

# IT TAKES ALL KINDS: ON FRIENDSHIP

By John Lysaker

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I. Friendship, like being, like almost anything, can be said in many ways. Aristotle, in *Nicomachean Ethics*, distinguished between three kinds of friends – use, pleasure, and character – depending on the kind of goals they jointly pursued, namely the useful, the pleasurable, or virtue. And one can observe those categories or their approximation in some contemporary practices. People speak of best friends, study buddies, and some have groups of friends who gather to enjoy sporting events. But there are also new categories such as the frenemy and many also have a host of social media friendships that range from intimate exchanges to little more than forgotten sums in a virtual ledger. These days, “friendship,” at least at the level of usage, travels without much friction across a diverse range of cases, marking distinctions within a broader field of sociality that includes acquaintances, allies, enemies, and strangers. What’s a philosopher to do?

One path seeks a definition minimal enough to make room for most usages but thick enough to maintain distinctions like friend and acquaintance. I will refuse this path, but not because it is incoherent. I just don’t feel the point. What itch is thereby scratched? Having digested claims about family resemblances and radial concepts, we not only are familiar with words having multiple meanings but attracted to the traction that differential usages provide. A good cook is one thing, a good friend another, and a good worker a wonderfully ambiguous third, not to mention “good day, sir!”

What does itch underneath a plurality of usage is a question of value. Are any of the phenomena thereby named better than the others? When one thinks about what relationships to cultivate, would it be a mistake to keep to friends of use and forgo friendships of pleasure? Are “best friends” the best friendship has to offer? Such questions prompt evaluations rather than definitions. And yet, regarding what conditions is one better than another? Goodwill? Companionship? And if various kinds of friendship realise the same goods, how (at what cost) and to what degree? A full assessment of the many kinds of friendship thus requires something like a moral psychology or better still, anthropology, given friendship is not only a matter of beliefs and affects but an enactment of cultural systems.

II. Relying on a series of Greek terms (*philia*, *eros*, *agape*), many consider friendship a species of love,

distinguishing *philia* from *eros*, for example, say by the breadth of its application and the affect contour of its occurrence. C.S. Lewis's *The Four Loves* is typical in this regard (1960), as is my own, essay, "Friendship at the End of Metaphysics" (1996). I've begun to have doubts, however. I certainly can be (and have been) in love with another who feels otherwise. But I can't 'be in friendship' with another who does not reciprocate.

Why does this matter? If we are to evaluate kinds of friendship, we need a feel for how they realise the goods that result from their occurrence. Thought as an interaction, "friendship" directs us toward conditions that enable, intensify, frustrate, stall, and/or compromise the interaction, which is always more than the affective regard of one for another. For example, building upon Aristotle's observation that friends tend to live together, one might argue that friendship requires ongoing affiliation, and that limited affiliation will contract the friendship even if the affection one feels remains the same. Similarly, one might wonder what's best for the friendship, which is not quite the same as what's best for one's friend. If that sounds strange, imagine that one might forgo a job located far away because that will put too much pressure on one's marriage. Not that it will be too hard on one's partner—it will be too hard on the partnership. So too with friendships. One might elect to live somewhere because doing so will maintain vital friendships. Or, moving away, one might grieve the inevitable weakening of something (rather than someone) that one holds dear. Taking friendship as an interaction thus clarifies the phenomenon as thoroughly relational, renders more salient how some of the goods of friendship are secured and nurtured, and discloses how they are good for us as well as you and me.

III. While friendships are conducted in many ways, certain features characterise enough of them to warrant generalisations. The first is a kind of affection – friends enjoy and so desire each other's company in a range of activities that can be limited or expansive. If my company never brings you any enjoyment, your willingness to accompany me is more of a favour or obligation than an enactment of friendship. Not that friends do not do favours for one another, including attending events they'd otherwise avoid. But in general, they enjoy being with the other.

But affection is insufficient for friendship. Friends do things together, and freely. I presume all will agree that coercing or bribing another does not render the resulting interaction a friendship. And as noted, friendship is enacted rather than simply felt. Friends make time for one another. If I decline to help you paint your living room but call whenever I decide to refresh mine, we're not friends of use – I'm using you. If I never 'like' or comment on your posts, something is amiss, as when we "hide" certain people on social media accounts.

The weak, if not corrosive, character of bad faith alliances also suggest that friendship is not only a voluntary affiliation but sincere, as Emerson suggested in "Friendship" (1840). My affection must be genuine, and my affiliation based on the reasons I give or the feelings I express. Otherwise, the relation is counterfeit.

