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# *Friendship and trust as moral ideals: an historical approach*

## *The modern friendship ideal*

IT IS NOT PECULIAR to modern society that ideals of friendship express some of the 'noblest' potentials of human association. But an ideal of friendship so contrary to the forms of association that dominate the larger society is distinctive to our times. Explicit contract, rational exchange, formal division of labor, and impersonal institutions define the Great Society; by inversion, they also define those ideals constituting friendship understood at its morally best. Especially in the urban core of Western society, particularly its more educated sectors, friendships are judged of high quality to the extent that they invert the ways of the larger society. In this ideal, friendships are voluntary, unspecialized, informal and private. They are grounded in open-ended commitments without explicit provision for their termination—unlike contractual relations, prior stipulation of the conditions that legitimately end a friendship cannot be constitutive of friendship. In such an ideal, friendships are diminished in moral quality if terms of exchange between friends are consciously or scrupulously monitored, for this implies that utilities derived from friendships are constitutive, as in market relations, rather than valued as expressions of personal intentions and commitments.

Such friendships are grounded in the uniquely irreplaceable qualities of partners—their 'true' or 'real' selves, defined and valued independently of their place in public systems of power, utility and esteem. Friendships so conceived turn on intimacy, the confident revelation of the self to a trusted other, the sharing of expressive and consummatory activities. Ideally, friends are oriented to the intentions and meanings that give rise to acts, not the publicly standardized meaning or import of acts. The behavior of friends to each other is appropriately interpreted through knowledge of the other's inner nature, not the content or

consequences of actions. The privacy of friendship is not only cultural but formal: no body of law and administrative regulation brings sovereign authority to bear on friendships; while others may pass censure or render judgment, friends have the right and capacity to ignore them.

To be sure, 'personal' relationships other than friendship manifest many of these attributes, often with greater emotional intensity. But kinship, marriage, erotic relations are, variously and to some extent, constituted by conditions, or a specialization of role or function, not wholly created by will and wish; by contingent criteria of performance; and by legitimate and enforceable supervision by third parties or public agencies. The modern friendship ideal aspires towards forms of conduct profoundly different from those of the institutionalized social order (1).

This friendship ideal is of particular interest because it holds forth the promise—the more alluring because so elusive—of realizing in interpersonal life the fullest potentials of individuated personal agency. As a private and unspecialized relationship—not constituted by any division of labor or criteria of efficiency save those created by friends themselves—friendship is continuously created by acts of will. It offers, in principle, the actualization of the 'real self' in relation to others, a self undefined by public, impersonal or ascriptive definitions and constraints, including those of gender. It provides an ideal, indeed idealized, arena for that highly individualized conception of personal agency central to modern notions of individual freedom.

Friendship is one means by which persons establish trust between them. Trust involves a distinctive solution to problems of interpersonal uncertainty. Knowledge of others and their behavior in contingent circumstances is intrinsically imperfect; decisions about one's behavior predicated on knowledge of others is a distinctive subset of the infinitely many cases in which decisions must be made on the basis of imperfect knowledge. But it is distinctive in that knowledge or assumptions about particular others, rather than about the course of nature or aggregate events, is involved. As Simmel remarked, the unknowability of others,

(1) The account to this point is a compound drawn from the literature and of my formulations and priorities. Many of these themes are elaborated in Allan (1979), Levinson (1984), Naegele (1958), Paine (1969), Reiman (1976), Suttles (1970), Telfer (1970), Tenbruck (1964), Turner (1976), and Wolf (1966). For descriptions of what friendship means to largely middle-class urbanites, see Parlee (1979) and Maisonneuve (1966). The

literature of 'pop sociology' and contemporary advice books reflects similar perspectives; for two recent American examples, see Rubin (1985) and Pogrebin (1986). The most seminal sociological writing on friendship is by Simmel, whose influence is so pervasive and resonant for its study that selective citation risks distortion; for starting points, see Simmel (1950, pp. 118-128, 307-344).

and the criteria defining knowledge that underlies trust, varies historically—in ways this essay seeks to explore (2).

In trusting friends, without the support of third party supervision—such as that provided in legal contracts, or in sanctioned moral codes governing kin and corporate relations—we act *as if* another will under no conditions harm us, or slight our welfare. For Hobbes,

*trust* is a passion proceeding from the belief of him from whom we expect or hope for good, so free from doubt that upon the same we pursue no other way to attain the same good; as *distrust* or diffidence is doubt, that maketh him endeavour to provide himself by other means. And that this is the meaning of the words trust and distrust, is manifest from this, that a man never provideth himself by a second way, but when he mistrusteth that the first will not hold (Hobbes [1650] *in* Raphael 1969, I, pp. 8-9).

A distinctive vulnerability attends this form of trust: betrayed or unmet, it characteristically involves a greater loss than foregoing the good to be had as a result of trusting. This stands in contrast to calculated risk-taking, as in rational schemes of betting or investment seeking favorable probabilities such that losses are not greater than an unachieved good. If trust in friendship is betrayed, in contrast, we often stand to lose more than the good achieved in trusting (Deutsch 1958, pp. 265-68).

Uncertainty about others cannot be eliminated on purely experiential grounds. Trust is meaningful precisely because others retain their capacity to act against our interests or turn indifferent to them, and because a situation may arise in which they may be tempted to do so (Held 1968; Luhman 1979, 1988). Trust copes with uncertainty by a distinctive mechanism: acting *as if* the other will not let us down although the other cannot but have the capacity to do so. In transcending the unavoidable possibility of betrayal, personal trust achieves a moral elevation, lacking in contractual or other engagements enforced by third parties. Trust takes on a certain moral urgency because it affirms the impossibility of betrayal despite its existential possibility. Unless morally elaborated, an empirical history of justified reliance on another can at most yield confidence at asymptotic levels.

(2) Simmel offers a fundamental point of departure: 'Confidence, evidently, is one of the most important synthetic forces within society. As a hypothesis regarding future behavior, a hypothesis certain enough to serve as a basis for practical conduct, confidence is intermediate between knowledge and ignorance about a man. The person who knows completely need not trust; while the person who knows nothing can, on no rational grounds, afford even confidence. Epochs, fields of interest, and individuals differ, characteristically, by the

measures of knowledge and ignorance which must mix in order that the single, practical decision based on confidence arise' (Simmel 1950, pp. 318-19). What is said about trust here is a compound of the relevant literature and my own views. Important statements on trust, for present purposes, are: Blau (1964, Ch. 4), Deutsch (1958), Eisenstadt (1974), Eisenstadt and Roniger, 1980, 1984), Gambetta (1988), Held (1968), Luhmann (1979, 1988).

