



Week #5a: Friendship, Morality and the Spiritual Life

Prayer Before Studying Ethics:

Lord God, without you we are not able to please you;
mercifully grant that your Holy Spirit may in all things direct and rule
our hearts,
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

--Book of Common Prayer, Trinity 19

Why Should Friendship Be Thought Of As a Moral Problem?

It may seem strange to be talking about friendship in an ethics course. In a society that focuses on the individual's felt needs, it seems obvious that we can give an account of friendship in which moral issues do not arise. For example, if sometimes we find ourselves alone and bored and we don't want to be alone and bored, then at those times it is useful to have friends so that we can enjoy their company and receive encouragement and stimulation by talking and doing things with them. No obvious moral issues here, so why introduce friendship into an ethics course at all?

One way of addressing this is to ask whether the account of friendship given above is really correct. In other words, are friends only relevant or important to me because they help me to avoid conditions I find unpleasant (loneliness and boredom) and experience conditions I find pleasant (the stimulation and support I receive from a friend while pursuing an activity we both enjoy, e.g. clothes-shopping at the mall on a Saturday afternoon or going out for a cup of coffee at the newly-opened Starbucks around the corner)?

- What are the limitations of this kind of account?
- In what ways does it give a very superficial account of friendship or even misunderstand what friendship is really about?
- What does this account of friendship assume is of central importance? E.g. who or what is at the center of the universe, according to this account?

The Self and Others: Is Egoism the Basis of Friendship?

One defining feature of friendship that is correctly recognized in the above account is that friendship is a voluntarily acquired relationship. One can choose one's friends; friendship is therefore fundamentally different from the ascriptive relationships we have had since birth (having certain people as one's parents and sibling, belonging to a certain ethnic or racial group, being born in a certain country and region), since friendship includes both elements of *choice* and *personal response*.

Individualistic, drive for success-->geographical mobility-->decline in ascriptive relationships, increase in voluntarily acquired relationships

One of the strange things about the account of friendship given above is that it makes the friend and the friendship look like nothing more than the means to attain to attain my ends (goals). If they help me to get what I want (what I feel I need), they are useful. If they do not help me to get what I want (what I feel I need), then they are not helpful and can be discarded.

How might we test our friendships to see if they were really based on nothing more than self-interest or egoism (=the belief that one should not perform an action unless one believes that it will benefit oneself)?

- If you lost your job, couldn't find a new one for several months, ended up even more deeply in debt and had your car repossessed, what degree of practical help could you count on from your current set of friends? How would your spouse respond in such a situation? Would he or she have any friends that he or she could count on for a significant degree of practical help?
- If your boss accused you of stealing money from the company and put you on leave pending a police investigation, what degree of support could you count on from your current friends or coworkers?

Assuming your friends did not abandon you when things got bad and you ceased to be pleasant, charming company and a source of good-humored conversation and juicy gossip, it is likely that your friendships are based on something more than just egoism.

One of the odd things about explaining friendship by reference to egoism (i.e. friendship is a useful way to meet one's felt needs and achieve one's chosen goals) is that it makes friendship look like a one-way relationship based on my own peculiar needs. I feel I need something, you can provide it, I take it from you, end of story.

- Sims article
- "I hate her!" (It is possible for a person to be friendly for a time, but not intimate or dependent, sensing that deeper commitment would be an obstacle to his or her own personal projects.)

(1) Normally people claim or pretend in their friendships that the friendship relationship is a two-way street (i.e., it is mutual and reciprocal): Not only do I take from the friend, but I also offer or give the friend something in return.

(2) A two-way relationship requires trust and is impossible where trust cannot be maintained.

- Both parties assume that the relationship and the disclosure involved in the relationship will be treated in a way that does not make one vulnerable to manipulation and abuse or redirect the relationship away from its original purpose into exploitation (sexting as an example).

*This is also why introducing sexuality into friendships can be problematic. If sexual attraction becomes the basis for the relationship, the relationship has been renegotiated into something different (more like a one-way relationship that aims at pleasure and is rewarding for the person proposing it). Sometimes that renegotiation also uses private

knowledge about the other person to push the renegotiation of the relationship.

- Both parties give the other person the independence and freedom to express themselves and speak candidly about matters, which, if spoken outside the friendship, might result in losing the other person's respect and/or would be met with rejection, ridicule or hostility.

