

**“Whoever has succeeded in the great challenge,
to be a friend to a friend”
On the Gift of Friendship**

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Togetherness and the “Preconditions” of Being Human

Humans are social beings. They have a variety of relationships with each other and lead their lives in communities. The human being lives with other human beings, but also from them and for them. No one has brought him- or herself into being and can live for him- or herself alone. People are and will remain dependent on and related to other people throughout their lives. And vice versa, they are always there for other people, to care and take responsibility for them. This human togetherness is inescapable, regardless of how much modern thinking focuses on the individual and his or her autonomy. Only because the individual belongs to a community can he become a free self at all. Freedom presupposes relatedness and belonging.

The words “mother tongue” and “fatherland” refer in a special way to this social dimension of human life. After all, the mother tongue is not the language one chooses or invents for oneself, but rather the language one finds oneself in, with which one opens up and gains access to the world. One cannot freely choose a mother tongue, because in order to choose something at all one needs a language. Thus the community of human beings who all speak the same mother tongue is a given community. Something similar applies to what is meant by “fatherland.” The word presupposes the perspective of the nation. But what is meant by this can be further

understood in the sense of a certain historical-regional origin or homeland. This, too, cannot be freely chosen; rather, it is always already given to the human being. No human being comes into the world as a cosmopolitan, as a citizen of the world, but always as a member of some concrete community. Before he can appropriate this community or origin for himself, he already belongs to it. Incidentally, this also applies to religion, even if occasionally it happens today that even religious parents do not raise their children religiously, in hopes that later they can make a free choice about the matter. This, however, fails to recognize that to make a truly free choice, one must have already been somehow religiously socialized. One must already be acquainted with the language of religion to express oneself in it—even negatively. Consequently, one could, even though slightly polemically, argue, that such parents would have to refrain from speaking to their children, as well, so as not to give them a mother tongue that they have not chosen for themselves.

Many relationships between people stem from historical, linguistic, cultural, religious, or geographical circumstances. With those people with whom one has a common history, who speak the same language, who live where one lives, and who have similar habits or ideological and religious convictions, one stands in a special as well as morally obligatory relationship—in the sense that one shares something (that which is compressed into the concept of “identity”) with these people and is therefore closer to them. The loner is the exception who proves the rule. Even those who live completely alone stand within certain forms of human community—even if they consciously keep away from other people.

The community with which human beings are closely connected due to their birth is of elementary importance. No one has chosen his parents and his family; one discovers this community first: as a precondition. One grows up in it and remains connected to it throughout life. Then one has the freedom to relate to it by accepting it, shaping it or distancing oneself from it. In the strict sense, however, one cannot leave one’s family. One’s mother and father remain so forever—as mother or father. Similarly, parents cannot revoke this relationship. They can cast their child out and refuse him love, but they can never undo their children’s state of being their children, or their own state of being their parents. One always belongs to a family or is related to certain people. Even if social changes and expanded biotechnological possibilities lead to an alteration in what is meant by “family” (and the evaluation of this development can be left open at this point), the statement remains true. For even as a social phenomenon, the familial context into which one is born—which is not of one’s choosing—is inescapable. It is not possible to undo the past, one’s own *having-become*.

One cannot reinvent oneself. The origin eludes every human being, and precisely vis-à-vis this fact he—leading his own life—must begin something.

The “Great Challenge” and the Gift of Friendship

Friendship is likewise a natural phenomenon.¹ Even if a historicity of what friendship means and how it is shaped and lived can be established, it belongs to nature, to the enduring essence of the human being, that he or she has friends and needs friends.² If someone hears that another person has no friends, it is noted with regret. There are good reasons to assume that such a life without friends is joyless and that something is missing which is of special, if not necessary, importance for being human. One wonders why this person has no friends or how he or she deals with the fact that one has no friends. Friendship, however, does not stem from family ties, even if one may have fostered a friendly relationship with siblings or sometimes with parents. Other similarities—such as a common language or even a shared history—also explains friendship only to a limited extent. There are many people with whom one shares a language, history, or many other things, yet very few actually become friends. Furthermore, friendship is also possible across the boundaries of language and culture.

Sometimes it seems that common interests are especially important for friendship. These are the friendships Aristotle described as “useful.”³ Today we often do not speak of friends in this context, but of colleagues, acquaintances or business partners. There are also friends one has because it is enjoyable or pleasant to spend time with them. Aristotle was also familiar with these friendships. In his view, young people in particular cultivate these “pleasurable” friendships, which rarely have long-term significance. Here the focus is on the immediate pleasure or pure enjoyment such relationships provide. But Aristotle knew a third type of friendship, for which the word “friendship” is used in a special sense today, namely, the “friendship of character,” which makes two people “real” or “best” friends. While “useful” and “pleasurable” friendships have a superficial meaning, friendships of character reach deeper. These are often friendships for life. Aristotle’s beautiful idea that the “friend [...] is another

¹ Cf. the still inspiring thoughts of Aristotle on the naturalness, necessity and beauty of friendship, *Nicomachean Ethics*, books VIII and IX.

