

Philosophy and Friendship

At dire times like the present, friendship becomes a much-valued concept. Like me, I suppose you are all checking through your address book for old friends you have somehow failed to keep up with. Now seems like the time to do this. Friendship of course is not a new human activity. Philosophers have defined and described it in a variety of ways.

We form friendships for many reasons including the evolutionary one that serves the important purpose of providing us with social inclusion and a sense of identity; our friends provide us with a firm sense of 'who we are' ---indeed a social evaluation. **Epicurus** (341-270BCE) had no doubts, although his followers lived apart from main Greek city states :

"We don't exist unless there is someone who can see us existing; what we say has no meaning until someone can understand; friends confirm our identity--- give us knowledge; they know our weaknesses and values"

Aristotle discusses it as part of his writings on Ethics (how we should live our lives). He considered three categories of friendship: there are *Friends of Utility*, who you know professionally, or from your workplace, business contacts who you like; these can be used by you or vice versa; whereby a modicum of utility suits you both. In Aristotle's day this would cover politicians, military commanders, Sophists and fellow lecturers at the Lyceum. The second type is *Friends of Pleasure* : a fluid arrangement where contact is a social one; you are both entertained and amused in company of each other. The third category he calls *Friends of the Good*: these are the close intimate relationships I allow for honesty, open debate ---and of course, as he would insist, the transference of reason and knowledge, which is the essential *Good* he (and Socrates) refers to. Most prominent Athenians in those days had close acquaintances; confidantes, usually of intimate young males.

Naturally, as the history of ideas moved on so did perceptions as to the role of friendship. **Michel de Montaigne**(1553-1592 *Essais*), although spending much of his life alone in his vast library, valued his few friends as being

"...more essential than the elements of water or fire...they understand us for who we think we are"

La Boetie was his closest friend, the catalyst for his vast philosophical output; *"who allows me to extend my mind to writing about important things"*
Montaigne's chance encounter with La B. inspired his erudition and fame.

So, from the idealist to the cynical view of friendship. **Friedrich Nietzsche** (1844-1900) maintained that if your friend really intended you to be strong and purposeful he would wish trouble and strife for you, making your life difficult in order to improve and reveal your true powerful inner self. A famous quote is *"your best friend is also your best enemy"*. His best friend for a while was the great composer **Richard Wagner** (1813-83). Nietzsche revered his music until the great composer changed his approach towards religious and mythological images in his operas. Then Friedrich turned on his best mate :

"Is Wagner not rather a disease?. He contaminates everything he touches –he has made music sick." Clearly a man who practises what he preaches.

As you might expect, Nietzsche had few generous words for women or love but he propounded one aphorism that might be worthy of consideration:

"It is not a lack of love, but a lack of friendship that makes unhappy marriages." Warning ---do not discuss during Isolation!

The old reprobate died in 1900, friendless and insane.

Interestingly, during his writings of early 20c, **C S Lewis** examined the old Greek terminology for relationships. For friendship- *philia* ; as well as related word 'Agape' which means a love that is purely social in nature; a love for your friends, neighbours, community ; *eros* -- romantic love , *storge*—affection. His writings were moralistic in tone, seemingly following Socrates and Aristotle in proclaiming that we cannot live happily alone. Friendship means taking your friend beyond the narrow limits we have as a Self: special friendship is grounded in a shared appreciation of a common Truth (his truth was a Christian one). Shared values will always prove more effective than a lone venture. His Narnia stories might be allegories based on these definitions.

In a philosophy magazine, recently I read a very individual view of friendship by a philosopher called Mary Hunt. She elevates friendship into 'a model and goal for life'. The real basis of mutual respect and social progress relies upon close friendships---she has lost faith in functional marriage and disclaimed romantic love as a basis for productive relationships: Close friendships are 'a more practical vehicle for changing society'.

‘Love is merely a battle for individual power, whereas, friendship allows for productive equality’. Worth some domestic discussion?

There is a book I read on the philosophy of Shakespeare. My own feeling is that the great man was more an astute psychologist than a philosopher, but his writings do depict the strengths and foibles of human nature as well as clearly addressing ethical questions within the realms of philosophical debate. I considered Shakespeare’s depiction of aspects of friendship which appear in many of his plays and poetry and have selected a couple merely as an indulgence for those of us who love his work.

A deserted, paranoid Hamlet, a man alone in a world of betrayal and mistrust, urges to his only friend Horatio :

Those friends thou hast/and their adaption tried

Grapple them unto thy soul/with hoops of steel

As we know Hamlet managed to jettison friends and relatives with astounding consistency, needing a guiding advice that only emerged from his own conscience.

However, it is in the *Merchant of Venice Act4* we witness the greatest example of friendship in Shakespeare. In the courtroom Shylock is poised to cut into the heart of Antonio, who is forfeit for a loan not repaid to Shylock. He is facing this terror on behalf of his best friend Bassanio who failed to settle the debt. Antonio’s bosom is bared, Bassanio weeps with despair, Shylock dagger in hand, smiles in anticipation, the courtroom becomes mournful and silent, Antonio holds out his hand to Bassanio and tells him:

Repent but you that shall lose your friend

And he repents not that he pays your debt;

For if the Jew do cut but deep enough

I’ll pay it instantly with all my heart. WOW!

So ends a brief scamper across philosophy and friendship. An old friend is longing to hear your voice, what you actually say is of secondary consideration; everybody wishes to be remembered by an old friend . Good luck, keep well.

John Latham

