

Bartolomé De Las Casas Essay Series

Second Essay

How to Tell a Flatterer from a Friend

By Michael Pakaluk

Author with son Joseph



Our task, as was said in the first essay, is to rediscover for today the practice of friendship. We recognize that there is something lacking in us, in so far as we hardly think about or appreciate this important, and very human, phenomenon of friendship. So we look to the ancients as our guide, not because they are ancient, but because, in contrast, they valued friendship above almost everything else, and they wrote about it with subtlety and wisdom. We want to know how they defined friendship, how they distinguished true friendship from false, and how they thought friendships are formed and preserved. Aristotle will be our chief guide here, because his famous discussion of friendship, in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, represents the very best which the ancients have to offer on the subject. However, before we begin to discuss friendship, there is an important preliminary to be taken care of: we need to distinguish friendship from flattery.

Every human endeavor involves distinguishing the true from the false; similarly, we cannot have a sound notion of friendship, unless we have a good concept of false friendship, or flattery. In every area and discipline, a person who has real expertise is able to distinguish the real from the merely apparent. The jeweler has to be able to distinguish diamonds from glass. A banker must be able to spot counterfeit bills and put them aside. If a doctor cannot distinguish real cases of a disease from only superficially apparent ones, he'll be useless. And we can't be true friends, or acquire true friends, unless we can detect a flatterer.

A friend in the true sense is someone who knows what is really good for his friend, and in a practical way helps his friend to acquire those things. A flatterer, in contrast, either does not know, or pretends not to know, what is good for someone else; his concern, rather, is merely that his friend be *satisfied* and *content*. The aim of a flatterer, above all, is simply to 'get along' with you, so that he can get whatever benefits he thinks will come from associating with you. He realizes that he can stay on good terms by making you feel good, and, to this end, he will say whatever he needs to say.

We do not claim that a flatterer must himself be aware that he is a flatterer. Most people are not aware of their own faults, and being a flatterer is a fault. A flatterer need not be manipulative and calculating; he need not consciously deliberate about how to achieve his intended effect. Rather, we might expect that, typically, flattery is simply an habitual way of acting for him. It is something he does as a matter of course.

How, then, should we contrast a friend and a flatterer? Above all, a friend is concerned that you *are* good, a flatterer, that you *feel* good. A friend tells you the truth about yourself, even if this is painful, whereas a flatterer distorts the truth, to make it match what you want to hear. A friend takes objective goodness to be the standard, and he opposes you when you stray

from it; a flatterer takes your wishes to be the standard, and he'll change what he takes to be good, to match them. A friend wants to agree with you, because your opinion is right; a flatterer wants to agree with you, because whatever your opinion is, is right. A friend thinks it good if you castigate yourself for some failure or sin; a flatterer will never let you admit that you've done something wrong--unless you persist in thinking so, and then finally he'll agree that you've done wrong, but only because you feel bad about it, not because he thinks it so.

Generally, a friend is devoted to the truth first, and he lets his friendships thrive or fail relative to this. He is easy to like, precisely because he does not take 'being liked' to be the first thing. He follows Emerson's maxim that the question definitive of a friendship is, "Do you see the same truth?" In contrast, a flatterer deals in appearances and mere opinions. For him, truth is irrelevant, or perhaps even a stumbling block. The question that is defining for him is "What do you *want* me to think is true?"

The ancients despised flatterers for three reasons. A flatterer is first of all inherently *deceptive*: he seems to be good for you, but in fact he is not. For that very reason, he is, secondly, *dangerous*: he occupies a place that ought, really, to be filled by someone who truly cares for you. He's always the wrong man in the wrong place at the wrong time. A flatterer lulls you into a false sense of confidence and causes you to let your guard down. Thirdly, a flatterer is servile and parasitic, a purely *derivative* character. He has no 'core principles' of his own; rather he merely responds to the wants and desires of others. He makes himself into a kind of servant of the illusions and conceits of the people he aims to please.

