

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 in an interpersonal relation is largely uncontentious – only in a metaphorical sense can one be said to be friends with oneself.¹ Whether one can be friends with animals and, if so, which ones, is a complex issue, which will be ignored for the present.² 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

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