Review Article

The Problematization of Friendship

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Konstan, D., *Friendship in the Classical World*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1997. 206 pp.

While attending a course on Plato's *Dialogues* and at the same teaching a course on Aristotle's *Nichomachean Ethics*, I was disturbed by the ancient philosopher's concern about friendship. Why friendship? Or rather: Why the problematization of friendship? Why was friendship of such a sufficient concern that they often wrote about it and even studied it? Did they consider their friends in the same way we consider our friends today? Was their friendship affectionate? Or was it calculated or obliged? What did they expect of their friends? David Konstan in his recently published excellent book *Friendship in the Classical World* (1997) nuances the different transformations of the relationship we call friendship from the Homeric age to the Christian Empire of the 4th-5th century. Friendship as understood is "a mutually intimate, loyal, loving bond between two or a few persons that is understood not to derive primarily from family, tribe or other such ties." It is an achieved rather than an ascribed relationship (1997: 1), that is, it is social and not natural. It was a matter of human artifice and social practice. The Greek form of friendship, constituted itself as an intimate public space between family and government. Yet the complexity of the practice of friendship makes it difficult to see how terms of other relations do not simply conflict with and therefore undermine it. The intelligibility and justifiability of ancient norms of friendship seems to be in question. Konstan argues that friendship existed in ancient Greece and Rome (for entirely different reasons) in contrast to other forms of social life based on kinship, citizenship or commerce. This dissents from the prevailing view that modern friendship as we know and experience it today

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finds its origins in the renaissance period and that friendship in Homeric society was constituted more by obligatory reciprocity or calculated cooperation than by sentiment or affection, as a consequence of the distinctive nature of societies which were then ruled more by custom than by law. Konstan cherishes the thought that there existed in the age of heroes a *sympathetic* and *altruistic* space. "The circle of friends occupied a social space within the larger community of people. Beyond family and among companion's of ones own class and community, friendship affords a special tie of affection and trust." (1991:43-44) Such a conception of friendship in ancient Greece not only reconstructs friendship as a personal relationship grounded on affection and trust but also reconfigures the character of social relations in antiquity.

Konstan traces the practice of such *intimate social spaces*. To understand the development of such a social practice or any social practice however is to understand the development of its norms or what in our increasingly "intelligent" society we would refer to as "software." Our author then devotes his attention to the world of Homer, the classical city of Aristotle, the Hellenic age of the Stoics, Plutarch and Solon, Cicero's Rome and the Christian conception of friendship. Our interest in this review is the philological examination of the term *philos* and the conception of friendship in Aristotle and its problematization.

The earliest record of friendship in the archaic world is the two epic works attributed to Homer. It should come as no surprise that Konstan devotes most of his time to the philological task of identifying the vocabulary used for friendship and showing its affinity to or its nexus with terms marking other bonds in Greek, Latin and with modern usage as the value of affectionate bonds is marginalized in the epics. Though the abstract noun *philia* is commonly rendered as "friendship," it covers a wider extension of relations than the English approximates (does not exactly equal) the English word "friend," however, has been confused with the abstract noun philia, hence leading to the conclusion that there is no Greek word equivalent to English friend. Konstan disagrees. The vocabulary used for personal bonds was not univocal in the epic and later Greek usage. Yet Konstan excavates a continuity to the change within the concept to prove his point. *Philos* was used in most instances in the epics as the modifier "dear," and preserves this meaning in classical Greek usage. In his summary of David Robinson's work, Konstan notes that the basic sense of *philos* is just 'dear'. Konstan also notes that the vocative of philos is employed

in all Greek periods as a "term of endearment," and is a stable reminder of its character as an adjective. (1997:30) In cases where it occurs as a noun in the epics, it is not applied specifically to friends but has broader reference. While friendship is only marginal to the narrative economy of the *Odyssey*, Konstan still finds proof for the positive value of things in the epic. When one is in unfamiliar territory, one wishes for familiar spaces and familiar faces. Konstan unearths the affection for the familiar that Homer injects into the interstices on his text.

