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Introduction: the Ambiguity of Friendship

Their relationship consisted
In discussing if it existed.

Thom Gunn

For a long time I was single. I relied heavily on friends for company, support and affection. And most of the time I was happy about that. Implicitly, I agreed with Aristotle: who would choose to live without friends even if they had every other good thing, he said. Moreover, I regarded myself as exceptionally lucky with my friends and still do.

But for all that, I was often alone and sometimes lonely. The friendships I enjoyed only went so far.

The limits were most obvious when compared to the relationships I witnessed between lovers or within families. It seemed to me that notwithstanding the occasional exception, friendship simply cannot bear the demands and intimacies, great and small, that are the very stuff of these other relationships of love and blood.

This set me thinking because my experience seemed very different from the way friendship is portrayed at a cultural level. Here it is frequently heralded as nothing less than the defining relationship of our age. In TV soaps, the characters always have their friends to return to when their sexual adventures fail; lovers come and go, but friends remain. Or, according to agony aunts, friendship is the ingredient that makes partnerships work (a suggestion that would have surprised many of those same agony aunts' aunts who ironically might have suggested the ingredient of partnership to make relationships work). For sociologists, a common assumption is that friendship is now most people's relationship of choice, and people often see their friends in opposition to traditional relationships of obligation: as marriage and family

flounders, to say nothing of lifestyles becoming more mobile, the belief (or hope) is that friendship will carry them through the serial monogamies and speedy pace of life. And for politicians, the idea of civic friendship is also gaining ground. Here the thought is that modern democracy can be revived by a notion of citizenship that includes a concern for others' wellbeing. Such civic friendship would counterbalance the dominant economic and individualistic model of politics which is mostly about rules and rights, and therefore tends to marginalise the civic space.

All in all, friendship is conceived of positively, as the new social glue to paste over networked lives: because it is ideally structured to cope with the stresses and strains, great and small, that modern life throws up, it will stop them falling apart.

But will it? My experience told me that whilst friendship can be great, its affections and commitments are often ambiguous. When a lover calls they automatically get first priority and family commitments are, well, family commitments. So perhaps the soaps are romanticising friendship, the agony aunts are resorting to it too quickly, and the sociologists and politicians are being overly optimistic?

In fact, this question is also regularly debated in the same TV programmes, newspaper columns, learned journals and political speeches. It is not one that will be decided here. However, upon further reflection it seemed to me that another, perhaps even more fundamental, question is rarely being asked – and it is one with which philosophy should be able to help. What exactly is friendship? What is its nature, its rules, its promise? How can one differentiate between its many forms? How does it compare to and mix with the connections shared between lovers and within families? If at least a kind of friendship is elastic enough to survive the relational stresses and strains of our flexible ways of life, is that friendship also strong enough to bear the burden of the human need to belong, to be connected, to be loved?

These questions are trickier to answer than it might first seem because friendship is hugely diverse. Although it is relatively easy to come up with definitions that account for part of it, it is much harder to find one that does not exclude any of its facets. Aristotle, whose writing on friendship still sets the philosophical agenda to this day, found as much 2,500 years ago. Friendship, he proposed, is at the very least a relationship of goodwill between individuals who reciprocate that goodwill. A reasonable starter for ten. However, as soon as he tried to expand it, the definition seemed to unravel.

He looked around him and saw three broad groupings of relationships people called friendship. The first group are friends primarily because they are useful to each other – like the friendship between an employee and a boss, or a doctor and a patient, or a politician and an ally; they share goodwill because they get something out of the relationship. The second group are friends primarily because some pleasure is enjoyed by being together; it may be the football, the shopping, the gossip or sexual intimacy, but the friendship thrives insofar, and possibly only insofar, as the thing that gives the pleasure continues to exist between them. Aristotle noted that these first two groups are therefore like each other because if you take the utility or the pleasure away, then the chances are the friendship will fade.

This, though, is not true of the third group. These are people who love each other because of who they are in themselves. It may be their depth of character, their innate goodness, their intensity of passion or their simple *joie de vivre*, but once established on such a basis these friendships are ones that tend to last. Undoubtedly much will be given and much taken too but the friendship itself is independent of external factors and immensely more valuable than the friendships that fall into the first two groups.

That there are better or higher friendships – different people may call them soul friends, close or old friends, or best friends – as opposed to instrumental and casual friendships, or mere friendliness, is surely right. But to say that great friendship is defined solely by its goodwill seems to miss its essence. Goodwill exists in these best kinds of friendship, but, unlike the lesser types, best friendship – arguably the quintessential sort – is based on something far more profound.