The act of trust extends commitment beyond extrapolated experience, by resolving uncertainties about others in the direction of unconditional confidence in their essential qualities and enduring dispositions.

Commitments based on an understanding of others' interests fall outside the moral ideal of modern friendship. If others' interests are allied with ours, then we do not trust them to act in our interest, but rather understand them to enhance ours to the extent that interests are mutually promotive. Excellent, reliable, even perfect knowledge of others's interests is in principle possible, unlike knowledge of others' inner nature—the advent of the 'interest paradigm', as Hirschman calls it, as an account of others and one's own conduct, historically functioned to reduce uncertainty about the behavior of others (Hirschman 1977, pp. 9-12, 42-56). But understanding of others based on interest does not depend on knowledge of their moral qualities or inner attributes—indeed, it is predicated on a universal rather than an individuating model of human nature. Trust represents a moral accomplishment that extends experience beyond the possibilities of extrapolation (3).

*A unitary concept of friendship: voluntarism, equality*

Despite apparent similarities to ancient, medieval and Renaissance forms of friendship—similarities often based on anachronistic and ahistorical readings—the 'routinized romanticism' of modern friendship ideals is as distinctive to modern society as is romantic marriage. An historical approach to friendship requires a coherent concept that both captures friendship as a unitary phenomenon and is sensitive to historical and cultural variation (4). Friendship in modern culture is morally celebrated, in part, as a pure expression in the domain of personal relations of voluntary agency, as expressing individual agency

(3) Seminally made by Simmel (1950, pp. 318-20) this key point is often elaborated in the literature on trust cited in note 2.

(4) The case for the uniqueness of modern friendship in Western culture is put in forceful conceptual terms by Paine (1969). A vigorous literature addresses large-scale historical changes in marriage, family, kinship and love; that on friendship is far less developed. The sources are less abundant and reliable, and sentimental and *belle-lettrist* approaches persist. Moreover, antipodal interpretive approaches have made conceptual con-

sensus difficult: while liberal thought has seen in civil society a broadening of social sympathies and a strain towards veracity and promise-keeping in social relationships, aspects of conservative and radical thought have conceived of market and bureaucratic society as inimical to personal relations of high quality (Silver 1985, 1990). Aymard (1986), Kon (1979) and Nelson ([1949] 1969), serious historical treatments of friendship of high quality, take no notice of each other and lack a common vocabulary of analysis.

and elective interpersonal affinities that in principle, if not in fact, are independent of ascriptive and categorical criteria (5). The idea of the 'voluntary' is, of course, central to modern culture and to theoretical conceptions of it, but antipodal contrasts between the voluntary and the 'traditional', like many other aspects of social theory oriented to the emergence of the modern world, risk tendentious, indeed teleological distortions of historical change.

Such caricatures have sometimes seemed plausible because the contemporary notion of the voluntary is often sought in aspects of past cultures that seem to anticipate the flowering of the voluntary in modern and liberal society—in analogy to that 'Whig history' of the 'growth of liberty' which, in a classic instance, took the Magna Carta as seminal for modern democracy. However, hardly any culture lacks a notion of the voluntary in its own terms—of acts and relationships emerging from choice and agency as understood by a particular culture. 'Bond friendship' and 'blood brotherhood', like other forms of institutionalized friendship studied by ethnographers, sharply differ from freely elective and non-institutionalized friendships characteristic of modern culture—their ritual and socially sanctioned character, and their frequent connection with imperative necessity seem to stamp them as 'involuntary' (Evans-Pritchard 1933, Kiefer 1968, Pitt-Rivers 1968, Tegnaeus 1952). From a teleological point of view, little seems voluntary about a friendship so clearly based on imperative necessity as the case of Philippine tribesmen who, asked why they have no friends outside their own communities, reply 'because I have no enemies' (Kiefer 1968, p. 233); nor does blood-brotherhood seem voluntary where many, perhaps all, in the relevant social category engage in this bond. Nor, to take a great leap in historical time, does there seem much that is voluntary in the inheritance of feudal obligations between lord and vassal, when one or the other dies and is succeeded by a son, given the problems of security in stateless societies and the logic of manorial economies. Yet, within such cases, the bonds of institutionalized friendship and feudal relationships are alike in that, compared to other relationships—customary, primordial, corporate, kin—they critically involve a voluntaristic component: particular persons select each other from a potential pool of others who are not selected, and the bond is created or reaffirmed through a ritual indicating commitment. In this perspective, feudal ties are voluntaristic, compared to ties of kinship, descent and corporate group (Ganshof 1961, pp. 69-105).

(5) The empirical patterning of friendships pp. 179-90; Laumann 1973; Maisonneuve in urban society is analyzed in Fischer 1982, 1966; Verbrugge 1977.

To conceive of the voluntary as 'free choice', and the involuntary as constrained by circumstance and cost, is to translate romantic ideals into timeless concepts. Even the purest instance of voluntarism is not captured by the image of unconstrained choice. At an admittedly high level of abstraction, there is little difference between constraints imposed by having enemies in other communities, and those stemming from the pervasive imperative in modern life to engage in contractual exchanges. In different terms, both traditional and modern societies provide occasions for voluntary agency.

That friendship in a great variety of historical instances is associated with a celebration of an ideal morality, one condition of which is its freedom from the obligations of corporate and kin groupings, as well as contractual ones, is often noted by analysts alike of classical, 'traditional', feudal, Renaissance and modern societies (6). Thus, in a discussion of 'pseudo-kinship', a widespread form of institutionalized friendship, Pitt-Rivers (1968, p. 412) remarks that it 'avoids being implicated in the internal dissensions of the kinship structure, for it involves no structural issues [... It] is what cognatic kinship aspires to, but *cannot*, be' (original emphasis). For Montaigne, friendship is other than, and superior to brotherhood, since brothers cannot freely choose one another and must be rivals for inheritance, whereas freely elective friends are in principle free from a rivalry in which one can benefit only at the expense of the other (Montaigne [1580] 1977, p. 136). In contemporary society, 'friendship [...] of a peculiarly ambitious and idealistic type [...] embodies] a very positive image of human social relations not realized elsewhere in capitalist society' (Abrams and McCulloch 1976, p. 44). The substance of friendship as a moral ideal varies historically, but the theme that friendship expresses an ideal of voluntary personal agency runs throughout these instances.

