**f****r****i****endship/**友谊**(Yǒu Yì)**

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| Final Remarks | Michael Kahn-Ackermann, Qiu Zhijie | 19 Jul 2022 |

Michael Kahn-Ackermann: Understanding of „friendship“ by European thinkers has undergone changes through the times. The first comprehensive definition was given by Aristotle in his *Nicomachean Ethics.* The term "philia" is still translated as "friendship", even though it is not identical with the terms of „friendship" used nowadays. Nevertheless, it has had a great influence on the ideas of friendship in Europe until today.

According Aristotle real friendship is reciprocal and therefore only possible among equals. He distinguishes three different types of friendship:

1. Friendship that is formed out of the motive of usefulness

2. Friendship that arises from common desire

Both are friendships of a lower kind and temporary, since the objects of utility and pleasure can change easily.

3. friendship between virtuous people: *"For they wish each other* ***good*** *equally, inasmuch as they are good, and they are good in themselves. But those who wish good to their friend for his own sake are friends in the perfect sense.“[[1]](#footnote-2)*

This form of friendship is permanent because it is based on the **virtue** of both friends. They share the **idea of the good** with each other and find the **quintessential good** in each other.

This kind of friendship has a prerequisite: *„…the formation of such bonds of the heart requires time and the habit of living together; … until one has proved and proved oneself lovable to one another.“[[2]](#footnote-3)* This kind of friendship is therefore reserved for only a few people.

Marcus Tullius Cicero in his text *"*[Laelius de amicitia](https://www.gottwein.de/Lat/cic_philos/Lael01.php)**"** diagnoses the capacity for friendship (amicitia) as a fundamental criterion for distinguishing humans from animals. For him, **"righteousness"** on both sides is a necessary basis for friendship. Righteousness, in turn, is based on virtues consisting of reliability, sincerity, firmness and nobility of mind, which mean freedom from ambition, licentiousness and presumption.

Mainly these two authors created the foundation of European thinkers understanding of friendship. They were incorporated into Christianity, and even post-Christian thinkers follow Aristotle and Cicero in many ways.

In the late 18th and early 19th centuries, as a reaction to enlightenment, industrialization and profit oriented capitalist society a sentiment-based understanding of friendship took the place of virtue-based friendship in European societies. The ideal of „romantic friendship“ is based on the "agreement or harmony of souls" and, like romantic love relationship, it often leads to the separation from society, even to rejection of society, which is perceived as empty, superficial and utility-oriented. But the antique ideal of friendship as a relationship without utilitarian and egoistic purposes is preserved.

Schopenhauer also adheres to this ideal. But unlike his predecessors he doubts that the idea of true friendship can be realised in the world at all. Friendships are usually built with ulterior motives in order to gain an advantage from the other person. His sentence *"Friends call themselves sincere, enemies are.* “has become famous.

In the 20th century European intellectuals ways of looking at friendship asked more about the social, material or psychological conditions of friendship than about its essence. The transition to a psychological approach to friendship is found in Nietzsche, who also is sceptical towards the possibility of true friendship: „… *for almost always such human relationships are based on the fact that some things are never said, …(and) never touched: but if these little stones get rolling, friendship follows behind and breaks up*.“[[3]](#footnote-4)

But whatsoever changes took place in European thinkers understanding of “true friendship”, there are some common features in the definition of friendship, which until recent times never changed

* Friendship is an exclusively interpersonal, reciprocal relationship between individuals
* Friendship is a relationship that has its end in itself and therefore must not be based on purposes such as utility, pleasure, trade or the like
* Friendship is based on mutual trust, sympathy and understanding

A different understanding of „friendship“ exists in the field of politics and exercise of power. „Friendship“ in politics, regardless of the political system, has always been based on benefits and the expectation of gaining advantages. Therefor in politics „friends“ can easily turn into enemies. For Machiavelli, one of the most influential European political thinkers, friendship for a good ruler is necessarily instrumental and subordinate to political goals; the difference between true and benefit-driven friendship is abolished in the exercise of rule. This purely instrumental use of the term friendship in power exercise met often stern critique by European intellectuals.

A more recent phenomenon is the expansion and abstraction of the concept of friendship with the idea of "friendship" between collective groups, peoples or even states. It did not exist before the Enlightenment, before the emergence of nation states and mass societies. The concept of "friendship between peoples" was only coined in the 20th century by Josef Stalin, and the creation of "friendship societies" between states are also creations of Soviet socialism. This expansion and emptying of the concept of friendship in the course of the emergence of nation states and ideologically indoctrinized mass societies has now penetrated into everyday social communication, especially but not exclusively in „socialist countries“. To be called or addressed as a "friend" by complete strangers is either an empty phrase or an attempt to use the emotionally charged term "friend" to assert one's interests. The classical understanding of friendship as an interpersonal and reciprocal relationship is no longer present here.

The fundamental reinterpretation, expansion and extensive emptying of the concept of friendship reaches its climax on the internet: On Facebook and other platforms, one is constantly asked to find new "friends" and to communicate with "friends", i.e. with people whom one does not know personally at all and from whom one has no chance to learn more than they want to show digitally about themselves. *The choice in the social network is between friendship or nothing at all.“[[4]](#footnote-5)*

*“*True friends” in the Aristotelian sense still exist in European societies alongside the power-, benefit- or pleasure-oriented „friendships“, even if the values by which they are defined and measured have changed. But the growing emptying or misuse of the terms “friendship” oder “friend” in European, Chinese and other societies as well in the global Internet make these terms more and more useless to describe a fundamental human relationship.

Qiu Zhijie: I thought the Chinese notion of friendship was very singular, especially the idea of friendship as a tool for promoting morality among senior intellectuals, which has been exaggerated to the end that they can only resort to stones and plants as their confidant(zhiji). But I have realized in communication with European scholars that this idea of friendship for morality is almost the same among European intellectual traditions. Furthermore, other Chinese scholars distinguish more meticulously between "confidant" and "soulmate(zhiyin)," where people who do not know each other are able to understand each other's art in the lofty mountains and flowing water(gaoshan liushui) type of way, and this "soulmate" is characterized more by fun or spiritual interaction. It is also a profound enlightenment to me that a confidant involves a more comprehensive and in-depth insight into the multifaceted nuances of a friend.

1. Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, Book VIII, Chapt.3 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, Book VIII, Chapt.3 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Friedrich Nietzsche, Huaman, All Too Human, Sect. VI: Man in Society [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Amanda Lenhart, Mary Madden, Friendship, Strangers and Safety in Online Social Networks, Pew Research Center, 2007 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)