

Introduction

FRIENDSHIP AS AN HISTORICAL VARIABLE

The subject of this book is the history of the relationship we call friendship in the classical world, beginning with the Homeric epics and concluding in the Christian empire of the fourth and fifth centuries AD. While the idea of friendship is not uniform over various cultures or even within a single culture at any given moment, the core of the relationship with which we shall be concerned may be characterized as a mutually intimate, loyal, and loving bond between two or a few persons that is understood not to derive primarily from membership in a group normally marked by native solidarity, such as family, tribe, or other such ties. Friendship is thus what anthropologists call an achieved rather than an ascribed relationship, the latter being based on status whereas the former is in principle independent of a prior formal connection such as kinship or ethnicity.

An achieved relationship does not necessarily mean one that depends essentially on free or personal choice. One may meet friends by accident and be drawn to them for mysterious reasons having little to do with decision, as is often the case with erotic attraction, for example. Arranged marriages and those based on individual sentiment or infatuation may from a certain point of view seem like two kinds of constraint; the fifth-century BC rhetorician Gorgias thus held that *erōs* or erotic passion was involuntary (*Helen* 19), and in canon law infatuation may be grounds for annulment because marriage was not entered into freely. In addition, friendship is “socially patterned” by numerous factors such as class or age. The role of election in discussions of friendship, though commonly insisted upon in modern accounts, appears to be historically variable.¹

¹ “Socially patterned”: Allan 1989: 47; class: *ibid.*, 130–42; election: e.g. Black 1980: 5; Little

The description of friendship offered above may seem to be so minimal as to be a human constant across all societies, like the capacity to love or to grieve. In fact, however, it is commonly supposed to be much more restricted, and some have argued that friendship in the modern sense emerged only with the Renaissance or indeed still more recently, as late perhaps as the eighteenth or even nineteenth century. Thus, one writer remarks: “one cannot help thinking that easy equal friendship is a late development in Western culture.” And he adds: “Think of the depressing overtones of the word ‘friend’ in eighteenth-century politics and the posturing associated with most classic and much vaunted friendships, like Montaigne’s with La Boétie” (Furber 1995). Anthropologists, moreover, have popularized the idea that “there are kinship-oriented *v.* friendship-oriented societies” (Paine 1969: 508).² In particular, it has been denied that the terms that are translated as “friend” or “friendship” in ancient Greek or Latin involve the personal intimacy and affection that are associated with the modern conception. Thus, Malcolm Heath (1987: 73–4) writes that *philia* (friendship) in classical Greece “is not, at root, a subjective bond of affection and emotional warmth, but the entirely objective bond of reciprocal obligation; one’s *philos* [friend] is the man one is obliged to help, and on whom one can (or ought to be able to) rely for help when oneself is in need.” Simon Goldhill (1986: 82) remarks in a similar vein: “The appellation or categorization *philos* is used to mark not just affection but overridingly a series of complex obligations, duties and claims.”

What is more, the predominant view concerning the classical Greek vocabulary of friendship is that it did not distinguish between friends in the modern sense and a wide range of relationships from family ties to those between fellow-citizens. For example, Paul Millett (1991: 113) writes: “It is true that from the viewpoint of comparative sociology, to say nothing of our own experience, the all-inclusive quality of Greek friendship is anomalous.” Millett cites the article on “Friendship” by Odd Ramsøy in the *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* (1968: 12) for the generalization that “most other important social relationships exclude friendship,” which “tends to be incompatible with such relationships as those of mother and child, lovers, and employer and employee.” Millett goes on to

1993: 39; but contrast Cucó Giner 1995: 26–8, 36–8 for the view that even institutionalized friendships are voluntary.

² Cf. also Paine 1969: 513; Cohen 1961: 352.

