

THE ART OF FRIENDSHIP

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The Chinese character for 'friendship'

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An Ancient Ideal

The ideal and pursuit of friendship held great fascination for ancient Greek thinkers and artists as diverse as Aristotle and Epicurus, Homer and Sappho. Yet friendship has received little philosophical attention since the time of the ancients. Surprisingly, even modern Aristotelian philosophies have not treated friendship as a topic for serious reflection (e.g., despite the portrayal of strong friendships in the novels of Ayn Rand -- such as those between Gail Wynand and Howard Roark in *The Fountainhead* and between Hank Rearden and Francisco D'Anconia in *Atlas Shrugged* -- neither Rand herself nor thinkers in her "Objectivist" tradition have written on friendship).

What is it that makes for a strong and deep friendship? And what does it take to maintain and grow such a friendship? The topic is much broader than I can pursue in a short essay, but I would like to explore several aspects of friendship that have impressed themselves on me through my own experience and reflection.

First, it is clear to me that there is much more to friendship than agreement about intellectual matters. For example, I do not feel a great affinity for every libertarian, Objectivist, or Aristotelian I happen to meet. Friendship is a matter of connecting at a deeper and more personal level than mere philosophy or ideology. The salient fact I've realized in seeking potential friends and building friendships is that there are precious few people with whom one can truly connect in life. One is fortunate if one finds half a dozen really good friends with whom one has a deep affinity. Indeed, there are so many ways *not* to connect with another person that it is astonishing that one finds close friends at all.

Why should this be? I think it is related to the fact that the only person one really understands is oneself -- and then only if one is reflective and struggles to pursue the Greek ideal of "know thyself". If I understand myself and you are similar to me in some deep ways, then you and I can connect. Further, it's my self-knowledge that gives me my vision of life. I find that my closest friends see things in much the same way as I do -- not necessarily at the level of explicit ideas, but in the realm of what we find personally important about life and the world. Yet that kind of similarity is both rare and fragile -- so much so that the friendship relation is not transitive; one friend of mine might not get along well with any of my other friends, even though I feel such a strong affinity with each one individually.

The Analogy of Art

All this is deeply personal, almost subjective -- and therefore I think there is a real similarity between art and friendship. Just because I feel a deep connection to, say, the music of Duke Ellington does not mean that a friend of mine will, even though we see eye-to-eye on so many other things. Part of the reason for this phenomenon is the fact that both friendship and art are additive. By this I mean that all the music I love (and there are many, many genres, creators, and pieces of music I love) adds up to a complete presentation of my vision of life in musical form. But it takes Bach and Dvorak and Ellington and Yes and Bob Marley and Hot Rize all the wildly different kinds of music that I love to represent all the aspects of my self and my vision of life in music. Each piece or type of music taps into part of my vision or style of life -- but no single piece or type can capture the whole.

I think the same is true of friends. There are many aspects of myself that cause me to connect with one friend, and many aspects -- but not necessarily the same aspects -- that cause me to connect with another friend. There may be some overlap between these aspects so that one of my friends might have a lot in common with another, but on the other hand there might not be enough for two of my friends to connect in the way that I do with each one alone.

Because no single person aligns perfectly with everything about me, it is dangerous to expect one person (say my spouse) to be my only friend. I can't get everything I need from one person; and no one person can get everything she needs from me. I need many friends to provide or "reflect" some of the aspects that I don't perhaps get from my other friends. Further, the range and kinds of friends that I need are different from the range and kinds of friends that you need. For instance, one of the things I love about my friend Eric is his musical sensibility, which enables the two of us to explore topics that I would probably not explore with other friends of mine.

Another Self?

My attempt to do justice to the transitive nature of friendship involves an implicit criticism, or at least modification, of the Aristotelian notion that "a friend is another self". For if a friend is truly another self, then each of my friends would have to find all the others to be equally worthy of friendship; yet we know this not to be the case. A friend is not literally another self, but one

who shares many of my same interests, values, ideals, and perspectives. If a friend were truly another self, then I would need but one friend; and it is because a friend is not quite another self, but sees life from a different stance than I do, that I need multiple friends with whom I can explore different aspects of life and the many facets of my being.