Friendship can therefore open one up to new things and is a mirror to us that can help us to gain a different perspective on life and ourselves (note the role of joking, irony and laughter with friends, which restores us and also helps us take a less serious and more fully rounded view of life and ourselves). Friendship therefore requires us to be responsive to having our views and interests challenged and developed in a different direction. One only really comes to know oneself through the friendships one experiences over the course of a lifetime. "We find out who we are as people with and through our friends" (Ray Pahl, *On Friendship*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 165).

(3) Often our better, closer, more lasting relationships have one further feature: The friendship does not center on a specialized interest with a predictable outcome. Instead, the friends are each committed to some good that transcends the relationship itself (i.e. the good thing is bigger and broader than the relationship itself).

- For example, perhaps you and your friend are both alumni of Michigan State and you are each committed to seeing the Michigan State football team win over other teams, especially hated archrival Univ. of Michigan. The fact that you and your friend are both united in seeking this common goal strengthens and provides at least a partial basis for your friendship and the friendship itself is further strengthened by your engagement in a common activity that supports this goal (i.e. you are willing to brave rain and scorching sun to cheer on Mich. State and jeer the opposing U. Mich. team into ignominious defeat).
- OR perhaps you and your friend are both connoisseurs of fine donuts and have spent most of your university years eating out of the two major food groups (donuts and coffee). Your friendship is based in part on the fact that you are both moved by a common desire for the good (pursuing and savoring the taste of superior donuts) and this relationship is further strengthened when both of you camp out in the Krispy Kreme parking lot for three days, so that you both can be one of the first twelve customers to enter the new store and win a year's supply of free donuts.

Obviously these are fairly commonplace, trivial examples that may guide a part of our lives, but probably not our whole life, unless they are linked to other, broader commitments. (Perhaps my support for the Michigan State football team is part of my broader belief that life in this part of Michigan is superior to life anywhere else and this local patriotism leads me to work at the Michigan Chamber of Commerce, marry someone from the area, and spend my free time--when I am not at football games--raising money for local community organizations.)

Beyond Egoism: Aristotle's Account of Friendship As Rooted In a Common Commitment to the Good and Oriented Toward the Achievement of Moral Excellence(s)

Aristotle: If we are to attain what is best, we need to live a life that is based upon reason [i.e. the proper exercise of the highest human faculty] and displays practical wisdom (discerning what is fine and noble within particular circumstances) and justice (which is a social/relational quality), since the best life can only be obtained when we live in community with others, keeping others interests in mind and showing goodwill toward others.

(1) Friendship and community are therefore strictly necessary for us if we are to flourish and attain the best life:

“Perhaps it is just absurd to make out that someone living like a hermit could be happy. Nobody would choose to possess all good things, and yet to be on their own. A human being is social, naturally fitted to live with others” (*Nicomachean Ethics* [=NE] IX.9, 1169b16-19; tr. Hughes; cf. 1155a, 5-6, 27-30; *Politics* 1253a2)

Besides this basic claim, which Aristotle believes is intuitive and will automatically commend itself to any reasonable person who has some experience of life, Aristotle also makes a further claim:

(2) Note that some moral excellences, which are part of the best life, actually require other people in order to be realized or develop, e.g. you cannot be generous or learn to be generous when you are, like Robinson Crusoe, stranded on a desert island (cf. NE 1155a5-15; 1169b11-15)

Aristotle recognizes three kinds of friendships:

(1) Friendships based on utility (the friend/friendship is *useful* to you for some further purpose which you think is good)--example: study partners or using social media to network for economic/professional advantage (Cf. Prov. 14:20: "The poor is hated by his neighbor but the rich man has many friends" and 19:4 "Wealth makes many friends but the poor is separated from his neighbor."

Question: Can you think of any other types of friendships that fit this description?

(2) Friendships based on pleasure (the friendship is *pleasant* and one values this kind of pleasure)--example: drinking buddies.

Question: Can you think of any other types of friendships that fit this description?