To develop a unitary notion of friendship requires asking whether equality is a condition of friendship (7). While equal or roughly

(6) Some examples are: Hutter (1978), Eisenstadt (1974), Mills (1937).

(7) Technically, it is also necessary to distinguish friendship from kin and blood relations. The complexity of the relevant literature, especially ethnographic, precludes an adequate discussion within the scope of this essay. While many have concluded that friendship and kinship constitute different systems (Paine 1969; Pitt-Rivers 1968; Wallman 1974), some have interpreted friendship as a special case of kinship (Schwimmer 1974). These disagreements, largely within the anthropological

literature, have little parallel in sociological literature addressed to modern society, which readily distinguishes between friendship and kinship (Allen 1979, pp. 30-45) by the criteria offered in modern culture and theory alike: ideally, friendships are personal, private, unspecialized, as well as non-contractual. For present purposes, I wish simply to state my agreement with the view that friendship and kin- and blood-relations are fundamentally distinct, a case elegantly summarized by Paine (1969).

comparable status has often been evoked as a condition of friendship since ancient times, and remains part of the contemporary folklore of friendship, taking it as a necessary condition of friendship would exclude from the domain of friendship many varieties of feudal and patron-client bonds, and perhaps such 'friendships' as those of Achilles and Patroclus in the *Iliad*, or Roland and Oliver in *Chanson de Roland*, in which a hero's *philos* or *compagnon*, although equal in social status, cannot, by definition, be his equal in honorific terms. However, a unitary concept of friendship does not require this.

The culture and legal codes of modern civil societies encourage the idea that friendship requires equality. In these settings, all citizens in principle enjoy identical rights, and inequalities are distributional rather than categorical. Inequalities in power, esteem and resources are considered potentially corrupting to a relationship valued 'for its own sake', as in the prototypic modern friendship ideal: it is a moral accomplishment for friends who are indeed unequal to construct a relationship to which this fact is irrelevant. However, it is ahistorical to impose the anti-instrumental aspect of modern friendship ideals on past and other societies. To be sure, writings on friendship have from ancient times warned against flatterers and sycophants on the one hand, and the abuses of power on the other (8). However, the celebration of friendship as a moral accomplishment in active life has not been understood as incompatible—until the approach of modern times—with the constitutive obligations of friends to provide each other with determinate and vital services and resources (9).

On the contrary, many historical forms of friendship have turned on the unembarrassed, indeed morally celebrated provision, albeit in terms of relationships different from those of 'non-friends'. Friendship obligations predating civil society, highly codified in the cultures in which they are embedded, are often replete with what modern culture and thought consider 'instrumental' features. In modern culture, equality of status reduces the risk that 'instrumentalism' will illegitimately affect the world of private friendship so that friends do not value each other 'for their own sakes'. However, it is historically often the case that the mutual provision of services and resources constitutive of some

(8) From a very large literature of advice and observation, see illustratively, for the former, Plutarch (1927); and, for both, Alberti ([1437] 1969).

(9) Since Aristotle's ranking of types of 'friendship'—pleasure, utility and moral—is so often quoted in the literature on friendship,

usually with philological and historical looseness, it is necessary to remark that a few quotable fragments, distorted by unexplicated translation and out of context, do not do justice to these complex matters. For relevant comments, see Adkins (1963) and Fraisse (1974).



forms of friendship turn precisely on inequality of status: what patrons and clients, and lords and vassals, *maîtres* and *fidèles*, offer each other is equivalent, but cannot be identical. Indeed, equality of condition might conduce to rivalry and jealousy, while difference of status defines a situation in which parties to friendship are committed to provide resources to each other equivalent in moral and practical worth, but substantively distinct. The long heritage of thought on friendship includes both the celebration of equality and identity between friends, expressing the triumph of trust over the inevitable temptation to rivalry, suspicion and jealousy, and also of difference in status, expressing an honorable asymmetry of sentiment and services (10).

Therefore, we may conclude, a unitary conception of friendship does not require equality as a universal condition. To be sure, this in turn requires criteria indicating which forms of equal and unequal relations are to be considered, genotypically, as 'friendship' and which not. At this point, we reach the core of the idea of 'a personal relationship'. In modern sensibility, the 'personal' inhabits the sphere of the private and the prevalence of 'personal' emotions and values is sharply distinguished from the 'impersonality' of public, specialized and contractual dealings. However, the genotype of the 'personal', as Simmel has subtly argued ([1907] 1978, pp. 292-303), lies not in its emotional content, but in the structural attribute of 'substitutability'. The extent to which the substitutability of persons is consequential indicates the extent to which a relationship is 'personal'. If to change patrons, lords, *maîtres*, *philia*, *compagnons*, spouses, lovers, and so on, entails palpable consequences, to that extent such relations are 'personal'; conversely, where this is not so, they are 'impersonal'. Such relations vary enormously in the degree to which they are 'personal' in this severely structural sense.

The 'impersonality' of modern society, as Simmel argues, frees us from 'personal dependence' on particular others for a host of practical needs, thereby enhancing the possibility of 'personal' relationships valued as expressions of inner personality, independent of 'instrumental' agendas and defined by voluntary will rather than standard or public criteria. In this sense, modern friendship is prototypically the most 'personal' relationship possible, since it is in principle indifferent to all

(10) For the former, see the Middle English friendship epic *Amis and Amiloun*, and other instances cited in Mills (1937). The logic of the latter is summed up concisely in Bacon's conclusion to his essay 'Of Followers and Friends': 'There is little friendship in the world, and least of all between equals, which was wont to be magnified. That that is, is

between superior and inferior, whose fortunes may comprehend the one the other' (Bacon [1597] 1903, pp. 273-4). To be sure, Bacon is here using 'friendship' in the old sense, inappropriate to the modern sensibility, of trustful loyalty in practical matters. On the vicissitudes of 'friendship' in English, see Stone (1977, pp. 93-99) and Trumbach 1978, p. 64).

constitutive features other than those willed by friends—something that cannot be said, with the same conceptual purity, of kinship, marriage, and erotic relations (11). However, in times past, the domain of the ‘personal’, in Simmel’s distinctive sense, was deeply embedded in structures and codes not of the parties’ making. To deny them the status of the ‘personal’ would be, again, to impose modern sensibility on the historical past. Thus, we may consider relationships to approach the pure case of ‘friendship’ to the extent they are constituted by the most voluntaristic mode of action available in a given culture, and involve commitments to others whose substitution creates a consequentially changed situation.

