

FROM THE EDITORS – The Keys to Understanding Friendship (A.M.W.)

The ancient Greeks wrote so much about friendship that the authors who succeeded them, both historical ones and our contemporaries, were rarely able to go beyond the ideas of Aristotle and Cicero (who was also a follower of the former), as if the entire philosophical enquiry into friendship were to forever remain a collection of footnotes to the Stagirite's works. References to them are also surprisingly frequent in the articles included in the present volume of *Ethos*. This fact seems to confirm the opinion that Aristotle's place in the history of philosophical thinking on friendship is exceptional, regardless of whether his standpoint is accepted without reservation, reinterpreted or criticized.

We are in fact indebted to Aristotle for the discovery of friendship as one of the most important human affairs. According to Władysław Tatarkiewicz, the Aristotelian ethics of friendship complements the ethics of intellectual life, as well as civil ethics, because in the light of the Stagirite's most mature insights, friendship appears as irreducible, precious in itself, indeed autotelic. The Aristotelian ethical legacy, however, is not free from ambivalence – the truth on friendship is obscured and distorted by a eudaimonistic and perfectionist theory of the good. It seems that in order to save what is essential in Aristotle's concept of friendship, one needs to separate it from his ethical system, into which it was too precipitately forced. *Amicus Aristoteles...*, but the full truth on friendship is to be sought elsewhere.

Even the Stagirite's idea of friendship as good will, which enables him to surpass the limits of his eudaimonistic discourse, disappoints the contemporary reader whose sensitivity has been formed by the Christian message of the neighbourly love. According to the Athenian sage, the source of good will is not the truth about one's neighbour, but the truth about oneself. "For men say that one ought to love best one's best friend, and man's best friend is one who wishes well to the object of his wish for his sake ... and these attributes are found most of all in a man's attitude towards himself ... it is from this relation that all the characteristics of friendship have extended to our neighbours," writes Aristotle, and concludes: "[Man] is his own best friend and therefore ought to love himself best."¹ It is hardly questionable that friendship with oneself is a necessary form of friendship, lending consistency to one's personality as that of a subject, increasing the awareness of one's own worth and motivating to improvement. What seems doubtful is considering friendship with oneself as the paradigm of friendship as such. The eudaimonistic perspective, centered on the subject's own perfection, overlooks the primary element of the lived experience of friendship, namely, the bond between friends, the intersubjective relationship that, to a certain extent, constitutes also the subjects involved in it.

St. Augustine has movingly expressed such an experience, telling the story of his friend's death: "At this grief my heart was utterly darkened; and whatever I beheld was death. My native country was a torment to me, and my father's house a strange unhappiness; and whatever I had shared with him, wanting him, became a distracting torture. Mine eyes sought him everywhere, but he was not granted them; and I hated all places, for that they had not him; nor could they now tell me, 'he is coming,' as when he was alive and absent. I became a great riddle to myself, and I asked my soul, why she was so sad, and why she disquieted me sorely: but she knew not what to answer me."² The loss of a friend involves an experience of the loss of the good that the friend himself is. It is not an injury to one's perfection that causes pain, however

¹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1168 b, trans. W.D. Ross (<http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/nicomachaen.9.ix.html>).

deep the injury might be, but the severance of the ties between persons. Friendship consists not only in valuing the qualities of a friend, but also and above all in valuing his or her very presence, due to which friendship becomes a relation between persons devoted to one another. Reciprocity appears as the fundamental value underlying all the qualities that friendship contributes to the life of the individuals engaged in it. Why should it not bring them happiness, especially if they are selflessly disposed to one another?

Although Aristotle has provided us with valuable insights into friendship, he seems to have used an inappropriate philosophical key to interpret it. Thus it is necessary to seek other paradigms to enable a better elucidation of the phenomenon of friendship, so intriguing, and so unchanging, despite the multifarious and dynamic transformations of culture. The Biblical tradition, personalist philosophy, narrative ethics and the contemporary pedagogical and linguistic awareness have shed more light on the essence of friendship. None of them rejects Aristotle's view on the importance of friendship among human affairs; they all, however, influence our understanding of why friendship is so precious and beautiful.

