

Introduction Friendship: An Unanswered Question

*Graham M Smith**

What is friendship and why is it important? If an individual were to come to a point of sincerely posing such a question to another in the course of their personal relations it would be a cause for concern. To do so is certainly something regrettable; it is perhaps even a sign of the tragic. In this context the posing of such a question indicates that something has gone awry in the life of the enquirer. The question is a symptom of a deeper malaise. The questioner might well be suffering from some personal loss, betrayal, crisis of faith, or psychological illness. The question betrays a fundamental disconnection from the world of mutuality, recognition, sympathy, and sharing. In other words, it indicates a disruption in the experience of that which binds others and sustains their communion and meaning. Clearly such an enquirer is lacking something important in their life. They have lost the connection to the world that others hold in common. They strike us as somehow alienated from what makes life meaningful, and maybe even lacking something that could complete their existence. Yet this unusual and extreme case – a case where we see a life distorted by being devoid of the understanding and experience of friendship – also points to something else of significance: the experience of friendship is an ubiquitous one. Moreover, it draws our attention to the fact that friendship of some variety is necessary not only for a successful life, but for the common life of human beings to be sustained at all. For what would human life be without friendship? How could we sustain not only all that is practical, but also the very moral and affective fabric which makes us human? Thus, the extreme case of a person posing a question about the very meaning and value of friendship is not just an illustration of a private tragedy: taken more widely, it also points to a concern with a much more pressing and encompassing perspective.

It would seem that our question, ‘What is friendship and why is it important?’, cannot be answered directly if it is asked in sincerity by one person to another in the course of the unfolding of their lives. If such a question were asked no definition or explanation could be forthcoming – at least not one that would likely make sense to the questioner. Asked in the course of a human life gone astray this question can only be replied to by the respondent *being* a good friend. It is not discussion but demonstration which is required. For such an isolated enquirer is unlikely to be persuaded about the importance of friendship. What they need is to be reconnected to the emotional and moral universe which makes the importance of friendship self-evident and the lived experience of billions across the face of the earth. What the questioner needs is to be relocated within the framework and dynamics of friendship which cross-cross forwards and backwards across generations and sustain human endeavour. This is a psychological and emotional need; no doubt an ethical one too. It might even have practical import. However, in this case it is a personal affair. Yet even despite this initial observation, reflection on this scenario indicates the possibility of a wider and deeper perspective with friendship taken as a concern which expands beyond the instance to the more generic. Approached in this way we

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focus on the foundations, dynamics, and value of friendship. It is no doubt true that personal friendships, the kinds of friendships which everyone seeks and which are welcome sustenance in the lives of billions, can be analysed in such a way as to bring coherence to our question. In so doing, personal friendships are shown to be the subject of not only psychology and ethics, but also to play a role in politics, religion, economics, and culture. Each of these approaches raises fresh questions and identifies new puzzles about friendship. Each of these approaches also brings forth fresh insight and understanding of friendship as a personal, intimate, and perhaps even unique bond between two persons. Such insights are likely to enhance and inform the experience of friendship as it is lived between two persons.

Friendship as a site of serious intellectual enquiry encompasses this, but it does not rest at these borders. A concern with friendship moves beyond the personal. As a site of study, friendship admits not to the reduction to a single example, but to the production of variety. Thus, a concern with friendship also begins to touch upon the deeper questions of which personal friendship is simply one response. Understood in its most basic form friendship is a relation, and thus to be exploring and explaining friendship is to be engaged with the bonds between person and person, group and group. To be interested in these bonds is to be concerned with what is somehow shared between people; it is to be interested in how they act together, and how they understand each other, their ideas and ideals. It is also to be simultaneously concerned with how those bonds are possible, and how our social fabric is woven from those connective threads. It is to be interested in the development of those threads and how they come to structure what is built upon them: the social, the political, the religious, the cultural, and the philosophical. Friendship also lends itself quickly to an engagement with ethics and normatively: friendship can be good or bad, supportive or restrictive, aimed at justice or aimed at narrow self-advancement, open or closed. Often it is many of these things at once. Friendship, then, indicates a concern, but it is not limited to a concern with a very specific and limited relationship (personal friendship) although it surely includes this. Friendship is concerned with the bonds which connect all people, and all manifestations of those bonds under whatever name: eros, philia, amity, dynasty, citizenship, concord, loyalty, commitment, community, solidarity, neighbourliness, fraternity, compatriotism, comradeship, sisterhood, care, and perhaps even love. In being so focused this understanding of friendship begins to answer our original question. What is friendship? Friendship is a concern with bonds between persons; and those bonds take multiple forms. Why is it important? Friendship underpins our very social intercourse and makes our world both possible and meaningful. This means that unless we try to understand friendship we fail to see as full a picture as we might. It also means that we threaten to misunderstand the fabric of our world. This can result not only in neglect, but also in entropy and decay as we fail to do those things which are needed to continue to support friendship.