### *Historical contexts of friendship*

Three very broad settings, themselves comprehending vast variety, seem to define distinct forms of friendships.

In stateless societies with dispersed resources held by quasi-sovereign units each of which strives for autarky but can rarely achieve it, the extent to which trust in friendship is fulfilled is unambiguously known by adequate performance of prescriptively required acts on occasions that unambiguously call for them. There is no neutral, civic space in which friends may aid each other without hurting third parties. Examples are Homeric Greece, manorialism, early feudalism.

Where political and economic development has become more extensive than corporate groups but is not coextensive with the most inclusive unit of political sovereignty, trustworthy friendships are indispensable for protection and competitive advancement, but are strained by, and coexist with, the incomplete emergence of encompassing political sovereignty, markets, or bureaucratic administration. To be out of systems of alliance, clientship and the reliable exchange of favors is to inhabit a sphere not, as in modern life, of privacy, but of solitude, and hence of deprivation and vulnerability. The ambiguities of transition, a growing market in personal loyalties, the acute concern with the problematic posed by others’ independent capacity for agency and their inner intentions, are characteristic of these situations. Correspondingly, there is an elevated, to modern tastes hyperbolic, celebration of exemplary forms of faithful friendship. Examples are the classical *polis*, late and ‘bastard’ feudalism, the Renaissance, and Absolutism.

(11) This is elaborated in Silver (1990).

In modern society and states, with their unprecedented depersonalization of economy, polity and administration, concerns for personal safety and the advancement of competitive interests are addressed—to an extent not earlier imaginable—by impersonal means. In the earlier phases, when civil society appears as a liberation of human potentials, romantic friendship with its characteristic agenda of expressive intimacy and personal development takes on ideal forms that define the ‘high culture’ of modern friendship. Friendship becomes a value distinctive to the new sphere of the private but, in contrast to the exclusivistic friendships of times past, is understood by classical liberals and their followers to contribute morally and psychologically to the generalized, fraternal sympathy of liberal society (Silver 1985b, 1990).

*Friendship in history: some notes*

Both classical and feudal materials give the impression that trust and friendship are essentially objective. The strong emotions of Achilles and Roland upon the deaths of their warrior-companions, Patroclus and Oliver, do not constitute their bond, but rather are sustained by the exchange of resources and services in conditions of high danger. In *Chanson de Roland*, Roland mourns:

When Roland sees that Oliver is dead [...]
 With tender words he bids his friend farewell:
 ‘Alas, companion! Your valor ends in woe.
 We were together so many years and days;
 You never wronged me, and I kept faith with you.
 Now you are dead, I grieve to be alive’ (*laisse* CL).

What Roland mourns is the passing of a *compagnonnage* perfect of its type—total reliability of mutual aid, based on the companion’s exceptional capacities:

Count Roland’s friendship no coward ever knew
 Nor any man false-hearted or too proud,
 Nor any knight who was not skilled at war (*laisse* CLXI).
 (Terry 1965, pp. 77, 81)

Benveniste’s (1973, pp. 94–100) philological analysis of the Roman notion of *fides* is much to the point. The act of trust involved in *fides* implies the certainty of remuneration—loyalty and faithfulness secures the benefit of that which has been entrusted. *Fides* does not refer so much to an estimate of another’s moral qualities, as in the modern expression, ‘I have faith in you’. Rather, it is a capacity or resource which one can, as it were, invest in another; once invested, *fides* creates credit with the other. The transaction is objective in that *fides* is a

resource available for allocation in competitive systems of alliance and cooperation. It obligates another, in receiving one's *fides*, to extend trust—not merely belief, but concrete resources to be made available in determinate circumstances. Indeed, specific and practical imperatives run through historical accounts of friendships in times past. Friends are valued for superbly manifesting virtues—fighting ability, courage, wise counsel, loyalty—the modern counterparts of which are money, power, status; the excellence of these virtues is their capacity to wring rewards from a world that is not competitive in the sense of the modern market, but in which one gains only if others lose.

Thus, to consider a limiting case, Homeric man knows no distinction between mistake and error (Adkins 1960, pp. 30-60)—the meaning of relationships lies in their consequences, not inner intentions (12). While the category of the intending self emerges by the Athenian period (Snell 1961), the objective value of acts continues to define the friendship code. Thus, in Euripides's *Iphigenia in Tauris*, two friends (*philoî*), Orestes and Pylades, dispute whether one shall die for the other: a contest in friendship-virtue that became formulaic in medieval literature. Orestes says:

How can you wrong me, thinking I would live  
And leave you here to die? [...]  
[...] I could never show my face again [...]  
But to be pointed out and rightly spurned  
As one who had betrayed a friend. People  
Might say worse things than that, the worst  
An evil mind could think of to enjoy:  
That I had wished or even caused your death  
To benefit, as husband of your sister,  
By my inheritance—to win your throne.  
Such thoughts are frightening, but worse my shame  
In your imagining that I might leave you.  
If you meet knife and flame, then so do I.  
I am your friend and there's no more to say.  
(Euripides 1956, 11: 674-686)

The friendship code offers multiple tests of friendship turning on the consequences of acts, coexisting with a sense of friendship as interior to the bond, similar in these respects to the medieval friendship. Montaigne clearly expresses his rejection of this historic friendship ethic:

If someone questioned me in this fashion: 'If your will commanded you to kill your daughter, would you kill her?' and I said yes [...] that does not bear witness to my consent to do so, because I have no doubt at all about my will, and just as little about that of a friend. It is not in the power of all the arguments in the world to dislodge me

(12) When exceptions occur, in such settings, as when Roland forgives Oliver for striking at him with his sword, in the confu-

sion of battle, they take on a supererogatory character (Terry 1965, p. 76).

from the certainty I have of the intentions and judgments of my friend. Not one of his actions could be presented to me, whatever appearance it might have, that I could not immediately find the motive for it (Montaigne [1580], 1977, p. 140).

