

# On Friendship

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Friendship, in all times and all cultures, is considered a virtue – a moral goodness. It has been discussed in classical literature as well as in contemporary writings. In India we have the Sanskrit verse on friendship. A friend is one who sees you through thick and thin, and stands by you in your good days as well as in your adversity. It goes as follows:

utsave vyasane caiba  
durbikshe rastraviplave  
rajodvare sasmane ca  
yatisthati sa vandhavah

In ancient Greece there had been much discussion on friendship both in Plato's dialogues *Lysis* and *Symposium* and Aristotle's *Nichomachean Ethics*<sup>1</sup> and *Eudemian Ethics*<sup>2</sup>. Aristotle has distinguished between different kinds of friendship. These are as follows:

- (1) There is the friendship based on utility; the bond is formed primarily on the basis of mutual utility. This is found in business relations, e.g., "I have a friend in the air lines; he can check the status of the air ticket".

There is the friendship based on pleasure, where the basis of friendship is shared pleasure, e.g., the friendship between music-lovers and viewers of films. The shared interest in listening to music and viewing films makes them friends. In this connection, it would perhaps, not be beside the point, to recount a real life story published, some years ago in the monthly magazine *Reader's Digest*. One young man and one young

woman met during an adventure tour in the wilderness of America. The shared pleasure in undertaking the adventures, the hardships and challenges created a bond of friendship between the two strangers.

The friendships just mentioned are, according to Aristotle, secondary forms of friendship. They are easily dissolved and tend to disappear when the source of friendship dries up. Though useful and necessary for everyday living, they are not true friendships. To go back to the story of the Digest, the friendship was lost after coming back to the civilized world. The young lady who is the narrator of the story avers that the friendship that flowered in the wild did not survive in the city.

What, then, is true or perfect friendship? What is first friendship according to Aristotle? It is an important human good. It is a human condition in which two persons of equal character, equal in virtue, mutually care for each other for their own sake. Thus, friendship is on the basis of character. Such a friendship endures as long as virtue endures and is not easily dissolved.

Aristotle, who has written extensively on friendship and who values it very much, calls the friend a “second self” (*allos or heteros autos*). What is his argument for saying this? It goes like that. Friendship proceeds from self-love. We all love ourselves. Aristotle claims that a man is his own best friend. He ought to love himself the best. Self-love is very common. What is the basis of the self-love? It is not the self as a seeker of pleasure, money or honors but the self as a rational being. Self-love has two senses. One is equivalent to self-interest and is used of those who run after money, honors, and pleasures to themselves, gratifying the irrational part of their soul. In the second sense it is used of the person who assigns to himself what is most truly good, the deliberative or rational part of the soul. Living a life of reason is a virtue, a good, a worthy thing, a life worth living. When a person recognizes the same virtues which he admires and cherishes in himself, in another person, there is perfect friendship between them. True friends, Aristotle tells us are friends of equal virtues. This prompts Aristotle to say that a friend is one with whom one shares a single soul. The friend

is a soul mate. What is a friend, then? A single self and two bodies. Our friends manifest those traits of character which we cherish in ourselves. In perfect friendship between equally virtuous persons one friend will share the other’s character. This means that what one cherishes in oneself he will also recognize and admire in the other. True friends are character friends.

It is needless to say that true or perfect friendship which is called first friendship is a two-way traffic. The recognition of virtues is a mutual recognition. One of the parties cannot remain indifferent. Aristotle has a reciprocalist or mutualist scheme of friendship. This mutuality is reserved for men because it implies the faculty of deliberation which belongs neither to animals nor to God. As Derrida observes in his gloss on Aristotle, God has no friends. For He has no use of friends. He thinks himself and nothing else.<sup>3</sup>

Aristotle well understands the inestimable value of friendship because he believes that man aspires for happiness. A happy life is a life excellently or virtuously lived. A happy life is a self-sufficient life, lacking in nothing. A friend is necessary for the self-sufficiency. One who lacks a friend lacks self-sufficiency. And if he is not self-sufficient he is not happy. Hence, it is necessary for one who wants to be happy to have excellent friends. It is to be noted that not only Aristotle but other thinkers too have put friendship within a moral framework. The intimacy of a close friend is seen as a kind of self-examination and character-improvement. As Nancy Sherman observes:

Each is inspired to develop himself more completely as he sees the admirable qualities . . . manifest in another whom he esteems . . . Character friends . . . are eminently suited as models to be emulated.<sup>4</sup>

A similar thought is found expressed in Laurence Thomas. According to him because of the love friends have for each other they are committed to each other’s flourishing. Now the expression “flourishing” occurs many times in Aristotle’s ethics. It signifies “living well” or “living

successfully”, which the friend seeks to enhance rather than stifle.<sup>5</sup>

However, if we consult our everyday experience friendship does not always inspire us to moral improvement. There is a gap between the philosopher’s accounts of the good of friendship and everyday experience. Friendship may involve moral risks. Through loyalty to a friend one can be led into moral wrong doing. Close friends are dangerous.