In our own times interest in friendship is once again growing: it is emerging from a period of relative neglect. In the Ancient literature the treatment of this theme was both routine and sustained. To the Ancient mind no serious account of the world of human beings could be offered without attending to friendship. It was at once familial, romantic, pleasurable, practical, and political. It was connected to virtue, justice, and the good life. In contrast, and on the whole, the Moderns are strangers to friendship. In modernity the tendency has been to split analysis between two competing foci: the individual and the nation. Although it is true this has led to

some advances, it has also had the effect of isolating the individual from others: individuals are atomised and stand alone from each other, or alone in the mass. Thus, on the one hand the focus on the fate of the individual threatens to splinter politics to a total fragmentation. Often conceived of as pre-social and pre-political, this individual has been clothed in liberty and buffeted by power: they might need to overcome their eerie isolation, but they are not inclined to do so. On the other hand, sometimes the focus has been on the nation-state or ‘the people’. Now the individual becomes isolated in another way, swallowed up into a vast machine or organism in which they must play their part or be threatened with expulsion. Here the body is animated by power which is most often conceived of as being a possession which is wielded from top down, or projected upwards and reflected downwards from the largest part. Thus, the possibility of a continuous whole which explains the interconnectedness of persons and their world has been replaced by a preference for two distinct nodes. In such an analysis the fact of politics becomes a problem in need of explanation and justification, rather than the expression of what it means to be a human and the possibility of a shared project.

In this light, to think about friendship again is to begin to re-engage with a tradition which has been obscured by modernity, but which also holds great promise for the times towards which we are heading. Yet to think about friendship is not simply to attempt to revive the past. Nor is it to set up a new ideal or utopian vision for the future. Instead to think about friendship is to re-engage with what might be thought of as a fundamental question. It is to focus again on what binds person to person, group to group. It is to focus again on that sharing and basic connectedness which provides the fabric onto which the social, cultural, religious, and political world is woven. Without friendship – without the bonds between person and person – no recognisably human world is possible. That this question and focus is now becoming increasingly pressing in a number of fields, and for those with a number of purposes, is a sign of the limitations of the modern focus. Something more is now needed to complement this picture.

AMITY is the first journal – to our knowledge – to provide an exclusive space to this important concern. The essays contained within its pages are representative of some of the most contemporary thinking and scholarship on this topic. AMITY is constrained by no sociological, religious, political or philosophical school. Nor could it be. The topic of friendship cuts across sociological, religious, political and philosophical traditions as decisively as it cuts across these boundaries in the lives of people. AMITY recognises that friendship is not confined to any particular discipline or field, and so disciplinary openness is necessary if a fuller understanding and development of this theme and its problems is to be achieved. As such it explores friendship through disciplinary, cross-disciplinary, and post-disciplinary work. The primary demand that AMITY makes of its authors is that they engage with friendship and each other in an open and constructive way, and that they express their ideas in a clear and accessible vocabulary. In establishing AMITY it is intended that a space is created to pursue the numerous questions that friendship raises and to begin to provide some answers – and undoubtedly multiply those questions too. Ultimately the aim of AMITY is not only to provide a forum for rigorous and exemplary scholarship and debate, but also to provide a way to answer some of the pressing questions of our time which can be addressed by an understanding of friendship. This edition is the first step towards that goal.

Note on contributor

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