*Note that in (1) and (2) we do not love the friend so much as the usefulness or pleasure that the friend provides (NE 8.3, 1156a10-14). They are also often specialized and organized around a limited area (segmented and differentiated), e.g. a school-based network, a work-based network, a church-based network that need not involve engagement with other areas of one's life (so that persons in the school-based network of study buddies may not know one's spouse, children, parents, members of one's church, etc.)

(3) Friendships based on goodness (both persons admire and are committed to the good [i.e. what is incontrovertibly good or good without qualification= a thing worth doing for its own sake] and

both persons are good themselves). This kind of friendship is more likely to last, because it is based on the person's intrinsic qualities; by contrast, being useful and giving pleasure very much depend upon the ever-changing, unpredictable circumstances of this life.

Question: Can you think of any other types of friendships that fit this description?

Review Questions on Aristotle's threefold typology of friendship:

- Do you think Aristotle's theory about three basic types of friendships provides an adequate account of the different types of friendships? Are there kinds of friendships that do not fit well (or even at all) into this model?
- For example, if a Christian missionary in the Middle East forms a friendship with a devout Muslim, how would this be analyzed within the constraints of Aristotle's scheme?

What is it about this type of relationship that reveals a possible problem or ambiguity in Aristotle's definition of the good?

The love we have for the friend resembles the love we have for ourselves:

Aristotle thinks that in friendships based on goodness (= [3] above), the good person's love of the friend is essentially the same as the good person's love of himself or herself, i.e. friendship is very similar to the better sort of self-love. Aristotle tries to prove this in the following way:

In the friendship based on goodness, the friends

- (a) Wish for and do what is good for their friends and do it for their friends' sake;
- (b) Are concerned for their friends' lives for their friends' sake;
- (c) Spend time in their friends' company (expectation of frequent communication/interaction);
- (d) Have the same desires as their friends;
- (e) Share sorrow and joy with their friends.

Aristotle then points out that the good person relates to himself in essentially the same way: he wishes for his own good, is concerned for his own life, enjoys his own company and has no conflicts in his desires, joys and sorrows. (This is not true of the people who are not good and their lives are therefore dysfunctional and full of conflicts. Consider, for example, the person who is driven to acquire money, possessions and honor in a world in which these are in short supply. Such a person may find that his desire to have things that others also desire conflicts with his desire to maintain good relations with those others so that he may be honored by them.)

Friendship is therefore an extension of the way that we care for ourselves when our lives are rightly directed.

- The friend is therefore really "another self" (NE 1166a31-32), since people whose lives are committed to the good will consequently have same desires, joys and sorrows.
- Note that there is nothing about one person having the good that excludes the other person from having it (contrast the role played by luxurious possessions or honor, where one person's gaining these excludes the others from them, e.g. only

one person can be the president, so all who wish it must compete against each other to have that office, automatically excluding the others from it).
Cf. Lk. 15:9: "And when she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.'"

Questions, Discussion and Case Studies:

--Carolyn S. Briggs, *This Dark World: A Memoir of Salvation Found and Lost*, pp. 232-233

--Judith Martin, *Miss Manners Guide for the Turn-of-the-Millennium*, pp. 400-402)

Beyond Both Egoism and Aristotle: Christian Spiritual Friendship As a Supernatural Gift Which Points/Leads Beyond Itself To Friendship With God

The Bible and the Christian tradition are remarkably cautious and reserved in their treatment of friendship.

- 1) Insofar as God chooses for himself an elect people, the fact of belonging to God's people is the primary, most basic identity the believer has.
 - a) All narrower, more exclusive commitments (I follow this Christian leader, I belong to this denomination or church network, I am a friend of this person but not of that person in the church) are rejected or treated with a certain reserve because they can readily undermine that one primary truth--that we belong first and foremost to God's people.
 - b) One can see this reserve about friendship especially in the Old Testament, where the social dynamics of a traditional tribal society are also at work and limit discussion of friendship in the modern sense
 - i) The Hebrew word *rea'* refers to a much broader circle of people than we would call friends, i.e. people with whom one is connected by the kinship/political structures of the traditional society (this could include relatives and family members, political supporters, advisers to the king, etc.) or by immediate proximity and economic connection (the neighbor).
 - ii) The Wisdom literature is skeptical about people who want to form intimate relationships, esp. across traditional social boundaries, warning that this is often simply driven by self-interest and one should carefully test a person before trusting him or her (Prov. 12:26). E.g. Prov. 14:20: "Friends will hate poor friends, but there will be many friends of the rich." Poorly chosen or hastily chosen friends (whose real concern is about money) can therefore lead one into financial disaster (Prov. 6:1-5)

