

Of Love and Loyalty

Classical friendship was, I believe, an elective, affective relationship. That is, friends were understood to be chosen, not determined by birth or kinship, and friendship was based on love. In these respects, it was similar to modern friendship, which is usually assumed to be voluntary and predicated on affection. There were some respects, however, in which classical and modern notions of friendship differed: one of the most conspicuous had to do with the sharing of confidences or personal information, which is taken to be the hallmark of intimacy. A further difference comes to light, I think, in relation to loyalty.

At first blush, it would appear that loyalty to friends was no less prized in antiquity than it is today. Affirmations of the importance of fidelity or constancy in friendship abound. In Euripides' tragedy, *Orestes*, Orestes declares: "friends [*philoï*] should aid friends in trouble; when fortune is generous, what need is there of friends?" (655-57); and his faithful friend Pylades asks: "where else shall I show myself a friend if I do not defend you in dire misfortune?" (802-3). The unspoken premise of these statements is that people are inclined to put their own interests ahead of others', and so become scarce when they are called upon to make sacrifices. Eric Felten, in his book, *Loyalty: The Vexing Virtue* (2011: 4): "The Greeks were sticklers for the loyalties that make family and friendship flourish."

Aristotle defines the verb *philein* as "wishing for someone the things that he deems good, for the sake of that person and not oneself, and the accomplishment of these things to the best of one's ability" (*Rhetoric* 2.3, 1380b36-81a1). The term *philia* also does duty, of course, for friendship, which Aristotle defines as a reciprocal affection or love in which each party is aware of the other's sentiment. *Philia* is aroused, according to Aristotle, principally by three qualities:

the pleasurable, the useful, and virtue. By grounding the highest kind of friendship in virtue, Aristotle may have sought to evade one of the challenges to friendship that later writers will raise more insistently, namely the possibility that, in doing all one can to assist a friend one may find oneself committed to performing actions that are wrong or criminal. Cicero is particularly alert to this danger. He notes that one of the motives for ending a friendship is “disagreement over sides [*partes*] in respect to the republic” (*De amicitia* 21.77), and he states categorically that friendship can never justify rebelling against the state. Aristotle had already affirmed that one must never demand that a friend do something bad (*Nicomachean Ethics* 8.8, 1159b5). If friends are united by their regard for virtue – and if virtue is single and univocal – then the dilemma posed by Cicero would not arise.

But of course, things are not so simple. According to Aulus Gellius (*Attic Nights* 1.3.9), Theophrastus, in the first book of his essay *On Friendship*, treated in detail the question of “whether one ought to assist a friend contrary to what is just and to what extent and in what ways,” and he allowed that it was acceptable in certain contexts. Cicero too, Gellius points out, granted that one may support even an unjust ambition on the part of a friend, so long as it does not lead to acute disgrace (*Cicero De amicitia* 17.61, cit. Gellius 1.3.13). Gellius worries that this advice is too vague to be helpful in practice. A second obstacle to loyalty involves what we might call the degree of commitment. Under what circumstances ought friends to lay down their lives for a friend’s sake, or make some other extreme sacrifice? How does one balance the cost to oneself against the benefit to the other? Short of death, one may quibble about the cost involved in any particular effort on behalf of a friend. As a precaution, Aristotle advises that good friends not make excessive demands: since affection is mutual, those in need ought to avoid imposing on a friend in the same measure that the friend is ideally disposed to succor them.

There is also, as Aristotle recognizes, a third impediment to friendship, and that is the waning of affection on the part of at least one of the parties. Aristotle addresses the question in relation to childhood attachments: it often happens that children develop differently, or that one outstrips another in virtue or some other capacity, and as a result the equality on which friendship is ideally founded is lost. As Aristotle puts it, “if one friend remained a child in intellect while the other became a fully developed man,” they could hardly remain friends. He then asks whether the superior friend should behave no differently toward the other “than he would if he had never been his friend,” and he replies: “Surely he should keep a remembrance of their former intimacy, and as we think we ought to oblige friends rather than strangers, so too, with those who have been our friends, we ought to make some allowance for our former friendship, at all events when the breach has not been due to excess of wickedness” (*NE* 8.3). For, as Aristotle has just explained, “What is evil neither can nor should be loved; for it is not one's duty to be a lover of evil.”

Euripides' *Orestes* is a proving ground for ancient Greek conceptions of friendship, and illustrates many of the points that Aristotle makes. The scene is Argos, where Orestes and Electra have been condemned to death for having murdered their mother. In the nick of time their uncle Menelaus arrives on his way home from Troy. Menelaus is Orestes' and Electra's sole hope of safety, and Orestes appeals to him as a friend (cf. *philoisi*, 450) and as one obliged to Agamemnon (453), who launched the expedition to avenge the abduction of Helen. When Menelaus hesitates, evidently intimidated by the threats of his father-in-law Tyndareus (622-29), Orestes answers with a volley of arguments. First, he insists that Menelaus would simply be repaying his debt to Agamemnon, who risked his life for his sake (642-43; cf. 652-54). He goes on to concede that the murder of his mother was wrong: “I am in the wrong [*adikô*]. It is right

that I receive some wrong [*adikon ti*] at your hands in return for this evil.” At stake is the first constraint on the obligations entailed by friendship that we noted above: ought one to commit a wrong on behalf of a friend? In rescuing Orestes and Electra, Menelaus would be subverting the law of Argos, but the gain to his friends would be immense.