Aristotle recognised as much, and whilst his discussion of friendship contains many important and illuminating insights – that we will make much of here – he knew, I think, that ultimately a definitional approach to friendship has its limits.

This philosophical ambiguity as to what friendship is reflects, then, the ambiguity that appears to be part and parcel of friendship in life. Try listing some of the friends you have – your partner, oldest friend, mates or girlfriends, one or two family members, work colleagues, neighbours, friends from online chat rooms, family friends, a boss perhaps, therapist, teacher, personal trainer – whoever you might at some time think of as a friend. A look at such a list puts your friends in front of you, as it were, and highlights the vast differences. For example, the friendship with your partner will in certain key respects be unlike that of your oldest friend, though you may be very close to

both. Conversely, although friendship is for the most part a far less strong tie than say the connection to family, you may feel less close to members of your family in terms of friendship than others with whom you have no genetic or legal bond. Then again, lovers might make you blush and families can make you scream, but friendship – even soul friendship – is usually cool in comparison.

As you continue further down the list to the friends who are in many ways little more than acquaintances, associates or individuals for whom you have merely a sense of friendliness, it is obvious that friendship stretches from a love you could scarcely do without to an affection that you'd barely miss if it ended. Some people would say there is some minimal quality which means that it makes sense to call all of them friends (perhaps Aristotle's goodwill). Others would disagree: they are the sort who say they have a handful of friends and that others are people they only know. In other words, the ambiguity of friendship extends to the very possibility of prolific and profound friendship-making.

Personally, I think that Aristotle is on to something in his belief that the closest kind of friendship is only possible with one or two individuals, such is the investment of time and self that it takes. 'Host not many but host not none', was his formula. He would argue that less is more and it is easy to substitute the networking for the friendships it is supposed to yield. One of my arguments will be that life produces personal relationships of many types, but out of these connections good friendship may or may not grow. For example, certain associations or institutions like work or marriage can foster friendship but those same associations or institutions need not necessarily be characterised by friendship themselves; friendship emerges, as it were, from below up. It is a fluid concept.

Another dimension to the ambiguity of friendship is its apparent open-endedness. Unlike institutions of belonging such as marriage which is supported and shaped by social norms, or work where individuals have contractually defined roles, friendship has no predetermined instructions for assembly or project for growth. People have to create their friendships mostly out of who they are, their interests and needs, without any universally applicable framework. On the one hand, this is a potential weakness, because a friendship may 'go nowhere' or 'run out of steam'. On the other, it is a potential strength because there is also a freedom in this that is crucial to friendship's appeal: it is part of the reason for the diversity within the family of relationships called friendship.

In summary, then, it seems that it is not possible to say unequivocally what friendship is. Sometimes it is intense, sometimes it is thin. Sometimes it appears to embrace many, sometimes only a few.

This might seem to be a bit of a blow if the question is what is friendship. However, far from ambiguity automatically leading to philosophical impasse, an exploration of the very ambiguities of friendship is actually a very good way forward. After all, is not mistaking relationships for what they are not – that is being blind to their ambiguity – arguably the greatest cause of disappointment and failure? A married couple may assume they are friends in some deep sense when really they only have goodwill for each other because of the kids; without realising that, when they go, the friendship does too. An employee and a boss may think they are good friends after all the late nights, trips abroad and hours spent together: but when the day arrives for the appraisal or pay rise, and both turn out to be modest, the friendship stumbles and falls.

Alternatively, consider this thought experiment suggested by Nietzsche:

Just think to yourself some time how different are the feelings, how divided the opinions, even among the closest acquaintances; how even the same opinions have quite a different place or intensity in the heads of your friends than in your own; how many hundreds of times there is occasion for misunderstanding or hostile flight. After all that, you will say to yourself: 'How unsure is the ground on which all our bonds and friendships rest; how near we are to cold downpours or ill weather; how lonely is every man!'

Honesty about any relationship is likely to improve it, even if the honest thing to do is not put too much hope in it!

The mistakes that people can make in friendship are also exemplified in some of the things people commonly say about it. For example, many would say that the test of good friendship is being able to pick up immediately where you left off even if you haven't seen the friend for some time. Aristotle, though, thought that good friendship depends on shared living and spending substantial, regular, quality time together. 'Cut off the talk, and many a time you cut off the friendship,' he said. The question is where does the balance lie?

Or again, are not the Life columns of newspapers and magazines increasingly scattered with tales of friendship's labour lost? A piece on 'Google grief' caught my eye, the twenty-first century phenomenon of learning of the death of an old friend on the web. The writer, Michele

Kirsch, complained that having had such a shock, she was not allowed to grieve for her dead friend because those with whom she lived now were implicitly asking, 'If he was so brilliant, why haven't you been in touch for 18 years?' Fair question, she is forced to admit; the friendship she had was nostalgic and only in her head.