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observe that Greek usage, as illustrated for example by Aristotle, admits of the term *philos* or “friend” in respect to “parents, brothers, benefactors, fellow-tribesmen and fellow-citizens,” as well as to “husbands and wives, fellow-voyagers, comrades-in-arms, guest-friends, and cousins,” and he adds that “perhaps the clearest illustration comes from the *Memorabilia* of Xenophon, plotting the extension of *philia* both inside and outside the family circle.” A somewhat different but comparable reduction of the emotive aspect of the Roman conception of *amicitia* is reflected in the narrowly political interpretation defended by Sir Ronald Syme (1939: 157):

Roman political factions were welded together, less by unity of principle than by mutual interest and by mutual services (*officia*), either between social equals as an alliance, or from superior to inferior, in a traditional and almost feudal form of clientship: on a favourable estimate the bond was called *amicitia*, otherwise *factio*.

Peter Brunt cites the German scholar Wilhelm Kroll for the view that “*amicus* means in the everyday language of [Cicero’s] time no more than a political follower.”³

THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL TURN

The views represented above are not radical or eccentric; on the contrary, they represent the dominant and indeed almost universal conception of ancient friendship, especially Greek friendship, in current scholarly literature.⁴ It is appropriate to trace the development of this interpretation before proceeding to indicate the kinds of evidence that tell against it and which will be examined in detail in the chapters of this book.

An important shift in the understanding of ancient society occurred with what might be called the recent anthropological turn in classical historiography, represented in the English-speaking world by Moses Finley and his disciples, and in French above all by the heirs of Louis Gernet.⁵ Finley, in an essay entitled “Anthropology and the Classics” (1986 [orig. 1972]: 118), described anthropology as the “mentor” of the classics, which might provide, if not a theory, then “an approach, a habit of thought – I might say, a methodology.” One of the fundamental insights adopted from anthropology was the emphasis on systems of exchange in pre-modern

³ Brunt 1988: 352–3 summarizing Kroll 1933: 55ff; cf. Powell 1995.

⁴ Further discussion in Konstan 1996. ⁵ See Kurke 1991: 90–7.

societies. Building on the work of Bronislaw Malinowski (1922: 176), Marcel Mauss, a student of Emile Durkheim, wrote in his seminal monograph, *The Gift* (1967 [orig. 1923–4]: 140): “If friends make gifts, gifts make friends. A great proportion of primitive exchange, much more than our own traffic, has as its decisive function this latter, instrumental one: the material flow underwrites or initiates social relations.” As Leslie Kurke explains: “In contrast to commodity exchange, gift exchange depends on a personalized relationship between transaction partners which endures over time.”⁶

In his extraordinary book, *The World of Odysseus* (1977 [orig. 1954]), Finley applied the concepts developed by Malinowski, Mauss, Gernet, and Karl Polanyi (1944; 1969) to the societies represented in the Homeric epics.⁷ Friendships, especially between foreigners, were now interpreted as elements in a network of social relations that constituted the fabric of pre-civic communities regulated by custom rather than law. Walter Donlan (1980: 14) remarks on the “complex system of guest-friendship (*xeniē*), which afforded individual protection in a hostile tribal world, fostered the expansion of ‘foreign’ contact and increased the prestige of individuals and their *oikoi* [households].” Although the precise characterization of Homeric society might vary, many scholars have agreed that in Homer obligatory reciprocity outweighs sentiment in interpersonal relations. In particular, “Homeric ‘friendship’ appears as a system of calculated cooperation, not necessarily accompanied by any feelings of affection.”⁸

The reason, it is supposed, why friendship assumed so pragmatic a form in the archaic world is that it served as a matrix for relations that in modern societies are governed by autonomous economic and legal practices. In *The Ancient Economy* (1985 [orig. 1973]), Finley argued that the societies of classical Greece and Rome did not possess an economy in the modern sense of the term. Rather, the economy was inextricably embedded in a complex of social relations that included personal bonds. To impose modern categories by separating out economic exchange or other transactions as a distinct domain of social activity obliterates the difference between the ancient world and contemporary capitalism.

The roots of Finley’s thesis may be found in the social theories

⁶ Kurke 1991: 93, with reference to Mauss 1967: 34–5; Bourdieu 1977: 171.

⁷ See Millett 1991: 15–23; Van Wees 1992: 26–8; on Polanyi, see Humphreys 1978: 31–75.