In his rejoinder, Menelaus does not address the claims of justice directly but alleges that he lacks the power to take on the Argives in open combat (688-92; cf. 710-13). Instead, he will try persuasion. The debate implicitly raises the second issue mentioned above, that is, the degree of sacrifice that is warranted by friendship. At this point Orestes’ friend Pylades enters, having been banished from his home in Phocis. The friendship of Orestes and Pylades was legendary, and Orestes, upon catching sight of him, pronounces him a trustworthy (*pistos*) man and dearest (*philtatos*) of mortals (725-28). Pylades in turn addresses Orestes as “dearest of agemates and friends and kinsmen.” Pylades insists on accompanying Orestes to the Argive assembly, where he will plead his case for exoneration: “Where else,” he says, “could I demonstrate that I am your friend if I do not come to your aid when you are in direst trouble?” To which Orestes replies: “This proves it: get comrades [*hetairous*], not just blood kin! An outsider whose character fuses with yours is a better friend [*philos*] to have than countless blood relations!” (802-06, trans. Kovacs).

Orestes’ appeal to the assembly is defeated, save that he and Electra are granted the privilege of doing away with their own lives rather than die by stoning. Pylades declares that he is prepared to die with them, but Orestes attempts to dissuade him: “Take yourself back to your father, don’t die with me. You have a city, while I have none, you have a father’s house and the great refuge wealth provides. To be sure, you have lost your marriage to my ill-starred sister here, whom I gave you to keep in honor of our friendship [*hetairian*]. But take another wife and

have children! Your marriage tie [*kêdos*] with me is over” (1075-79, trans. Kovacs). Orestes is playing the part of a friend in refusing to implicate Pylades in his own misfortune. Pylades, in turn, rejects his arguments, as a good friend should. How, he asks, can he think of facing his countrymen, as one who “stood by you as a friend [*philos*] before your trouble but now that trouble visits you am your friend [*philos*] no longer?” (1095-96, trans. Kovacs). With this, Pylades proposes the plan to kill Helen as a way of taking vengeance on Menelaus, then burn down the palace and go out in a blaze of glory.

To be trustworthy or loyal – *pistos* in Greek – is the quality of a friend; to fall short of it is simply not to be a friend at all, or not in the right degree. Trustworthiness and friendship are covariant: the one is the mark of the other, and when Menelaus fails to come to the aid of his nephew, he stands accused not of a want of loyalty but of being deficient as a friend as well as a kinsman. This is perhaps why loyalty is not mentioned by Aristotle as a distinct virtue. In his *Eudemian Ethics*, Aristotle quotes the saying that “a friendship that is not stable is not a friendship” (7.5, 1239b15-16); there is no need to stipulate loyalty as a distinct attribute of friendship. Loyalty has a different status in modern attitudes toward friendship and other relationships predicated on affection. To see the difference, we may examine another drama that examines what is expected of friends, this one dating to the middle of the twentieth century.

Edward Albee’s *A Delicate Balance* premiered on Broadway in 1966 and won the Pulitzer Prize in the following year. It has been revived on Broadway just this year, with John Lithgow and Glenn Close in the leading roles. The setting of the play is the living room of Tobias and Agnes, a well-to-do elderly couple who are subject to the angst and self-doubt typical of the contemporary theater. Agnes’ alcoholic sister, Claire, lives with them, and in the course of the play the daughter, Julia, now in the process of her fourth divorce, comes home. In the

meantime, another couple, Harry and Edna, arrive unexpectedly; while they were at home, they were stricken with a sudden, intense attack of panic and they hope to stay indefinitely with Tobias and Edna, who are their best friends. They are given Julia's room, which irritates the infantile and self-indulgent daughter immensely and forces Tobias and Edna to reconsider their invitation. Tobias in particular is torn between what he takes to be his obligation to so close a friend and the inconvenience that this new arrangement imposes on his family: deep down, he himself is ambivalent about the intrusion. Matters come to a head in the third and final act, which is the part relevant to the present discussion.

