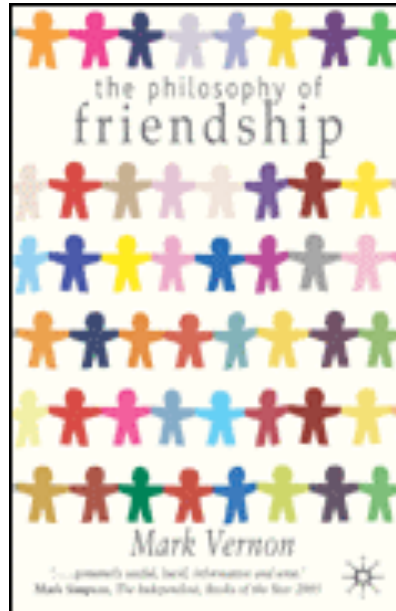


*Without friends no one would choose to live, though he had all other goods.*                   **—Aristotle**



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## THE POLITICS OF FRIENDSHIP

When friendship is present in public life, the modern political world is suspicious. It needs to relearn a lesson from Classical Greece, says Mark Vernon.

**H**ow should a democracy be judged? Some argue that the freedom of the press is the determining issue; others, the probity of its politicians; others again, its citizens' happiness. Well, here's another suggestion. It has not, to my knowledge, been much considered by think tanks and modern commentators, though for ancient Greek and Roman political thinkers it was central. Neither does it feature in the cost-benefit analyses of economists, though most people would say it was essential to the good life. The alternative measure is the extent to which democracy is conducive to friendship.

At first, the suggestion might appear odd. It seems natural to assume that a democratic society is automatically a friendly one: its characteristic elements, like freedom of association, could only contribute to the flourishing of friendship. Of itself, therefore, friendship might be thought as simply a by-product of democracy, if one that is highly desirable.

However, friendship is a more interesting test because some of democracy's highest values are actually at odds with it. In short, friendship puts the humaneness of abstract democratic ideals on the spot.

One obvious point of tension is between the egalitarian principles of democracy and the individual partiality of friendship. Democracies treat all citizens the same: everyone is equal in the eyes of the law and has the right to one, and only one, vote. Human rights too are absolutely universal or they are worthless. Friendship cuts across this because it is not universal but is defined by its particularity. To say "you are my friend" is meaningless if it does not imply that I regard you above the rest. One would do something for a friend that one would never dream of doing for someone else; friends act for each other out of preference and loyalty not disinterest.

Democracies, therefore, have an ambivalent attitude towards friendship. It is fine in private but deeply suspect if and when it is seen to play a part in public life. Then politicians are accused of nepotism, which in a way is counterproductive since so-called "cronies" are likely to give much to public life by virtue of their loyalty. Alternatively, companies can end up in court if they are seen to appoint without due regard for equal opportunities, for all that knowing someone before you appoint them is perhaps the only way of being sure they can do the job.


A second area of conflict between the values of friendship and democracy concerns justice. For Aristotle, justice could be thought of as "failed friendship". It is when individuals cannot resolve their differences amicably—note: amicably—that they turn to the law. It aims to solve their problems according to a depersonalised conception of fairness. Or, when friends can no longer "hold things in common", as one Greek saying defined friendship, they ask the courts to divide their possessions and rule over them. Thus, for Aristotle, rectificatory justice is a pragmatic good, since people will always fall out. But it is not an absolute good, because if all people

lived well, justice would simply be a common character trait implicit in friendship.

In a democracy, however, justice is an absolute good: it must be done and be seen to be done. Again, therefore, democracy can nurture a suspicion of friendship, thinking that it is a way of doing things characterised by questionable commitments and opaque affections, not the transparent, transcendent fairness of justice. The downside of idealising justice in this way is the speed with which people turn to the law when resolving personal disputes. Hence, perhaps, the fact that the most mature democracies are highly litigious. And as those involved in family law know, a litigious culture is one in which friendships struggle to thrive.

There are other points of tension between democracy and friendship. For example, democracies tend to nurture utilitarian approaches to politics, based upon trying to establish the greatest happiness for the greatest number. Friendship, though, abhors “felicific calculus”, preferring to build relationships. Might this not suggest a reason why increasingly affluent democracies become increasingly unhappy places to live?

True, egalitarianism, justice and economics-driven problem-solving are hugely valuable and underpin a very many great goods. However, that they are valued because they are impersonal is double-edged. The great paradox for democracies espousing these universal ideals is that unless their sovereignty is tempered they become dehumanising and tyrannical. And friendship, without which the good life is simply impossible according to Aristotle, suffers.

For ancient philosophers friendship was a political problem too. They understood that it could be corrosive of civic life. But they adopted a different approach. Rather than putting all their efforts into upholding universal ideals that tend to sideline and undermine friendship, they sought to promote ideals for friendship too. For Plato, the best friends are truth-seekers. For Aristotle, friendship schools the greatest virtues. For Cicero, they are intent on the greater good. Is it not time for us to do likewise and re-establish a high place for friendship? 

**Mark Vernon** is the author of *The Philosophy of Friendship* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005) and a freelance journalist, media consultant and broadcaster. He published *Business: The Key Concepts* with Routledge in 2002 as well as chapters on philosophy in various academic's books. He was a priest in the Church of England

1994-1996 and holds a PhD in philosophy from Warwick University, UK.

