Bartolomé De Las Casas Essay Series

Third Essay

The Demands of Friendship

By Michael Pakaluk

Author with son Joseph

Where to start?

We have been reflecting on friendship as classically understood, in contrast with which relationships in contemporary society seem impoverished. We noted that classical philosophers, such as Plato and Aristotle, regarded friendship as much more important and precious than we typically do. This had something to do, we observed, with their better appreciation (as shown in their account of the *virtues*) that there is such a thing as human *goodness*. And we furthermore looked at ways in which modern attitudes of relativism push us towards insincerity and untruthfulness—with the result that, in our dealings with others, we perhaps inadvertently become more like the 'flatterer', so much despised by the ancients, than a true friend.

Recall that our goal is a practical one: our aim is not merely to think correct thoughts, but rather to live life better, by first coming to appreciate friendship as did the ancients, and then putting this into practice, in a manner appropriate to our conditions. We want to acquire true friends and to be true friends.

So far we have said that, in order to be a true friend, one must *avoid being a flatterer*, But to say this is to have taken only the smallest of steps in the direction of friendship, since friendship is demanding. It has been said, as if to set down a benchmark, "Greater love than this no one has, than to lay down his life for his friend." Take this remark to represent the true ideal of friendship. To seek the ways of friendship, then, is in reality to wish to become the sort of person who would gladly, in the requisite circumstances, make such a sacrifice. And, obviously, there is a good bit of ground between avoiding flattery and sacrificing one's life.

Misleading Maxims

There are two sorts of persons, G.K. Chesterton once remarked: those who divide humanity into two sorts, and those who do not. The modern mind, in thinking about human relationships at least, likes to dichotomize. But we shall see that this tendency is only minimally useful as regards friendship.

For instance, it is often said that we should treat another not *as a mere means*, but *as an end*; or that we should love others *unconditionally*, not *setting down conditions*; or that we should be *altruistic*, rather then *egoistic*.
But what does it mean, to treat another person 'as a mere means'? Here is a suggestion: we treat other people as mere means, when, by deceit or force, we get them to do something that they would not otherwise have done—since then we 'manipulate' or 'control' them. We might say that to treat anything as 'a mere means' is to deal with it other than according to its proper nature. If,

for instance, I use a fine piano to play fine music, then, even though a piano is an instrument, I do not use it as 'a mere means', since I am using it well for the purpose for which it is made. And in doing so I am taking care of it and respecting it. But suppose I buy a fine piano merely because I want to impress guests who come into my house (since I am not a musician and do not really care about music)—then I am using even that piano as 'a mere means'.

Yet just as a piano has a proper nature and function, so does a human being. A human being is an intelligent agent, who causes things to happen in the world by *understanding* them and *freely willing* to bring about what he regards as good. So then: if I deceive someone, then I cause him to act without understanding; and if I force him to do something, then I cause him to act without freely willing so. In both cases, I 'use' him to bring about results that I desire, while not respecting his nature. To this extent I might be said to care more for those results than for his proper nature, and, accordingly, I can be said to treat him as 'a mere means.'

So this maxim, 'treat others as ends, not as mere means', is of only limited usefulness in our quest for friendship, since all that it serves to accomplish, is to exclude deceit and force in our dealings with others. (Note, by the way, that if someone is an aggressor, or is set upon carrying out criminal ends, then force, such as that employed by the law, is justifiable in dealing with him, and even deceit—for insofar as he becomes an aggressor, he has himself done violence to and receded from his proper nature.)