Christians are aware of the nearness of God who unites with man in Jesus Christ. Jesus reveals God as Father, and himself as his disciples' Friend. "You are my friends if you do what I command you. I no longer call you slaves, because a slave does not know what his master is doing. I have called you friends, because I have told you everything I have heard from my Father" (John 15:14-15).

Jesus' teaching on friendship between God and man is rooted in the Old Testament, which, in its entirety, may be read as a "book of friendship." God the Creator of man and woman, and the God of the Covenant present in human history, acts in it as man's friend. In ancient Greek thought friendship was considered as an exclusively human relationship, possible only between equal individuals, whereas in the Hebrew tradition friendship is regarded as the core of religious life and described as a gift from God that elevates its recipients. The transcendent God becomes accessible to human beings, and so the story of salvation told in the Bible becomes a tale of God's friendship and fidelity. In this way the fragile and transient human friendship is redeemed and renewed by God's action.

The Bible provides numerous examples of cultivating friendship between people regardless of their gender, nationality, and social conditions, since friendship is, by its nature, a unifying factor that harmonizes differences. Friends are chosen: it is impossible to befriend anybody or to befriend everybody. However, "otherness" of any kind, such as for instance a person being a woman, a foreigner or a subordinate, must not exclude him or her from the circle of possible friends. Of this the Biblical authors seek to convince us.

In the anthropological perspective that emerges from the theological one, the Bible indicates the personalist paradigm as the appropriate key to the understanding of human affairs, among which friendship occupies an outstanding position. Neither in the New Testament nor in the Old Testament do we find personalism as a theory (it was developed only when the Christian message encountered the mentality of the Greeks) – but the Biblical texts contain a narrative that discloses the person's worth and her capacity for communion. The Bible never speaks directly about the person, but it narrates about individuals engaged in particular mutual relationships adequate to the nature of a personal being: they may be the bonds of friendship, or their opposite: the attitude of hostility.

² St. Augustine, *The Confessions*, Book IV, 4, trans. E.B. Pusey (<http://www.sacred-texts.com/chr/augconf/aug04.htm>).

The Bible retains its hermeneutic ability to reveal man to himself, what is more, the Biblical narrative calls for a normative reflection, consistent with the universal experience of being human. It seems that the beauty of friendship is grounded in the presence of the personal element that permeates human relationships and prevents them from exhausting themselves in the pursuit of objective goods, even if the latter are conceived of as the goods for persons bound in friendship.

The Aristotelian insight into the mutual improvement of friends through the virtue of friendship can be even better appreciated from the vantage point of personalist ethics that commands the affirmation of the person for her own sake. Once moral obligation is no longer subordinated to the natural pursuit of happiness, ethics becomes a normative discipline in the proper sense of the term.

The narrative style of ethical discourse, however, is not an alternative to normative ethics. In fact, an open, yet clearly delineated normative space is the territory where friendship “happens” in its diverse existential forms. Stories of friendships, of those fulfilled and those unfulfilled, lasting and unreliable, denied and redeemed, considered as a redeeming power or as an illness, show the paradoxes of friendship and teach us to be cautious in applying simple categories to human affairs. The normative mode of thinking, characteristic of ethical investigations, emerges as a horizon embracing a varied landscape vibrant with life. We will be able to appreciate how lively and interesting it appears, once we understand that it is an “anthropological landscape” that – as Socrates believed – provides abundant material to authors of both tragedies and comedies.³

The tension between norm and fact does not necessarily lead to resignation or pessimism, although numerous thinkers complain about the absence or eclipse of friendship, or even diagnose its twilight in the contemporary culture, deeply permeated by pragmatism and hedonism. Even such a clear-headed thinker as Clive Staples Lewis cannot conceal his nostalgia for the times when friendship was given more attention. Undoubtedly, we can talk about the crisis of this human relationship. Yet, if we look under the surface of the currently prevailing mentality, we will be able to perceive numerous symptoms of the resilience of friendship. Like other authentic human experiences, it cannot be fully eradicated and continues to be valued, declared and expected. This state of affairs demands the pedagogical courage to reinstate friendship to its due position in the educational process, to place it in its centre instead of keeping it on the peripheries. It is difficult to appreciate friendship without learning its taste in childhood and adolescence. This observation would be banal but for the fact that an appallingly great number of individuals believe cultivating friendship is not an appropriate pursuit for adults.