Montaigne's perspective is at most only incipiently romantic; in Stoic spirit, he considers a friend's character fixed, transparent and knowable.

No post-classical culture cared so much about loyalty, trust, friendship and personal obligation, both as virtue and problem, as the Renaissance, a critical period in the history of friendship ideals. There is deep concern with dissimulation and the false friend, the Machiavel, the man of 'policie', the insinuating flatterer. Italian manuals praised the art of *dissimulazione* (13). The Renaissance discovers the capacity of the lie, and of ambiguous and equivocal speech, not only to deceive, but to do so in a manner that creates an alternative reality (Mullaney 1980). Words now share with acts the capacity to define reality and shape relationships; consequently, the knowledge of others' inner intentions becomes unprecedentedly problematic.

The Elizabethans experienced this as a crisis in personal and political forms of trust, only partly distinguishable in a period in which Othello speaks of his 'government' of Desdemona (III, iii, l. 256), and in which the law of treason was gradually coming to refer uniquely to the monarch (Bellamy 1970, Pollock and Maitland [1895] (1968), II, pp. 500-08). They feared the subversion of assumptions on which the frame of the moral order depended. They saw in lordship and loyal service, in friendship and trustworthy alliance, both selflessness at its noblest and an indispensable resource in matters of high practical urgency. Selflessness did not, however, take the form of altruism—modelled on the Christian value of superogatory self-sacrifice. Rather, it consisted of exemplary adherence to the code of honor—of faithfulness in adversity and defeat (James 1978)—manifesting a claim to supreme worth in terms of trustworthiness and loyalty.

The partial modernization of polity and economy in the Elizabethan period meant that the noble class, drawing on households, dependents

(13) 'To know how to prevail by [...] one's talents affords great joy [...] the more so if one masters oneself [...] the most glorious of victories. This can come about through dissimulation, for once reason dominates impulse one attains to great calm; and though one might feel a bit sad at keeping silent that which one wishes to speak, or not doing what sentiment expresses, one gets great pleasure in having been restrained in word and deed [...] Oh virtue [of dissimulation], the grace of other virtues which becomes still more beautiful when in some manner dissimulated! [...] You

are highly useful to great fortunes, for you sustain them, and you offer aid to small ones in preventing them from crumbling away. It is your nature to use numerous services to order republics, administer war and keep peace. We see how much disorder, how many losses and disasters follow when one abandons you [...] I wish it were permitted me to reveal all that I owe to the benefits you have given me; but instead of thanking you, I would violate your laws if I did not dissimulate that which, using intelligence, I have dissimulated (Acetto [1641] 1930, pp. 87-88).

and alliances, reliably commanded fewer resources. Trust, obligation and loyalty became intensely problematic and idealized when late feudal forms of personal obligation were eroded, yet still much needed, and when joint enterprises still required the trustful collaboration of personal allies, during a time when the newly centralized and impersonal monopoly of political loyalty claimed by the monarch strained the older systems of loyalty (Stone 1965, Chs. v, viii).

An instance is conveniently drawn from the most classic of Elizabethan dramatic texts, *Hamlet*. Horatio is less a personal friend in the modern sense than a perfect confidant—sharing and aiding his 'lord's' stratagems, keeping them in confidence, immune to passion and flattery—qualities for which Hamlet praises him. Horatio's very dependence sustains Hamlet's trust:

Nay, do not think I flatter.  
For what advancement can I hope from thee  
That no revenue hast but thy good spirits  
To feed and clothe thee? Why should the poor be flattered?

Superiority indeed tempts to flattery:

No, let the candied tongue lick absurd pomp,  
And crook the pregnant hinges of the knee  
Where thrift may follow fawning.

But Horatio, though 'poor', being of 'good spirits', is not a flatterer:

Since my dear soul was mistress of her choice  
And could of men distinguish, her election  
Hath sealed thee for herself (III, ii).

Hamlet's soul has 'sealed' Horatio—put the princely insignia on him as on a charter, or a letter closed to others—in the confidence that, though dependent, he is immune to the temptation of self-interest in serving his 'lord' (14). Horatio remains alive only on Hamlet's charge to 'report me and my cause aright', resonant of the obligation of medieval brothers-in-arms to inherit feuds and 'maintain causes' (Keen 1962). His

(14) Compare Iago:

I follow him to serve my turn upon him.  
We cannot all be masters, nor all masters  
Cannot be truly followed. You shall mark  
Many a duteous and knee-crooking knave  
That, doting on his own obsequious bondage  
Wears out his time, much like his master's ass,  
For naught but provender... Others there are  
Who, trimmed in forms and visages of duty,  
Keep yet their hearts attending on themselves;  
And, throwing but shows of service on their lords,  
Do well thrive by them, and when they have lined  
their coats,

Do themselves homage. These fellows have some soul;  
And such a one do I profess myself.

(I, i, ll. 45-55)

The passage conveys Iago's insincerity not only in substance, but in his inversion, grotesque to contemporary sensibility, of the language of obligation. To 'attend' on oneself (not one's lord), to do 'homage' to oneself (a metaphor that chokes on itself), is perversely to convert the very language of loyalty to 'self-service'.

counterpoint with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern—dangerous false friends whose ‘insinuation’ Hamlet soon detects—is carefully arranged. The poignancy of Hamlet’s bond with Horatio derives from a tradition of formal obligation which, no longer reliable, was the more precious in a dangerous world. Wishing to die, Horatio compares himself to ‘the antique Roman’—summoning up the classical models of loyalty—rather than ‘the Dane’, the man of his own treacherous times. Yet Hamlet never shares with Horatio the material of the great monologues, the secrets of his soul. He rather confides his suspicions and tactics, like that of the play-within-a-play, ‘after which we will both our judgments join/In censure of his [the king’s] seeming’—a strong echo of the medieval companion’s formal obligation to offer *consilium* (Keen 1962). Only toward the end—when urgent action seems suspended, the texture turns mellow and contemplative—rejecting Horatio’s counsel not to duel, does Hamlet share with him a ‘personal’ feeling: that ‘all’s ill’ about his heart. The formality of their bond, far from being incompatible, as in modern sensibility, with personal emotion, both constitutes it and excludes intimacy.

