

The Value in Friendship

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The purpose of this essay is to ask a question. The question is: “What is it that we value in friendship?”

The purpose of this essay is not to answer the question. That’s a more daunting task than I intend to tackle here. Rather, my purpose is simply to ask the question.

You may think I’ve already asked the question; so my essay has achieved its purpose and I should stop right now. After all, didn’t I just say that my question was: what do we value in friendship? But I haven’t really succeeded in asking that question yet, because I haven’t yet clarified what question I am asking. That is, I haven’t yet distinguished the question I want to ask from other questions that are easily confused with it. So we’re not yet at the point of being able to ask my question. We need to wander about in the wilderness a little bit – though hopefully not for forty years – before we can get to the promised land of my question.

In order to get where we’re going, we need to start somewhere else. Let’s start with a quotation from E. M. Forster: “If I had to choose between betraying my country and betraying my friend,” Forster wrote, “I hope I should have the guts to betray my country.”¹ This remark nicely captures what can seem philosophically problematic about friendship. Friendship can conflict with the welfare of society: loyalty to a friend might require you to betray your country. Friendship can also conflict with your own welfare: betraying your country is likely to get you imprisoned or killed, that’s why it takes guts.

Sidgwick famously claimed that utilitarianism and egoism are the only moral theories that make sense.² Like much that Sidgwick said,

1. E. M. Forster, *Two Cheers for Democracy* (Orlando: Harcourt Brace, 1962), pp. 67–76.

2. Henry Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1981), pp. 497–8.

it was intelligent and wrong. But what makes it intelligent, despite its being wrong, is that it captures an intuitively appealing idea. When I'm being partial, I have special reason to care about my own interest, because it's *me*. And when I'm being impartial, I have special reason to care about the welfare of everybody, because from the impartial standpoint, everybody counts equally. But then friendship seems to fall between the cracks. It seems too altruistic from the standpoint of self-interest, and too self-centered from the standpoint of the general welfare.

Hence there have always been some philosophers who counselled against placing too much weight on personal commitments to particular people. Utilitarians from Mozi in ancient China to William Godwin in 18th-century England have criticized partiality to loved ones on the grounds that it tends to slight the legitimate prior claims of the broader society; Godwin, for example, wrote that one should save a stranger from a burning building, in preference to saving one's mother, if the stranger were an important social benefactor, and one's mother a mere chambermaid.³ And Stoics like Epictetus have warned that emotional attachments make one's personal serenity vulnerable to bad fortune. In a famous Stoic anecdote that has attached itself to a number of different philosophers, the wise man explains his equanimity at the news of a loved one's death by saying: "After all, I knew that he was mortal."

Yet most philosophers – egoists and utilitarians included – have been friendlier to friendship. Epicurus, for example, defends friendship on egoistic grounds: friendship is a source of personal happiness. In response to the inevitable objection that a friend is someone you value for the friend's own sake, not simply as a means to your own happiness, Epicurus distinguishes between the motivation for getting yourself *into* a friendship and the motivation you have once you're in it.⁴ The latter motivation – the motivation that is internal to, or constitutive of, friendship – is indeed a concern for the friend for the friend's own sake, not for the sake of your own happiness. Your own happiness is (ordinarily) a byproduct of the friendship, but not its primary aim. However, since friendship *does* tend to bring happiness, a concern for one's own happiness is a good reason for getting oneself into a friendship in the first place. Then,

3. William Godwin, *Inquiry Concerning Political Justice*, Book 2, Chapter 2.

4. Cicero, *De Finibus* I. 65–70.

once you are in a friendship, you will acquire a new concern you didn't have before; you will then respond to goods that are internal to the friendship. Before you are in the friendship, you don't yet have any reason to care about *those* goods (though you do have reason to *care about* caring about them). Analogously to Macintyre's notion of goods internal to a practice, the goods internal to friendship are goods whose point we can recognize only when we are already in a friendship. In Epicurus' words, "All friendship is intrinsically valuable; but it arises from benefiting."⁵

Thus we have self-interested motives for fostering non-self-interested motives in ourselves (or allowing them to be fostered). It is like Pascal's Wager, which is supposed to motivate us to try to *become* believers, but which, for those who finally *do* believe, must be kicked away after use, like a ladder or a fish trap (depending on which side of the Urals one draws one's similes from).