The signs of the true friend:

- (1) The friend is constant in adversity (=doesn't abandon one when circumstances change and money or influence is gone; compare Aristotle's concept of friendships based on utility): Prov. 17:17; 18:24
- (2) The friend offers constructive criticism rather than flattery: Prov. 27:6; Ps. 141:5. (The friend is therefore committed to the good and understands the friendship to be based upon the good; compare Aristotle's friendships based on goodness.)

- iii) Despite this skepticism, there are still some remarkable examples of transcendent friendship in the OT, most notably the friendship of David and Jonathan (see Deut. 13:7; 1 Sam. 18:1,3-4; 19:1; 20:16-17; 2 Sam. 1:26; 21:7; Ru. 1:16)
- 2) In the New Testament, there is also a suspicion of merely natural relationships that are based on self-interested reciprocity (*do ut des* [Latin]=“I give so that you may give”) and cannot endure testing (compare Aristotle's concept of friendships based on utility).
 - a) Cf. the rule given in Lk. 14:12: “When you make a dinner or a supper, do not call your friends, nor your brethren, nor your kinsman, nor your rich neighbors...”
 - b) Note the description of the persecution accompanying the end of the age/Messianic woes given in Lk. 21:16-17 on betrayal by family and *friends*. The coming of the Lord and his Kingdom relativizes all earthly friendship and even creates kinds of antagonism and opposition which have a spiritual basis.
- 3) The development of a positive notion of spiritual friendship in the intertestamental period.
 - i) Intertestamental Wisdom literature focuses on the good shared by the friends (compare Aristotle's concept of friendships based on goodness):
 - (1) Only those who fear God are capable of true friendship and they alone find true friends (Sir. 6:16-17)
 - (2) Through fear of the Lord, one can become a friend of divine Wisdom (Wis. 8:18)
 - ii) In early rabbinic literature, true friendship lies in a common reverence for God and a common commitment to studying his Law.
 - iii) Note the way that (i) and (ii) refocus the friendship
 - (1) Friendship is now seen as a beneficial moral influence, promoting moral and spiritual growth through a common commitment to a higher good);
 - (2) While this spiritual friendship remains preferential (some people will be more suitable as friends than others because of their greater commitment to God, God’s Law and God’s Wisdom), it is not exclusive or restrictive (anyone may become more committed to these things and thus become suitable for spiritual friendship).
- 4) The development of a parallel/analogous notion of friendship with God, with earthly friendships pointing/leading toward this greater and more significant friendship.
 - a) Ex. 33:11: Moses speaks with God “as a man speaks with his friend”
 - b) Abraham as the friend of God in 2 Chron. 20:7 ; Is. 41:8; James 2:23 (all looking back to Gen. 18)
 - c) Friendship with the world (=hatred of God) (James 4:4) opposed to friendship with God
 - d) Friendship with Jesus in Jn. 15:13-15 as the highest form of love, calling one to imitate Christ’s own example of self-sacrificing friendship, a friendship which should define the way Christians understand and relate to one another (cf. 3 Jn. 14: "The *friends* send their greetings. Greet the *friends* there by name."

e) Friendship here is defined not so much in terms of subjective emotional intimacy but rather in terms of being intimately involved in the affairs of others (rather than mutually concealing one's affairs from one another), so that others' affairs become our affairs and we are now involved in a "joint enterprise together without secrets" (Derek Tidball, *The Social Context of the New Testament: A Sociological Analysis*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984, p. 80).

5) Augustine made a special contribution to early Christian reflection on friendship.

a) Although Augustine may have been indirectly familiar with Aristotle's threefold division of types of friendship, Augustine's reflection on friendship is largely shaped by his reflection upon the definition of friendship which Cicero gives in his treatise *Laelius (De amicitia=On Friendship)*:

"Friendship is nothing other than agreement on all things divine and human, along with good will and affection" (*Laelius* 6.20, cited in Augustine *Contra Academicos* 3.6.13 and *ep.* 258.1)

Note: This is understood from the outset as a friendship between people roughly equal in status.

