



The Nature and Limits of Friendship

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As Aristotle wrote in the fourth century BC, “No one would choose to live without friends, even if he had all other goods.” Even the affluent and powerful, he maintains, are in need of friends if only to have someone to bestow their generosity upon and to help them protect their interests. For Aristotle friendship is one of the most important goods that we possess as human beings and without it he believes that we would certainly not be able to flourish. Thus when he maintains that friendship is “indispensable for life,”¹ we should not take that to mean that we could not go on living unless we had friends, but rather that friendship is necessary for a complete and happy life.

Aristotle is not alone in recognizing the importance of friendship for human happiness. Indeed, the question of friendship occupies a place of importance in their writings of almost all the great authors of the ancient world: Plato, Seneca, Cicero and Augustine all wrote extensively on the subject, and each of these thinkers took it for granted that a life without good friends is simply not worth living.

The discussion of friendship, however, has been sadly lacking in modern thought. (When was the last time, for example, that you saw a seminar being offered on the topic?) C.S. Lewis maintains that the reason for this neglect is that friendship seems—on the surface anyway—to be the least necessary of all forms of love:

Friendship is—in a sense not at all derogatory to it—the least *natural* of loves; the least instinctive, organic, biological, gregarious and necessary....Without [sexual love] none of us would have been begotten and without [parental love] none of us would have been reared; but we can live and breed without Friendship. The species biologically considered, has no need of it.²

Friendship also has an unavoidable elitism about it that rubs modern liberal tendencies the wrong way. Included in almost every conception of friendship is an implied or overt “us” and “them” dichotomy. Friendship forces us to make the distinction between those who are among the ranks of our friends and those who are not.

The lack of interest that we have in the moral dimension of friendship is indeed unfortunate, since many of the most important moral issues that human beings face on a daily basis have to do with our relationships to our friends. Most of us will probably go our whole lives without ever having to make decisions about abortion, euthanasia and the like, but we will all be confronted with the various obligations and difficulties that inevitably arise out of our relationships with our closest friends. At one time or another, we will all struggle with questions about the full extent of our obligations to our friends and of their

obligations to us, and we will probably all experience betrayal at the hands of those we consider trusted friends. Friendship, in short, is often the central arena in which we live out our moral lives.

The Essence of Friendship

Since the discussion of friendship in modern philosophical thought is so limited, we will begin by examining the great classical treatment of the subject—that is, Books 8 and 9 of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*. As you may recall from our previous discussion (Chapter 2), Aristotle argued that the possession of virtue was indeed necessary for happiness. He also believed, however that certain other goods contributed to the happy life, and that among the most important of these necessary goods is friendship. In Books 8 and 9 of his *Ethics*, Aristotle undertakes a philosophical examination of friendship in order to clarify precisely how this vital good contributes to one’s ultimate happiness.

Aristotle begins his treatment of friendship by making a distinction between three different types of friendship based upon the objects that attract the friends and bond them together. These he calls friendship of pleasure, utility, and virtue.

In friendships of pleasure two individuals are drawn to one another solely because of the enjoyment they derive from each other’s company. The best examples of this type of friendship would be drinking buddies or football pals, although some sexual relationships might also be included. Friendships of utility are founded upon some practical benefit that the friends perceive in their relationship with one another.³ In this sense, a business associate or a neighbor with whom we car pool can rightly be called friends, although our relationships with them might be limited almost exclusively to the workplace environment or to the car that we share with them on the way to work.

In both friendships of pleasure and utility, people become friends because of what they can get out of the relationship and not necessarily because of any real affection that they have for one another. The focus in both cases is primarily on one’s own needs, which can often make these types of friendships egocentric and in some cases exploitative. These types of friendships, according to Aristotle, are usually superficial at best and therefore fleeting.⁴

There is another form of friendship that Aristotle discusses, however, that is far more substantial than the two kinds previously described. This third type, which he calls friendship of virtue, exists between individuals who are drawn to one another for their own sake, and not for any extrinsic reasons. Such friendships of virtue, he maintains, can exist only between individuals who are equally good—presupposing that the friends are in agreement about what is good. In this form of friendship, one wishes good for his friend’s own sake, not simply because of what he can get from his friend.⁵

