**friendship/友谊(Yǒu Yì)**

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| European Perspective | Michael Kahn-Ackermann | 19 Apr 2022 |

A quote from the preface to a book about „friendship in the age of the internet:

*Every person is unique in his or her nature and behaviour in interpersonal relationships. This individuality makes it difficult for researchers to find a uniform definition for friendship and to make a general statement about the connection between friendship and personality. Friendship is a concept that cannot be explained in simple words. Every person has his or her own understanding of the conditions that qualify someone as a friend and of what friendship means to them.*

Before the understanding of friendship got lost in countless individualisms and singularities, as expressed in this section, important thinkers of Europe took the trouble to explore the essence of friendship and thus influenced our understanding of friendship until today.

Friendship (**philia**) is an important theme of Aristotelian moral theory. Aristotle in his *Nicomachean Ethics* understands friendship to be the optimal form of relationship in which the participants value each other and do good deeds for each other.The term "philia" is still translated as "friendship", even though it is not identical with the terms of "friendship used today. Nevertheless, it has had a great influence on the ideas of friendship of the following generations in Europe - until today.

In his philosophy of friendship, Aristotle makes a fundamental distinction between friendship between equals and between unequals. For him, real friendship is reciprocal and therefore only possible among equals.

Aristotle distinguishes three different types of friendship among equals

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

2. friendship that arises from common desire

Both are easily dissolved and temporary, since the objects of utility and pleasure change for people- they are friendships of a lower kind.

3. friendship between virtuous people- i.e. friendship in the perfect sense: *"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."*

This form of friendship is permanent because it is based on the **virtue** of both friends. They share not only utility and pleasure but also the **idea of the good** with each other and find the **quintessential good** in each other.

This kind of friendship has a prerequisite: *"Nor does the formation of such bonds of the heart require time and the habit of living together; for, according to the proverb, one cannot get to know one another unless one has first eaten the familiar bushel of salt together; nor, therefore, can one take a liking to one another and make friends until one has proved and proved oneself lovable to one another."*

This kind of friendship is therefore reserved for a few people

In his writing, 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, too, **mutual virtue** is a condition for friendship. But compared to Aristotle, he understands friendship in a more practical way, without the agreement on the **„idea of the good“** required of "virtuous friends". For him, **"righteousness"** on both sides is sufficient as 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. " *Friendship is ... nothing else than agreement in all things divine and human, combined with benevolence, love and esteem, and man -* ***wisdom perhaps excepted*** *- should not have received a more beautiful gift from the immortal gods."* By wisdom Cicero understands what Aristotle describes as **insight into the idea of the good.**

Mainly these two authors created the foundation of the European understanding of friendship. They were received by Christianity and incorporated into its general thought. Even most post-Christian thinkers also follow Aristotle and Cicero insofar, as they share the view that true friendship means a relationship between two persons that has its end in itself and therefore must not be based on purposes such as utility, pleasure, trade or the like.

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 the European societies. In the ideal of romantic friendship, as in the case of romantic love, ancient sobriety is replaced by emotional exuberance to the point of sentimentality. „True friendship“, like „true love“, is now based on the "agreement or harmony of souls" and, like a love relationship between two individuals, 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.

Even a thinker like Schopenhauer, who was opposed to Romanticism, also adheres to this ideal. He says: *"True, genuine friendship presupposes a strong, purely objective and completely uninterested participation in the weal and woe of the other, and this in turn presupposes a real identification with the friend."* But unlike his predecessors and directed against the romantic understanding of friendship, Schopenhauer 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 ways of looking at friendship prevailed, that 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 shares Schopenhauer's pessimism on this point:

*"(J)ay there are friends, but error, deception about you led them to you; and silence they must have learned in order to remain friends with you; for almost always such human relationships are based on the fact that some things are never said, indeed that they are never touched: but if these little stones get rolling, friendship follows behind and breaks up*."

Let us have a look in the understanding of „friendship“ 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. It therefore clearly belongs to the first of Aristotle's three categories. But it is already clear in Cicero that friendship in political life is not subject to the same conditions as in private life. For Macchiavelli, one of the most influential European political thinkers of modern times, 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.

Another more recent feature of the political understanding of friendship is the expansion and abstraction of the concept of friendship. From ancient to modern times, it was taken for granted that friendship existed exclusively as an interpersonal relationship. The idea of "friendship" between collective groups, peoples or even states 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. In Aristotelian terms their foundation and existence can be described as a ideological combination of the first two types of friendship: Benefit for some and pleasure for the other „friends“.

The 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 deeply into all everyday social communication, especially but by no means exclusively in „socialist countries“. It serves political as well as commercial purposes. To be called or addressed as a "friend" by complete strangers is, in the better case, an empty phrase without any real meaning; in the worse case, it is an attempt to use the emotionally charged term "friend" to assert one's interests. The classical understanding of friendship as a relationship based on virtue, righteousness, sympathy or even just sentiment between two persons, which is founded on more than hoped-for benefits or shared interests, is no longer present in the concept of friendship used here. Not even one constituent characteristic of the concept of friendship is still necessary: reciprocity.

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.

*„Central to Facebook is the concept of friendship. This digital community on the internet is based on social contacts, which are explicitly called friends. So one can be friends with another user or have no relationship at all. It is not possible in this dual system - such as in the world outside of Facebook - to simply have more or less likeable acquaintances, colleagues or other forms of relationships. The choice in the social network is between friendship or nothing at all.“*

Here, at least, Chinese language, which still distinguishes between 网友 and 朋友, is more honest.

Of course, „true friends“ in the Aristotelian sense still exist in our societies alongside the contentless, benefit- or pleasure-oriented „friendships“, even if the values by which they are oriented and measured have changed. But the numerous "friendship guidebooks" published in both real and digital formats in Europe and China equally are more an expression of a lack than of a multitude of fulfilling „true friendships“.