Not only love, but also friendship can develop thanks to eros, the inner force that enlivens one’s interest in the existence of another person. Czesław Miłosz expressed it in an autobiographical reflection on his lived experience of friendship: “An erotic background does exist in friendships between men, but it would be ridiculous to immediately start talking about homoeroticism. It is a physical joy, the eyes’ joy at the sight of a friend, the same as at the sight of a woman whom we love, a kind of affirmation of being.”⁴

The decline of eros in human relationships, which Benedict XVI reflected upon in his Encyclical Letter *Deus Caritas est*, seems also to affect the temperature of friendship.

³ See: Plato, *Symposium*, 223 D, trans. B. Jowett, (<http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/symposium.html>).

⁴ Czesław Miłosz, *A Year of the Hunter*, trans. M.G. Levine (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1995), 69.

Dispassionately shared common interests are insufficient to unite friends and make them, as the ancients said, “one soul in two bodies.” Passion and mutual fascination are necessary for individuals to become friends and save their friendship when it is put to trial.

Let us direct our attention also to the role of examples in the culture of friendship. It is common knowledge that examples, not words, attract us. Remembering particular friendships between famous individuals as well as ordinary ones creates the climate in which the ideals of friendship as such are cultivated. The present volume of *Ethos* includes a series of articles commemorating the late Cardinal Stanisław Nagy, who passed away several months ago. For almost twenty five years he served as President of the Advisory Research Board of the John Paul II Institute at the Catholic University of Lublin. From its beginnings, the milieu of the Institute developed as a community inspired by the friendship between Fr. Tadeusz Styczeń and Fr. Stanisław Nagy, who were both professors of this university. Each of them was also a good friend of Karol Wojtyła, whose election to the Holy See did not interrupt the history of his relations with friends; he continued them now as Pope John Paul II, giving them an even richer meaning, and thus showing that the Church is a space of friendship. A similar openness to friendship is characteristic of Pope Francis. His encounters with his old friends are not sentimental, but express the idea of the Church as a community of persons close to one another and united by Jesus Christ. Telephone calls to his friends and acquaintances have become a part of the Pope’s service to his contemporaries.

The presence of the Church in the world is manifested in different ways, the path of friendship being, in a sense, the noblest of them all; despite its modesty, or perhaps thanks to it, the way of friendship seems the most fruitful pastoral method. Ultimately, the source of the singularity of human encounters lies in the naturalness with which we live through our friendships. An eloquent testimony to the culture of friendship in the biography of Pope Francis can be found in his conversations with Rabbi Abraham Skorka in which he engaged as the Archbishop of Buenos Aires. Revealing the secret of the book co-authored with Skorka, Jorge Bergoglio revealed also the secret of friendship: “Rabbi Skorka and I have been able to dialogue, and it has done us good. I do not remember how our dialogue started, but I can remember that there were no barriers or reservations. His simplicity was without pretense, and this facilitated things. I could even ask him jokingly, after a loss by River Plate, if that day he was going to eat ‘hen soup.’ When he proposed to me that we publish some of our dialogues, my ‘yes’ was spontaneous. Reflecting later, in solitude, I thought that the explanation for this quick response was due to our experience of dialogue during quite a bit of time; a rich experience that consolidated a friendship and that would give testimony of our walk together from our distinct religious identities.”⁵

Translated by Patrycja Mikulska

⁵ Jorge Mario Bergoglio, Abraham Skorka, *On Heaven and Earth* (New York: Random House, 2013), xv.