He goes on to say that such friendships of virtue are in fact even more useful and pleasant to those who are involved in them than even friendships of utility or pleasure would be. Although this sounds a bit contradictory, it actually makes a great deal of sense when you come to think about it: if I really know what is good for my friend and care about him for his own sake, I am much more likely to be able to provide him with the kind of assistance and enjoyment that he really will appreciate. Friendships of virtue are also typically much longer lasting than the other two types, since they tend to last as long as the friends remain good. Since the goodness of virtuous individuals is usually an enduring thing, such friend-

ships are capable of lasting indefinitely.⁶

In the course of the relationship between two morally good individuals who are drawn together for their own sake, something else occurs that is quite significant: the friends actually grow in virtue through their dealing with one another. As Aristotle puts it, “the friendship of good men is good, and it increases with the frequency of their meetings. Also, it seems, they become better as they are active together and correct one another: from the mold of the other each takes the imprint of the traits he likes.”⁷ The reason why this transformation occurs so naturally in friendships of virtue is because in such relationships the friends are capable of acting as a “mirrors” for each other’s souls. Because my friend is so similar in character to myself, by seeing him in action, by observing how he responds to various situations in life, I can obtain a more objective understanding of my own nature and character. This objectivity, Aristotle believes, enables me to examine my own life more intensely than I otherwise could, offering the possibility of moral transformation and growth.⁸

Although it would seem that compared to friendships of virtue, friendships of utility and pleasure are fairly shallow and ought to be shunned, this is actually not the case. An individual’s life will typically be filled with all three types of friendships, and, according to Paul Wadell, there is actually nothing wrong with this:

Though not ideal and certainly not sufficient for *eudaimonia*, these most common friendships of usefulness and pleasure have positive value. The fact that Aristotle delineates three kinds of friendship suggests each human life needs to include all three. While it is true that of the three, friendships [of virtue] are most important, it is also true that not every friendship needs to be or can be of this type; not every friendship could sustain the intensity and rigor virtue friendships require.⁹

Wadell is certainly correct in arguing that we have room enough in our lives for all three kinds of friends. In *De Amicitia* (On Friendship), Cicero, however, maintains that while such banal kinds of friendships can be sources of “pleasure and profit” for those who are involved in them, one’s life cannot be fully complete without at least one friend who cares for us for our own sake and who is as committed to our well-being as we ourselves are. It is for this reason that he makes the distinction between perfect and imperfect friendship and focuses most of his attention in *De Amicitia* on the former rather than the latter kind of friendship.¹⁰

Rather than dwelling on the kinds of friendships that ordinary individuals possess, I would like to spend a little time examining the kind of idealized form of friendship that both Aristotle and Cicero (as well as many other classical authors) think is so crucial for one’s ultimate well-being. After examining this ideal, we can then proceed to look at the various ways in which friendships often go astray. Specifically I would like to focus on three questions related to friendship that are often considered crucial by classical thinkers: (1) how should we go about choosing friends? (2) what limits—if any—should be placed on our friendships? and (3) under what conditions—if any—should we terminate a long-standing friendship?

Choosing Friends

It is a sad but true fact that most human beings spend far more time choosing the right home or toaster or pair of shoes than they do choosing the right kind of person to have as their friend. If I was planning to buy a used car, I certainly would not buy the first car I saw in the first dealership I entered, would I? If I did something like that, people would rightly think that I was imprudent at best, and perhaps even a bit of a fool for not being more cautious. When the car I selected starts to act up a few months after I purchased it, they would probably say it was my own fault, and they would be right.

And yet, we often do something quite similar to this when we choose certain people for our friends. More often than not it is convenience rather than character that dictates our choices: we choose people who we grew up with, or who live near us, or who we work with to be our friends because it is relatively easy to establish quick relationships with these individuals. We rarely if ever ask if these people are worthy to be our friends or if they can be trusted. When the relationship falls apart under the most unpleasant circumstances, when we have been betrayed by someone who was supposed to be our best pal, we are shocked and amazed. We really shouldn't be, though: when you settle for a lemon, you shouldn't be surprised if it eventually leaves a bitter taste in your mouth.

