

Friendship, philosophy, and gender in historical perspective

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ABSTRACT: Since antiquity Western philosophers have reflected systematically on friendship, declaring it essential to human wellbeing. However, because conceptions of friendship have changed over time, the philosophic discourse on friendship must be viewed historically. This essay traces the transformation of conceptions of friendship from antiquity to the present and argues that the philosophic discourse on friendship has had an overt gender inflection. In the ancient and premodern worlds, friendship (especially, its highest form, virtue friendship) was reserved for men only; women were excluded from it on account of their perceived innate inferiority. In the modern period, discussions on friendship became more egalitarian and less tied to philosophy. Friendship could now be practiced not only among men of different social classes, but also among men and women, and increasingly among women. As modern women cultivated friendships with other women, they also recognized the political power of friendship as a lever for social change, giving rise to modern feminist movements in which female friendships loomed large. Friendship features prominently in contemporary feminist theory, reflecting the revival of ancient virtue ethics in moral philosophy, on the one hand, and the emergence of feminist ethics of care, on the other hand. Today, as in antiquity, friendship is a highly valued ingredient of human wellbeing.

Keywords: virtue; happiness; feminism; ethics of care; gender.

Introduction

Friendship is a fundamental social bond that appears in all societies and cultures (Hongladaron and Joaquin 2014). This bond characterizes not only relationships among individuals but also among social groups, sub-cultures, and even world religions (Goshen-Gottstein 2018). Given the preponderance of human friendships, it is no wonder that the topic has generated sustained philosophical reflections over the centuries. Plato's *Lysis*, *Phaedrus*, and the *Symposium*, Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, Plutarch's *Essay How to Tell a Flatterer from a Friend* and *On Having Many Friends*, Cicero's *Of Friendship*, Seneca's *Letters of a Stoic*, Aelred of Rievaulx's *Spiritual Friendship*, Michele de Montaigne's *Of Friendship*, Francis Bacon's *Of Friendship*, Immanuel Kant's *Lectures of Friendship*, and

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Søren Kirkegaard's *Works of Love* are among the most famous philosophic texts devoted specifically to friendship.

Western philosophers recognized friendship as a crucial aspect of human wellbeing, or happiness (*eudaimonia*), so that philosophic reflections on friendship belonged to the Western philosophic discourse on happiness. With the revival of virtue ethics in moral philosophy, contemporary philosophers and ethicists examined the views of Plato and Aristotle on friendship that framed the conception of friendship in the Hellenistic-Roman world and throughout the Middle Ages. Scholarly interest in friendship has risen steadily since the 1990s, generating anthologies of primary literary sources on friendship (Enright and Rowlinson 1991; Welty and Sharp 1991), analyses of key philosophic contributions (e.g., Pakaluk 1991; Badhwar 1993; Rouner 1994), or conceptual analyses of friendship in Western culture (Pahl 2000; Vernon 2005; Lynch 2005; Nehamas 2016). The philosophy of friendship constitutes but one aspect strand in the interdisciplinary field of Friendship Studies.

Although friendship has been a persistent concern of Western philosophy, conceptions of friendship and practices of friendship have changed over time; friendship is historically and culturally demarcated. Integrating history, philosophy, religious studies, and gender studies, this essay focuses on the gender inflection of the Western philosophic discourse on friendship as it evolved over time. Part 1 discusses friendship in the ancient and medieval world and argues that friendship was reserved for men only. Women were excluded from the social bond of friendship – especially its highest form, virtue friendship – on account of their perceived innate inferiority. The exclusion of women from virtue friendship exacerbated their exclusion from the public political sphere where friendship was practiced. Part 2 focuses on friendship in the modern world and shows both continuity and change with premodern conceptions and practices of friendship. Intriguingly, as modern women became better educated and cultivated friendship with other women, they came to recognize the political power of private friendship as a lever for social change, thus giving birth to feminist movements. Part 3 explores the attention to friendship in feminist philosophy, reflecting the revival of virtue ethics in moral philosophy, on the one hand, and to the articulation of feminist ethics of care, on the other hand. The paper concludes with the observation that in our consumerist, entrepreneurial, and technologically saturated society friendship has remained as important as ever, precisely because social media platforms have trivialized friendship.

1. Friendship, philosophy, and politics: for men only

Friendship took center stage in ancient moral philosophy because it was viewed as the social context for the cultivation of virtues, without which human beings cannot flourish. Virtue (*arête*) refers to the excellence of character that constitutes the life of the well-functioning, happy person. Virtues are the dispositions that incline the person toward the objective good and virtues enable us to act in the right manner, at the right time, and for the right reason. Virtues, however, are not innate; they are acquired through habitual

practice in inter-personal relations. The cultivation of virtue is a social process that could be accomplished only through interaction with other individuals, especially friends. For the ancient philosophers, friendship was the bridge that linked the individual to other human beings and even to other groups to which the individual belonged. The virtuous person experiences well-being, or happiness (*eudaimonia*), because he or she possesses the virtues that ensure right living.