² See, inter alia, Andreas Schinkel, *Freundschaft. Von der gemeinsamen Selbstverwirklichung zum Beziehungsmanagement – Die Verwandlungen einer sozialen Ordnung*, Freiburg—München 2003; *Von der Freundschaft als Lebensweise. Michel Foucault im Gespräch*, Berlin 1984.

³ Cf. for this and the following Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, VIII, 3 ff.

himself” applies to these.⁴ For in this friendship, despite all differences—not least due to the fact that friendships are made by at least two people—an agreement and a unity are experienced that concern the essence of human life. Differences, which undoubtedly continue to exist between people, appear secondary in the light of such a friendship. In some cases, they even enliven the friendship, so that friends complement or support one another. One friend’s strength can compensate for another’s weakness.

Shared interests or the enjoyment of shared undertakings are not enough to create such a friendship, nor are they necessary for it. Indeed there are factors that make it easier to form such a friendship with another person, but these cannot explain this type of friendship. Even if two or more people want to form a friendship with each other, it does not necessarily lead to the desired result. Real friendship cannot be willfully pursued or even planned. Even when you feel particularly close to the other person, they can remain a perpetual stranger. Even the trust that is so important for friendships, the reliability in dealing with each other or the services one has rendered to the other person, are not enough to serve as reasons for a friendship. There is no obligation to become friends. Friendship is a free relationship between people, which also has an affective dimension, and this presupposes something that cannot be easily achieved and cannot be demanded from a moral perspective, apart from mutual respect and reliability.

As the Greek word for friendship, *philia*, or the statements of Aristotle show, friendship is a form of love. As such, it transcends the conditions of its genesis. Whatever may be cited for its origin or its depth—and good friends can always tell many stories about their friendship and its development—is not sufficient for establishing the “that,” the facticity of friendship. So, while many of the relationships people have with each other are conditional in many ways, and can also be explained by their conditions, a moment of the unconditional appears in deep friendship—just as in a love relationship or in the love of parents for their child, which also cannot be understood solely as natural. In the context of a logic of love, friendship points into the abyss, into that realm which eludes language and to which one can only draw attention with cautiously indicating words. For this reason, friendship is often referred to as a “gift,” a “grace,” or a “present,” that is, as something that is undeserved, something that one did not and should not expect because then it would not be a real gift. Friedrich Schiller speaks in the “Ode to Joy” of the “success” (*Gelingen*) of the “great challenge” (*großen Wurfes*) of friendship. This is a deep phrase. For in a real

⁴ Cf. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, IX, 4.

friendship, a “great success” has actually been achieved, something that cannot be planned but rather is given or awarded when one has become “a friend to a friend.” Thus, despite all possible efforts, luck is necessary for people to love one another and become friends.

For this reason, the gift of true friendship is very rare. Whoever has a lot of friends on Facebook or other forums knows that most of them are not real friends but at best “pleasurable” or “useful” friends. It is not uncommon for these friends to serve merely as an audience, that is, for the sake of the pleasure one derives from one’s digital self-expression, or to serve one’s own entertainment through the contributions they post. On the other hand, the number of friends a person can have in the strict sense is limited. For friendship requires not only happiness but also time, a shared history, a shared present, and a shared future. And just as time is limited, so are friendships also limited.

Freedom and the Risk of Friendship

Real friendship is something that gives itself to you. Friends give themselves to each other. But this doesn’t mean that a friend somehow falls into your lap. One must choose the friends and do something for them and for friendship. At the same time, one must also “work for” what is given. Friendship gives itself, but it requires the openness to accept the gift that one has given to another out of freedom, prior to having gained a final certainty about the character or intentions of the other person. For only when one encounters another person already in the light of the gift of friendship can he become a friend at all. Every friendship has an inherent risk—even in its beginnings—as well as a moment of hope, namely, whether the other person will really prove to be a friend in the future. Without the freedom to take this risk, the risk of being hurt and disappointed, there could be no friendship.