The forms of political friendship in the *Ancien Régime* were certainly inimical to intimacy. Consider the situation of the confidant at the court of Versailles:

[T]here are occasions when the press of business or the distaste of display forces princes to seek in the purity of nature for the pleasures which they do not find in their greatness. Bored by ceremonies, by affected seriousness, by faces and suits, they seek an entirely natural repose [...] Worn out by suspicions and jealousies, they seek to confide, to open a heart that they show to the world as hard. The flatteries of adulators make them wish for the sincerity of a friend; and it is this that they make of those confidants who are called ‘favorites’: persons dear to princes with whom they relieve the weight of secrets, with whom they wish to taste all the pleasures that familiarity of association and freedom of conversation may endow on private friends. But how dangerous are these friendships to a favorite who dreams more of love than of watching his own conduct! Though he wants to find his friend, this confidant meets his master; and by an unexpected turn, his familiarity is punished as the indiscreet freedom of a servant who has forgotten himself. Those courtiers whose interest always governs their conduct always manage to please, and their prudence enables them to avoid whatever shocks, whatever displeases. He who truly loves his master does not listen to his [own] heart (Saint-Évremond [1676] 1927, I, pp. 60-1; my translation).

Here, ‘private friendship’ is no more possible between master and confidant than, in Tönnies’ view, among the bourgeoisie in capitalism (15). Both prince and confidant yearn for intimacy; but neither can

(15) Here is one of Tönnies’s accounts of social interaction in *gesellschaftliche* society:

It consists of an exchange of words and courtesies [in which] in reality everyone is thinking of himself, in competition with the others. For everything pleasant

which someone does for someone else, he expects, even demands, at least an equivalent. He weighs exactly his services, flatteries, presents, and so on, to determine whether they will bring about the desired result. Formless contracts are made continuously [...] (Tönnies [1887] 1963, p. 78).

escape the logic of their stations. True love of a master, for a confidant, must exclude the 'heart', and maintain 'interest' at the center of the bond.

The conditions of Renaissance political life did not diminish the supreme importance of practical acts as forms of help between friends, but subtilized and complicated the relationship between acts and speech. The figures of Iago and the many other 'Machiavels' of the period are descended from a line of personified Vices dating back to the medieval religious drama (Spivack 1958). In the Renaissance, such figures lose the moral transparency and prototypically evil character that had earlier characterized them, and move into the circle of fully human persons, combining human nature with the morally 'unnatural'. The revelation of their evil, after they have done their worst deeds, is not merely a personal shock, but threatens the dissolution of the moral order as a whole.

In contrast, the designs of comparable figures in medieval literature are palpable. In *Chanson de Roland*, the traitor Ganelon exploits the warrior code to pursue his aims, but his evil nature is apparent to all. Similarly, the ill-will of the faithless steward in *Amis and Amiloun*, an early medieval story of two faithful friends, is also transparent, as is that of other such figures in medieval literature (Mills 1937). The fascination of the Renaissance with flattery, lying, insinuation and equivocation indicates its characteristic 'ethical nightmare' and, thus, its highest ideals. The question of others' intentions, and how to gain knowledge of them, becomes acutely problematic. When Iago, in a masterfully resonant phrase, declares at the outset of *Othello*, 'I am not what I am', he superbly evokes the power of dissimulation to create an illusory reality that utterly masks true intention (16). When one's nature could no longer, in principle, be perceived either in acts or words—and in settings where trustful reliance on others was crucial in a dangerous world—a crisis in personal morality emerged.

Machiavellianism in personal relations, and the reactive horror of it that characterized Tudor and Elizabethan sensibility (Praz [1928] 1966, pp. 90-145) occurred in the course of a transition from customary and sacral modes of alliances to a calculative stance towards coalitional possibilities. Given the incomplete development of monetized markets, of impersonal means for the enforcement of contract, and of impersonal provision for public order, it was risky indeed to do without recourse to persons worthy of trust. Yet insofar as time is defined, not as

(16) The phrase echoes the English translation of God's self-description (Exodus iii. 14), compounding moral horror with blasphemy.



governed by custom—in which ‘the memory of man runneth not to the contrary’—but by contingency and uncertainty, trust cannot be securely derived either from customary obligations or a record of loyal action. Words—promises, oaths, undertakings—become crucial to assessing others’ intentions; but speech became newly vulnerable to dissimulation.

*Incipient and classical liberalism*

As the network of bureaucracy and market exchange spread, distaste mounted for the practical reciprocities that had marked personal bonds in earlier times. The eighteenth century moralists of commercial society sought to define personal obligations in ways compatible with the requirements of market society. The high emotion that surrounded both the fulfillment and betrayal of personal trust had, by the late eighteenth century, subsided into puzzled uncertainty or calm and routinized moralities, centered on a moral psychology featuring sympathy, benevolence, and prudence. Friendship emerges as one of a variety of benevolent social bonds, like family, neighborhood, and the intercourse of citizens in civil society, understood as shaped by propinquity and elective affinities more decisively than by station, corporate group and political imperatives: in short, a description of the world offered by modern social psychology appears. The early liberals were concerned to define friendship as intrinsically private. At the conceptual level, they sought to show how personal relations, such as friendship, could not be governed by any formal code, such as provided by religion or honour—nor, indeed by exchange relations similar to that of the market. In his seminal treatise on social psychology, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Adam Smith remarked on the formlessness of personal relations in commercial society:

[T]he general rules which determine what are the offices of prudence, of charity, of generosity, of gratitude, of friendship, are in so many respects loose and inaccurate, admit of so many exceptions, and require so many modifications, that it is scarce possible to regulate our conduct entirely by a regard to them [...] The actions required by friendship, humanity, hospitality, generosity are [...] vague and indeterminate.

The author of the seminal work in market theory rejected exchange theory as applicable, as norm or theory, to personal relations:

Of all the virtues [...] gratitude is that, perhaps, of which the rules are the most precise [...] that as soon as we can we should make a return of equal, and if possible of superior value to the services we have received, would seem to be a pretty plain rule, and one which admitted of scarcely any exceptions. Upon the most superficial

examination, however, this rule will appear to be in the highest degree loose and inaccurate, and to admit of a thousand exceptions.