In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle offered the most systematic analysis of friendship. In Book 8 and Book 9 he explained why friendship is necessary for human beings, why we cannot flourish without friends, and how friends relate to each other (Price 1989, 103-161; Stern-Gillet 1995, 27-77). Aristotle distinguished between three types of friendship: friendship based on utility or benefit; friendship based on pleasure; and friendship based on virtue or character. The first two types of friendship are shown to be imperfect and inferior to the third, because they are temporary and undertaken not for their own sake. Only virtue friendship counts as true or perfect friendship because a bond based on virtue is permanent or at least long lasting. In virtue friendship each person is a friend to the other because of that person's intrinsic goodness. Friends are attracted to one's character, and they influence or shape each other's life; the friends spend time doing things together and are disposed toward each other as they are disposed toward themselves. In such friendship between intrinsically good people, the friend is "another self" (NE 1166a).

For Aristotle, friendship was a necessary ingredient of the intrinsically good life, a life that enables humans to flourish qua humans. Importantly, human flourishing is not a subjective feeling or a particular pleasure we experience when we engage in a particular activity. Rather, human flourishing pertains to the objective nature of humans as particular kind of animals. Humans are rational animals who are by nature also political animals. The rational and political nature of humans dictates that "only together with others in a life ordered by reason can we be what we were meant to be" (Pangle 2003, 196). Human beings flourish and thrive when they acquire moral and intellectual virtues through interaction with friends. In the context of friendship human beings can seek wisdom and engage in the act of contemplation (*theoretike*), which in Book 10 of the *Nicomachean Ethics* is presented as "complete happiness."

Aristotle has left for posterity an ambiguous legacy: in Book 8 and 9 he extolled the merits of friendship as ingredient of the good life, whereas in Book 10 he advocated contemplation rather than friendship as the happiest life of humans. This ambiguity has generated conflicting interpretations. According to one, the so-called "exclusive/dominant interpretation," Aristotle privileged the philosophic life of contemplation as the happiest or best life for humans, which does not include friends (Kraut 1989; Kenny 1993). According to the so-called "inclusive interpretation," the best life for humans is political life with friends and several other external goods (Hardie 1968 [1981]; Ackrill 1974; 1981 [1993]). We need not resolve the tension between these approaches or trace their reception in Western thought. What matters here is that women

were not included in the nexus of virtue, friendship, contemplation, and happiness. For Aristotle, the consummate biologist, females are weaker and colder in their nature than males. In the *Generations of Animals*, he asserted that "the female state is being as it were a deformity, though one which occurs in the ordinary course of nature" (IV, vi, 755a). Because women were seen as "deformed males" or "incomplete males" women were excluded from formal education, especially philosophical education, and from citizenship. In ancient Greece, civic or political friendship as well as philosophical friendship were for men only; men and women could not be virtue friends because they were not equal as much as parents and children could not be virtue friends (Ward 2016, 17-18). Recently, feminist philosophers have offered a more egalitarian interpretation of Aristotle, arguing that mothering can be seen as a model of friendship (Ward 2008), but this strong misreading tells us how contemporary feminists wish to understand Aristotle rather than what Aristotle meant or how Aristotle was understood in his own day and in subsequent centuries.

Aristotle's analysis of friendship and happiness shaped the Western discourse for the following centuries (Annas 1993; Konstan 1997). In antiquity, the Stoics "recognized friendship as a kind of knowledge of most general types that does not really instruct about the particulars of how to be a friend. They did, however, acknowledge a virtue and an art of how to make friends" (Collette-Dučič 2014, 87). The Stoic sage strove after only one thing: virtue and virtuous action. Because virtue was the perfection of our rational capacity, the wise man sought to be rational and to make the world around him conform to the normative dictates of reason. The bond of friendship with one another consisted in the total dedication to an ethical goal and friendship could be shared by other people who are committed to such a goal. Stoicism thus paved the way for the universalization of friendship, outside of the immediate civic context of the polis. The Epicureans also considered friendship to be rationally based, but they valued freedom from pain and anxiety (*ataraxia*) above all else. For them friendship played a crucial role in securing freedom from pain and anxiety and philosophizing could only be undertaken among friends who are committed to frank speech, a commitment between people who can trust each other absolutely. In the Epicurean community of like-minded sages "friendship involved mutual enjoyment of each other's company, mutual activities, mutual help and mutual cooperation, whatever the sacrifices involved" and friendship, in contradistinction to love, "was not an emotion but a virtue and an art" (Lesser, 2014, 126). The Epicurean Garden was a community of friends who utilized the technique of frank speech among friends to help one another in emulation of their chosen sage. In the Epicurean community philosophy was practiced among friends and had a clear therapeutic function (Gordon 2012). Friendship was of concern for other philosophical schools such as the Neo-Pythagoreans and the Middle Platonists, as well as in non-philosophical, literary sources in the Greco-Roman world (Fitzgerald 1997). The institution of friendship permeated the intellectual culture of the ancient world.

Cicero, an eclectic Stoic, played an important role in the history of the Western discourse friendship. His treatise, *On Friendship (De Amicitia)* transmitted the discussions of the meaning, uses, and problems of friendship to the Roman world (Weiss 2014). Cicero believed that in Roman aristocracy good men could enhance each other's lives through close friendships. Like Aristotle, Cicero held that men of virtue seek each other out not because of need but because of the qualities within themselves. Only by sharing virtue can friends find genuine happiness in each other. For Cicero, as for Aristotle, friendships and political life went together: a good state cannot exist without virtuous friends working together not only for personal satisfaction but also in furthering each other's public career. According to Cicero, the community of good men who contribute through their bonds to the quality of discourse and the growth of virtue in society. After the death of Cicero, and the changes in the Roman state, a more pessimistic view of friendship was expressed by Seneca in his *Letters from a Stoic*. According to him, the best thing a good man can do is to withdraw into himself and to cultivate friendship with like-minded men without entertaining any hope that such personal relationship will make a difference in the life of the state (McGuire 1988 [2010], xxviii-xl).