Note 2: For Cicero friendship is a *political* virtue, one that helps one to advance into public office and function effectively as a statesman.

b) Augustine's early position (indebted to Cicero and the classical, pre-Christian philosophical approaches to friendship)

i) Because friendship is a bond which "is effected by similar traits of character" (*Gn. litt. imp.* 16) and unites people in mutual sympathy, friendship always has moral value and significance and can be either a

(1) negative moral influence. Augustine attributes his theft of pears in his youth to a "friendship too unfriendly" (*Conf.* 2.9.17), i.e. a friendship that led him away from the good, rather than toward it.

(2) OR a positive moral influence.

(a) In *Conf.* 6.14.24, Augustine and his friends retired to a country house at Cassiacum outside Milan (386-387) to pursue a reflective, philosophical life (to be a "community of philosophers" in submission to Christ and united in a common pursuit of divine wisdom)

(b) In his *Soliloquies* (1.12.20; 1.13.22) want his friends to live with him so that they might together seek knowledge of their souls and of God and seek wisdom.

ii) Note that this kind of friendship is based on sympathy in the human person who extends the friendship and that friendship is regarded as a kind of collaborative task performed by people with a common interest in and commitment to the pursuit of divine wisdom.

c) Augustine's later position (emerges out of reflection upon the account of divine grace found in the Holy Scriptures)

i) The classical definition is too limited and non-specific:

(1) If one says, "friendship is agreement on things human and divine," one must

(a) add, "in Jesus Christ our Lord and our true peace" (*ep.* 258.4)

(b) understand "things human and divine" to mean the two great commandments given in Mk. 12:29-31

- (c) understand that this refers not simply to an intellectual agreement (Cicero) but and agreement in will and action.
- ii) A new definition of friendship is proposed in *Conf.* 4.4.7-4.12.19, which is distinctively Christian and explicitly theological in character:
 - (1) “There is no true friendship unless you establish it as a bond between souls that cleave to each other through the love ‘poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who is given to us’ (Rom. 5:5)
 - (2) Note that this means that
 - (a) God, not human beings or human sympathy, is the cause and origin of human friendship
 - (b) Friendship is a supernatural gift from God, for which we should be profoundly grateful
 “What consoles us in this human society so full of errors and hardships, except unfeigned faith and the mutual love of good and true friends?” (*City of God* 19.8).
 - (c) It is the Holy Spirit who establishes and preserves the bond of human friendship
 - (d) Friendship rests upon and represents to us the divine charity (=perfect, supernatural love) that is a fundamental part of God’s own character and inner life (a point developed in *De trinitate*, where the Holy Spirit is the bond of love which unites Father and Son; it is therefore appropriate be the one who produces an analogous created love that binds human beings together). (In *De trin.*7.6.11 Augustine even considers the idea that one could conceive of the Holy Spirit as the friendship existing between the Father and the Son.)
- iii) Note that in this later position friendship is never reduced from being a specific preferential relationship to being a general love for all creatures, i.e. charity. Friendship instead adds something new to the charity that is owed to all people; the attraction and delight that we experience more eagerly toward some people makes it easier to extend charity toward them. (One might consider here the ease with which one could build a friendship with a person that comes from a similar background, lives in one’s neighborhood and attends one’s church vs. the difficulty a missionary might have in forming friendships that cross linguistic, cultural and religious boundaries.)
- d) Augustine also further develops the notion of friendship with God found in Ex. 33:11 and Wisdom 7:27.
 - i) This is not the product of moral effort, as Augustine had first thought (*Gen. adv. Manich.* 1.2.4), but is rather something established by grace when God freely bestows his own friendship (*Sermo* 335.2) and grants a share in his eternal wisdom (*City of God* 11.4).
 - ii) This also points to an important distinction between friendship with creatures and friendship with God. Created friendships can never be permanent and lasting in the way that friendship with God is, since human beings are mortal and die. While created friendships may be based upon and partially image the bond of love within God’s own inner life, they ultimately point and lead beyond themselves, directing one toward friendship with God which is the

only friendship that will last forever, being greater than death itself (cf. *Sermo* 299.6).