There is a further implication of the fact that there is no such thing as another self: the falsity of the notion (which can be traced back to Aristotle) that a friend is a “mirror” who “reflects” my soul back to me. This idea, resurrected in recent times by psychologist Nathaniel Branden, contains a germ of truth but involves a metaphor that is so misleading as to be positively harmful. The germ of truth is that a friend is one in whom I can see my inmost values made real in the world; for a friend does share much of what I deem good or important in life as well as deep aspects of my core being (in my case, often my interest in ideas and my artistic bent). But no person perfectly shares these things with me: not to the same degree, not in the same way, not in the same combination, not with the same experiences. It is a metaphysical fact that no two individuals are the same; sometimes deeply alike and similar, but always different. And while it is the deep similarities that make close friendship possible, it is the subtle differences that can make friendship stimulating to one’s mind and soul over the span of years.

A friend of mine does not reflect my soul back to me in a passive way, mirroring my every aspect with perfect fidelity to the original. What a boring relationship that would be! Far from being a mirror, my friend is a partner in exploring life. My friend and I do not face each other and gaze into each other’s eyes in search of passive reflection, we face outward and walk side by side in search of active exploration and the creation (and appreciation) of value in the world.

Something More

It is my attempt to do justice to phenomena such as this that makes me doubt the wisdom of Ayn Rand’s philosophy as traditionally presented and to search for “something more” where others might be content with “nothing but” what Rand presented. Here’s an example of my searching. In college I became interested in Chinese philosophy, mainly from reading Hao Wang’s book *Beyond Analytic Philosophy*. Now, an interest in Chinese philosophy is not typical for someone who is broadly in the Randian tradition, to say the least! But I find wisdom in the Chinese tradition that is simply lacking in much Western thought. For example, consider this passage on friendship from the Taoist philosopher Chuang Tzu:

Tzu Sang-hu, Meng Tzu-fan, and Tzu Ch’in-chang were friends. They said to

each other: “Who can live together without any special effort to live together and help each other without any special effort to help each other?” ...The three looked at each other and smiled, completely understood each other, and thus became friends.

I especially like the part about being friends “without any special effort”. I think there is a certain naturalness and lack of artificiality to true friendship, and I have always found that to a great degree in my friendships. I think there’s a connection here to my friend Scott Capehart’s essay “Finding the Inner Game”. Scott explores the idea of accomplishing something without special effort, of letting oneself do what comes naturally to the body (or to the soul, in this case). There’s a great deal of truth in this idea and I know that I cannot create anything very useful or good (especially in songwriting or composing or poetry-writing -- or friendship) without letting my soul do what comes naturally.

Now, Scott is an actor, and he and I have talked repeatedly about the value of spontaneity in acting. And although I have no acting experience, I do have performing experience as a musician, and I have seen the value of spontaneity in my performing life. To perform up to one’s highest hopes and standards, one must be willing to let go of those standards as explicit guides to performance -- one cannot “plan” the entire performance. Paradoxically, in some sense one needs to let go of explicit goal-pursuit in order to create the greatest value. (This is close to the Taoist idea of *wu-wei* -- of natural action as opposed to forced or artificial action.)

But is not this anti-rational, since planning is rational and not planning (being spontaneous) “must be” irrational by comparison? I think that seeing the matter in this way involves a false alternative, or a kind of rationalism. It involves identifying one’s person with one’s mind to the exclusion of one’s body, one’s native characteristics and traits, one’s habits -- one’s “soul”, if you will. I’ve never “planned” any of the songs or poems I’ve written -- in a way they just came to me, although creating them did involve work, especially preparatory work. Yet the process of creating things is not an emotional process, and it does not involve letting go of one’s mind and surrendering to one’s feelings. I think that the process of creation goes deeper than emotion: it goes to the core of one’s being and to the accumulated wisdom and experience that make you who you are (thus the importance of preparation). And that accumulation is an *accomplishment*. One of the things I find disturbing when I reflect on my own early experience with Ayn Rand’s philosophy is the extent to which I was willing to throw away everything that I was innately and culturally (nature and nurture) and everything I had made of myself (volition) in pursuit of some ideal that uniquely captured the way I “ought” to be. It took me a long time to regain my equilibrium and realize that what I was had

value, and that not all my value derived from my ideas and the degree to which my life and personality aligned with those ideas, especially not in all of their concrete manifestations (what an old friend of mine calls “Howard Roark Syndrome”). I realized that I am primarily an individual who was influenced by Rand, not (at the depths) an adherent to any particular philosophy or ideology. I’ve come to see that it’s unhealthy to identify so fundamentally with a set of ideas. Even on a purely intellectual level it is dangerous (although being ideological can be a way of learning ideas at some stage in one’s life) -- but on the level of what makes you “you”, it is always damaging.