The Christianization of the Roman Empire brought about profound changes in the understanding of friendship. In contrast to the non-personal conception of the deity in pagan philosophy, Christianity posited a personal conception of God and insisted that human relationship with God is paradigmatic friendship. The discourses on friendship by pagan philosophers -- especially by Aristotle, Cicero, and Seneca -- continued to reverberate in the Christian world throughout the Middle Ages, especially among the educated members of religious orders and monastic communities that preserved, studied, and interpreted the ancient philosophers (McGuire 1988 [2010]; Classen 2011). However, the fusion of Greek philosophy (especially Stoicism and Middle Platonism) with monotheism began not with a Christian thinker but with a Jewish thinker: Philo of Alexandria. Attempting to make Judaism intellectually appealing to educated Romans (Niehoff 2018), Philo claimed that the standard definition of a friend could be found in the Torah of Moses. As Philo put it, "in the works of Moses, a friend is so near that he does not differ from a person's own soul. For he says: 'the friend, the equal of your soul'" (Sterling 1997, 209; Tirosh-Samuelson 2021a, 59-60). For Philo, *philia* was not limited to human relations but was extended to human friendship with God. Since Philo was regarded as a Church Father, this trope became the center of Christian piety, thus transforming the discourse on friendship in the Roman Empire after the spread of Christianity.

Reconciling Roman conceptions of friendship with Christianity was not easy since the new religion commanded universal love of the neighbor rather than commitment to select friends (Konstan 1997, 149-173; White 1992, 13-44; 45-60). After all, the Gospel is addressed to "all nations" and the devout Christian is commanded "to love the neighbor as thyself" (Mark 12:28; Matthew 22:39). Privileging universal love over the love of select friends explains why in Christianity "friendship does not seem to play a significant role in the good and righteous life" (Nawar 2014, 198). Christian philosophers of late antiquity

and their followers in the Middle Ages stripped the concept of virtue of its aristocratic connotations and grounded friendship and its associated excellences in the creaturely status of human beings. For Christians, the love of God ought to precede and supersede individual choice and inclination and friendship and its obligations were incorporated into the virtue of charity (*caritas*).

In medieval Christianity, friendship appeared to be a rival to community, contrary to Aristotle or to Cicero who regarded friendship and community as complementary. For example, Augustine saw friendship as a possible obstacle to the development of moral reasoning and it is no wonder that he wrote no treatise on friendship. In his *Confessions*, 3.3.6 Augustine considers friendship as an occasion for sin; in our unredeemed nature, friendship is liable to bring out evil motives and emotions such as pride and shame that obstruct right action. Nonetheless, Augustine "retained some of the terminology that was central to the Greek account while transforming it, and with it the relationship between individual and community" (Valk 2009, 125). In the fourth century, reflections on perfect Christian life absorbed some elements of the pagan notions of friendship. Therefore, the "common faith and devotion to God provided[d] a similar basis for friendship as shared interest and a devotion to virtue or truth had denoted for the men of antiquity" (White 1992, 56). In early Christianity, ideal Christians – namely, martyrs and ascetics – were recognized as "friends of God." A more inclusive meaning of friendship with God was manifested in prayer, in which Christian men and women perceived themselves as servants of God or as children of God the Father. In prayer, Christians speak to God as a friend (Moltmann 1994).

In medieval Christendom reflections on friendship developed in monastic and scholastic communities that read Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and Cicero's *On Friendship* through the lens of Christian piety. Aelred of Rievaulx, the Abbot of a large Cistercian monastery, and Thomas Aquinas, the Dominican friar and theologian at the University of Paris, are the primary examples of systematic philosophical reflections on friendship. Inspired by Cicero, Aelred composed his treatise, *Spiritual Friendship*, with the intent of creating a Christian society. As Marc Vernon explains, for Aelred, friends should be willing to die for each other, following the example of Jesus and the love between friends should be undying in the sense that "he that is a friend loves at all times" (Vernon 2010, 183-184). Friends should share all things in common, as Aristotle already called for and as was established in the earliest days of the Church and recorded in the Acts of the Apostles. Sharing things in common comes to represent how friends are "other selves" to each other, and becoming a friend was a rigorous process in which loyalty, integrity, and patience of the parties were tested. Thomas Aquinas' systematic reflections on friendship appeared in his *Commentary on Aristotle's Ethics* (Bourke 1974). Like Aelred of Rievaulx, Aquinas held a positive evaluation of friendship which he incorporated into his analysis of charity: in charity we are friends with God so that human friendship can be compatible with the love of God. Put differently, the virtue of charity makes us friends with God and friendship with God enables us to be true friends to others (Kerr 2014, 245-267). Aquinas successfully integrated the love of individual friends into the ideal of neighborly love, but later Dominican theologians challenged his views. In the fourteenth century, friendship

with God was assimilated into currents of piety in mystical networks that emphasized personal union of their souls with God (Kerr 2014, 266).