Dean Cocking and Jeanette Kennett in their article, “Friendship and Moral Danger”<sup>6</sup> have focused on the conflict between friendship and morality. They have argued that the good of a friendship has little to do with morality. The attempt to embed the good of friendship wholly within a moral framework is said to be “absurd” by them. It is rather the value of friendship that may conflict with moral considerations and may at times override such considerations. To substantiate their contention they have resorted to the analysis of a film, *Death in Brunswick*. Let us follow the story and its analysis by Cocking and Kennett.

Carl is the protagonist in the film. He has many defects of character and he cooks in a night club of dubious reputation. His assistant Mustapha is a dealer in drugs. He was badly beaten up by the strongmen of the night club and was told that Carl is responsible for the beating. So one night he enters the kitchen and attacks Carl. Carl had a multiple-pronged fork in his hand. Mustapha falls on it and dies. In acute panic Carl calls his best friend Dave. When Dave saw the dead body his immediate reaction was to call the police. But Carl begs him not to do so as it would mean his going to the jail and he cannot cope with a jail-life. So Dave helps Carl to move the body and takes it to the cemetery where Dave works. Dave breaks into a coffin in an open grave, stamps on the decaying decomposing corps to make room for Mustapha and re-closes the coffin. Later they deny all knowledge of Mustapha to his wife and son. Dave’s actions are a series of wrong doings by any standard. And they show the moral danger of friendship.

Cocking and Kennett’s observation is that although Dave has failed as a moral agent in failing to do what he ought and doing what he

ought not have done, he has not failed as a friend. One might even think that it is the requirement of close friendship in the circumstance that makes him do what he does, and he fails Carl seriously if he does not. Carl’s asking for help is an appeal to Dave’s friendship and he regards Dave’s action as a mark of the strength of their friendship.<sup>7</sup> Friendship is a valuable relationship and that it is part of both the nature and value of friendship that one may be led morally astray by the demands of friendship.<sup>8</sup> In this way, against the dominant philosophical account of a highly moralized conception of friendship the authors of “Friendship and Moral Danger” have upheld a view of friendship in which Dave’s action is not against moral reason. In so far as he acts for Carl’s view of his own good, he acts for a moral reason. In their words “. . . many apparent conflicts between friendship and morality should better be seen as conflicts within morality”<sup>9</sup> To reject my friend just when she is in trouble, whether through her own fault or not suggests that I fail to be a friend. To be a friend is to turn to our friends when they are in trouble even when it involves certain moral wrong doing.

The second question that arises is: Who can be a friend? Both in classical writings and critical literature the friend is a brother. The notion of friends as brothers promises for relationships built on intimate connection and like-mindedness. It suggests both equality of rights and intimacy. Aristotle had a reciprocalist or mutualist theory of friendship. But the reciprocity or mutuality is incomplete. For friends are equal and bound by the bonds of fraternity. Friends speak directly with one another; there is a face to face communication between friends. Friendship signifies liberty, equality, fraternity. Women do not enjoy liberty nor are they equal and hence fraternity with the men folk is out of the question. They occupy the private space while the men are in the public space. Woman is the symbol of the erotic. She is an object of male love. There cannot be perfect friendship between men and women. Commenting on this Derrida says that in all the philosophical discourse on friendship, on the one hand, there is a double exclusion of friendship between women and on the other between men and women.<sup>10</sup> And further on referring to Nietzsche Derrida says: “Women are not capable of friendship. She only knows love”. The

question remains if friendship between women is unnatural and conceived of as immoral.

As Derrida clearly understands it the goods internal to friendship bring with them their own challenges. Aristotle did not address these challenges because he conceived of friendship as a relationship between men, specifically good men in virtue of their goodness. The androcentric notion of friendship has been challenged by the feminists. The fact that women are repeatedly pushed to the inner quarters is a sign of their spilling over to the boundary. There is no reason why there cannot be a stable friendship between men and women and between women themselves. There is also the need to dislodge the supreme role assigned to reason as a male virtue and reorient human relationship in terms of emotion and feeling. In fact Derrida's criticism of logo-centrism in Western tradition has been an important trend setter in decentralizing reason. Though, it cannot rid us, once and for all, of the concepts fundamental to rationalism, it can transform them, displace them, and turn them against their presuppositions and little by little to modify the terrain of our thought and thereby to produce new configurations.

### References:

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2. *Eudemian Ethics in The Athenian Constitution*, trans., H.Rackham, Loeb Classical Editions, Cambridge: Harvard, 1952.
3. *J.Derrida, Politics of Friendship*, London: Verso, 1997, p.361.
4. "Aristotle on the Shared Life" in Neera K. Badhwar, *Friendship: A Philosophical Reader*, Ithaca: Cornell, 1993, PP.91-107.
5. *Living Morally: Psychology of Moral Character*, Philadelphia: Temple, 1989, pp. 153-55.

6. "Friendship and Moral Danger", *The Journal of Philosophy*, 2000, pp. 278-96.
7. *Ibid.*, p.280.
8. *Ibid.*, p.279.
9. *Ibid.*, p.283.
10. J. Derrida. op.cit., p.362.