Cicero maintains that the sensible person will take time to cultivate friendships, and will try to select others to be their friends whose characters he can have confidence in. The people we choose to be our friends, he says, ought to be reliable, well-adjusted, loyal, honest, unpretentious and congenial.¹¹ Naturally, finding someone with all these positive qualities will not be easy, nor can we simply choose those who happen to be near to us because of some accident of location. We may have to move beyond our usual circle of acquaintances and take time to cultivate relationships with men and women who seem to possess solid moral characters. Believe it or not such individuals do exist in every community; they are just not always so easy to find.

The work of choosing a friend does not end once we have selected someone of good character with whom to establish the foundations of a long-term relationship. It takes a great deal of time to determine the worth of another human being, and quite often those who at first glance seem to be ideal candidates for friendship over the course of time are proven to be less than admirable. It is for this reason that Cicero argues that during the early stages of a relationship we need to find some way to test the worth of those who we would have as our friends. The truly wise person, Cicero writes, "will keep a close check both on the direction which his feelings of friendship are taking and on the speed which they are developing, so that he may, so to speak, drive them like a tried and tested team, watching the development of his friendship by putting his friend's character to the test now here, now there."¹²

There are certain questions that we must constantly reflect upon during the early stages of a friendship: Would the individual I am contemplating making my friend be willing to put my interests ahead of his own convenience or profit? Can he be trusted to keep the secrets that I reveal to him? Is he going to be there for me when things are going wonderfully for him, but when my life has taken a turn for the worse? If the answer to any of these questions turns out to be no, I may still choose to have this person as an acquaintance (a friend of pleasure or utility), but I would certainly not want to include him into the ranks of my closest friends.

If, however, I find someone who possess the qualities of character that I desire in a friend, and if during the course of my early relationship with him, I see that he is, in fact, trustworthy, caring and dependable, then I can have some degree of confidence that this is a truly worthy candidate for a long-term friendship. It is at this point that complete candor and absolute trust on my part become an absolute necessity in order to allow the relationship between myself and my friend to deepen into something more meaningful and mutually sustaining.

Limits of Friendship

Once we have decided the kind of individuals we would like to have as friends, and have taken the time to assess their worth, another important philosophical question that arises is how many people we can include within the ranks of our friends. Is it possible, for example, to have an potentially infinite number of close friends, or do the limitations of our own natures and the demands of friendship itself militate against this? Montaigne has argued, for example, that it is ridiculous to think that we can have more than one close friend in our life without eventually coming into conflict:

the perfect friendship I speak of is indivisible: each one gives himself so wholly to his friend that he has nothing left to distribute elsewhere;...Common friendships can be divided up: one may love in one man his beauty, in another his easy going ways, in another liberality,...and so forth: but this friendship that possesses the soul and rules it with absolute sovereignty cannot possibly be double. If two call for help at the same time, which one would you run to? If they demanded conflicting services of you, how would you arrange it? If one confided to your silence a thing that would be useful for the other to know, how would you extricate yourself? A single dominant friendship dissolves all other obligations.¹³

The question that Montaigne raises is an interesting one. What would happen if, by chance, the two individuals that I call my closest friends are both in dire need at the same time? Who would I choose to help and who would I be forced to abandon? Although you might argue that such a situation is unlikely to occur, it is certainly not outside the realm of possibility. And if I would choose one friend over the other, what does this really say about the depth of my friendship with the one that I am forced to abandon?