Friendship is also characterised by goodwill. Friends wish each other well, hence the category of "frenemy," one who meets the above conditions but occasionally undermines us. Suppose I routinely ask you to dinner but propose cuisine you dislike. Friends of pleasure wish each other a pleasurable time, and this certainly falls short. Similarly, if I agree to help you paint and half-ass it, well: 'with friends like you...'

## **WHEN ONE THINKS ABOUT WHAT RELATIONSHIPS TO CULTIVATE, WOULD IT BE A MISTAKE TO KEEP TO FRIENDS OF USE AND FORGO FRIENDSHIPS OF PLEASURE?**

IV. There are other basic contours to friendship, and more to say about those I've already indicated, namely affection, voluntary affiliation, sincerity, and goodwill. But let me explore a handful of goods that one finds when these conditions are met. As social animals, humans desire companionship, even need it to varying degrees. There are times when we say, even to strangers: "I am happy for the company." And we prize affability

as an excellence of informal sociality because of the modest companionship it helps generate. Yes, it makes various transactions easier, but it also comforts, and that is a good associated with most if not all kinds of friendship – it's better than being alone.

Friends do more than provide company, however. We seem to dilate in their presence, and that is another way in which friendship is better than being alone. Friends usually make whatever we do better, maybe turning a chore into an excuse to hang out, share stories, laugh, as well as remove some shrubs from the backyard. Or they can take an established pleasure, and intensify it, as happens when we attend concerts and sporting events or share meals with friends. Friends not only provide company, therefore, but their company often enriches the activity in question.

## **EXPERIENCES ARE NOT ONLY ENRICHED BY THE PRESENCE OF FRIENDS, BUT THEY ALLOW US TO BE OURSELVES IN A MORE UNGUARDED MANNER.**

Experiences are not only enriched by the presence of friends, but they allow us to be ourselves in a more unguarded manner. One could think this effect in terms of the power of recognition, which affirms sense of self and builds self-trust. "You get me," we think among friends. But friendship is more generative than this. Not that friendships do not accord recognition – they do, and with a degree of specificity that broader cultural phenomena rarely achieve. (Take recognition to be a third good of friendship, therefore.) But one might limit recognition to an acknowledgement of pre-existing traits, capacities and identity, and in friendships we grow into ourselves. Film buffs develop a taste in common, maybe even a vocabulary, what we might call a way of seeing that is now characteristic of them. "Are you saying that friendship allows us to be ourselves?" To a degree, but my claim is a bit stronger. In friendship, we become who we aren't, or rather, who we otherwise probably would not have been, at least not in this way. So, should a friend say to another, "I'm

more myself with you," I would get it. They became that self with them, which discloses a fourth good of friendship, call it personal growth.

One reason we can come into our own in the company of friends is because, to some degree, we come to see through them. And while this is possible given the basic character of intersubjectivity, the goodwill of friendship leads us to take our friend's viewpoint seriously, to modulate it until it becomes ours even if, in another way, we do not share it. I can't hear certain music without hearing the voices of friends directing me toward certain dimensions that tickle the fancy of some and grate upon others. In a way, these friendships make possible a kind of ensemble listening, which indicates a related but differently toned good to that of coming into our own, call it reflective distance. The intimacy of friendship refracts our dispositions and opens vantage points we would not access on our own, or at least not without greater difficulty.

One also can turn to friends in times of distress or need. Friends support one another, and care certainly seems a good of friendship. Not that friends don't worry about importuning one another, and asymmetrical dependencies can introduce tensions into a friendship should one feel overtaxed or the other diminished by their need. But the goodwill of friendship tends toward care, and not just in a reactive manner. Friends look out for one another as well. Should I learn that a love interest of yours feels similarly and not share the information, you will feel let down, and justifiably. Friends are there for us even when we're not, and so, like the trusted, they expand our agency by being agents on our behalf.

V. I've glossed six goods of friendship: companionship, experiential enrichment, recognition, personal growth, reflective distance, and care. And I believe there to be more. But let me close by thinking about whether we can use my moral anthropological sketch to provide orders of value to the many ways in which we can be 'friends.' An intuitive way to generate a rank order is to determine which friendships realise what goods, how effectively, and with what intensity, and to assess the relative value of each good. Easier said than done, no doubt. How does one measure the intensity of a good, and how does one compare goods such as recognition and companionship? Uniform measures such as weight and temperature often enable comparisons across

differing things but the 'goodness' of goods doesn't seem to be that sort of thing. All is not lost, however, if Aristotle is to be believed, or more importantly, followed, as one follows out a convincing example.