- iii) Augustine also sees the relationship originally existing between God and human beings (original justice) as being a friendship (*Gn. litt.* 11.34.46) that was marred and destroyed by the Fall. In Christ's redemption, God-given justice restores the state of friendship (*De trinitate* 5.16.17).

Some Practical Reflections On the Implications For Pastoral Ministry: Collegiality and the Power Differential

(1) The old dogma that a pastor should never form friendships with other pastoral staff or with laypeople needs to be reexamined and is being reexamined in recent publications on pastoral leadership (see, for example, E.R. McManus, "The Friendship Dilemma," *Leadership Journal* Fall 2001; available online at

<http://www.christianitytoday.com/le/2001/004/26.10.html>)

(2) There is no doubt that friendship with other staff can be difficult at times (since the job performance of staff members must be regularly evaluated and their personal weakness and failings directly addressed, sometimes through termination).

(3) There is also no doubt that friendships with laypeople can also sometimes pose problems (one can be accused of practicing favoritism toward certain persons, groups and opinions rather than dealing in a fair and impartial manner with all members of one's congregation).

(4) Still we need to move beyond such practical, prudential considerations and ask ourselves how friendship is to be understood theologically and what relevance it has for the flourishing of human life in general and for spiritual and moral growth within the Christian life in particular.

- For example, is it really possible or even healthy to relate to other leaders in the local church in a wholly detached, impersonal, task-based manner? Or is this perhaps simply a product of unreflectively embracing our society's attitudes toward professional relationships in the workplace, without asking deeper, more searching questions about the goals of the Christian life and how these ought to be pursued?

Thanks to a number of rather depressing recent studies on pastors' physical and mental health, we can also state the need for pastors to develop significant friendships in terms of harms to be avoided:

The demands of pastoral work can erode one's ability to make and sustain significant friendships due to:

- time limitations under a heavy workload--on average pastors in America work about 55 hours a week; solo pastors of evangelical churches often work considerably more hours, particularly in their first ten years of ministry (c. 65 hrs./week)
- unwillingness to appear to others as weak or struggling (particularly in the first few years of ministry where one is concerned to demonstrate competence and thus, it is hoped, earn others' respect and trust--this seen as basic to maintaining one's authority)
- implicit competition with other clergy.

A lack of close friendships contributes directly to pastors' three of most commonly expressed complaints (loneliness, isolation and diminished marital adjustment/global marriage satisfaction), which are also the principal indicators of job dissatisfaction, burnout and leaving the ministry.

Recent studies suggest that roughly a third of clergy form the kind of supportive friendships they need to keep stress at manageable levels and function effectively in ministry. The other two thirds will reject the need for friendships (either denying the need for intimacy or unfairly forcing their spouse to bear the entire emotional weight of their personal needs and professional struggles) or repress this felt need for friendship by professionalizing it and focusing it rather narrowly around a certain vision of pastoral work which one has previously chosen ("What I really need is a mentor"). While having a mentor is a good thing and professionally helpful,

(1) such relationships are only rarely available in the American evangelical community and

(2) the concept of looking for a mentor who is involved in and supports our vision of ministry is too narrow and limited to do what friendship does. Sometimes the person whom God puts in our life as a friend has a vision of life and ministry that is quite different from our own previously chosen ideal and yet is one we really need. Holy friendships do have a purpose beyond the friendship (as does mentoring) but they are not narrowly instrumental (i.e. means to an end) professional strategies (as training, mentoring and therapy typically are). Such friendships sometimes appear pointless and yet it is precisely because means-end relationships are not immediately in view that they are able to have depth and facilitate change (so that we become, e.g., more loyal, consistent and truthful).

- Friendship involves a willingness to spend time on activities and goals that are of interest to others besides ourselves and to learn from the others' different histories, experiences, gifts and frame of reference, so that we come to see and respond in different ways
- Valuing a friend for the benefit he or she can provide (as evaluated within the framework for life one has oneself chosen to adopt) seems a rather shallow, one-way, utilitarian approach to friendship.
- True friendships need to begin and be rooted not in our own imperfect, self-absorbed and self-interested love but rather in God and God's perfect love. Such friendships also need to end (find their goal/completion) not with oneself and the benefits one acquires but rather in God and His universal love for all creatures. "Friendships are constituted by the good they are meant to achieve" (Waddell, p. 105).