However, one’s freedom is not enough to let this friendship happen. Or at least this is not enough if the friendship is to develop and deepen. At some point, real friendship requires reciprocity and mutual appreciation. My friend can only be someone who understands me as his friend. Yet freedom does not only play a role at the beginning of a friendship but remains constitutive of friendship. In earlier times, people could become “blood brothers.” But in the case of blood brotherhood friendship becomes precisely something else, namely, a brotherhood sustained by the power of “common blood,” a quasi-natural connection. Today, this is thought to be alien to true friendship, as friendship no longer requires the expression of brotherhood

or fraternity. Nor does it require a covenantal agreement or special oath of allegiance; rather, it remains within the risk of free mutual recognition and appreciation.

Such a friendship—far more than a strategic alliance or a superficial acquaintance—can deepen over time. But it can also fail and fall apart. Friends can become strangers or even enemies again. After all, it is the openness of time in which friendships grow. Precisely this makes the true friend so valuable. For it is also time that can take friendships away, that can cause real friends to become strangers again and lose that which defined the friendship.

If a friend breaks their trust, this need not end the friendship, for there is the gift of forgiveness. It is said that time heals all wounds. But many wounds even time cannot heal, especially if they were inflicted by someone close. The pain, as well as the memory of the wounding, can diminish. But a real reconciliation—that which we understand by “healing”—does not arrive in such a way. This is possible only through the power of forgiveness. But the superficiality with which we often ask for forgiveness or apology overlooks what a profound act forgiveness truly represents. For it presupposes, on the one hand, not only the insight into one’s own guilt and the courage to ask for forgiveness, but equally, on the other hand, the free encouragement of forgiveness. Since one is guilty again and again, especially vis-à-vis one’s friends, there is always an awareness of the necessity for forgiveness, which friends need in particular due to their closeness, and which is also an acknowledgement of one’s own finite nature and guilt.⁵

Closeness and Goodwill of the Friend

In contemporary ethics, friendship—with exceptions such as Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida or some neo-Aristotelian thinkers—plays only a secondary role.⁶ This is

⁵ Cf. here the understanding of the (ontology of) forgiveness provided in Robert Spaemann: *Glück und Wohlfühlen. Versuch über Ethik*, Stuttgart 1993, 239 ff. or in his *Personen. Versuche über den Unterschied zwischen ‚etwas‘ und ‚jemand‘*, Stuttgart 1996, 235 ff.

⁶ Cf. among others Jacques Derrida: *Politik der Freundschaft*, Frankfurt a. M. 2002. On the discussion of friendship, in addition to the classical remarks on friendship from Plato's *Lysis* to Cicero's *Laelius* to Michel de Montaigne's *Essay on Friendship*, see also Angelika Walster (ed.), „Freundschaft“ im interdisziplinären Dialog. *Perspektiven aus Philosophie, Theologie, Sozialwissenschaften und Gender Studies*, Innsbruck – Wien 2017; Alexander Nehamas, *On Friendship*, New York 2016; Jennifer Whiting, *First, Second, and Other Selves. Essays on Friendship and Personal Identity*, New York 2016; Peter Schulz, *Freundschaft und Selbstliebe bei Platon und Aristoteles. Semantische Studien zur Subjektivität und Intersubjektivität*, Freiburg—München 2000. A good overview of philosophical approaches to friendship is given by Klaus-Dieter Eichler (ed.), *Philosophie der Freundschaft*, Leipzig 1999. From a theological perspective,

mainly due to the universalistic perspective of modern thinking. The focus is not on the special relationship that two close friends share through a specific history, but rather on the general relationship between people. In this context, it becomes apparent that the obligations one has towards other human beings on account of their being human differ from those one has towards one's friends. Friends are connected through an affective affinity, the love of friends, which plays no role when it comes to obligations towards human beings as such. Conversely, one does not encounter one's friends primarily in an attitude of obligation but out of inclination, love, or what might be called goodwill.

Thus, as has already been indicated, friendship reveals the paradox of love: real love is undeserved, a pure gift, and yet it carries one into the realm of responsibility. One must also prove oneself worthy of love. Friendship similarly reveals the paradox of trust: trust is a gift that must be given to the other person before he or she has proven to be trustworthy. Only when trust is given out of goodwill can he or she even present him- or herself in this way—as worthy of the gift of trust. Otherwise, one could never be certain whether the trust placed in another is justified. From the perspective of a hermeneutics of suspicion, it could be supposed, for example, that the less trustworthy the other person is, the more trustworthy he wants to present himself. However, the friend is never entitled to this goodwilled trust. It remains a gift.