And yet, if it is really quite easy to make mistakes by thinking the relationship is something other than what it is, the best kinds of friendship (however that is judged) are essential for a happy life: human beings need people they can call friends and not just people who are relatives, partners, acquaintances, colleagues or associates. In other words, the corollary of friendship's ambiguity is that it is packed with promise and strewn with perils. This, then, sets the agenda for this book. It is these perils and that promise which I hope to track down, the ambiguities and points of contention that I address. My aim is not to try to produce a comprehensive definition or theory of friendship. Rather, the value of asking about friendship lies in the asking, not necessarily in coming to any incontestable conclusions.

I am taking a lead here from Plato. According to him, at the end of a lengthy conversation on friendship with the Greek youths Lysis and Menexenus, no less a person than Socrates concluded that he had not been able to discover what friendship was. He feared looking ridiculous because paradoxically it also seemed that he, Lysis and Menexenus were friends. But he had good reason for not tying friendship down. Although everyone has friends of some sort and friendships appear to share similarities, and thus be definable, they are in life as varied as the people who form them. This is the irreducibility of friendship; people have an infinite variety of experiences of it. So another way of putting it is that this is a philosophy book of the sort which invites you to test its ideas against your experience. (In fact, with a subject like friendship it is almost impossible to do otherwise.) It is a search through philosophy for the things that may thwart friendship and for the conditions within which it may best thrive.

Philosophy is frequently overlooked as a resource for thinking through friendship in this way. This has much to do with the fact that only a relatively small number of philosophers have written on the subject at any length. What is more, those that have, although generally agreeing that friendship is essential for a happy life, also say that it provides no automatic satisfaction of human desires for deeper relationships or society's need for connection. Friendship is 'a problem worthy of a solution', as Nietzsche gnominically put it. Or as Aristotle wrote: 'The desire for friendship comes quickly. Friendship does not.'

The implication is that the best kinds of friendships are only possible between people who properly value it and who understand how many things from the personal to the political can compromise, undermine and destroy it. There is an art to friendship. The hope is that philosophy can teach something about it.

Each chapter looks, therefore, at key ambiguities that may exist in any friendship, and almost certainly in certain types, to test for the perils and identify the promise.

The first begins with the world of work because work friends frequently exhibit some of friendship's chief ambiguities. For example, on the one hand, the workplace is a good place to find and make friends. But, on the other, it is also one where supposed friends can show remarkable indifference (as in the speed with which the friendship is forgotten when someone leaves the office). The workplace also has an insidious capacity to undermine friendship. The fly in the ointment is the culture of utility that pervades it. People are there to do things, they are paid for doing them, and they are often encouraged to compete against each other in so doing.

Now, although all friends use each other from time to time, this means that friends at work are at risk of coming to feel that they are merely being used. Therein lies the ambiguity of friendship at work. Moreover, the workplace is not an isolated environment in the Western world. It informs a culture that tends to colour society as a whole; productivity often counts for more than perspicacity, the professional touch more than the personal touch, being praised more than being praiseworthy, wherever you are. All this is detrimental to friendship and so this chapter also provides us with a first look at friendship in a social context.

The second chapter considers another source of ambiguity in friendship, namely, sex. The downside is that sex can clearly imperil friendships by its possessiveness or its inappropriateness. The upside is that a friendship which includes a sexual element is the best sort of relationship that many people hope to have. I will argue that the key is to recognise that whilst a sexual relationship will start with physical passion, a passion of a non-sexual sort needs to kick in too if a good friendship is to develop. This is actually a natural if at times delicate step to take because the two kinds of passion are connected: a mature couple will realise that their deeper desires cannot be satisfied only in each other and that their relationship should nurture a search for fulfilment elsewhere too, in wider aspirations and achievements shared together.

This chapter is also a good place to consider a related sort of friendship, passionate friendships that have never had a sexual element (and where to have gone down the sexual route would have destroyed it). The erotic element is here sublimated in the passion that these friends share; we say these friends have a passion for life.