Call these, then, the "three D's" of a flatterer: *deceptive*, *dangerous*, and *derivative*.

Now someone today who was confronted with this distinction between a friend and a flatterer might reasonably raise an objection. "This notion of a flatterer," he might say, in response, "has no real application today. Yes, there are some odd characters who fit the description, but generally most people try to be genuine with others. To be sure, there is such a thing as 'flattery'—and everyone engages in it from time to time--but it's relatively rare, and it's easy to spot. On the other hand, there are not very many people who build their whole identity, their entire character, around the practice of *flattering* others. Maybe young adults need to be careful of fawning and flattering friends, but not mature adults."

There is some truth to this objection. It is true that there are relatively few personality types who can obviously be set aside and avoided as flatterers. But flattery takes deceptive forms and is perhaps more common than the objection allows. We can distinguish in fact four modern types of flatterer: the Chameleon; the Tolerator; the Validator; and the Surface Skater.

The Chameleon, just like the lizard by that name, changes his appearance to match his environment. Among liberals, he is a liberal; with conservatives, he voices conservative opinions. If he happens to be a religious fellow, he will not let this show among non-believers. Many times in a single day he can change radically the things he says, and he is not disturbed by the appearance of contradiction. He is very hard to get to know, and almost impossible to befriend, because one can hardly determine what he really thinks. Out of a kind of weakness, or lack of self-assurance, his first impulse is always to agree. If, therefore, you challenge him as to whether a particular statement really reflects his own view, he'll come to doubt it himself, and

agree with you that maybe it does not.

Yet the Chameleon is deceptive, because in fact he has very strong opinions, which, surging inside him, can acquire at times an irrational force, because he never brings them out and tests them in debates with others. The Chameleon is therefore a passive-aggressive character, superficially agreeable, but deep-down hostile to many of those who think they are on good terms with him. His hidden hostility makes him prone to betray or undercut precisely those he has just agreed with: in fact, he finds himself resenting others for their opinions, because he cannot help agreeing with them, against his own judgment. The ancient thinkers would have counted such a character as a flatterer, and clearly he satisfies the three D's: his true opinions remain *deceptively* hidden; but these lurk *dangerously* below the surface; and his views are simply *derived* from his surroundings.

The Tolerator makes tolerance his highest principle; his one goal is to tolerate everyone—except, of course, the intolerant. But “the intolerant” end up being those who believe that some things are objectively right, and others are objectively wrong. People like that will of course “intolerantly” reject and dismiss what they regard as wrong. So, although, the Tolerator thinks of himself as universally agreeable, in practice he divides up the world into two camps, and he can get along with members of only the one camp—people who, like himself, won't insist on objective goods and bads. Yet these are just those persons who are incapable of being true friends (since they can neither know nor seek your real good). So the Tolerator, curiously, is caught in a practical contradiction: he aims to be friendly only towards those who are incapable of being real friends with others.

The Tolerator takes a principle originally meant to be observed in limited political contexts—tolerance among people who make different claims about revealed religion—and aims to erect it into a general rule for human relationships. He does so, because he wants to be on good terms with everyone (and he wonders why some people are so obtuse as not to do the same). But to aim to be on good terms with everyone--automatically, without anyone undergoing fundamental change, and without anyone's views or commitments being set apart as wrong--is itself a posture of flattery. His vain hope is to please all of the people, all of the time. The Tolerator is consequently *deceptive*, because he cannot sustain the impartiality he says that he says that he adopts; he is *dangerous*, because his intolerance towards people with real principles lacks principled limits; and he is *derivative*, too, because in the end he stands for nothing. We may sum up the Tolerator by saying that he aims, impossibly, to flatter all other flatterers like himself.