Although it is certainly true that the limitations of our natures make it impossible to have too many close friends, I believe that Montaigne is wrong for arguing that true friendship demands complete exclusivity. C.S. Lewis correctly observes that this sort of radical exclusivity is more applicable to erotic love in which two individuals want to shut out the rest of the world and delight completely in each other's company. In friendship, on the other hand, two friends will typically be open to discovering a third (or fourth or fifth for that matter) who shares their tastes and interests. It is not uncommon, for example, for two friends, planning something exciting or interesting to do together to say something to each other like, "Gee, I bet Susan would really enjoy doing this with us; we should call her up and invite her." Friendship, in this regard, never shuts the door completely on others: although it must be selective, it is never completely exclusionary as is erotic love.¹⁴

We should not delude ourselves, however, into thinking, as many young and inexpe-

rienced people often do, that we can have large numbers of close friends. I once had the experience of traveling from New York City to Buffalo—an eight hour drive across New York State—with someone who made it a point to inform me of the good friends she had in every major town we passed along the way. By the time we got to Buffalo I counted a total of 16 or 17 people this woman numbered among the ranks of her closest friends. My own reaction to this amazing feat was to express serious doubts that she had even the slightest clue of what it really means to be a good friend.

Not surprisingly Aristotle believes that we should strive for the mean in determining how many good friends we should possess. “Neither too many nor too few good friends” is his working maxim. We know that the person with too few trusted friends is missing something crucial in his life. On the other hand, real friendship places demands upon us and requires some degree of reciprocity for the good acts that our friends have performed on our behalf.

So what is the correct number of people that we can have as our friends, according to Aristotle? It simply is the “largest number with whom a man might be able to live together, for...living together is the surest indication of friendship.”¹⁵ We should probably understand “living together” as the ability to spend quality—that is, close, intense and personal—time with our friends, and we simply do not have the ability to do this with large numbers of people. The question that we constantly have to ask ourselves, according to Aristotle, is whether the number of friends we have permits us to fully share in their joys and sorrows “as if they were our own.” If we can’t do this because we have too many conflicting commitments among our friends, then it is probably time to prune their number down a bit. If we look at our relationships realistically, we are probably only going to have a handful of people at most who we are going to admit into the ranks of our closest friends.

Criticizing Our Friends

We have seen that parents often go astray in their care for their children when they fail to provide them with the moral guidance that they need to develop into moral adults. Such parents coddle and protect their children, even when they are behaving badly, leading their children to believe that they can never do anything wrong.

Something similar occurs in misguided types of friendship as well. There are many men and women in our society, for example, who clearly believe that they are obligated to stand by their friends even when they are engaged in a pattern of behavior that is potentially harmful to themselves or others. Some would go so far as to say that one should not even point out his or her friend’s errors. As the old French adage goes, “*L’amour est aveugle; l’amitié ferme les yeux*” (Love is blind; friendship closes its eyes).

This view, surprisingly, is held by that otherwise rigid moralist of the Enlightenment, Emmanuel Kant. In the *Lectures on Ethics*, he maintains that our friends know their faults far better than we do, and thus to point them out would be a waste of time. He also believes that to point out the faults of friends would threaten the friendships, since the preservation of their sense of dignity hinges on their belief that we have not noticed these faults:

To point out his faults to a friend is sheer impertinence; and once fault finding begins between friends their friendship will not last long. We must turn a blind eye to the faults of others, lest they conclude that they have lost our respect and

we lose theirs.¹⁶

Passages such as this one make me wonder if Kant had the slightest conception of what friendship is really all about. In true friendship—as opposed to a more frivolous and superficial sort of relationship—there exists such a high degree of intimacy and affection, that a friend should know that I still respect him even when I point out his faults. Indeed, he knows that it is precisely because I respect him so much that I set higher standards for him than I would for others. Far from destroying the relationship that I have with my friend, such candor about his faults should in fact strengthen my relationship with him.

Imagine for a moment that a close friend of yours is engaged in a pattern of behavior that is either personally harmful or at the very least has the potential to work against her long-term best interest. Perhaps, for example, you have a friend who has recently begun to go to dance clubs where hardcore drug use is common; perhaps she has even begun to experiment with these sorts of drugs. Should you remain silent when you know that this sort of lifestyle could well ruin your friend's life? And if you opted to remain silent, as Kant recommends, what would such silence say about your concern for your friend's well-being?