> When Odysseus is abroad among distant populations such as Cyclopes and Phoenicians he is described in a formulaic phrase as being *philon apo*, "distant from *philoi*"... although enemies may arise among townspeople, as the Odyssey makes all too clear, when opposed to complete strangers the people back home are "near and dear" (1997:30)

The broad reference of *philos* in epic diction traverses the space of *hetairos,*[1] which is frequently translated as "friend." Konstan is quick to dismiss this however. *Hetairos*, "companion" covers wide range of amenable relations of kin and it is not used specifically to refer to those closest to heart and mind. *Philos* are chosen from among the most intimate of ones *hetairoi*. Another adjective that specifies those *hetairoi* who belong to this intimate space is *pistos*, "faithful" or "trustworthy." Konstan condenses his philological task.

> Taken together, the terminological complex constituted by hetairos, and the markers *philos* and *pistos* embraces the essential elements associated with friendship: a select relationship between non-kin grounded on mutual affection ("dearness") and loyalty or trust. (1997:33)

Perhaps taking a cue from modern day friendships, Konstan directs his attention to Athenian songs recited at the symposium. He does not find anything astonishing from the lyric poetry that survives for these are full of allusions to *hetairos* and not to *philos*. The symposium of the archaic Greek is very different from its namesake today, when it is most often held as an academic function. The recitation of the word, this time in lyric was present as well but there was revelry and dining which was the heart of the whole event.

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[1] *Therapon, eros, xenia* are also treated.

> Technically the symposium is said to be part of a feast of any kind, when dishes were removed, and the drinking commenced. In Athens of the fifth century BC however, drinking parties were regarded as an aristocratic style of entertainment devoted to reveling, eroticism, display of wealth, and the cultication of excellence at the lyre and poetic recitation. (1997:44)

Like companions in our modern day, the *hetairoi*, groups of companions, oiled their comradeship in drinking sessions. The commercials of San Miguel have symposiastic provenance. The *skolia*, lyric drinking songs, expressed their joys, concerns, hopes and fears about friendship. Thus one *skolia* wishes, "if only it were possible to know without being deceived about each man who is a friend (*andra philon*) what he is like, cutting open his chest, looking into his heart, and locking it up again." (1997:45) Intimations of social strife and betrayal are not irregular.

Aristotle's works contain the most extensive treatment of friendship in the classical period. W.D. Ross in his translation of the *Nichomachea Ethica* conjures Book VIII (1155a ff) as a discussion on "friendship." Given the philological evidence provided by Konstan, we can say with certainty that Aristotle's textual intent in these sections of his text is obscured by the wide spectrum of relationships that Ross allows in his translation. In this period, *philos* assumes a restricted sense and is divested of crisscrossing uses and meanings and is also exclusive of kin and other acquaintances, be it the neighbor or the fellow citizen. Ross uses "friendship" for almost all types of relations, that between friends, siblings, parents and children, friendships between lovers, fellow soldiers and countrymen. It would appear the Aristotle was rebelling against the conventions of his day and is more like a contemporary, which is what Ross makes him to be. Given the restrictions on friendship, it comes as no surprise that what Aristotle is talking about is the different kinds of human relationships "that involve character and affection," that is, the various kinds of *philia*, including that specie of *philia* between *philoi*, that man is thrown into and makes in his life. With philological convictions, Konstan interprets *philia* as "love" or "loving relationship." Consistent with Greek usage, Aristotle reserves the term *philoi*, as in the *philia* between *philoi*, when referring to friendship proper. We should not be confused moreover when Aristotle uses the verb *philein*, "to love," in his treatment of the various kinds of *philia*, "since the verb has the same extension as

the abstract substantive *philein.*" (1997, 68) Yet despite Ross' shortcomings, the software, that is the grounds that people take to be determinative of friendship, of *philia* between *philoi*, come out in his translation as choice, reciprocity and most of all mutual affection. The mutuality is expressed in the common adage, "Friends have all things in common."

Writers become more vocal of this space that one "makes for oneself" (*poieisthai*) between kin and community. One is born into his family and thrown into his community. One makes friends. Brotherly or comradely and parental love do not fall into this category. Brotherly love is not friendship because this is not an achieved relation and has its source in shared physical identity. Aristotle notes that our childhood friendships become lasting friendships when he attributes similarity of age and common upbringing as grounding friendship (1161b 34). These however have something akin to kinship by virtue of their "throwness" into the same community or the same roots. One grows up with childhood friends almost as if one were born with them. They are almost hardly voluntary. The family for the Greeks was fundamentally a feature of nature even as it embodied a set of norm. Its members know just what they had to do in contrast to that other basic institution in public life, the government, where deliberation was normative. Parental love or the love of a mother for a child is also not friendship, in the strict sense of the term for besides not being an achieved relation, the mother's *philia* does not count on any return. Christian friendships on the other hand take its structure from kinship.