The 'thousand exceptions' are occasioned by circumstances unique to the varieties of individual personalities and their personal relationships:

If your benefactor attended you in your sickness, ought you to attend him in his? Or can you fulfill the obligation of gratitude, by making a return of a different kind? If you ought to attend him, how long ought you attend him? The same time which he attended you, or longer, and how much longer? If your friend lent you money in your distress, ought you to lend him some in his? How much ought you lend him? When ought you lend him? Now, or tomorrow, or next month? And for how long a time? It is evident that no general rule can be laid down, by which a precise answer can, in all cases, be given to any of these questions. The difference between his character and yours, between his circumstances and yours, may be such, that you may be perfectly grateful, and justly refuse to lend him a half-penny; and on the contrary, you may be willing to lend him ten times the sum which he lent you and yet justly be accused of the blackest ingratitude, and of not having fulfilled the hundredth part of the obligation you lie under (Smith [1759, 1790] 1976, p. 174).

Adam Smith thus anticipates, indeed invents, the problematic addressed in contemporary sociology in terms of 'social exchange' (Blau 1964, Ch. 4). But more to the immediate point, he rejects a model of exchange theory, drawn from the impersonal market, as applicable to personal relations. The emergence of the liberal market in the economy, far from providing a cultural and theoretical model for personal relations, in Smith's view clarified the distinctiveness of the two domains: both normatively and interpretively, in Smith's account, market exchange theory cannot address the new forms of personal relations—private, uncoded, informal, idiosyncratic—that come distinctively to prevail in what he called 'commerical society'. The father of market theory was precisely not an 'exchange theorist' in the domain of personal relationships.

Liberal social thought develops and cherishes the clear distinction between public and private, the market and the personal (Benn and Gaus 1983, pp. 39-66). In the ideal liberal commonwealth, the bourgeois *polis*, the peaceful exchange of equivalent values benefits all; the virtue of exchange is in its utility and its equivalence. But friendship is diminished, within liberal thought and culture, precisely to the extent that it openly rests on equivalent exchange and utility. Hence, conditional helpfulness and the explicit exchange of valued services and resources becomes particularly abhorrent in the ideology of modern friendship. 'If you are right', cries the impulsive Aziz to his friend Fielding, at a celebrated moment in E. M. Forster's *Passage to India*, 'there is no point in any friendship; it all comes down to give and take, or give and return, which is disgusting, and we had better all leap over this parapet and kill ourselves'. In the name of social science, exchange

theory 'unmasks' the delusions of those who search in friendship and other personal bonds for mutually affirming attachments free of the 'contamination' of market culture (17).

However, the aversion to exchange in friendship does not originate as a recoil against 'commercial society' but rather, in the counter-culture, so to speak, of the late *Ancien Régime*. Thus Rousseau:

The only bond of my associations would be mutual attachment, agreement of tastes, suitableness of characters [...] I would want to have a society around me, not a court; friends, and not *protégés*. I would not be the patron of my guests; I would be their host. This independence and equality would permit my relationships to have all the candor of benevolence; and where neither duty nor interest entered in any way, pleasure and friendship would alone make the law (Rousseau [1767] 1979, pp. 348-8).

Nothing could more clearly proclaim the coming of the modern ideal of friendship.

However, during the two centuries earlier, Montaigne's praise of unconditional friendship founded solely on elective affinity between two irreplaceable selves—'If you press me to tell why I loved him, I feel this cannot be expressed, except by answering: because it was he, because it was I'—found largely incomprehension, even in the circles which appreciated La Rochefoucauld's remorseless unmasking of self-interested calculation behind every seemingly generous or selfless act; only with the advent of romanticism, in the first third of the nineteenth century, did Montaigne's doctrine of friendship, though itself only incipiently romantic, find sympathetic understanding (Frame 1940, Ch. 1). Factional and clientelistic politics, unlike capitalism, did not sustain a broadly adversarial culture, but at most, as reflected in La Rochefoucauld's *Maximes*, one of disillusion. In Molière's *Le Misanthrope* Alceste, in his moral rage against false friendship, hypocrisy and insincerity, has in the end no choice but to retire from the world. In Mme de La Fayette's novel of 1678, *La Princesse de Clèves*, the delicate sincerity of a wife destroys her marriage and life. Marivaux's play of 1739, *Les Sincères*, argues that even those passionately committed to sincerity cannot sustain its results, that sincerity is no less vulnerable to affectation, than other values, and that discretion, tact and perhaps even benign flattery are both authentic to human nature and requisites of happiness. Until the rise of a self-confident adversarial culture as the *Ancien Régime* approached its end, the ethic of personal relations expressed at its purest in the modern ideal of friendship was at most incipient (18). The problematics of friendship are specific to each

(17) See Gould (1980, pp. 63, 88) for a critique of exchange and complementarity perspectives in social theory animated by these values.

(18) It is difficult to situate Luhmann's (1986, esp. Ch. 7) analysis with respect to this conclusion, but certainly necessary to call attention to his serious analysis of these

historical setting, and cannot be grasped by projecting those of one period on another.

*Friendship among the modern poor*

The modern friendship ideal is of course far from universal, in scope and intensity, and why this is so suggests something about the conditions that sustain it. Consider poor black people in urban America. Elliot Liebow's *Tally's Corner: a study of Negro streetcorner men* (1967) reports a strong concept of friendship among black males in Washington DC, whose cash incomes are both low and irregular. Cut off from the impersonal worlds of regular employment, organizational participation, market exchanges, and bureaucratic transactions, their energies 'are almost entirely given over to the construction and maintenance of personal relationships' (p. 161), the core activities of which address 'the basic prerequisites of daily living' (p. 175). They have elaborated and strong concepts of friendship, culminating in 'going for brothers', a 'special case of friendship in which the usual claims, obligations, expectations, and loyalties of the friend relationship are publicly declared to be at their maximum' (p. 167). While friendships feature warm 'personal' sentiments, 'especially lacking is an exchange of secret thoughts, of private hopes and fears' (p. 206). The ideal of friendship is morally elevated, noble and uncalculatingly generous (19). Yet, friendship is fragile: the 'ideal' defines its counterpart, a cynical 'reality', and the lived experience of friendship includes both:

Friendship is at its romantic, flamboyant best when things are going well for the persons involved. But friendship does not often stand up well to the stress of crisis or conflict of interest, when demands tend to be heaviest and most insistent. Everyone knows this. Extravagant pledges of aid and comfort between friends are, at one level, made and received in good faith. But at another level, fully aware of his friends' limited resources and the demands of their self-interest, each person is ultimately prepared to look to himself alone [...] Attitudes towards friends and friendships are thus always shifting, frequently ambivalent, and sometimes contradictory. One moment friendship is an almost sacred covenant; the next it is the locus of cynical exploitation: 'Friends are [good only] for money' (pp. 180-1).