Systematic treatises about friendship were all composed by members of religious orders or monastic communities. Brian Patrick McGuire (1988 [2010]) reconstructed the practice of friendship in these religious communities based on chronicles, essays, monastic rules, letters, diaries, and even poems, which were all written by men. But what about friendship among women, who also lived in religious communities? In recent years feminist scholars have uncovered women's reflections about friendship, showing that as "women appropriated the classical language of *amicitia* and used it to their own ends" (Verini 2016, 366). In medieval communities and networks of women, female-female friendships were formed. Very few educated, literate women reflected on friendship in writing, although they did not generate manifestos on friendships as did male authors. Alexandra Verini has argued that medieval "women's writings represent female bonds that resonate with traditional friendship theory, but that ultimately reveal the pitfalls of androcentric friendship models by emphasizing the detrimental effects that sameness, rigidity, and insularity can have on a community" (Verini *ibid*, 367). For example, in Christine de Pizan's *The City of Ladies*, virtue unites friends, but virtue also acts as an exclusionary measure, differentiating one relationship from another. Friendship did occur in networks of women who shared the characteristics of virtue, but they exercised virtue in diverse ways. Medieval female mystics, as feminist scholars have shown, exhibited the phenomenon of spiritual friendship, an emotionally intense experience closely akin to erotic love but without undoing the vow of chastity (Karras 1988; Elliot 1993). As Karras observed, medieval "spiritual friendship" was far more intense and demanding than what we call 'friendship' today or what Cicero and Aristotle understood by 'friendship.'

2. Modernization, secularization, and the democratization of friendship

The secularization of Western society and culture in the modern period brought changes in conceptualization of friendship. Starting with Michel de Montaigne in the 16th century, friendship became a subjective experience that could not be explained philosophically since it was uniquely personal and idiosyncratic. Montaigne's essay, *On Friendship* discusses friendship from the perspective of his experience of an actual, real friendship he enjoyed for four years with Etienne de la Boetie. For Montaigne, ancient writers on friendship were "weak" because the facts of friendship "surpass even the precepts of philosophy" (Fuller 2008, 206). True friendship could never be deduced from philosophical description of the relationship of friends, because friends are two unique human beings whose relationship is unique unrepeatable experience. Friendship cannot be rationally ordered because it is "between two individuals who unexpectedly find each other," ... "in a relationship that is lived in the present moment" and is "a release from utility into mystery that illuminates what I understand myself to be through connection to another's self-understanding" (Fuller *ibid*, 208). As Montaigne put it:

In the friendship I speak of our souls mingle and blend with each other so completely they efface the seam that joined them, and cannot find it again. If you press me to tell why I loved him, I feel that this cannot be expressed, except by answering: Because it was he, because it was I ... Our friendship has no other model than itself and can be compared only within itself (cited in Fuller *ibid*, 210).

Montaigne still retained the association of friendship with virtue, and, like Aristotle and Cicero, he held that one can only have a very small number of true friends in life. But Montaigne's insistence on subjectivity of friendship dissolved the link between friendship, philosophy, and politics characteristic of the ancient approach to friendship.

If friendship is an emotional bond, individuals who were previously separated by rigid social boundaries of religion, sex, class, race, or nationhood could now become friends. Therefore, the modern world saw the expansion of the scope of friendship to include relations between men and women, Jews and non-Jews, aristocrats and middle-class people, and Whites and Blacks. With the spread of democratic ideals and the expansion of education for women, educated women now began to reflect on friendship and record their experiences not only in their intellectual relations with men but also in their relationships with other women. Theorizing about friendship, modern women thus transformed the meaning of friendship. First, the boundary between love and friendship became more porous since female-female friendships consisted of romantic or erotic ties in which friendship could also be expressed sexually. Second, as modern women increasingly agitated for social inclusion and equal rights, they recovered the political and civic function of friendship which ancient Greek and Roman philosophers took for granted. While modern educated women experienced the power and social impact of friendship, modern male philosophers had difficulty incorporating friendship into their theories of moral philosophy. Third, as the scope of friendship expanded, the forces of modernity – urbanization, industrialization, the rise of market economy – accentuated rootlessness and alienation which only made the bond of friendship more precious than before.

The most relevant factor for the changing face of friendship in the modern period was women's education. As women became better educated, first through private tutoring, then in formal institutions of learning, and eventually in universities (although this was a long and uneven process), modern educated women could develop virtue friendship with educated men as well as with other educated women. The power of friendship to transcend existing social boundaries was very evident in the salons of wealthy Jewish women in German-speaking countries. They were some of the first social settings in which friendships between men and women and between Jews and non-Jews were experienced. As Emily Bilski and Emily Braum explain, the "salons were among the first institutions of modern culture. From the seventeenth to the early twentieth century, they fostered the decline of aristocratic caste and the rise of new egalitarian elites" (Bilski and Braun 2005, 1). Bilski and Braun further elaborate that:

[p]recisely because the salons were private, they enabled people of different economic standing, religion, rank, and nationality to exchange ideas and be recognized both as individuals and as part of common humanity. To know the 'other,' it was vital to erode

stereotypes of class, gender, sexuality, and ethnicity. Further, salons marketed high culture for a larger world by launching individual talent and aptitude into the broader fabric of civic life. In the seventeenth century the salon infringed on church and court as a site of literary and musical production and patronage; by the end of the nineteenth, it challenged the artistic taste of nation-state institutions. Finally, the salons granted women a singular means for education, professional identity, and personal empowerment (Bilski and Braun 2005, 2).