⁸ Millett 1991: 121, with reference to Adkins 1963.

proposed by the eighteenth-century liberal Scots thinkers such as Adam Ferguson, David Hume, Francis Hutcheson, and Adam Smith. Allan Silver has explained how these Enlightenment figures understood the difference between ancient and modern friendship:

precommercial societies do not offer the possibility of disinterested relations, ungoverned by the clash and calculation of interests; only the development of the market does so, in those domains falling outside the market itself and therefore newly distinguishable from the interplay of interest. (Silver 1990: 1484–5)

This is why in pre-modern societies such as ancient Greece “the purpose of friendship . . . was to help friends by defeating enemies” (Silver 1990: 1487); this sordid and calculating mode of interaction was unavoidable, Silver writes in his summary of Adam Ferguson’s argument, because

in such settings vital resources are obtained largely through what modern culture and theory see as personal relations . . . In contrast, the Scots conceive of personal relations in commercial society as benefiting those involved at no cost to others; friendship becomes simultaneously a private virtue and a public good. (Silver 1990: 1484–5, 1487, 1496)

The qualities of disinterestedness and intimacy are peculiar to modern friendship, then, because individual bonds now occupy the space freed up by the emergence of the economic sphere governed by market relations.

It is now apparent that one strand of the argument developed in this book, according to which friendship in the classical world is understood centrally as a personal relationship predicated on affection and generosity rather than on obligatory reciprocity, challenges prevailing assumptions about the nature of social relations in antiquity. Rather than conceiving of Greek and Roman friendship as seamlessly embedded in economic and other functions, I am claiming for it a relative autonomy comparable to the status it presumably enjoys in modern life. The implications of this view are considerable. There is obviously a world of difference between ancient and modern social systems, although it has been argued that the Athenian economy in fact achieved a certain autonomy in the fourth century BC and perhaps earlier.⁹ But both societies – perhaps for entirely

⁹ Fourth-century autonomy: Cohen 1992: 4–7; for the economic transformation of Athens following the Persian invasion and Athens’ new role as imperial center, see Frost 1976 and Garnsey 1988: 89–164; Graham 1995: 8–10 remarks on the high level of organized trade testified to by Homer.

distinct reasons – did produce a space for sympathy and altruism under the name of friendship that stands as an alternative to structured forms of interaction based on kinship, civic identity, or commercial activity. This resemblance or continuity in the nature of friendship has consequences, as the following chapters will indicate, for how one writes the history of classical ethics, politics, and trade.

FRIENDSHIP AND OTHER RELATIONS

Social concepts do not exist in a vacuum. Friendship in any society is bounded by a set of alternative relationships that mark off its specific dimensions and properties. Semiotic theory posits the necessity of contrast in the construction of cultural ideas; as Umberto Eco (1976: 73) observes: “A cultural unit ‘exists’ and is recognized insofar as there exists another one which is opposed to it.” Stephen Nimis (1987: 9–10) rightly adds that language “is much too complex to be thought of in terms of a series of binary correlations . . . A cultural unit is a *nodal point* arising from a series of criss-crossings of numerous oppositional axes.”

The controversy over whether friendship existed in contrast to kinship, citizenship, and other ascribed roles in classical antiquity has already been noted; part of the argument of this book consists in demonstrating that it did, more or less analogously to the way modern friendship does. But friendship also takes its contours from other achieved relations that abut upon it, such as romantic love, the bonds that exist between mates and comrades, voluntary partnerships, neighborliness, and, in classical Greece, the special connection between foreign friends called *xenia*. The structure of erotic attraction, for example, in ancient society is not identical to that in twentieth-century England or the United States; one point of difference is the constitutive role played in the construction of Greek *erōs* by pederastic relations between men and boys, which produced a rather sharp distinction between amatory and amicable ties. Again, whether friendship assumes the same form among women as it does among men, and whether it is acknowledged as the name of a relationship between women and men, are not constants. Moreover, the numerous public feasts and other collective activities that marked the social life of the classical polis, along with common service in political office and in military units by men residing in different and often non-contiguous villages throughout the territory of Attica,

especially after the reforms of Cleisthenes shuffled and reorganized local demes into larger patch-work units, all contributed to the formation of friendships among people living at a distance from one another, and thus to a distinct differentiation between friends and neighbors.¹⁰ The several inclusions and exclusions that operate among these categories vary not only between cultures but in the course of classical antiquity itself, and thereby articulate different moments in the history of ancient friendship.

