

Friendship

Giorgio Agamben

Friendship, our topic in this seminar, is so closely linked to the very definition of philosophy that one can say that without it, philosophy would not in fact be possible. The intimacy of friendship and philosophy is so deep that philosophy includes the *philos*, the friend, in its very name and, as is often the case with all excessive proximities, one risks not being able to get to the bottom of it. In the classical world, this promiscuity—and, almost, consubstantiality—of the friend and the philosopher was taken for granted, and it was certainly not without a somewhat archaizing intent that a contemporary philosopher—when posing the extreme question, ‘what is philosophy?’—was able to write that it was a question to be dealt with *entre amis*. Today the relation between friendship and philosophy has actually fallen into discredit, and it is with a sort of embarrassment and uneasy conscience that professional philosophers try to come to terms with such an uncomfortable and, so to speak, clandestine partner of their thought.

Many years ago, my friend Jean-Luc Nancy and I decided to exchange letters on the subject of friendship. We were convinced that this was the best way of approaching and almost ‘staging’ a problem which seemed otherwise to elude analytical treatment. I wrote the first letter and waited, not without trepidation, for the reply. This is not the place to try to understand the reasons—or, perhaps, misunderstandings—that caused the arrival of Jean-Luc’s letter to signify the end of the project. But it is certain that our friendship—which, according to our plans, should have given us privileged access to the problem—was instead an obstacle for us and was consequently, in a way, at least temporarily obscured.

Out of an analogous and probably conscious uneasiness, Jacques Derrida chose as the *Leitmotiv* of his book on friendship a sibylline motto, traditionally attributed to Aristotle, that negates friendship in the very gesture with which it seems to invoke it: *o philoi, oudeis philos*, “o friends, there are no friends.” One of the concerns of the book is, in fact, a critique of what the author defines as the phallogocentric conception of friendship that dominates our philosophical and political tradition. While Derrida was still working on the seminar which gave birth to the book, we had discussed together a curious philological

problem that concerned precisely the motto or witticism in question. One finds it cited by, amongst others, Montaigne and Nietzsche, who would have derived it from Diogenes Laertius. But if we open a modern edition of the *Lives of the Philosophers*, we do not find, in the chapter dedicated to the biography of Aristotle (V, 21), the phrase in question, but rather one almost identical in appearance, the meaning of which is nonetheless different and far less enigmatic: *oi* (omega with subscript iota) *philoï*, *oudeis philos*, “he who has (many) friends, has no friend.”¹

A library visit was enough to clarify the mystery. In 1616 the great Genevan philologist Isaac Casaubon decided to publish a new edition of the *Lives*. Arriving at the passage in question—which still read, in the edition procured by his father-in-law Henry Etienne, *o philoi* (o friends)—he corrected the enigmatic version of the manuscripts without hesitation. It became perfectly intelligible and for this reason was accepted by modern editors.

Since I had immediately informed Derrida of the results of my research, I was astonished, when his book was published under the title *Politiques de l'amitié*, not to find there any trace of the problem. If the motto—apocryphal according to modern philologists—appeared there in its original form, it was certainly not out of forgetfulness: it was essential to the book's strategy that friendship be, at the same time, both affirmed and distrustfully revoked.

In this, Derrida's gesture repeated that of Nietzsche. While still a student of philology, Nietzsche had begun a work on the sources of Diogenes Laertius and the textual history of the *Lives* (and therefore also Casaubon's amendment) must have been perfectly familiar to him. But both the necessity of friendship and, at the same time, a certain distrust towards friends were essential to Nietzsche's strategy. This accounts for his recourse to the traditional reading, which was already, by Nietzsche's time, no longer current (the Huebner edition of 1828 carries the modern version, with the note, “*legebatur o philoi, emendavit Casaubonus*”).

It is possible that the peculiar semantic status of the term ‘friend’ has contributed to the uneasiness of modern philosophers. It is well known that no-one has ever been able to explain satisfactorily the meaning of the syntagm: ‘I love you’, so much so that one might think that it has a performative character—that its meaning coincides, that is, with the act of its utterance. Analogous considerations could be made for the expression ‘I am your friend’, even if here a recourse to the performative category does not seem possible. I believe that ‘friend’ belongs instead to that class of terms which linguists define as non-predicative—terms, that is, on the basis of which it is not possible to construct a class of objects in which one might group the things to which one applies the predicate in question. ‘White’, ‘hard’ and ‘hot’ are certainly predicative terms; but is it possible to say that ‘friend’ defines, in this sense, a coherent class? Strange as it may seem, ‘friend’ shares this characteristic with another species of non-predicative terms: insults. Linguists have demonstrated that an insult does not offend the person who receives it because it places him in a particular category (for example, that of excrement, or of male or female sexual organs, depending on the language), which would simply be impossible or, in any

case, false. The insult is effective precisely because it does not function as a constative utterance but rather as a proper name, because it uses language to name in a way that cannot be accepted by the person named, and from which he nevertheless cannot defend himself (as if someone were to persist in calling me Gaston even though my name is Giorgio). What offends in the insult is, to be precise, a pure experience of language, and not a reference to the world.