The salons of Jewish women, in which art, philosophy, and literature were cultivated as an expression of the German ideal of *Bildung*, greatly contributed to the emergence of the modern conception of friendship. According to Seyla Benhabib, the salons “forged bonds across classes, religious groups, and the two sexes, creating the four walls within which the new forms of sociability and intimacy could develop among emergent civil society” (Benhabib 2000, 16). In these intellectual salons, as Benhabib describes:

[t]he joy of speech culminates in friendship, in that meeting of the hearts, minds, and tastes between two individuals. Particularly in the case of the German salons, the search for *Seelenfreunde*, a friend of one’s soul, one who understands oneself perhaps better than oneself is predominant... With friends one shares one’s soul, however, to share the soul – an entity that itself comes to be discovered in this new process of individuals – one has to project a certain depth of the self, one has to view the self as a being whose public presence does not reveal all (Benhabib 2000, 17).

The salons created a new social space between the public and the private, in which writers, artists, civil servants, and aristocrats mingled, exchanged ideas and texts, and formed emotional bonds and romantic attachments. These interpersonal relations were very different from the civic friendship between virtuous men of antiquity, the intellectual love of God of medieval philosophers, or spiritual friendship of Christian mystics. Following Montaigne, moderns viewed friendship as a private, intimate, emotional bond between men and/or women who need not share the same social status but who are expected to reveal themselves to each other and provide emotional support for each other in a highly fragmented world obsessed by utility, productivity, and consumption (Allan 1998). Friendship no longer demanded the shared sameness of virtue and instead accepted the otherness of the friend and his or her irreducible difference. It was no coincidence that the person who theorized the role of difference in friendship was Hannah Arendt, a secular Jewish woman who became a stateless person, exiled from her country on account of her Jewishness. She was not only a philosopher of friendship but a woman who cultivated profound, life-long friendships with men and with women, sometimes (as in the case of her friendship with Martin Heidegger) the loyalty to the friend obscured the truth about the friend (Tirosh-Samuelson 2021b, 220-223).

As women became better educated, boarding schools for women became settings where young women fell in love with other women, experiencing the so-called “pashes,” namely passionate crushes. In *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love between Women, from the Renaissance to the Present* Lilian Federman documented the institution of romantic friendship among educated women in England and France (Federman 1981 [1998]). Romanticism and changes in schooling, religion, and social role

for women, led educated women to seek their equals who could assist rather than hinder their professional pursuits. The Irish writer, Edith Somerville, put it succinctly when she stated that "the outstanding fact ... among women who live by their brains is friendship. A friendship that extends through every phase and aspect of life, intellectual, social, pecuniary. Anyone who has experience of the life of independent and artistic women knows this" (cited in Federman 1981 [1998], 205-206). The quote highlights the link between friendship, intellectual prowess, and gender in the modern period. A thinking woman requires like-minded female friends with whom she could be most herself.

Friendship and comradeship among women empowered them to demand equality, civic rights, and political inclusion. Indeed, female-female friendships were instrumental in the success of large-scale feminist movements. From the Suffragette movement to equal pay, to justice against sexual misconduct, and to the fight for reproductive rights, camaraderie amongst communities of women has been crucial in propagating social change. To appreciate the social and political impact of female friendships we only need to bring to mind the friendships of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony; Charlotte Bronte and Ellen Nussey; Katherine Harris Bradley and Emma Cooper; Vera Brittain and Vinnifred Holtby; Virginia Woolf and Vita Sackville-West; Eleanor Rathbone and Elizabeth Macadam; Elinore Roosevelt and Lorena Alice Hickok among the most well-known female friendships whose dynamics can be gleaned from their extensive correspondences (Oram and Turnbull 2001). The Mutual Admiration Society, which Dorothy L. Sayer and her female friends established in Somerville College, was another reminder that Oxford indeed "remade the world for women" (Moulton 2019). For them the boundaries between love, sex, and friendship were very porous.

Estelle Freedman who studied 19th century American feminist movements argued that female-only communities contributed to the political leverage and feminist consciousness of women (Freedman 2006). In 1890s Women's Clubs began forming as the Suffragette Movement picked up momentum. By 1914 women's club membership had reached about a million and a half people and these clubs attracted women who desired to fill traditional gender roles and simply wanted to make friends. The clubs began shaping the political views of women, encouraging them not to perceive themselves as simply mothers and wives but rather as citizens with a voice, ultimately leading the clubs to launch civic reform programs. Female-female friendship strengthened the ability of women to contribute to feminism by promoting their self-agency and assertiveness and empowered women to shape society into a more equal world through the creation of exclusively female communities. The prominence of women's clubs in the 1890s expanded the domains in which women could participate, thereby promoting feminist ideology. These communities of women facilitated the abolition of gender-based hierarchies in political and industrial settings by force of numbers: the alliance of a million women with the sole intention of attaining female rights in society had a tremendous effect on the social climate at the time. However, after women's voting rights were obtained, women's clubs lost their influence. Women no longer felt the compulsion to participate and instead assimilated into formerly male-dominated spaces, taking on traditionally deferential roles in the workplace.