Such variations are of course not specific to classical antiquity, and it is salutary to remind oneself of divergences in modern conceptions of friendship that occur over a brief period of time or reflect differences in local culture, class, or point of view. Thus, we took note earlier of Odd Ramsøy's (1968: 12) claim that relationships between parents and children, brothers, lovers, or workers and bosses tend to "exclude friendship." More recently, Janet Reohr (1991: ix), in a sociological study of modern friendship, affirms:

What seems intriguing about friendship is its inclusive nature, whereas other relations often maintain exclusionary boundaries. It is possible for two people to be friends and have no other relational connections yet it is also possible to be siblings and friends, spouses and friends, colleagues and friends.

A writer who comments that "Over the years probably the most universal restriction on friendships has been to limit them to persons of the same sex," dedicates his book on friendship to "my wife and friend."¹¹

The criteria or differentiae that discriminate friendship from other affective bonds are of several sorts. To the extent that friendship excludes relationships marked by kinship or by differences of age, gender, and class (e.g. between masters and slaves), it invites a sociological analysis. Friendship may also be approached psychologically by way of the quality of the emotion specific to it. On this basis, Laurence Thomas (1993: 59) would efface the distinction between love and friendship: "I do not believe that there is a deep formal difference between friendship and romantic love." Alternatively, one may insist on the phenomenological differences between the experience of friendship and that of love, pointing, for example, to the

¹⁰ On the specific character of women's friendships, see, e.g.: Rubin 1959; Wright 1982; Raymond 1986; Eichenbaum and Orbach 1988; Allan 1989: 63–84; on collective activities in the polis, Schmitt-Pantel 1990a; on common service, Osborne 1990: 283.

¹¹ Bell 1981: 95; cf. Black 1980: 112–13.

relative absence of jealousy and possessiveness in friendship as opposed to romantic love. Again, the presence or absence of particular practices, such as sex, may motivate a conceptual distinction between two kinds of relationship. The emphasis in this book will fall on social aspects of friendship, but account will be taken where possible of alterations in what may be called the structure of feeling characteristic of the relationship.¹²

SOURCES AND THE PROBLEM OF LANGUAGE

Knowledge of friendship in classical Greece and Rome is based almost exclusively on the interpretation of textual sources. Images on pottery give some idea of the companionship of the symposium. Archaeology may suggest something about the material conditions of ancient society, but it is mute on the nature of a relationship like friendship, except insofar as it may illuminate a social context that for independent reasons is presumed to have a bearing on it: a case in point are size and density of population, which are sometimes supposed to affect the possibility or quality of friendships. When Walter Donlan (1985a: 301) observes of archaic Greece that “within the villages and village-clusters that made up the early *demos* [people], the majority of households were probably linked by ties of blood and marriage,” he is inferring from physical remains the small space available for personal and optional bonds between non-kin. A semi-urban region like classical Athens, then, with a population perhaps upward of 150,000 people (including women, children, and slaves), may be thought to have permitted the emergence of friendship as a primary social category, although modern evidence for the effect, good or bad, of urbanization on the formation of friendships is not unambiguous. Occasionally, the visual arts may supplement written sources, as in the case of archaic vase paintings illustrating Achilles’ special friendship with Ajax.¹³

Determining the parameters of ancient friendship, then, is fundamentally a philological task, which must begin by identifying the vocabulary of friendship and specifying its connections both with terms denoting other bonds in Greek or Latin and with the modern

¹² Phenomenological differences: Alberoni 1990: 33; structure of feeling: Williams 1977: 128–35.