If this is true, ‘friend’ would share this condition not only with insults, but with philosophical terms: terms which, as is well known, do not have an objective denotation and which, like those terms Medieval logicians labelled ‘transcendent’, simply signify existence.

For this reason, before getting to the heart of our seminar, I would like you to observe carefully the reproduction of the painting by Serodine which you see before you. The painting, kept in the Galleria nazionale di arte antica in Rome, depicts the encounter of the apostles Peter and Paul on the road to martyrdom. The two saints, motionless, occupy the centre of the canvas, surrounded by the disorderly gesticulation of the soldiers and executioners who are leading them to their death. Critics have often drawn attention to the contrast between the heroic rigour of the two apostles and the commotion of the crowd, lit up here and there by flecks of light sketched almost randomly on the arms, the faces, the trumpets. For my part, I think that what makes this painting truly incomparable



is that Serodine has portrayed the two apostles so close together—with their foreheads almost glued one to the other—that they are absolutely unable to see each other. On the road to martyrdom, they look at, without recognizing, each other. This impression of an excessive proximity, as it were, is accentuated by the silent gesture of shaking hands at the bottom of the picture, scarcely visible. It has always seemed to me that this painting contains a perfect allegory of friendship. What is friendship, in effect, if not a proximity such that it is impossible to make for oneself either a representation or a concept of it? To recognize someone as a friend means not to be able to recognize him as ‘something’. One cannot say ‘friend’ as one says ‘white’, ‘Italian’, ‘hot’,—friendship is not a property or quality of a subject.

But it is time to begin a reading of the Aristotelian passage upon which I intended to comment. The philosopher dedicates to friendship a veritable treatise, which occupies the eighth and ninth books of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Since we are dealing with one of the most celebrated and discussed texts in the entire history of philosophy, I will take

for granted a knowledge of its most well-established theses: that one cannot live without friends, that it is necessary to distinguish between friendship founded on utility and on the pleasure of virtuous friendship (in which the friend is loved as such), that it is not possible to have many friends, that friendship at a distance tends to result in oblivion, etc. All this is very well known. There is, however, a passage of the treatise which appears to me not to have received sufficient attention, although it contains, so to speak, the ontological basis of the theory. The passage is 1170a 28—171b35.

And if the one who sees perceives (*aisthanetai*) that he sees, the one who hears perceives that he hears, the one who walks perceives that he walks, and similarly in the other cases there is something that perceives that we are in activity (*oti energoumen*), so that if we perceive, it perceives that we perceive, and if we think, it perceives that we think; and if perceiving that we perceive or think is perceiving that we exist (for as we said, existing [*to einai*] is perceiving or thinking); and if perceiving that one is alive is pleasant (*edeon*) in itself (for being alive is something naturally good, and perceiving what is good as being there in oneself is pleasant); and if being alive is desirable, and especially so for the good, because for them existing is good, and pleasant (for concurrent perception [*synaisthanomenoi*] of what is in itself good, in themselves, gives them pleasure); and if, as the good person is to himself, so he is to his friend (since the friend is another self [*heteros autos*]) then just as for each his own existence (*to auton einai*) is desirable, so his friend's is too, or to a similar degree. But as we saw, the good man's existence is desirable because of his perceiving himself, that self being good; and such perceiving is pleasant in itself. In that case, he needs to be concurrently perceiving his friend – that he exists, too – and this will come about in their living together, conversing and sharing (*koinonein*) their talk and thoughts; for this is what would seem to be meant by “living together” where human beings are concerned, not feeding in the same location as with grazing animals.

... For friendship is community, and as we are in relation to ourselves, so we are in relation to a friend. And, since the perception of our own existence (*aisthesis oti estin*) is desirable, so too is that of the existence of a friend.²

We are dealing with an extraordinarily dense passage, since Aristotle enunciates here some theses of first philosophy that are not encountered in this form in any of his other writings:

1) There is a pure perception of being, an *aisthesis* of existence. Aristotle repeats this a number of times, mobilising the technical vocabulary of ontology: *aisthanometha oti esmen*, *aisthesis oti estin*: the *oti estin* is existence, the *quod est* as opposed to the essence (*quid est*, *oti estin*).