Interestingly, as women began to engage in social and political reforms, they found the reflections of ancient male philosophers, especially Aristotle, quite inspiring, because they understood that friendship is the bond of community. Jane Addams, the co-founder of Chicago Hull House settlement and the Nobel Peace Prize Laureate, is a case in point. Addams, as a recent biographer put it, is a “first rate practitioner of political friendship, understood in the Aristotelian sense of the association that is just because the parties make reciprocal contribution to a mutual utilitarian purpose” (Moskop 2020, 2). Addams developed political friendship among persons and groups who are unequal in power and resources. Her pragmatist, process-oriented accounts expanded political friendship beyond current applications to democratic citizens, and even beyond the boundaries of any formal association. Addams forged across-class collaborative friendships with and among diverse immigrant neighbors, labor unions, professional experts, philanthropists, and government agencies in Chicago’s Progressive Era industrial world. Hull House residents helped to organize or hosted day care facilities, art classes, a social science debate club, a museum, dramatic performances, and women’s club among other functions. In her numerous books, Addams provided accounts of how unequal relationships evolved toward collaborative partnerships that were more egalitarian and democratic and to which she referred to as friendship, comradeship, or fellowship. For Addams, in political friendships, strangers pursue a common utilitarian purpose as they center on problems that could not be addressed by a predefined national group of citizens. Political friendships required collaboration among those who were affected by the specific social problem. Addams’ collaborative friendship practices informed the more abstract works of Chicago School pragmatist John Dewey and George Herbert Mead, who were her friends and sometimes collaborators at Hull House (Moskop 2020, 6).

While modern women in the Suffragette Movement expanded the scope, practice, and theory of friendship, the lived experience of women did not fit well into modern moral philosophy articulated by men, precisely because male philosophers based their moral theories on the concept of the autonomous Self. Friendship often conflicted with modern moral reasoning, a tension that did not exist in premodern philosophy. In Deontology – whose major theorist was Immanuel Kant – duty rather than virtue determines the rightness of the act. Kant discussed friendship in the *Metaphysics of Morals* (1797), Part II (the Doctrine of Virtue). According to Kant, ethical duties fall into two kinds: a) duties of love (e.g., kindness, gratitude, sympathy) and b) duties of respect (e.g., avoidance of arrogance, backbiting, and mockery). Kant treated friendship separately because in friendship “love and respect are combined on equal footing” (Payton 1994, 135; Filippaki 2012). Kant echoed Aristotle’s notion that friendship is based on mutual good will. Kant distinguished between “friendship of need,” “friendship of taste,” and “friendship of disposition.” The first is like Aristotle’s friendship of utility, the second is like “friendship of pleasure,” and the third and best kind is equivalent to “friendship of virtue.” But if Aristotle thought that the perfect form of friendship is rare, Kant held that it was an ideal state that was *unachievable*. Kant’s pessimism lies in the unbridgeable gap between the world of appearances, the phenomenal world, and the noumenal world of things-in-

themselves. Human beings indeed belong to both worlds: as material beings they are governed by the laws of nature, but as rational people endowed with free will humans are free from determination by the causal influences of the world of sense. The only source of human freedom is obedience to the rational law. As rational beings, humans have no choice but to think of themselves as free: humans must attribute to every being endowed with reason a rational, free will so when we make a choice we must act under the idea of freedom.

In Kant's moral theory, the rightness or wrongness of action depends on whether the act fulfills our duty to the moral law – the Categorical Imperative -- and this moral law acts on all people regardless of their interests or desires. Because of the universality of the moral law friendship did not fit neatly into Kant's moral theory. For Kant, friendship and justice are in conflict. Why? First because Kant insists that a good will entails acting out of sense of moral obligation or duty. But if friendship is to be defined as duty, how does duty relate to the emotions, which are so crucial to the modern experience of friendship? Second, Kant argues that the moral law is universal and binding on all rational agents in similar circumstances, but in friendship the members regard each other as unique, and they relate to each other because of specific features that are not related to universal rational humanity. And third, Kant's moral law is based on impartiality that reflects the viewpoint of the ideal disinterested judge. He excluded many attitudes that make one partial or biased, but in friendship the partners are very partial toward each other and wish to extend preferential treatment rather than remain objectively detached. Friendship thus undermined the universality of Kantian moral philosophy.

Friendship also did not fit well into the other dominant modern moral theory – Consequentialism, of which Utilitarianism is the most famous version – in which the rightness and wrongness of the act depends on its consequences. In this moral theory, the moral agent ought to do whatever action produces the greatest aggregate happiness for all human beings. Thus, the good deeds that a friend does for his/her friend would be morally justified only if they were to bring about the best outcome for everyone. Because this moral theory is concerned with universal happiness, it is difficult to explain the deeds that good friends do for each other, for true friends seem to love each other for their own sake and they seem to regard the good that they do for each other as valuable in its own right. Yet, Consequentialism/Utilitarianism says that these acts are valuable only because they relate to the aggregate of human welfare, namely, the theory instrumentalizes friendship, making it a means to a higher good. In modern moral philosophy of the 19th and first half of the 20th century friendship remained a marginal topic. By contrast, modern literature generated many reflections on friendship as men and women recognized the value and nuances of friendship, as an antidote to the social forces that enhanced the breakdown of traditional social institutions and growing alienation and estrangement (Enright and Rowlinson 1991). Only in the second half of the 20th century did philosophers return to examine friendship systematically and they did so by recovering ancient philosophical reflections. Ancient virtue ethics was revived in contemporary moral philosophy while second wave feminism came into its own.