Less dramatically imagine that a close friend of yours admits that he has been using questionable accounting practices to increase his own profits at the expense of his shareholders. Your friend sees nothing wrong with such practices, since they do not violate any specific laws and they cause little real harm to individual shareholders, most of whom have more money than they need anyway. If you criticize your friend for his behavior, you will in all likelihood alienate him to the point where he no longer feels comfortable confiding in you. Your criticism might even permanently damage your relationship with your friend. Should you express your criticism of his behavior anyway?

In reflecting on this issue, the philosopher Montaigne argues that the willingness to reproach our friends when they go astray is in fact the most important duty of friendship: "Certain of my friends," he writes, "have sometimes undertaken to call me on the carpet and lecture me unreservedly, either of their own accord or at my invitation, as a service which, to a well-formed soul, surpasses all the services of friendship, not only in usefulness, but also in pleasantness. I have always welcomed it with the wide open arms of courtesy and gratitude."¹⁷ The reason why we should actually be grateful when our friends reproach us for engaging in destructive behavior is that such reproach is actually the clearest manifestation of their benevolence towards us. Whereas our enemies and those who are indifferent towards us couldn't care less whether we are led into ruin by our actions, our true friends care about our well-being as much as they do their own. And their reproach should be considered the clearest manifestation of that care.

Of course, admonishment must always be done in the right way—namely, out of respect and concern for the other. It sometimes happens that we admonish our friends for their faults only to allow ourselves to feel a sense of moral superiority over them. If admonishment is done in this kind of way, it will most likely lead to the destruction of the friendship, since no one likes to be belittled by someone who is supposed to be his or her friend. "We may admonish," Cicero reminds us, "but we must not scold; we may reprimand, but we must not humiliate."¹⁸ Provided that reproach is done in a charitable and gentle fashion, it should deepen rather than dissolve any authentic friendship.

Ending Friendships

Friendships can break up naturally for a number of different reasons. Sometimes friends simply outgrow one another or over time begin to develop radically different outlooks on life. In such cases there may be no basis for the continuation of the friendship.¹⁹ At other times even the best of friends can be torn apart by rivalries (over a potential suitor, a desirable job, etc.) or because of some violent disagreement that the two friends may have. While the break-up of friendships of this sort are indeed unfortunate, it is an all too frequent consequence of relationships that are established early on in life and between individuals who have a fairly superficial understanding of what friendship is all about. When such relationships unravel, as they often do, the parties usually move on to more profitable relationships after a suitable period of adjustment, grief or mourning.

There are also situations, however, in which one has to make an intentional decision to end a friendship—perhaps even a long-standing and intimate one. Under what circumstances might one take action that cause the dissolution of such a friendship? Cicero and Aristotle both agree that a friendship should be ended when one's friend begins to turn wicked.²⁰ The reason why such a friendship must be ended, according to Aristotle, is that the love of a good person should only be directed towards good objects. A good person, in short, should never allow himself to be intimate with someone who has become bad.²¹

Imagine the following scenario for example:

Gary and John met during high school and become close friends through their mutual love of baseball, rock climbing and classic 60's rock. They both played on their high school's varsity team and later received athletic scholarships to prestigious colleges. Although during their four years of College they saw each other only occasionally—mainly during summer breaks—they continued to remain loyal fiends, who were always there to support one another during difficult times. Each summer they would do a week-long climbing trip together at Yellowstone National Park, where they would spend hours talking about their hopes and dreams and confiding in each other about their moral and personal weaknesses.

After college Gary introduced John to Kathy, a friend of his sisters, and she and John hit it off immediately. After dating each other for several years the two decided to get married. Gary was delighted when John asked him to be his best man at the wedding. Within a few years of getting married, John and Kathy had two children together (with Gary acting as godfather to their oldest son). Although they occasionally fought about money and John's excessive work hours, the two seemed to have a happy marriage and a comfortable family life.

Then one day, John confides to Gary that he recently fell in love with, Monica, a 24 year old woman who works in his office. When Gary expresses his astonishment about this turn of events, John admits that his relationship with Kathy was not as wonderful as it appears to be on the surface and that, since the birth of their second child, the two had not been as physically intimate with one another as they once were. Although he had tried for years to make their marriage work, John laments that all he had succeeded in doing was making himself more and more miserable.