What grounds the friendship of persons who do not have a common upbringing? Aristotle points out virtue or strength of character, pleasure and utility. Only good men can be friends for these are capable of wishing the other good and doing good for the sake of the friend. Good will alone does not make a friendship, however. One may bestow recognition on another for a certain excellence in public performance, his great deed, etc. but the other does not become a friend. Aristotle observes that one can have good will toward almost anyone who possesses excellence and worth but this is still not friendship for it is not mutual and "does not involve intensity or desire" (1166b 33); "for how can one call them friends when they do not now their mutual feelings?" (1156a 3). It does not necessarily follow that persons with excellent character will be pleased with and will be helpful to each

other, that is become friends, otherwise we shall be a friend to all virtuous persons, which means having so many friends which means *having no friends at all.* (1158a 10/1171a 8-10) Good will however can be the beginning of friendship in the same way that beauty is the beginning of love. It takes the generative powers of time coupled with the pleasure with each other's company and some mutual benefit, for friendship to arise out of this good will.

Aristotle argues that strength of character or virtue is closer to ones nature than pleasantness or usefulness. For friendships that are based on this are engaged upon by friends for reasons of their own nature, that is, for reasons of some feature of themselves that is not optional for them. It is therefore the most stable ground among the three but it alone does not complete the specifications of friendship. Good friends are pleased with each other. They may be pleased with the same things, that is, with each other's character and at the same time take pleasure in the things they occupy themselves with, which for Aristotle is indicative of what they value in life and how they value it. The activities they share, be it studying philosophy or drinking together or engaging in some athletic activity, are sure to make them better. "Thus friends are said to spend their time together in whatever they value in life."[2] Their presence may not be mandated for the fact that they have the same passion for the activities they engaged in gives them that sense of living together (11721 37-14). Friendship is the reward for all the good things they do in common. There is something characteristically Athenian to the point about pleasure being derived from the same things which though incidental, I would like to call the fourth element that grounds Athenian friendship: symmetry or equality. It is not enough that they get pleasure from each other but that they should get pleasure from the same source, virtue. Otherwise, it is not friendship but something more like the love between lover and beloved where the roles are complementary and not symmetrical. "For those do not take pleasure in the same things, but the one is seeing the beloved and the other in receiving attentions from his lover." (1157a 5-5) Konstan ventures to add the philological distinctions. In friend-

[2] Athenian friendship had about it an indomitable consciousness of virtue. Such an open admiration of excellence is different from the self-disclosure in Christian friendship. The latter recommends openness regarding ones weakness with a view to personal intimacy.

ship, all members are *philoi*, while in erotic relationship, the lover is *erastes*; the beloved, *eromenos* or *eromene* (1997:38).[3]

In the *Lysis* Plato specifies the symmetrical element in friendship when Socrates concludes with epistemic certitude that the two boys are friends because they are equally rich, meaning, one cannot be richer than the other for between them everything is common. "I shall not ask which is the richer of you two, I said; for you are friends are you not? (*Lysis* 207)

As friendships presuppose symmetry, asymmetry can unmake them. A sudden change in status, wealth, virtue or vice or anything else, in any of the parties breaches the friendship. (1138b 30-35) Thus Athenian friendship rules out any friendship with God. Christians who who conceived relationship with the Divine possible will later surpass them. The flatterer, who in Greek society appeared to be quite a character, is not a friend for he assumes a subordinates position.[4] "Friendship is equality." "It becomes the paradigm of relations in the democracy." (1997; 82) Aristotle scribes that "where the citizens are equal, they have much in common." (1161b 8-10)

Aristotle devotes much attention to how parity can attained and maintained. While he says that it is through loving each other, which is a characteristic virtue of friendship, even unequals can be friends; but this could be more a prescription of a reformer than historical fact. We could not dismiss that unequal or contraries, as rich and poor, can have mutual affection. Aristotle does not dismiss that. None the less, Aristotle could not envision a friendship at a certain point of the social distance. At some point, they could not continue to be friends.[5]

Friendship was grounded not only on affection and thought or pleasure but also on deeds. Doing good means not failing to provide

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[3] It is for this reason that Konstan dismissed as irrelevant the matter of sexual connection to the question of Achilles' and Patroclus' friendship. Perhaps the same can be said between that of Alexander and Hephaestion, who compared themselves to Achilles and Patroclus. See John Maxwell O'Brien: 1992, *Alexander the Great. The Invisible Enemy. A Biography*. Routledge.