3. Theorizing friendship anew: the impact of feminism

In the second half of the twentieth century feminism transformed the life of all women, whether they define themselves as feminists or not. Feminism has made possible the figure of the “brilliant friend,” to quote the title of Elena Ferrante’s famous *Neapolitan Novels*, although the identity of the author known as “Elena Ferrante” is still shrouded in mystery. Like Elena Ferrante, women scholars today are more honest about the fragility and mystery of friendship (Rubin 1985; Rose and Roades 1987; Yalom 2015; Tillman 2015; Gardiner 2016). Friendship is susceptible to destructive emotions such as anger, envy, and competition (issues that Ferrante brilliantly explores) but friendship also enables women to overcome the vicissitudes of life at the workplace, in marriages, through illness, aging and finally death. The feminist literary scholar, Nancy K. Miller, evoked Ferrante’s title in her *My Brilliant Friends: Our Lives in Feminism*, in which she relates her lifelong friendships with three academic women. Miller reminds the reader that “without friends, part of us remains missing, the part that needs to look beyond our narrow boundaries to negotiate with what’s not us” (Miller 2019, 5). This astute observation should be kept in mind as we examine the contribution of feminist philosophers to contemporary discourse on friendship.

Attention to friendship in contemporary philosophy is inseparable from the recovery of virtue ethics in contemporary moral philosophy. As noted above, modern moral philosophy was dominated by Deontology and Consequentialism, but that began to change after G.E.M. Anscombe published her seminal essay, “Modern Moral Philosophy” (Anscombe 1958). Her influential essay stimulated the development of virtue ethics as an alternative to Consequentialism/Utilitarianism, Kantian ethics, and Social Contract theories. A friend of Ludwig Wittgenstein and a translator of some of his works into English, upon her graduation from Oxford, Anscombe taught at Sommerville College and later became the Chair of Philosophy at Cambridge which Wittgenstein previously held. Anscombe was the ultimate proof that women could be professional philosophers and that they did change the course of Western philosophy, Aristotle notwithstanding. Anscombe charged that secular approaches to moral philosophy are unjustified because they use concepts such as ‘morally ought’ or ‘morally right’ or ‘morally obligated’ that are legalistic, presupposing a legislator as the source of moral authority. In the past, God occupied that role, but modern secular moral philosophies dispensed with God and therefore they lacked the proper foundation for meaningful employment of those concepts. Anscombe called for developing an alternative that would be based on moral psychology, moral virtue, the facts of human nature, and an account of the good for humans. In other words, ethics should be based on virtue and human flourishing, precisely as the ancient philosophers taught. Although Anscombe’s essay could be interpreted in more than one way, it undoubtedly inspired the emergence of virtue ethics based on new analysis of human flourishing in which friendship takes center stage. Women – (Rorty 1983; Sherman 1989; Annas 1993; Broadie 1994; Nussbaum 1994a; 1994b; Ward 2016) –

greatly contributed to this philosophical analysis. As trained classicists, they did not demarcate the disciplines of philosophy, literature, and history but deliberately and creatively integrated them.

A crucial aspect of friendship – mutual caring – has received a lot of attention by contemporary philosophers (Helm 2005 [2021]). Friends care about each other, and there is widespread agreement that caring about someone for his or her sake involves both sympathy and action on the friend's behalf. Friends must be moved by what happens to their friends to feel the appropriate emotions: joy in their friend's successes, frustration, and disappointment in their friend's failure. As an expression of their caring for each other, friends must normally be disposed to promote the other's good for her sake and not out of any ulterior motive. When we care about something we find it worthwhile or valuable in some way. In caring about a friend, we project a kind of intrinsic value onto the friend. But friendship goes deeper than mutual caring; friendship also may lead to intimacy, even though philosophers differ on their interpretations of intimacy. Essential to intimate friendship is trust since it facilitates self-disclosure among friends who care about the other's good for the other's sake act on behalf of the other's good. A third thread in philosophical accounts of friendship is shared activity since friends engaged in joint pursuits and the shared activity is motivated at least in part by the friendship itself.

Feminist philosophers contributed to the analysis of friendship by examining mutual caring among friends, articulating a feminist virtue ethics, and elaborating a feminist ethics of care. According to Robin S. Dillon:

[f]eminist ethics seeks to develop practical approaches to subvert the subordination of all people but especially women. Feminist ethics is also concerned with the depreciation and exclusion in moral philosophy of women's perspectives. It takes the experiences of women to be as worthy of respect and concern as men's and so it seeks to revise or rethink aspects of ethical concepts, methods and theories that ignore or denigrate women's experience (Dillon 2017, 570).