2) This perception of existing is, in itself, pleasant (*edys*).

3) There is an equivalence between being and living, between awareness of one's existing and awareness of one's living. This is decidedly an anticipation of the Nietzschean thesis according to which: "Being: we have no other experience of it than 'to live'."³(An analogous affirmation, although a more generic one, can be read in *De Anima* 415 b 13 —"In the case of living things, their being is to live."⁴)

4) Inherent in this perception of existing is another perception, specifically human, which takes the form of a concurrent perception (*synaisthanesthai*) of the friend's existence. *Friendship is the instance of this concurrent perception of the friend's existence in the awareness of one's own existence.* But this means that friendship also has an ontological and, at the same time, a political dimension. The perception of existing is, in fact, always already divided up and shared or con-divided. Friendship names this sharing or con-division. There is no trace here of any inter-subjectivity—that chimera of the moderns—nor of any relation between subjects: rather, existing itself is divided, it is non-identical to itself: the I and the friend are the two faces—or the two poles—of this con-division.

5) The friend is, for this reason, another self, a *heteros autos*. In its Latin translation, *alter ego*, this expression has a long history, which this is not the place to reconstruct. But it is important to note that the Greek formulation is expressive of more than a modern ear perceives in it. In the first place, Greek, like Latin, has two terms to express otherness: *allos* (Lat. *alius*) is a generic otherness, while *heteros* (Lat. *alter*) is otherness as an opposition between two, as heterogeneity. Furthermore, the Latin *ego* does not exactly translate *autos*, which signifies 'oneself'. The friend is not another I, but an otherness immanent in self-ness, a becoming other of the self. At the point at which I perceive my existence as pleasant, my perception is traversed by a concurrent perception that dislocates it and deports it towards the friend, towards the other self. Friendship is this de-subjectivization at the very heart of the most intimate perception of self.

At this point, the ontological dimension in Aristotle can be taken for granted. Friendship belongs to the *prote philosophia*, because that which is in question in it concerns the very experience, the very 'perception' of existing. One understands then why 'friend' cannot be a real predicate, one that is added to a concept to inscribe it in a certain class. In modern terms, one might say that 'friend' is an existential and not a categorical. But this existential—which, as such, is unable to be conceptualized—is nonetheless intersected by an intensity that charges it with something like a political potency. This intensity is the 'syn', the 'con-' which divides, disseminates and renders con-divisible—in fact, already always con-divided—the very perception, the very pleasantness of existing.

That this con-division might have, for Aristotle, a political significance, is implicit in the passage of the text we have just analysed and to which it is opportune to return.

In that case, he needs to be concurrently perceiving his friend – that he exists, too – and this will come about in their living together, conversing and sharing (*koinonein*) their talk and thoughts; for this is what would seem to be meant by “living together” where human beings are concerned, not feeding in the same location as with grazing animals.

The expression translated as “feeding in the same location” is *en to auto nemesthai*. But the verb *nemo*—which as you know, is rich with political implications (it is enough to think of the deverbative *nomos*)—in the middle voice also means ‘to partake’, and the Aristotelian expression could mean simply ‘to partake of the same’. It is essential, in any case, that human community should here be defined, in contrast to that of animals, through a cohabitation (*syzen* here takes on a technical meaning) which is not defined by participating in a common substance but by a purely existential con-division and, so to speak, one without an object: friendship, as concurrent perception of the pure fact of existence. How this original political *synaesthesia* could become, in the course of time, the consensus to which democracies entrust their fates in this latest extreme and exhausted phase of their evolution is, as they say, another story, and one upon which I shall leave you to reflect.

Giorgio Agamben
University of Verona

Translated by Joseph Falsone
University of Sydney

Notes

1. Diogenes Laertius, *The Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, trans. R.D. Hicks, 2 vols. (London: Heinemann, 1959) 464-465. [Note: In this parallel text Loeb edition, Hicks provides a somewhat more elaborate translation of the Greek: “He who has (many) friends can have no true friend.”]
2. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Christopher Rowe (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002) 237-240 [Greek added.]
3. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale (Random House: New York, 1968) 312 ¶582 “Das Sein—wir haben keine andere Vorstellung davon als ‘leben’.”
4. Aristotle, “De Anima,” *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1984) vol.1, 661.

Copyright © 2004 Giorgio Agamben, Joseph Falsone, *Contretemps*. All rights reserved.