

Book Review

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Michael H. Mitias, *Friendship: A Central Moral Value*.

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According to Michael Mitias, ‘no moral theory can be adequate if it does not treat friendship as a central moral value or if it does not acknowledge it as a (sic) essential ingredient of the good life’ (p.1, cf. p.197). This declaration creates the puzzle that his book explores: how is it that philosophizing in the western tradition has paid so little attention to friendship? Mitias qualifies this claim about friendship’s neglect by clarifying that theorizing about friendship stalled after the close of the Stoic period in the fourth century (pp.1-2). He further qualifies this claim by explaining that even when later writers did pay attention to friendship, they did not treat it as ‘a central moral value and ... a condition of the good life.’ (p.2)

Mitias’s explanation for the failure of philosophers over the last sixteen hundred years to appreciate the centrality of friendship to moral life is a shift in the moral paradigm (p.4). The moral paradigm embodies a culture’s ‘understanding of the moral as such: what does it mean for an action, a person, a law, or a community to be moral?’ (p.87) This shift in moral paradigm is, in turn, rooted in a change in the cultural paradigm (p.5). Chapter One is devoted to Mitias’s understanding of the concept of a moral paradigm. Chapter Two discusses moral paradigms in Hellenic and post-Hellenistic cultures. These first two chapters say little about friendship specifically. Indeed, changes in the moral paradigm over time are Mitias’s main focus throughout the book as a whole.

Chapter Three locates friendship in the context of Hellenic and Hellenistic moral theory, focusing on the views of Aristotle and Cicero as exemplary. Mitias offers fairly perfunctory summaries of these ancient thinkers’ views, making no mention of the role that gender or social status plays in their accounts of friendship. Nor is there any reference in the chapter or the notes to any of the secondary literature on these texts. I was also struck by the way Mitias just imputes the views of Gaius Laelius in *De Amicitia* to Cicero himself. This is probably warranted but should, as an interpretive move, be noted and justified.

Friendship in Medieval Moral Theory is the topic of Chapter Four, but anyone glancing at this book would think that this theme commands much more space. This is due to an error in the running titles, whereby ‘Friendship in Medieval Moral Theory’ appears atop every odd numbered page from 63 to 163. The Medieval moral paradigm was marked, in Mitias’s view, by three key features - otherworldliness, a finally created world, and hierarchical institutionalism (p.89). As per his wider argument, these features powerfully influenced medieval approaches to friendship. Or, rather, they explain the absence of friendship in medieval moral theory – sections 4 and 5 of this chapter both include ‘absence’ in their subtitles. This chapter concludes with a

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discussion of Gilbert Meilaender's argument regarding the displacement of *philia* by agape in Christian ethics (p.118).

Although Chapter Five is entitled 'Friendship in Modern Moral Theory', many pages elapse before we get any discussion of friendship. Once again, this mismatch between the title of the chapter and what is covered in its first pages is due to Mitias's conviction about the need to delineate the features of any period's moral paradigm before addressing friendship. The modern moral paradigm is marked by humanism, diversity, rationalism, and reform-mindedness. These features collaborated to marginalize friendship's importance in human life, and its marginal status is re-enacted in this chapter, which accords six pages at its end to the specifics of friendship in modern moral theory. Even then, Kant is the only figure who gets any attention. The book's last historical chapter is about friendship in contemporary moral theory, but it says even less about friendship. This is because 'the three prominent philosophical approaches, pragmatism, philosophy of existence, and analytic philosophy, dismissed friendship as a central moral value from moral theory.' (p.191)

Friendship is asserted to be an ontological need in the book's closing chapter. Humans are social creatures and from this Mitias jumps to proclaiming our need for friendship. It 'is an indispensable condition for human growth and development; and it is so basic that we cannot be truly fulfilled without meeting its demands.' (p.198) Whatever the changes in self-understandings and the moral and the spiritual conditions that give rise to them, the 'basic stuff – emotional, intellectual, and biological' of human identity 'has practically remained constant' (p.198). Part of this enduring stuff is the need for friendship (p.1, p.14, p.121).

But beyond insisting that friendship is a constant human need, Mitias says little about its forms or demands, so it is unclear what friendship really *is*. The last chapter offers a definition from the *Webster New College Dictionary* (p.205). Although some are touched on in passing in this chapter, the questions that have surfaced in the philosophical tradition are not taken up in any depth or detail. Is there a single form of friendship? If there are multiple forms, are some better than others? Is friendship based on similarity or difference? Is it possible across differences of gender, class, and age? Does it require similarity of moral character? Is it a form of moral pedagogy or can friendship encourage immoral activity? Can it occur within marriage? Does it require equality? Mitias does announce that no matter what categories of people it unites, '*philia* is a *human* relation' (p.206, *emphases original*). But this begs the question of how the human is construed, as well as whether Aristotle and Cicero could have affirmed this permissive, inclusive approach to friendship.

Perhaps centuries of philosophical neglect have made it hard to pose, let alone answer, such questions about friendship. However, Mitias seems to be saying that for the past sixteen hundred years, western philosophy has been a bad mirror of human nature because it has failed to reflect, and reflect upon, this enduring component of selfhood. But philosophical approaches to friendship, however limited and deficient, appear to be impotent when it comes to affecting our need for and experience of friendship. If humans continue to need and define friendship much as they ever did, then philosophies that undervalue or neglect friendship have had little impact.

Title notwithstanding, *Friendship: A Central Moral Value*, is not primarily about friendship. It reprimands western philosophy and culture for failing to value properly this

relationship and constructs an homogenizing narrative to justify the reprimand. But, fortunately for us, Mitias suggests that ontology remains largely untouched by philosophy, and we are left to infer that centuries of theoretical neglect have had few, if any, harmful consequences for our friendships.

Note on Contributor

Ruth Abbey is Professor of Political Science at the University of Notre Dame. She is the author of *Nietzsche's Middle Period* (Oxford University Press); *Philosophy Now: Charles Taylor* (Princeton University Press); *The Return of Feminist Liberalism* (McGill-Queens University Press). She is the editor of *Contemporary Philosophy in Focus: Charles Taylor* (Cambridge University Press) and *Feminist Interpretations of Rawls* (Penn State University Press). She has also written a number of journal articles, ranging from topics such as contemporary liberalism, to conceptions of marriage, to animal ethics, to cyberdemocracy. She has been the recipient of a Leverhulme Trust Research Fellowship, and research fellowships at the Princeton Institute for Advanced Study and the Murphy Institute for Ethics and Public Affairs.