Feminist theorists have rightly insisted that gender "makes a great deal of difference to how human lives go and to how social institutions and practices, including the practices of mainstream moral philosophy are structured, function, and shape our lives individually and collectively" (Dillon, *ibid*). Engaging action, values, character, thought, emotions, motivation, responsibility and individual and collective lives, feminist ethicists examine the contexts of unequal power, and expose how women are constrained, marginalized, exploited, or harmed. As a distinct variant of virtue ethics, feminist virtue ethics examines issues of character critically considering gender and power and it highlights character dimensions of gendered subordination and dominance. Feminist virtue ethics is more distinctly political, addressing distortions of character that are engendered under conditions of subordination and privilege and that contribute to the maintenance of oppression. Feminist virtue ethics is attentive to social context, and the social locations of individuals and insists that virtues, vices, and flourishing are linked in important ways to conceptions of gender. Finally, feminist virtue ethics considers character dispositions as inculcated, nurtured, directed, shaped and given significance and values by social

interactions, institutions, cultural understandings, and traditions. Individuals are never the sole architects of their own character because character formation is always social.

Ethics of care is the most well-known feminist contribution to contemporary moral theory. Drawing on the work of the Jewish psychologist, Carol Gilligan (1982), who identified a distinctive moral voice speaking a language of care that emphasizes relationships and responsibilities in contrast to the dominant voice in moral philosophy whose languages of justice stresses rights and principles, feminist theorists developed theories that commended virtues and values traditional linked to women and activities for which women have borne the primary responsibilities (Nodding 1984; Ruddik 1989; Tronto 1993; Kittay 1999; Held 2006). Feminist theorists argued that care ethics can and should be extended to the public realm, relationships among strangers, and even global and environmental contexts. Care ethics began with “rescuing feminine virtues” – care, compassion, sympathy, and altruism – which were assigned to women, and therefore valued less than the virtues of justice, rationality, and self-sufficiency, which were assigned to men. Some feminists warned against an uncritical valorization of care because it could promote gender essentialism, or because it presents other-directed care as virtuous no matter what it costs to the female care giver. Be this as it may, feminists regard care as a *sine qua non* of genuinely good human relations, as typified by friendship (Brisson 2017). Lorraine Code put it simply when she suggested that friendship is a preferable model for the relational self since “friendships are created around an implicit recognition that persons are essentially ... ‘second persons’ throughout their lives” (Code 1991, 95). By affirming care and caregiving as morally significant, care ethics both reflected and gave shape and form to the feminist concern that moral theories written by men do not adequately address the range of women’s life experiences.

Friendship received special attention in feminist ethics of care. Marilyn Friedman, for example, has argued that friendship is a voluntary relationship that “offers personally as well as socially transformative possibilities usually lacking in other important tradition-based close relationship, such as familial ties” (Friedman 1994, 307). Rejecting the autonomous view of the self, and asserting instead a social conception of the self, she has hailed friendship as “a model of community that usefully counterbalances the family-neighborhood-nation complex favored by communitarians” (Friedman 1994, 234). Friedman has correctly insisted that friendship is so precious in contemporary life because of the dissolution of traditional social bonds, especially in urban settings. In friendship, individuals re-create themselves anew and build voluntary social relations outside family and ethnic ties, “often in opposition to the expectations and ascribed roles of their found communities” (Friedman *ibid*, 248-49). She has promoted friendship, and especially friendship among women, as a vehicle for critique not only of reigning moral theories but also of the conventional conception of ethnic community.

Feminist care ethics accentuate three themes pertinent to friendship: the relational Self, the partiality of moral agents, and the relevance of social context (Keller and Kittay 2019). Whereas modern moral philosophers presented the moral and political agent as

independent and autonomous adult, feminist care ethicists instead highlight the dependence and interdependence of persons as central to human existence and as a new model of moral agency. Contrary to the obsession with the rational calculation, feminist care ethics accentuates the moral importance of emotions, even though they recognize the relevance of principled thinking in the caring relations. Caring relations are not based on impartial thinking but are instead rooted in partiality that enhances intimacy and closeness within the relationship. Finally, care ethics eschew universality and are instead attentive to the specific social context of the caring relations in which the care giver and care receiver encounter each other, from the “bottom up” so to speak. Whether care and justice should be seen as antagonistic principles or rather as complementary principles has generated a lot of discussion among care theorists. In short, the feminist analysis of care allows us to understand the subtleties of friendship as a model of care.

Conclusion

This historical overview makes clear that friendship has been a persistent theme of Western philosophy, since friendship is a human existential need that appears in all societies and cultures. While conceptions of friendship have changed over time in response to changing historical circumstances and cultural conventions, it is mistaken to radically differentiate between ancient and modern conceptions of friendship as does Nehamas (2016). This essay emphasizes the persistence of ancient and premodern models of friendship in modern and contemporary discourses, while recognizing their changing nuances. Today friendship remains as important as ever before precisely because our market economy has generated two main economic figures – the consumer and the entrepreneur – that threaten and deplete the bond of friendship (May 2014). Moreover, in our technologically saturated society social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, and Snapshot) have become important venues, especially among teens, to make new friends and to interact with existing friends (Lenhart 2015). Although social media platforms facilitate constant communication, it is doubtful that these interactions constitute the friendship that philosophers had in mind when they recognized friendship as essential to human flourishing. To the contrary. Social media platforms have only trivialized friendship, exerting negative impact on human wellbeing, and increasing loneliness and despair, especially among youth. Viewing the Western philosophic discourse on friendship from an historical perspective might offer a counterpoint to the bullying, verbal violence, shaming, and hate speech that proliferate on social media. We have much to learn from the history of the philosophical discourse on friendship.

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