Julia is adamant about expelling Harry and Edna: "These people have no right," she says. To which Tobias replies: "No right? After all these years? We've known them since.... For God's sake, Julia, those people are our *friends!*" To Agnes, Tobias wails: "For God's sake, if ... if that's all Harry and Edna mean to us, then ... then what about *us?*" To which Agnes replies: "blood binds us. Blood holds us together when we've no more ... deep affection for ourselves than others." Family ties are stronger than friendship precisely because they do not depend on something so precarious as love. In the morning, Harry and Edna come downstairs, and Harry, alone with Tobias, announces that they are leaving. When Tobias protests, Harry asks plaintively: "Do you *want* us here?" He explains: "*I* like you, and you like me, I think, and ... you're our best friends." But during the night, he said to Edna that had Tobias and Agnes come to them, he would not have taken them in. Tobias loses his habitual cool and screams, "YES! OF COURSE! I WANT YOU HERE!" In a calmer tone he says, "we've know you all these years and we love each other don't we?" Then, excited again: "DON'T WE?! DON'T WE LOVE EACH OTHER?" And calm again, "Doesn't friendship grow to that? To love?" But he soon retreats again: "I like you well enough, but not enough ... that best friend in the world

should be something else – more.” And final, hysterically: YOU STAY WITH US! I DON’T WANT YOU HERE! I DON’T LOVE YOU! BUT BY GOD ... YOU STAY!!” Then, whimpering: “Stay? Please? Stay?” And he exits with Harry to help him bring down his bags.

Tobias experiences an emotional and moral conflict that is, I think, foreign to classical discourse (whatever the inner, unarticulated experience of ancient Greeks and Romans might have been). He ascribes his reluctance to welcome Harry into his home to a deficiency of love, which, were it strong or genuine enough, would override the discomfort of his family and his own hesitation, and so he determines to act as a friend should even though the feeling has waned. Having another couple move in with them is a sacrifice for Tobias and Edna, no doubt about it. But Tobias is not content with Aristotle’s cool observation that when childhood friends grow apart, they “should keep a remembrance of their former intimacy,” even though a genuine friendship is no longer possible. Tobias wishes to compensate for the dwindling, or at all events the inadequacy, of his affection by giving proof of a commitment and willingness to sacrifice that is no longer based on love. And is not this the very essence of what we call loyalty? In a penetrating essay entitled “Faithfulness and Gratitude,” originally published in 1908 under the title, “Treue und Dankbarkeit,” the German sociologist Georg Simmel observed: “Because of the supplementary character of faithfulness, such a term as ‘faithful love,’ for instance, is somewhat misleading. If love continues to exist in a relationship between persons, why does it need faithfulness? If the partners are not, from the beginning, connected by it but, rather, by the primary and genuine psychological disposition of love, why must faithfulness, as the guardian of the relationship, be added after ten years if, by definition, love remains identical even then, and still on its own strength has its initial binding power?” In a touching phrase, Simmel remarks that “Faithfulness might be called the inertia of the soul. It keeps the soul on the path on which

it started, even after the original occasion that led it onto it no longer exists.” Love is an internal state, an emotion: it may wax or wane, and is not readily subject to our control. Fidelity, by contrast, is an ethical imperative and hence a function of the will. As Simmel notes, “faithfulness, more than other feelings, is accessible to our moral intentions. Other feelings overcome us like sunshine or rain, and their coming and going cannot be controlled by our will.”

In ancient Greece, there was, I think, less of a disposition to separate out loyalty from love and friendship and to consider it as a distinct psychic state – one which is, nevertheless, parasitical on affection, for it manifests itself in love’s wake, as it were, in the turbulence that love leaves as a trace of itself when the feeling has already passed. Rather, a friend who is not loyal or *pistos* simply is no friend at all. There is no moral residue, no afterimage of friendship that demands our respect when *philia* has faded. It was understood that true friends would stand by one another, and if they failed to do so, it was not a case of friendship betrayed so much as evidence that the friendship had never existed in the first place. Perhaps this is why there seems to have been no Greek tragedy predicated on dissension among friends, as opposed to the very common theme of conflict among kin.

For Aristotle, and I think for the Greeks of his time generally, the emotions, and love among them, were not simply subjective states but were conceived first and foremost as responses to external impressions: the stimulus was thus part of the definition of the sentiment. If love is the active desire for the well-being of the other, it is elicited, as we have seen, by that person’s perceived traits. Accordingly, when a friend’s character or other qualities change, or are perceived to be no longer what one had taken them to be, the love dissolves and with it any commitment to the other that is entailed by the original affection. In Shakespeare’s famous avowal, “Love is not love which alters when it alteration finds” (Sonnet 116), we may see an

adumbration of our modern structure of feeling, in which love is liberated from the nature of its object and exists as a feeling apart, ideally – but perhaps impossibly – consistent and unchanging. Such a conception places a great burden on the individual, and gives rise to the kind of guilt that Tobias experiences, in Albee's play, when he fears that his love for Harry has diminished; he hopes that duty or loyalty can compensate for the insufficiency of love. Neither Euripides nor, so far as I know, any other classical Greek writer raises the problem of loyalty in quite these terms. True *philia* is by its nature loyal, and if it declines, it is the outer cause, not the feeling, that has changed.