The Validator is yet a third species of modern flatterer. Whereas the Tolerator takes a political principle and tries to make it universal, the Validator takes a private way of acting and makes it the mode of all relationships. He is, above all, affirming, like a mother who affirms and consoles the hurt feelings of her child. He thinks he does good for others precisely by affirming whatever they say. His friendliness is like the warm, gushy embrace of a mom—no questions asked, no accusations, no judgments. For him, the Worst Offense is to be ‘judgmental’ towards another, which means: thinking badly of something they have said, or done. Naturally, many times people will say or do things that the Validator, in advance, would have disagreed with. In that case, he will either change what he thinks, like the Chameleon, or he will embrace relativism, much like the Tolerator. “I validate what you say. It is true for you, as the opposite view is true for someone me.” The Validator, then, clearly has all of the marks of the flatterer.

But perhaps the most common flatterer of our time is the Surface Skater. Even in the ancient world, it was recognized that some of the most effective flatterers worked by subtly *changing the subject*. Was an unpleasant thought going to occur to his 'friend'? Then turn his mind to something positive. Was he perhaps going to dwell on some disparaging thing that an enemy had said the other day? Then start talking to him about his good traits, and the various good things that people had said recently.

The Surface Skater of today is very much like that. He studiously avoids every important, or 'heavy' subject, since these can bring along with them disagreement, or self-recrimination, or judgments. He especially wishes to avoid any suggestion that anyone he talks with has ever done anything wrong. Hence his big contribution to friendship, as he conceives it, is always to change the conversation to something light: to shopping instead of justice; movies instead of morality; car maintenance instead of soul maintenance; sports teams instead of family issues. If every one leaves a family gathering with full bellies, having talked only about the most fatuous trivialities, he figures that the very best in human association has been achieved. He can have lunch or coffee with you every day for ten years, and he'll never want to go deeper.

The Surface Skater is a classic flatterer, because he is concerned that people feel good, not that they are good. His *deceptiveness* is like that of a life filled with distractions; his *dangerousness* consists in keeping people from serious self-reflection; his *derivativeness* comes from his being essentially a creature of the media. The media, in fact, could hardly exert any bad influence on society, if there were no Surface Skaters, whose function it was to bring the media incessantly into private conversations.

So we see, then, that, far from being uncommon, the flatterer represents, perhaps, the standard mode of associating in modern society. Alas, we are generally content with the semblance of friendship, rather than friendship itself. If, then, we aim to revive the practice of friendship, the first thing we must do is to recognize that we live enmeshed in a web of flattery. The first step in coming to acquire knowledge, Socrates once said, is to know that you do not know. The first step in acquiring friends, it would seem, is to recognize that, perhaps, you have no friends. And we can recognize this, once we learn how to tell a flatterer from a friend.

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For further reading:

Lewis, C.S., *The Four Loves*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace) 1960.

Pakaluk, Michael, *Other Selves: Philosophers on Friendship*, (Indianapolis: Hackett) 1991.

Pakaluk, Michael, Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics VIII and IX*, translation with commentary, (Oxford: Clarendon) 1998.

Biography:

These four essays were commissioned by the North American Educational Initiatives Foundation, Inc. and written by [Michael Pakaluk](#), Associate Professor of Philosophy at Clark University. Professor Pakaluk received his A.B. and Ph.D. in philosophy from Harvard University. He publishes in a variety of areas, including ancient philosophy, moral



philosophy, philosophy of logic, political philosophy, and the history of philosophy. He is the author of two books, *Other Selves: Philosophers on Friendship* (Hackett, 1991), and Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, Books VIII and IX (Oxford, 1998), which have contributed to the resurgence of the philosophical study of friendship. He is currently at work on an introduction to Aristotle's *Ethics* (for Cambridge University Press) and a commentary on Plato's *Phaedo*. He is a founding member of the American Public Philosophy Institute (APPI) and Director of the Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy (BACAP). The father of nine, he is a Visiting Scholar in Philosophy at Harvard University in 2002-2003.

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