[4] Konstan nuances the flatterer and the hypocrite of the Christian era. The flatterer attempts to gain the favor of a superior, that is exploit him excessive adulation; the hypocrite hides his liabilities with a view to being liked.

[5] Seneca would envision a more radical egalitarianism in his time. Thus he encouraged people to take meals with their slaves. (1997:48)

help in times of need. Good will is expressed in helpfulness. Failure to do so ruptures the friendship. Friends were there to provide help without thought of commercial gain. Helping friends in difficulty satisfied the democratic *ethos*. There is the modest realization the each party is equally vulnerable. As an intimate space free from subordination or supremacy, the relationship of equals resisted any suggestion of debts of gratitude.[6]

> Friendship in the classical city was not embedded in relations of economic exchange (however informal in comparison to the modern market) any more than it was entangled in political alliances. It constituted in principle, like modern friendship, a space of personal intimacy and unselfish affection distinct from the norms regulating public and commercial life.

Perhaps Konstan should have gone through Plato's dialogues where there is a mine of information on Greek friendship. We can only imagine Crito nursing his anticipation's as Socrates slept. Crito does not want to lose a friend and also to lose face appearing like he valued his money more than his friend despite the fact that he has begged Socrates to escape. The ensuing exchange between Crito and Socrates gives light on the conflicts between ones loyalty to friends and to the laws of the state, and the dilemma between friendship and right in the ambiguous air of circumstances. The *Crito* makes it possible for Socrates' friends and us to discern the artifice of their alternative: either friendship or loyalty to the state. The voice of friendship does not demand violation of what is right and just. When friends invite its transgression, civic obligation which murmurs and hums in Socrates' ears become more important than the voice of friendship.[7]

In the *Phaedo*, Socrates has with him some of his intimate friends until the last moment of his life. To substitute for his own labors, he delegates his trust upon them to sacrifice a cock. Why he did not send them away, we can only speculate. Perhaps it is so that he may draw strength from them, nearest and dearest to heart and mind; and keep him company as he transits from this life. Or

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[6] "Encapsulating the popular Greek conception, Paul Millet (1991:118) puts the emphasis squarely on the utility of friends." In choosing friends, primary consideration were willingness to repay services in full. (1997:57)

[7] Konstan observes "the profound change in moral values between the archaic and the classical periods." The hero is transformed into a citizen. (1997:84)

perhaps it is so that they may be the judge of his death and measure the moral progress he has accomplished until that the last moment. Or perhaps it is to be Socrates' most explicit acknowledgment of "know thyself." Whatever it may be, their manifest affection, loyalty and love which is betrayed by their presence could not be made more obvious to a passive observer by their inconsolable grief over their loss.

That friendship assumes different configurations on account of transient historical concerns or necessities and possibilities and changing norms from which emerge new emphasis in the function of friendship cannot be renounced. Konstan's work is proof of that. The problematization of friendship as seen among the classical Greeks is linked to the greater problematic of existence. Friendship, among other things was a realm of appreciation and choices. The trust that the intimate space of friendship provided was a common safeguard, the distortion of which disrupts social life. Among them it seemed to be looped to an ensemble of practices in a society which aspired for personal excellence in all domains of life and which handed command over to the intellect. This ensemble of practices constitute the art of living the good life, the art of existence or a technique of the self. How pleasure can be enjoyed is part of this technique. This stylistics of existence boils down to their own conception of caring for oneself or relating to oneself. To care for oneself, says Aristotle, "is to be anxious that he himself above all things, should act justify, temperately, or in accordance with any of the other virtues and in general were always to try to secure for himself the honorable course..." (1168b 25-27) Aristotle puts us in a position to shift away from asking the question, "What is a friend?" and to ask instead question, "What must one be in a world with concerns like ours, in order to be a friend to another?"

Konstan's work is prepared with footnotes that need no praise but further reading. The uniqueness of his work consists essentially in taking up a material that was of sufficient concern for the ancient thinkers and writers yet is left for granted by many a present day scholar. The argument would be in vain if between the documentary rigor, a more fervent attention was not revealed. Behind the meticulous erudition of historical inquiry lies a practical concern with friends. It echoes a call to know and care for ourselves through the friends we keep.

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