John then tells Gary that he is planning to ask Kathy for a divorce so that he

can eventually marry Monica and move to Chicago, where they can have a fresh start on their new life together. He knows that his decision will be hard on Kathy, who still loves him and even more difficult for his two young children. Although John knows that Gary is personally opposed to divorce and that he is very fond of Kathy, he asks that Gary support him in this difficult decision.

What do you think that Gary should do in this situation? If he really is the type of person who is opposed to divorce, he probably he will try to reason with John and to convince him to do all he can to save his marriage. He might argue, for example, that the well-being of John's family is more important than his own vain desires for happiness or that he owes it to his children to try to work things out with Kathy.

If John refuses to change his mind about the divorce, despite all of Gary's protests, Gary ultimately has two choices. He might decide that his loyalty to John demands that he support his friend in his decision, even though he knows that this decision is morally wrong. The problem with this option is that, by supporting John and continuing to maintain an intimate relationship with him, isn't Gary—tacitly at least—condoning John behavior? And if Gary continued to maintain his relationship with John after he all but abandons his wife and children, what would this say about the quality of Gary's own moral character?

In the end if Gary truly values the institution of marriage and the sanctity of family, he will probably be forced to end his relationship with John, after it has become clear that John has no real interest in reforming his behavior. After doing all he can to bring John to reason, at some point—and there is no precise formula for when this point should come—Gary will probably be forced to terminate his friendship with John and transfer his loyalty instead to John's wife and children.

Although Aristotle believes that it is necessary to end even a long-term friendship when our friend's turns bad, this in no way means that we should simply toss our friend aside the moment he does something wrong. Aristotle believes that we are obligated to work diligently to reform him and hope for his eventual rehabilitation. For instance, if I had a friend who was beginning to develop an addiction to alcohol or drugs, I would certainly do all that I could to encourage him to seek out treatment; if he wanted me to, I should even be willing to accompany him to a treatment facility or a local alcoholic or drug addicts anonymous meeting. There may come a time, though, when I have done all that I can to convince him to give up his harmful behavior and he simply chooses not to listen. It is at this point that I must completely break off the relationship both for my friend's sake (since my rejection may be the only thing capable of jolting him back into decent behavior) and for my own (lest I myself become corrupted by my friend's bad behavior).

In cases where the friendship is a long-standing one Cicero believes that the friendship should be allowed to fade away rather than be stamped out. We should gradually discontinue our intimacy with the other, a process which Cicero refers to as the act of “unlearning” the friendship. Our aim, he says, should always be to avoid having what was formerly a close friendship turn to bitter enmity. The only exception he makes to this rule is either when a friend is engaged in extreme wrongdoing or when he asks us to do something that is morally illicit. In such cases the friendship should be broken off immediately.²²

NOTES

1. Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*. Trans. Martin Ostwald (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1962): 1155a5.
2. C.S. Lewis. *The Four Loves* (New York: Harper Collins, 1998): pp?????
3. Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics* 1156a11.
4. Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics* 1156a15-24.
5. Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics* 1055b30.
6. Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics* 1156b2-22.
7. Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics* 1172a11-13.
8. Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics* 1169b28-1170a4; 1170b1-14. See Cooper, 322.
9. Paul J. Wadell. *Friendship and the Moral Life* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989) 57.
10. Cicero, *On Friendship*.
11. Cicero, *On Friendship*.
12. Cicero, *On Friendship*.
13. Montaigne, Michel de. *Selected Essays* (New York: Walter J. Black, 1943): 67
14. C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* ??????
15. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1.10
16. Immanuel Kant. *Lectures on Ethics*, Trans. Louis Infield (New York: Harper and Row, 1963) 232.
17. Montaigne, 181.
18. Cicero, *On Friendship* 24.89.
19. Cicero, *On Friendship* 10.33.
20. Cicero *On Friendship* 76.21; Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 9.3.
21. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 9.3 (????)
22. Cicero, *On Friendship* 21.78; 10.35.

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