Of course, as with Pascal's Wager, the gamble might not pay off; sometimes friendship requires greater sacrifice than the satisfactions in friendship can compensate for. If that happens, you'll have cooked your own goose by cultivating unselfish motives in yourself. But in deciding what sorts of desires you want to have, you have to be guided by the *most likely* result; since the benefits of friendship usually outweigh the costs, getting into a friendship is a risk worth making.

So runs the egoist justification of friendship. And the utilitarian justification of friendship is like unto it: although friendship involves caring more about some people than about others, and so will sometimes lead people to make counter-utilitarian choices, we have good rule-utilitarian reasons for allowing and even fostering the institution of friendship, because it brings the human race more satisfaction than dissatisfaction, on the whole.

So there's a story about what makes friendship valuable. Is it an answer to *my* question? No. It says that we have instrumental reasons (whether egoistic or utilitarian) for getting into a friendship – namely, that friendship causes pleasure. But *why* does friendship cause pleasure?

I am not asking for a *causal* explanation. An evolutionary theorist might tell us that organisms that form affectionate bonds with one another are more likely to survive and reproduce, and therefore the evolutionary process has selected for the trait of finding friendship

5. Epicurus, *Vatican Saying* 23 (reading *hairetê* for *aretê*).

pleasurable, so as to motivate such organisms to pursue and sustain friendships. All that is no doubt true. But it is an *external* explanation. What I am looking for is the motivation *as it is experienced by the person who is actually in the friendship*. When you are in the friendship, it is not the survival or reproductive value of friendship that gives you pleasure. And it is certainly not the *fact that it gives you pleasure* that gives you pleasure. To enjoy friendship just is to get pleasure from it, so it makes no sense to say that what we enjoy about friendship is the pleasure we get. Rather, what we enjoy about friendship is whatever it is *in* friendship that makes it pleasing.

Now we are at last in a position to ask my question: What is it that we value in friendship? And now we can also see the significance of the “in.” There are many things that are valuable *about* friendship; many aspects that can be appreciated from the outside, as it were. And there are interesting and important questions to ask about those aspects. But none of those is my question. My question concerns the aspects of friendship that we enjoy or find valuable from the inside, when we are actually feeling the feelings of friendship. To answer this question with some indirect-consequentialist story, whether egoistic, utilitarian, or evolutionary, is to miss the point; to confuse my question with some other – and thus to miss seeing a significant issue. Such indirect-consequentialist stories tell us why we have good reason to adopt the motivations characteristic of friendship; but they do not tell us how friendship’s value looks when viewed *through* the lens of those motivations. (Incidentally, this is why indirectly consequentialist arguments are really *reductiones ad absurdum* of consequentialism; they show that consequentialists themselves are committed, by their very own consequentialist principles, to rejecting those principles. Since indirect versions of consequentialism are the only ones that ever had any chance of being plausible to begin with, this result is rather embarrassing for consequentialism; but then again, what isn’t?)

Although I haven’t yet mentioned the name of Aristotle – or used it either – my entire discussion has obviously been Aristotelean in spirit. But it’s not clear that Aristotle himself ever answers my question. Aristotle identifies, among the principal benefits of friendship, the fact that it extends our activity⁶ and increases our self-knowledge.⁷ I think this identification is less odd than it looks. But

6. *Eudemian Ethics* VII. 8; *Nicomachean Ethics* IX. 7.

7. *Eudemian Ethics* VII. 12; *Nicomachean Ethics* IX. 9.

are these goods supposed to be *internal* to the friendship, or not? And will the answer be affected by whether these goods are related *instrumentally* or *constitutively* to friendship – or is that a separate issue? Aristotle apparently leaves these questions as exercises for the reader.

What do we value in friendship? Well, the friend, certainly. But which aspects of the friend, exactly? In any case, we don't just value the friend, but also our relationship with the friend. (It's only when something has gone wrong that we find ourselves valuing the friend but not the friendship. "If only I didn't care so much about this goddamn person. ...") Which aspects of the relationship do we value? Aristotle talks about living together by which he means, not sharing a residence (for Aristotle, most of real living is done outside the home) but sharing activities together. But which activities, and what aspects of them? Are there different answers for different kinds of friendship, or is there a common denominator?

These are questions we can ask, and try to answer, only after we have first cleared the path to asking my question. I have raked, and now I shall rest.⁸

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