Aristotle regards friendship as a good because most, if not all, would take a life with friends over a similar life without them. Instead of applying a metric of goodness to locate the value of a disposition or interaction, he explores how they have been culturally assessed and works through disagreements, often revising their terms in the process. And we can do the same, that is, we can explore how a life unfolds when companionship occurs without recognition and when our companions also recognise us, and articulate which, if any, results in a better life. Yes, the process is inexact and open to ongoing contestation, but so it goes with ethics, according to Aristotle. The process of ethical reflection takes its leave from convention and personal experience, renders them articulate, and proposes results to others whose assessment likewise remains accountable. "But isn't that unduly conservative?" Yes, it conserves the sedimented learning of a given community (is that a bad thing?), but nothing prevents someone who discourses in this manner from contesting broad social habits based upon different experiences and other traditions. But rather than continue to address these issues in the abstract, let's explore some concrete questions, with the understanding that nothing like a systematic assessment is on offer.

VI. My first observation is that one should not undervalue friendships of pleasure, which involve interactions in pursuit of shared pleasures like watching movies, rooting for a favourite team, gardening, dining, etc. Not only do they provide pleasure, but companionship, and depending on the pleasure some measure of recognition, and in two ways. Friends recognise the legitimacy and value of the desire for that pleasure, and they recognise in one another the capabilities needed to discern that pleasure, say the delicacy with which a trumpeter handles a musical phrase. And if the people involved are broadly companionable, the friendship might expand into other pleasures or even a different kind of friendship. The limit of such friendships is that each party only brings a slice of themselves and their lives to the shared pursuit, and that truncates the kind of care and breadth of recognition such friendships provide. Moreover, a life limited to friendships of

pleasure might contract the parties' normative horizons, leaving them unreflective about the full character and consequences of the pleasures pursued and/or ignorant of other ends many believe are integral to a good life, say the pursuit of justice or the exercise of virtues such as generosity.

If I have correctly identified potential limits in friendships of pleasure (and by analogy, in all friendships that only circulate in a few, discrete domains of life), I also have begun to indicate better modes of friendship, namely, those that engage more of who we are and what we do and so provide a wider range of comfort, recognition, care, etc. And the test of the claim would be the same one Aristotle uses to argue that friendship is a nearly universal good – most if not all would choose more expansive friendships over narrower ones. But note, we often do not need to choose, which is good because narrower friendships might not be worse in all respects. Certain friends might stimulate a side of us that is rarely engaged in broader, deeper friendships, say a delight in bowling or a weakness for silly jokes, and so, were we to forgo such relationships, we would consider ourselves worse off. But usually, we needn't even if we regard other friendships as more valuable.

## **MORE EXPANSIVE FRIENDSHIPS ARE USUALLY CAST AS FRIENDSHIPS OF CHARACTER OR ETHOS, AND THEY ORIENT THE VALUATIONS OF MANY PRE-MODERN AND EARLY MODERN CONCEPTIONS OF FRIENDSHIP**

More expansive friendships are usually cast as friendships of character or *ethos*, and they orient the valuations of many pre-modern and early modern conceptions of friendship, including Cicero's and Montaigne's. But this isn't quite what I have in mind when I imagine friendships able to circulate across

my life. Cicero, in *De Amicitia*, holds that friendship involves harmony or accord or agreement (*consensio*) in “all things, human and divine, conjoined with mutual goodwill and affection,” whereas Montaigne, recalling his friendship with Etienne de La Boétie, writes in his *Essais*: “But in the friendship I speak of, they mix and work themselves into one piece, with so universal a mixture, that there is no more sign of the seam by which they were first conjoined.” On the one hand, the difference I have in mind is one of emphasis. Life friendships (my term for these broad engagements), share lives and the various challenges, pleasures, triumphs, and failures that accompany them. They not only live with one another but in some sense for one another – their lives are joint projects. But a friendship of ethos acquires the breadth it has because the friends share a deeply similar if not identical conception of the good life. Such lives are less joint projects, therefore, than trajectories that mirror one another, which might lead the two, following Aristotle, to regard one another as another self.

## **IF WE DIFFER OR DISAGREE AND WISH EACH OTHER WELL, WE SHOULD COMMIT TO STEEPENING EACH OTHER’S LEARNING CURVES, AND ASSESSING THE RELATIVE VALUE OF EACH OTHER’S COMMITMENTS.**

I came to “life friendship” and its emphasis out of respect for ordinary usage and the experiences it reflects. Most people have a range of friends with whom they share varying dimensions of their lives, and often within contexts of evolving difference, even disagreement. Even among friends who are drawn to art, each likely resonates differently across art domains and their various genres, and they might enjoy these differences as potential sites of ongoing education and growth. Similarly, two friends might

talk about and work through issues arising across their lives even if those lives are markedly different, as when one has children and the other does not, or one is active in political life and the other is averse to collective deliberation even while recognising its importance. And they might not simply tolerate those differences but appreciate the varying perspectives they afford. Similarly, I can imagine a group of friends – some vegan, some vegetarian, others omnivores – in which each tends to the needs of the others, and in differential ways depending on where, when, and why they are sharing the meal. I also can imagine friends that differ along political lines, with one drawn to a thick, republican conception of “the people” while the other favours a liberal state that strives to provide as much room for individual difference as possible.