Work and sex are two sources of ambiguity and the third chapter turns to another, exhibited in the way in which friends dissimulate. I am talking here about 'loving deceptions' such as when an individual says they like their friend's new boy- or girlfriend when they do not, or when someone else says that their friend's cooking or clothing or opinion is good or right when they really think it is wrong or bad. Once you start thinking about it, it becomes apparent that these false colourings, evasions and occasionally out-and-out lies pervade friendship. Even close friends will routinely dissimulate because they judge that the time is not right to speak out, that current sensitivities are too great for the honest truth, or more humbly that, even though they are close, equivocation is best because one should not presume to judge another's heart. The particularly odd thing about friendship is that this dissimulation, this feigning friendship, is often necessary for the friendship's sake. The question is what does this say about it? It turns out that the answer again has a plus, for it reveals another aspect of what is possible in the best kinds of friendship. This, in turn, is nothing less than a reflection on what it is to be human itself.

A different kind of ambiguity is explored in the fourth chapter, namely, the ambivalence with which ethics and moral philosophy tends to view friendship. It is marginalised for a number of reasons: ethic systems like utilitarianism or consequentialism do not know how to treat friendship because it seems to have ill-defined laws of its own; alternatively, the West's Christian inheritance has coloured certain secular institutions with a distrust of friendship because it is thought irredeemably selfish and particular. The question is whether this can be addressed philosophically and, then, redressed in practice.

This ambiguity also sets up a change of emphasis for the second half of the book, from the mostly personal to the mostly social. First, I ask why it is that although few philosophers have chosen to tackle the subject at any length, at certain times in the past friendship was a major concern (in ancient Athens, it was virtually on the core syllabus): what was it about friendship that led philosophers and theologians in the ancient and medieval worlds in particular to treat it seriously, when in modernity it is not? The suggestion is that in these periods of history, friendship enjoyed a social standing that it does not

today. Ancient Greek political life seems to have incorporated quasi-institutions of friendship. The medieval world did so too, overlaying the fundamental social unit of the household. Such civic friendship stands in marked contrast to our own situation, in which friendship is thought of as an almost wholly private relationship. The philosophical question this chapter poses is what ideological changes to the detriment of civic friendship took place at the birth of modernity, and what has been lost as a result?

However, this is not to say that friendship carries no social or political weight today. Inasmuch as it does, though, it is of a very different sort. This is the politics of friendship that I look at in Chapter 6, in particular in the philosophies that are found in feminism and the women's movement, and more recently in gay and so-called queer thought. Essentially, the difference is that friendship is now viewed as subversive of social norms rather than constitutive of them as it was before. Think of the anxiety provoked by the idea of gay marriage: I will argue that this has little to do with sexual acts and much more to do with forms of friendship that challenge tight notions of family.

This chapter also raises the question of possible differences between the friendships of men and those of women. The evidence on this is mixed and hard to read. On the one hand, there are sociologists who have argued that intimacy has been transformed in the modern world: in the same way that distinct gender roles are eroding at a social level, so differences between male and female friendship are softening too. On the other hand, there are others who argue that the evidence shows that gendered patterns of friendship still form in childhood and continue into adult life: from this view follow conclusions such as that women's friendships are more to do with self-disclosure and empathy, whereas men's friendships are more about the sociability of enjoying or doing things together. This is a fascinating question and is one that we will come to from a philosophical perspective particularly in this chapter. (In other chapters, my assumption is that the ambiguities of friendship are likely to be experienced both by men and women, and that whilst it might be that gender plays a role, it is not determinative.)

If the modern politics of friendship wants things to be different at a social level, whether implicitly or explicitly, then the final chapter returns to the question of what friendship ultimately aims at on a personal level. I call this the spirituality of friendship, not least because the most profound kind of friendship that people hope for is often referred to as soul friendship. Having said that, this is, I think, a much misused and sentimentalised concept. The philosophical tradition

portrays it as an exceptional and difficult love. It necessitates nothing less than being able to overcome the ambiguities of amity – though, if that is never wholly possible, it also suggests how one might live with regards to the very best that can be hoped for in friendship (which is much, if somewhat paradoxical).

So it turns out that philosophy is indeed illuminative of friendship. In the Conclusion I suggest why: at best, philosophy and friendship coincide – they are both founded upon the love that seeks to know.

The Appendix is for those who are interested in the philosophy of friendship in a more academic sense and addresses an issue that has been toyed with throughout the book – that of the rivalry, as I see it, between the account of friendship given by Aristotle and the portrayal of friendship as found in Plato. I want to suggest that in certain respects, and much against received wisdom, the latter is better. (For those interested in what particular philosophers have said on friendship, each chapter majors on the thought of one or a select few: Chapter 1 on Aristotle and Adam Smith; Chapter 2 on Plato and Aristotle; Chapter 3 on Nietzsche; Chapter 4 on Augustine, Kant and Thomas Aquinas; Chapter 5 on the ancient Greeks and Romans; Chapter 6 on feminism and Foucault; Chapter 7 on Montaigne, Emerson and Plato again).

And now, to work.

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