¹³ Urbanization: Fischer 1982: 114–22; Cucó Giner 1995: 20–1; Achilles and Ajax: Moore 1987: 158–9.

lexicon. We have already noted that the noun *philos*, which is the Greek word normally translated as “friend,” has been understood variously by scholars. For those who have supposed that its extension is so broad as to include blood relatives and fellow citizens, rendering it as “friend” will not be accurate. Thus, Mary Whitlock Blundell, in her book *Helping Friends and Harming Enemies* (1989: 40–4), classifies Greek conceptions of friendship under three main heads or circles: the family, fellow-citizens, and “the third main group of *philoí* [plural of *philos*]” that “approximates most closely to modern conceptions of a friend.” I shall present evidence to show that in fact *philos* as a substantive is normally restricted to the last category, but plainly such a demonstration involves a close analysis of texts, especially where critics of the highest caliber have disagreed over so fundamental a matter.

A further question involves the relationship between the concrete noun *philos* and other forms derived from the same root, such as the verb *philein*, which means “to love,” and the abstract noun *philia*, commonly rendered as “friendship.” As it happens, the form *philia* does in fact cover relationships far wider than friendship, including the love between kin and the affection or solidarity between relatively distant associates such as members of the same fraternity or city. Thus, it is often misleading or simply wrong to translate it as “friendship,” although the practice is quite general, as for example in English versions of the eighth and ninth books of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*. The different range of meanings of the terms *philos* and *philia* has contributed, I believe, to the prevalent confusion over the significance of the concrete noun, leading scholars to suppose that its use is as broad as that of *philia*. Hence the denial that Greek has a word corresponding to the English “friend,” though it would indeed be true to say that there is no single Greek term quite equivalent to “friendship.”

Similar problems arise with related vocabulary, such as the archaic term *xenos*, commonly translated as “guest-friend.” At the other temporal extreme of classical antiquity, one observes that the classical vocabulary of friendship tends to be eschewed by some Christian writers, while the word “brother” is used of members of the faith generally, and hence may be applied to non-kin, including friends, as well as to kin (e.g. Basil, *Ep.* 64, in reference to Elpidius who is no relation). In each case, the only procedure for getting at the sense is a patient examination of usage and contexts, inevitably

motivated by certain expectations which may be consciously maintained on theoretical grounds or else vaguely supported by intuition or common sense (the latter being nothing but the implicit endorsement of hypotheses formulated by others).

The issue of the extent to which Greek and Latin terminology for friendship corresponds to modern nomenclature raises sticky problems pertaining to the history of culture and of ideas generally. How is it possible to penetrate the hermeneutic barrier between distinct languages and social systems, especially given the idiosyncratic nature of the ancient city-state communities?¹⁴ With what assurance do we even begin the search for continuities in meaning over so vast a time period as two millennia and more? If, as we have suggested, every “cultural unit” is bounded by an array of concepts specific to a given historical moment, what sense is there in seeking equivalences between single elements of the two systems taken in isolation? In general, the value and reliability of such comparisons become manifest, if at all, in the results produced by investigation: where ancient and modern meanings are congruent, and also where they are not, should shed light both on the sense of specific passages in classical texts and on larger ideological configurations.

Of the connection between ancient and modern signs, Jacques Derrida (1982: 254) remarks:

While acknowledging the specific function of a term within its system, we must not, however, take the signifier as perfectly conventional. Doubtless, Hegel’s *Idea*, for example, is not Plato’s *Idea*; doubtless the effects of the system are irreducible and must be read as such. But the word *Idea* is not an arbitrary *X*, and it bears a traditional burden that continues Plato’s system in Hegel’s system.

Hegel was aware that the expression “*idea*” was transliterated from the Greek. In the case of friendship, where the signifiers *philos*, *amicus*, and friend are distinct, Derrida (1993: 366–7) affirms more cautiously: “we should not forget that we are speaking first of all from within the tradition of a certain concept of friendship, within a given culture . . . Now, this tradition is not homogeneous, nor is the determination of friendship within it.” Derrida proposes to identify “the major marks of a tension, perhaps ruptures, and in any case scissions, at the interior of this history of friendship, of the canonical figure of friendship.” *Philos* does not exactly equal

¹⁴ Cf. Roussel 1976: 6, 311–12.