Getting Personal

This is why the topic of friendship interests me so, because friendship is based not primarily on ideas, but on “what makes you you” -- on the personal, not the political or ideological or philosophical. Why am I attracted to those who are my friends? What is it that draws me to those who are dear to me? Nietzsche writes somewhere about the experience of meeting someone and knowing immediately that they “smell bad”. Similarly, some people “smell good” -- there’s a spark of interest, an acknowledgement of some affinity that is worth exploring. It’s a subtle thing and not given to easy analysis (although I do think it’s important to reflect on it, it’s not healthy to analyze it to death). Again, I think that friendship (as art) is not even primarily an emotional matter -- the emotions here are cues to something deeper. When I meet someone whom I feel has possibilities as a friend, certainly I feel emotions, but the feelings are based on the affinities, on the excitement of finding another person who shares your stance and outlook and perceptions to a great degree.

Thus as to the question of reason vs. emotion, I see no conflict between the two. I see both of these as flowing from something deeper: from one’s personhood or individuality or core being. Certainly reason is extremely important for forming one’s values and deciding on what is important in one’s life. And this is an ongoing process -- it’s not as if you decide on your values one day (or for a few years) and then you go on autopilot. I think that to some extent you need to do much thinking and training of your mind and outlook, but then you can trust your emotions a great deal, because your emotions and your reason both flow from the character and traits you’ve developed. This doesn’t mean it ever becomes less important to be clear-thinking. But you don’t have to think about every little thing when you’ve already thought deeply about what’s important to you and when you’ve lived enough to have integrated your thoughts and values into the very fabric of your being. At that point, at least in my experience, your explicit philosophy (in my case, Objectivism) pretty much fades into the background -- it’s always there, but it’s not always in the forefront of my thinking and experience, because I’m

too busy living.

Are ideas such as spontaneity and the deep integration of thought and emotion valued in Objectivism, at least as it has traditionally been presented? I think not. I know that I value spontaneity and being a free spirit in some ways, but those things do not seem to be valued in Objectivism. Yet is the fact that I value these things an indication that I embrace subjectivism? Again, I think not. I’m not sure what the “dialectic” is here between the objective and the subjective or personal, but I think it’s worth exploring. I know that I would rather value something that accords fully with “joy and reason and meaning” than be true to Objectivism for its own sake. As Rand said, philosophy is not an end in itself, only Man is an end in himself -- and I am enough of an individualist to think that “Man” can mean only an individual human being.

Friendship and the Love of Wisdom

I am so enamored of the ancient Greek conception of philosophy as the love of wisdom that I am more committed to finding and realizing a philosophy for living on earth than I am in pursuing academic philosophy. If a true philosophy for living on earth comes to value highly things that Objectivism (as historically espoused) does not value highly -- e.g., friendship, passion, spontaneity, naturalness, emotion, pleasure, enjoyment, insight, creativity, personal (even subjective?) experience, benevolence, kindness, getting along with others or setting them at ease (cf. the reaction of people to Roark vs. to Keating in *The Fountainhead*), trusting one’s native self and not attempting to remake one’s soul from the ground up based on conscious philosophy, letting go of ought and should and other moralistic concepts, creating or reacting to art based on what is personally important (as opposed to what is metaphysically significant or philosophically correct) -- then so much the worse for Objectivism, in my opinion.

I happen to think that attempting to do justice to these phenomena is more true to Rand’s idea of “joy and reason and meaning” than is the desiccated intellectualism of so many Objectivists and libertarians. And I think this is the right and healthy attitude to have regarding any body of ideas. But when one has this attitude one runs the risk of incurring the ire of the self-proclaimed defenders of Rand’s philosophical legacy. It’s important in this context to keep in mind something that Ayn Rand herself once wrote:

The most selfish of all things is the independent mind that recognizes no authority higher than its own and no value higher than its judgment of truth.