

Book Review

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Barbara Caine (ed.)

Friendship. A History

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Friendship: A History is an important monograph that offers students of friendship a good entry point into this ambiguous subject. It is skilfully edited by Barbara Caine, currently Head of the School of Philosophical and Historical Inquiry at the University of Sydney. The inquiry of the subject is also both from a historical and philosophical perspective, and the scholars that have contributed to the edited volume set out to analyse the major classical texts on friendship, and the changing role of friendship throughout (Western) history. It is an ambitious volume, setting out to analyse roughly 2500 years of history in 415 pages. Early on, the authors indicate that this means they will not cover every period in depth, but rather that they have focused on key themes that illustrate patterns of continuity and change (p.xiv). However, that concession proves to be unnecessary; even by limiting their focus the authors have succeeded in offering a good history of western friendship.

Chapters 1-5 offer a good overview of the development of friendship up to modern times. The first three chapters deal with classical ideals of friendship, while Chapters 4 and 5 offer perspectives from the Renaissance (4) and Enlightenment (5). Chapter 1 by Dirk Baltzly and Nick Eliopoulos is very comprehensive and offers a classical account of friendship that goes much further than merely summarizing the thoughts of Plato and Aristotle. Chapters 3-5 are quite refreshing in that they also offer a good account of Christian perspectives on friendship, rather than quickly glancing over this period before entering modernity. Another standout chapter is

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the one on Renaissance Friendships by Carolyn James and Bill Kent which, among other enticing approaches, also offers a visual analysis of the way friendship is portrayed in Renaissance paintings. Starting from Chapter 6 (Taking up the Pen: Women and the Writing of Friendship), an account of friendship in modernity is given. From Chapter 6 onwards the book takes a gendered approach, differentiating between friendship among men and friendship between women, and also devotes more time to class differences. Finally, Chapter 9 deals with the more recent past. The chapters are all of excellent quality and form a natural whole, which quite possibly has to do with the smart editorial choice to have a number of authors contribute both single-authored and collaborative chapters. The end result is that the reader is left with a very good understanding of the historical development of friendship, while also having been offered a myriad of different historical and philosophical approaches to study friendship.

That combination, a good overview of the history of friendship and the wide array of different methods to study the subject, are the two main strengths of the book. Having, purposefully, left out most non-western perspectives (occasionally they are offered, most notably in Mark Peel's Chapter 8, *New Worlds of Friendship*), has helped to limit the scope of the book, and thereby offering a more comprehensive account of the history of western friendship, while at the same time it leaves room for future scholars. One could easily imagine a companion volume focusing on non-western friendship. Published in 2009, some of the final sections on friendship in the digital age are a little dated ('Is there intimacy in email, SMS, blogging, or texting?' (p.346) can currently be replaced with Facebook and WhatsApp, and who knows by what next year), but that offers a good justification for an occasional updated edition. In any case, this does not affect the excellent historical and philosophical findings that make up 99% of the volume. My only real gripe lies with some of the conclusions that arise from the gendered approach in the latter half of the volume.

Although this approach can easily be justified, after all virtually all pre-modern sources offer a male centric perspective, some of the conclusions that follow this might, perhaps should, have been expanded upon. For instance, assertions that 'increasingly one can see more widely not only an acceptance of the idea that women are capable of friendship but even more a suggestion that they have greater capacities for friendship than men' (p.221) and that '[m]en bond with each other for the moment, and in the absence of women, they do not become intimate' (p.337) are not always further expounded upon. I hazard the guess that the authors are not far

removed from the truth, but their claims could have been further substantiated, for instance by connecting to Graham Allan's sociological studies which also hint in that direction (cf.: Graham Allan, *Friendship: Developing a sociological perspective*, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989, pp. 67, and 71-72). But apart from this minor gripe, the work remains a good entry point for those interested in a historical account of friendship.

Students of friendship will find much to love in *Friendship: A History*, while at the same time it is a great reference work for seasoned scholars. The book offers a plethora of exciting approaches to study friendship, and also leaves room for new avenues of research, for instance on non-western friendship.

About the reviewer:

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