Consider next the maxim that we should love others 'unconditionally'. This too is hardly useful, because in fact it is unrealistic and unsustainable. All true love seeks the good of the other person and seeks to be reciprocated, and to this extent it is conditional, at least in its exercise, if not in its intention. For instance, suppose a mother wishes to help her son who is struggling with a drinking problem. She loves him 'unconditionally', it is true, in the sense that she will never hate him. Yet, if she really loves him, then all of the concrete expressions of that love will certainly be conditional, since otherwise she harms him. So, for instance, if she were to keep giving him money, even when, she knew, he would use that money to buy drinks, she would serve as an 'enabler' and hurt him. So her expressions of love must be conditional on those expressions actually contributing to her son's true good. Again, if she were to let him continue to stay in her house, even when he showed no regard for others and disturbed the peace of the household, then she would shows imprudence and selfishness, rather than love. The reason is that love reasonably looks for a fair response. If her son fails minimally to correspond to her efforts to help him, by playing his part and acting well, insofar as he is able, then the arrangement cannot stand.

Or consider the notion that we should be 'altruistic' towards others rather than 'egoistic'—on the grounds that true love is 'disinterested'. This suggestion is misguided, because it relies upon a false dichotomy. All true love perfects the lover and thus contributes to, or manifests, his own goodness, precisely through his contributing to the good of his friend. Furthermore, true love is never 'disinterested' or 'impartial': rather, it yearns for reciprocity, and for the equality which results from reciprocation. Suppose, for instance, that over an extended period I continue to confer benefits and gifts upon another person, yet he never responds in kind; he never attempts to deal with me as I have dealt with him. Then *de facto* I set myself up as a superior. Inevitably, I make myself into his 'benefactor' rather than his friend. As a result of this 'disinterested' care he may in fact become dependent upon me in some respects—which might even please me, since I might take it to reflect upon

my own superior competence, resources, and affection. We all know that one-sided charity is typically obnoxious and destructive.

What should we conclude, then? *That all of the maxims which, in modern life are used to discern and guide relationships, are unsatisfactory.* They are either of minimal importance or false, if interpreted strictly. Yes, of course, we should avoid treating others 'as means'. But, after that, what next? To say that we should always show them 'unconditional' love is in most respects false; and to say that we should be 'altruistic' and 'disinterested' in our love for them is a recipe for the destruction, not the fostering, of friendship. But it is hardly be surprising that a culture which fails to practice friendship well, should propose to itself maxims which are not tenable for friendship.

The Measure of Friendship

What measure should we use, then, for our friendships?

Aristotle had a notion of what he called 'perfect' or 'complete' friendship, and he held, furthermore, that in perfect friendship each friend aims to become related to the other person, as he is to himself. The result is that it becomes proper to say that one's friend is 'another self.' We shall look more carefully at the notion of 'another self' in the fourth and final essay in this series; for now, let us look briefly at this notion of 'perfect' friendship, and how it serves as an ideal of friendship.

According to the modern maxims we considered, relationships are either good (loving another as an end, unconditionally, and disinterestedly) or bad (treating another as a means, setting down conditions, and looking to one's own advantage). Aristotle, rather, distinguishes three basic sorts of relationship, none of which is inherently bad. Each is good in its kind, but these three basic sorts have a ranking. There are, we might say, grades or degrees of friendship, and badness in human relationships typically consists in our being satisfied with a lower grade of friendship, when we ought to have sought a higher grade.

Aristotle explained the differences in degree of friendship in this way. He pointed out that there are three fundamental grounds on which we can find anything attractive and worth our attention: we may find something pleasant, or useful to us, or we may find it good in its own right. He pointed out that we may similarly find persons attractive for each of these three reasons, and thus we can form friendships on the basis of each.

So, for instance, I might wish to associate with someone because I find him entertaining; or because we share relatively superficial interests, such as a love of sports; or because sharing his company helps me to relax, or to take my mind off of my problems. These are all legitimate reasons, of course, for my wanting to associate with someone. It is not wrong to have drinks with a buddy simply to relax. Yet such a relationship is, clearly, a lower grade of friendship.

Again, suppose I know someone who is a jack-of-all-trades and usually call him up only when something is broken in my house. Or I form a close relationship with someone insofar as I start a business with him. Or suppose I 'network' for business purposes, or I am careful to show respect to someone (and that respect is truly due to him) because I think he will someday become influential, and I expect that he will be in a position to advance my career. –In cases such as these, I form relationships with others because, in one form or

another, they are useful to me. Once more, such relationships are legitimate: there is nothing wrong in people profiting from one another. Yet, again, such relationships are certainly not the highest grade.