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## EDITOR'S NOTE

**Go here to take the friendship intelligence—or FQ—test:**

<http://www.markvernon.com/friendshiponline/quizomatic76/test.htm>

The FQ questionnaire assesses your ideas about friendship and compares them with those of the great philosophers of friendship.

The 20 questions are loosely grouped into 5 sections:

1. Your friendships.
2. Friendship and other loves.
3. Friendship in the world.
4. Friendship and the virtues.
5. Philosophers on friendship.

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## ADLER ON FRIENDSHIP

The desire for friendship is always with us but we do not always have friends. In fact, the first thing that our own experiences, as well as many of the great philosophers, tell us about true friendship is that it is very rare. A lot of our associations seem like friendships at first, only to languish and disappear in time. These lack what might be called the “prerequisites.” In trying to set down what they are, we must begin by clearly distinguishing between relationships that are accidental and transitory and those that are essential and enduring.

Aristotle affords us substantial help here by pointing out that there are three different kinds of friendship: the friendships based (1) on utility, (2) on pleasure, and (3) on virtue.

The friendships of utility and pleasure go together, and are no doubt the most common. Everyone has experienced them. People are “friendly” to their business associates, neighbors, the members of their car pool, and even casual acquaintances on trains, boats, and airplanes. This kind of civility is, to some degree, a form of friendship, the friendship of utility, of mutual convenience. Simi-

larly, people are “friendly” to their golfing partners, to others at a cocktail party, and to acquaintances who entertain them. This is also a form of friendship, the friendship of pleasure, of mutual enjoyment.

These lower forms of friendship are not necessarily bad but they are inadequate. One of their defects results from the fact that they depend on and vary with circumstance. This is why they can quickly arise and just as quickly disappear. By contrast, when the Book of Proverbs says, “A friend loveth at all times,” it is referring to a higher form of friendship that does not depend on circumstance. In order to surmount the effects of time and happenstance, it must be based on the inherent qualities of the individuals involved. A friendship so anchored cannot be a passing friendship.

True friendship, then, surpasses (though it often also includes) both utility and pleasure. For Aristotle, such a friendship must be based on virtue, on a good moral character. Only in that way can it last. Further, it must develop slowly, since it presupposes familiarity, knowledge, and—eventually—mutual trust.

Aristotle goes on to observe:

This kind of friendship, then, is perfect both in respect of duration and in all other respects, and in it each gets from each in all respects the same as, or something like what, he gives; which is what ought to happen between friends.


Perfect friendship, then, also presupposes a certain equality of status. Montaigne, speaking of the kinds of human relationships, confirms this when he says:

That of children to parents is rather respect: friendship is nourished by communication which cannot, by reason of the great disparity, be betwixt these.

Parents can no more be friends to their children than teachers can be to their students. For the essence of friendship is reciprocity: giving and getting something like what you give. Parents see to the proper development of their children, and teachers guide the shaping of their students’ minds. Children and students cannot reciprocate in kind.

It should be clear now why real friendship requires more than merely having “*something* in common.” It is *what* people have in common that determines the kind of friendship they will have.

True friendship requires at least a sound moral character out of the richness of which individuals are able to give and get this precious affection. And the more individuals give, the more they realize a genuine kind of selflessness, the better friends they are. A good man will not only do for his friend what he would do for himself, but will, if necessary, do more.

These prerequisites being hard to fulfill, true friendship is bound to be rare. To acquire a real friend, therefore, is one of the most praiseworthy accomplishments in life. Montaigne tells a story of Cyrus, the ruler of Persia. He was asked whether he would exchange a valuable horse, on which he had just won a race, for a kingdom. Cyrus replied, “No, truly, sir, but I would give him with all my heart to get thereby a true friend, could I find out any man worthy of that affiance.” 

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## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

**Dear Members,**

**How would you respond to Robert Newton’s excellent questions?**

Max,

I just finished reading Dr. Adler’s US News and World Report interview in 1960. I have a few questions I would like to ask you as to whether you think Dr. Adler’s views would have changed, given today’s cultural environment:

1. Dr. Adler, as well as Robert Hutchins in his Introduction to the Gateway to the Great Books in 1963, both believe a major problem with our culture to be how we use our leisure, either constructively or not constructively. I know that futurists in the 1960’s forecast that the problems we would be facing around the turn of the century would be one of too much leisure due to all the technological advances.

But is this really the case or has technology driven us to heavier work loads in the name of efficiency? In the early 1960’s, having both parents working was not nearly as common as it is today. Is the question today one of poor choice of what we do in our leisure time or more one of us working more to “keep up with the Jones”?

2. Dr. Adler mentions the logical positivists and ties current relativism to its influence. In the interview, he was unsure that there

would be any adverse effect on our culture. (At least this is my reading of his article.) Would he feel the same way today? Many current conservative commentators have bemoaned the effect of relativism on our culture.

Robert Newton

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## WELCOME NEW MEMBERS

**Christopher Jacobone**

**Henry Laxen**

**Dana Patterson**

*We welcome your comments, questions or suggestions.*

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