so, Forster did not consider that the opposite view had by then altogether been silenced since he felt it appropriate to add: “Such a choice may scandalize the modern reader, and he may stretch his patriotic hand to the telephone at once and ring the police.”

**Christian Friendship: A Shift of Paradigm**

Christianity brought about profound changes in the conception of the nature and moral value of interpersonal relationships. While ancient pagan thinkers regarded friendship as secular and selective by definition, the Christian philosophers of late antiquity and the Middle Ages, having stripped the concept of virtue (aretē) of its aristocratic and intellectualist connotations, grounded friendship and its associated excellences in the creaturely status of human beings. Teaching that the love of God ought to supersede individual choice and inclination, these authors understood friendship and its obligations in relation to the virtue of charity (caritas). Since the soul’s relation to Christ was the only friendship worthy to be called perfect, human friendship took on a more complex character. Some Christian philosophers, Augustine most notably, regarded it as a possible obstacle to the development of moral reasoning. Others such as Aquinas reinterpreted Classical friendship as caritas and included benevolence and communion into the Aristotelian model of primary friendship so as to make it compatible with the teachings of Scripture which enjoin us to “love thy neighbour as thyself.” Having argued that “neighbour” covers all those who are equals in the eyes of God, Aquinas was able to conclude that it applied also to one’s enemies. The Christian doctrinal enlargement of Classical philia (friendship) constituted nothing less than a radical shift of paradigm. While friendship, as conceived by philosophers in the Classical tradition, was fundamentally particularistic, Christian love and friendship had to be directed at all human beings. No longer a question of inclination, achievements, merit and compatibility of temperaments, as it had been in Aristotle, friendship became a duty of benevolence; no longer constrained by rival commitments to the state, as it had been in Cicero, it was enlarged so as to include all nations.

Nobody better described the paradigm shift introduced by Christianity than Kierkegaard in *Works of Love*. In the following lines, which are almost incantatory in tone, Kierkegaard’s main target is Aristotle’s conception of “primary friends” as other selves to each other. That model of friendship, Kierkegaard argued, ought to be replaced by the Christian understanding of love as directed at every single human being in his/her quality as child of the Creator:
The neighbour is your equal. The neighbour is not your beloved for whom you have a passionate partiality. Nor, if you are an educated man, is your neighbour the one who is educated, with whom you are equal in education—for with your neighbour you have equality before God. Nor is your neighbour the one who is more distinguished than yourself, that is, he is not your neighbour because he is more distinguished than yourself... Nor is your neighbour one who is inferior to you, that is, insofar as he is humbler than yourself, he is not your neighbour... The neighbour is every man; for he is not your neighbour through the difference, or through the equality with you as in your difference from other men. He is your neighbour through equality with you before God, but every man unconditionally has this equality, and has it unconditionally. (Kierkegaard, Works of Love: 50)

While the universalistic conception of love and friendship that the Christian thinkers had introduced arguably represented a shift to a higher and nobler ideal, it also left in a theoretical vacuum the particularistic bond described by Aristotle and his followers. Christian universalistic teachings, bolstered by Kantian arguments, largely shaped the manner in which the morality of inter-personal morality came to be conceived in the Western tradition. Because friendship, by its very nature, does not readily fit the universalistic model of morality, it eventually fell off the philosophical agenda.

UNFATHOMABLE FRIENDSHIP

Friendship, once it was no longer tied to moral worth and intellectual achievements, became harder to define and to theorize. In the individualistic climate of post-Reformation Europe, questions such as “How is the true friend found”? “How is the bond of friendship sustained” became well-nigh impossible to answer. If friendship is a deeper and more rewarding inter-personal relationship than almost all others, it would seem to merit an equally significant beginning, such as the instantaneous mutual recognition of similarities of temperament or intellectual dispositions. Yet, disappointingly, the reality of ordinary people’s lives means that one’s closest friend often turns out to have been the colleague one shares an office with, the woman who was in the maternity hospital at the same time as oneself, the neighbour who shares one’s passion for mountain biking etc. Chance plays a greater role in the development of friendship than we often care to recognise.

Montaigne, as the great writer he was, gave a highly literary account of the nature of his lifelong friendship with a fellow writer, Etienne de la Boëtie, by ascribing it to the operation of other-worldly forces, such as fate and pre-determination, in which reason played no part. As he wrote in an oft quoted passage:

If a man should importune me to give a reason why I loved him, I find it could not otherwise be expressed, than by making answer: because it was he, because it was I. There is, beyond all that I am able to say, I know not what inexplicable and fated power that brought on this union. (Essays, I, XXVIII)

But if these lines are beautiful, they are also theoretically sterile; rather than providing an explanation, they are but an elegant way of side-stepping the question. And yet, no one since Montaigne seems to have come up with a better explanation. Modern friends, ourselves included, are prone to ascribe the deep friendship that they have with a few others to the presence of “elective affinities” between them, affinities which are taken to account both for initial choice and enduring affection. Modern friends tend to view their personalities as akin in crucial, though often disappointingly minor, ways. If pressed they would be likely to say that they love or like each other for their uniqueness. Is that a better explanation than Montaigne’s? No. It is unsurprising, therefore, that the parties are generally content to leave their bond unexamined on the ground that the origin of love and friendship is not a matter for close analytical scrutiny. Because they are capricious in origin and spontaneous in their development, modern relationships of friendship are mostly taken to be as fundamentally non-rational as they are precious.
REFERENCES


ENDNOTES

1. This is so, it would appear, even in the case of patients suffering from schizophrenia and other split personality disorders. The issue is, however, too complex and contentious to be examined within the scope of this essay.

2. With apologies to Lydia, the cat who has done her best to slow down the process of writing this essay.
They are, in chronological order, the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Eudemian Ethics*. A third and shorter treatise, *Magna Moralia*, is unlikely to have been written by Aristotle himself. To modern minds, Aristotle’s definition of primary friendship is sexist, but sexism was not an offence in his time. In this instance, we must be content with the assurance that, had Aristotle been alive today, he would have realised that good women are just as capable of primary friendship as good men are.

Rawls argued that a person’s goals in life are formulated in terms of the exercise of their natural or acquired abilities and skills: the greater the scope to exercise them, the more self-fulfilled a person will be. His reasons for calling the principle Aristotelian are spelled out in section 65.

A similar distinction is drawn in the *Lecture on Ethics*.

So much is clear in Ficino’s *De Amore* and his voluminous correspondence with friends. Be it noted, however, that he is prone to follow medieval usage in calling friendship “caritas.”

The passage is discussed in Veltman (2014, p. 279) to whom I am here indebted.

For Aristotle’s passage, see *Eudemian Ethics*, 1245b 20-21

It may amuse to learn that Kant himself misquoted the tag in the medieval manuscript. In the *Lectures on Ethics*, he wrote “When, therefore, Socrates remarks: ‘My friends, there is no friends,’ he implies thereby that there is no friendship which fully conforms to the Idea of Friendship. And he is right.” It is highly unlikely that, even in the *Lysis*, Socrates said anything of the kind in *propría persona*.

In fairness to Derrida, it ought to be pointed out that he was aware of the textual corruption, as testified by p. 208 of his *Politics of Friendship*.

The essay was first published in *The Nation* in 1938.

Not quite in Goethe’s sense though.

The paper was first read in 2015 at the University of Calcutta and, a week later, at the University of Delhi; I am most grateful to members of both audiences for their questions and comments. Thanks are due also to Peter Herissone-Kelly for discussions on Kantian matters over the years.

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