But now imagine this third case: You notice that someone has genuinely good traits. His good features are appealing to you and perhaps even fascinate you. Maybe you recognize that he is a better man than you are in those respects, and you wish you could become like him. As you associate with him, your regard shows itself in helping him out, to be sure, but primarily it shows itself in conversation, and in your merely spending time with him, enjoying his company.

This sort of friendship, where each recognizes and admires the other's good traits, would be a 'perfect' friendship, Aristotle said, and the highest grade of friendship. Here is his argument why: we can know that a friendship of that sort is the highest grade, because it in a sense encompasses, and surpasses while encompassing, the other kinds of friendship. The reason is that friends who love and admire each other because of their character, will also find each other's company enjoyable, amusing, and relaxing: decent people are personable and thoughtful, with a good sense of humor. Again, friends who are so on the basis of good character will prove useful and beneficial to each other. Why? Because people with good character quite naturally tend to help those around them, and especially their friends. Thus a friendship based on character contains within it what people seek in the other sorts of friendships and represents the high point of friendship. Perfect friendship is the ideal of friendship, because it shows us what a friendship can be.

Here we have an explanation for the uneasy conscience we sometimes have in dealing with people. A son calls his father from college only when he needs money: his conscience is uneasy, because he is in practice living only a useful friendship with his father, yet he knows that he ought to be cultivating a 'perfect' friendship. A husband and wife hardly have time to talk or simply to enjoy each other's company: even though their household is flourishing and the children seem to be doing well, still, they recognize that something is wrong, since they ought to have a perfect friendship, but their relationship has devolved into a useful friendship (which perhaps at intervals takes on the character of a friendship for pleasure). Again, a man meets his buddies from school for drinks and a movie once a month; this has been going on for years; but he's never succeeded in talking about anything important, even though one friend, he knew, was having an affair, and the other's children all have serious problems: he knows his relationship with his buddies should by this point have become a 'real' or 'deep' friendship, rather than remaining one that is centered solely on relaxation and amusements.

There is a simple explanation for why we keep from developing 'perfect' friendships: such relationships place greater demands on what we give. To contribute help or money to a friend, or to join him for drinks and good times, is to give him something of one's own, but not so far to give him yourself. You may make some sacrifices, but there are 'no strings attached'. Of course it's relative easy to give of one's money, but it's relatively hard to give of one's time—sincerely so, enthusiastically, and as the other person needs it.

In friendships based on usefulness or pleasantness, each friend continues to regard his own good as a kind of measure for what he counts as good in the friendship. It is because the other person fits into what I antecedently like or need, that I pay him any attention. Hence, when my likes or needs change, then my association with him comes to an end immediately—for I always regarded him as good only because he fit into my life, not because his life was

the sort that I wanted to fit in with.

But in 'perfect' friendships, these things work in the opposite way. Each friend, from the start and without restriction, gives himself to his friend, and, as a result of this, he gives also things that are of himself, such as his goods or things he finds pleasant. Moreover, each friend tends to count things as good because they are, first of all, good for his friend. His friend's good, not his own, becomes his standard for action within the friendship. Hence he becomes willing even to change his likes and his plans, if necessary, to conform to those of his friend. Ruth's saying from the Bible, "Your people will be my people, your God will be my God" is the outlook of perfect friendship.

The task of growing in perfect friendship, then, requires good judgment, to recognize when such a relationship is required or even possible; generosity; detachment from self; and, fundamentally, the ability to perceive, and to take delight in, someone's goodness, just for its own sake.

But then how are these traits acquired? For surely that is where we need to start, if we are to develop true friendships. I am convinced: they are acquired principally within the life of a family and that, indeed, the family may be characterized as the natural community for equipping persons to form perfect friendships.

But I simply leave this consideration to you, since its defense would require a series of essays all its own.

This is the third of four essays...

Click here for: **First Essay** | **Second Essay**

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.