As broadly in the Renaissance and Baroque, friendship is a practical imperative, in the absence of impersonal means of obtaining resources

issues in this period. For a broad account of contemporary sensibilities, see Mauzi (1979, esp. Ch. XIII).

(19) A friend gives, and receives 'goods and services in the name of friendship, ostensibly keeping no reckoning' (p. 163).

[A friend] prefers to see the movement of money, good, services and emotional support between friends as flowing freely out of loyalty and generosity and

according to need rather than as a mutual exchange resting securely on a quid pro quo basis. He wants to believe that his friendships reach back into the distant past and have an unlimited future; that he knows and is known by his friends intimately, that they can trust one another implicitly, and that their loyalties to one another are almost unbounded. He wants to see himself as Pythias to other Damons (Liebow 1967, p. 176).

and given recurrent, unpredictable uncertainty. The sentiments of friendship are highly charged, but not centered on intimacy. Partly in response to its unreliability, friendship ideals are morally elevated; correspondingly, cynicism and betrayal are pervasive. The ideal calls for uncalculative generosity; but the code of honor is too weak, and the scarcity and irregularity of resources too great. Nobility of ideals coexists with cynicism; the two moral sentiments mutually create each other: strenuous ideals arise in tension with cynicism, their logically implied opposite.

Here, from another study, is the voice of a poor black woman in a mid-western American city:

Some people don't understand friendship. Friendship means a lot, that is if you can trust a friend. If you have a friend, you should learn to trust them and share everything that you have. When I have a friend and I need something, I don't ask, they just automatically tell me that they going to give it to me. I don't have to ask. And that's the way friends should be, for how long it lasts. But sometime when you help a person they end up making a fool out of you. If a friend ain't giving me anything in return for what I'm giving her, shit, she don't get nothing else. These days you ain't got nothing to be really giving (20). You can't care for no one that don't give a damn for you (Stack 1975, p. 57).

The practical necessity of friends; pervasive distrust, to which generous friendship is an exception; total commitment to another as conditional on conscious reciprocity in relation to need; fear of exploitation; practical help rather than interiority at friendship's core: such, again, are the correlates—not of poverty as such, for many of these themes appear, *mutatis mutandis*, among Renaissance aristocrats—but of a social existence not pervasively organized by impersonal means of administration, exchange and governance (21).

### *The modern ideal of friendship reconsidered*

The modern friendship requires the very impersonality of administration, contractualism and monetized exchange over against which it is culturally distinguished. Can we better understand, in this light, its historically unprecedented emphasis on personal intimacy? The agendas of modern personal friendships are unprecedentedly various and idiosyncratic, the outcomes of an infinity of elective encounters between modern individuals. Intimacy in such circumstances is not only an intrinsic good, but a strategy of establishing trust. Only thus can one

(20) That is, people lack resources with which to be generous without adequate reciprocity.

(21) For an ethnographic study with resonant, though not matching material, see Velez-Ibañez (1983).

seek to acquire the kinds of knowledge about the other which permit the open lines of moral credit, of trust—unshaped by formal codes or necessary contingencies—that the modern friendship ideal celebrates. Since modern friendship no longer intrinsically involves the codified repertoires of consequential acts built into friendship ideals before and outside civil society, one cannot know what will be relevant to the bond; indeed, to codify this in advance is to offend the modern ideal, since it explicitly states conditions that justify termination, a feature of contractual rather than ideally personal relations. One cannot know in advance the conditions of termination not only for reasons intrinsic to the modern friendship ideal, but on account of interiority's infinite nuance and the vicissitudes of the modern self, no longer defined by station, code or destiny (Norton 1976). Against these problematics of uncertainty, intimacy is an optimal strategy in seeking knowledge of the other on which to base trust.

Moreover, friendship bonds in the modern world are potentially limitless because no longer set in institutional contexts. They are morally bounded only by our capacities to meet them. The better the friend, the closer the bond, the less defined the potential demands—in many respects, the opposite of friendship in times past. We cannot know in advance all that may be required of us. Scarcity and prudence may constrain our responses, but we must justify each such limitation. The closer the bond, the more the burden of justification is on us who are asked, not one who asks of us. No matter how reasonable our refusal, that we refuse at all must diminish us in terms of the ideal forms of friendship that inhabit the private life of the modern world. Their limitlessness poses the prospect of failure, perhaps betrayal. No matter what we accomplish, there lies beyond the shimmering possibility of still further achievements of disinterestedness, generosity, selflessness. We have no firm, controlling forms that consensually shape judgment of moral achievement as obligated friends (22).

The significance of the modern friendship ideal lies not only in the extent that it actually governs behavior—as in the norm/behavior paradigm by which sociology has often addressed values—but rather as a standard by which the quality of experience is evaluated. It may be that earlier friendship ideals, more demanding in many respects, were also more widely subverted, and in times of crisis, as in the Renaissance, occasioned much cynicism. While modern friendship coexists with, and depends on, the impersonal structures which are its antipode, friendship

(22) Much of the section to this point is a variation on the analytical theme sounded by Talcott Parsons ([1937] 1949), pp. 668-696.

in much of pre-liberal society represented a strenuous affirmation in the face of pervasive distrust. It may be that modern friendship ideals, 'purified' from 'mere' practical urgencies, contribute to an invidious comparison between impersonal and personal realms, celebrating a personal morality whose ideal attributes reflect that it need no longer carry the burden of 'objective' necessity. Only modern society has thus been able to create a democratized arena of elective affinities, in which persons culturally value each other for their true, that is their unproductive selves.

These issues, however, are internal to modern society. To project them into times past is to distort both past and present. The character and problematics of historical forms of friendship illuminate each other only if each is situated in its own place, and its own time\*.

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