On my view, such seams of difference and disagreement open a dimension within life friendships that friendships of ethos, at least as imagined by the likes of Cicero and Montaigne, foreclose. And it is a valuable difference because it turns life friendships into an ongoing learning process that initiates and supports ongoing personal growth, which I previously proposed as one of the goods of friendship. Learning curves enter the arc of life friendships because affection and goodwill incline us to learn about our friends, about their likes and dislikes, their values and aversions. If someone shows zero interest in these, I would be suspicious about any affection for me they might express. Moreover, I can’t treat another well if I don’t know where they believe their good lies, and I would be remiss if I did not share with a life friend what I’ve found to be valuable, marginal, and deleterious.

But what if strict accord is present among friends? Might that not be better? I think it unlikely that two people will agree about “all things, human and divine.” It seems more likely that there will be points of agreement, dissonance, and disagreement among sincere life friends, particularly over time, and not just over minor matters. Life friends sometimes disagree about how to raise children, where the mean of generosity lies, and what amount of time is owed to projects of social justice. And if that is so, idealising friendship in a Ciceronian manner courts disappointment and institutes conditions that encourage people to dissimulate or fill their friendship with pockets of silence. Moreover, it converts a

potential opportunity into a loss. The opportunity lies in the reflective distance that is one of the goods of friendship, a distance that grows more perspicacious in the context of difference and disagreement modulated by affection and goodwill. If we see eye to eye on all things, neither of us will provide the other with reflective distance. But if we differ or disagree and wish each other well, we should commit to steepening each other's learning curves, and assessing the relative value of each other's commitments. Learning together is another way of living together and for one another.

Friendships that admit of differentiation and contestation were celebrated in the nineteenth century by the likes of Blake and Emerson, but as with all things, one can overstate the case. In the least, life friends need to share capacities required for participation in a generative learning curve, which involves something like a shared ethos. And while it will be less comprehensive than what Cicero imagines, it will be thick enough to generate a character grounded in honesty, patience, and generosity, none of which are easy to come by in a consistent manner. Second, thinking of the friend as a "beautiful enemy," as Emerson does, is quite different than suspending judgment altogether. Goodwill is incompatible with indifference, and it refuses to enable what one regards as self-destructive or abhorrent behaviour. But in cases where we both can see good reasons for each other's tendencies and commitments, and better still, recognise the character of our friend in those tendencies and commitments (and so appreciate their integrity, as it were), a kind of value pluralism becomes possible that renders friendship an ongoing experiment fuelled by goodwill.

What though of the so-called "best friend," an idea that needn't be given a seamless, classical cast? Is it right to identify one among a group of life friends as the best, and to try to maximise one's time with them, perhaps even allow other friendships to contract? As I understand it, ethical judgments are matters of degrees rather than up and down judgments, so let me close by preaching caution about the idea of the *best* friend. Keats observes that the "best of Men have but a portion of good in them — a kind of spiritual yeast in their frames which creates the ferment of existence." If so, we should be wary of maintaining constricted social circles, and not just for our sake but also for our friends'. If we wish them well, we should encourage them to find

a range of friends that provide a variety of reflective distances, including on our own potential limits, with the caveat that should they learn something of interest, their goodwill for us will lead them to share it.

But it isn't just that we all have limits. It is likely that we also have interests and capacities whose fermentation requires other yeasts. Presuming this range of differentiation among persons, the good of personal growth is more intensely realised across a group of life friends rather than through a solitary best friend, and again, the goodwill of friends should wish a fit circle for one another and not regard that range of affection as a diminishment. "You do you," even if its without me from time to time.

## **FRIENDSHIPS PROVE BETTER WHEN THEY MULTIPLY AND DIFFERENTIATE AND SO CHECK OUR LIMITS AND METABOLISE OUR VARIED POTENTIALS.**

There are limits, of course, enforced by the demanding nature of life friends. We can only know and attend to so many people, and if we spread ourselves too thinly, it will be difficult to provide our friends with care, recognition, and some of the other goods of friendship. In fact, we might end up letting them down. But I think we shouldn't assume that the best friend sits atop a rank order of friendships. Instead, friendships prove better when they multiply and differentiate and so check our limits and metabolise our varied potentials.