It is precisely for this reason that Aristotle already granted justice no place in the friendship of character (although just people, in his view, also need friendship).⁷ If justice begins to play such a role in a friendship of character that, for example, one friend makes demands on the other, then is the friendship in a profound crisis. After all, friendship occurs within a space that takes precedence over justice, because what is essential to friendship cannot be demanded like just behaviour. Friendship displays a primacy of goodwill over the order of justice (and, as shown earlier, over any hermeneutics of suspicion). The logic of goodwill leads to the fact that one is not indifferent to the well-being of the other. One wants the friend to be well. And conversely, one can expect a friend to want oneself to be well. This reciprocity of friendship is a reciprocity of goodwill. Friendship is the mutual goodwilled interest in each other.

This reciprocity presupposes that friends meet each other on the same level and are equal.⁸ Wherever this equality is not pre-existing, it is brought about through

with reference to the difference and tension between classical-antique *philia* and Christian *agape*, it is worth reading Gilbert C. Meilaender, *On Friendship*, Notre Dame, Ind. – London: 2005.

⁷ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* VIII, 1.

⁸ The importance of equality is also emphasized by Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics*, VIII, 7 ff.

the friendship. For real friends, therefore, external differences become unimportant, so these differences need not be abolished or denied. Friendship can bridge the differences between an older person and a younger person, or between a rich person and a poor person. Friendship is realized and concretely experienced through the overcoming of differences which would normally keep people strangers to one another.

In this sense it might seem that, like justice, mercy is also out of place in a friendship. What could it mean to speak of acting mercifully towards a friend? Wouldn't mercy towards a friend contradict the need for equality and an encounter on the same level, as merciful action presupposes inequality, that is, the difference between the one who acts mercifully and the other who receives mercy?

There is indeed an understanding and practice of mercy among friends that would be inappropriate—and not only in this context—namely a “mercy from above” that reduces the other person to a recipient of merciful deeds and deprives him of his freedom. Not only does this raise the question of what is actually meant by mercy, but equally the far more important question of whether, conversely, friendships are not *in fact* relationships of mercy. This seems possible from a Christian perspective. Jesus not only sees himself as a friend of the people who do what he commands (cf. e.g., John 15:14), but he also acts mercifully towards people in general and calls them to a new friendly relationship with one another based on mercy. But is this a special case of a Christian-merciful friendship or the even more special case of the human being's friendship to Christ and Christ's friendship to the individual human? Or does it express a truth that goes beyond a Christian or religious context, revealing something about the nature and possibility of friendship? Can friendship succeed under the sign of mercy? Does friendship perhaps need mercy? Or is friendship in fact a relationship that is always already characterized by mercy? Is mercy, rightly understood, the inner core of friendship?

These questions point back to the dimension of love in friendship. For when friends love one another and wish to do good, then goodness among friends always presupposes mercy. This, however, does not merely mean to support friends who are doing well. This would be a reduced view of friendship, a friendship for only “good-weather days.” It is also important to stand by your friend when he is unwell, when he is suffering and ill, or when he is dying. It is precisely in the phases of suffering that people need each other most. And who could stand by another person—apart from family members, perhaps—better than a good friend? Being human is always already precarious because it is fragile, vulnerable, and finite. Thus, friendship requires mercy and a selfless compassion towards the other, the one who calls out for a caring

response and for responsibility. If one really meets this responsibility from the spirit of friendship, then one does not show oneself as a sovereign “master” over the friend, but as touched and struck by the friend’s demand to be a caring “servant.”

The Otherness and Selfhood of the Friend

It could be that Christianity points to a dimension of friendship that remained foreign to Aristotle, that is, friendship as lived mercy. This means that for all the equality and harmony among friends, the experience of a difference in the friendship always plays a role. This can be justified not only religiously, but also anthropologically. Because of their finite nature, human beings are always in need of the merciful attention of other human beings, who have mercy as a consequence of their finiteness. Friends are therefore not simply equal to one another. Especially when one of them is in need, they can be there for each other in different ways; one friend can help the other.

This difference between friends is not only evident in situations of need. Precisely the closeness to the friend, the harmony with him, reveals an irrevocable difference to him as a friend, and this is not to be confused with the other, more external differences that can relativize a friendship.

This brings the irresolvable paradox of closeness between human beings into focus. There is never an actual identity of the one with the other, but the greater the closeness, the greater the difference. The more superficial the relationships, the more likely are people to appear to each other as specimens of the human species, or as specimens of the various communities to which they belong. In this way each person can display him- or herself as an *alter ego*: a person like me. Against this background, Aristotle understood friendship as a special case of human identity. But it is necessary to add to this perspective. For the friend shows himself not only as another I, but as “you.” He is not simply “like me” nor a “person in himself,” but someone about whom I can not only speak, rather someone who—as a self of own origins—speaks to me and makes demands upon me. In him humanity becomes concrete and acquires a face. But precisely because of this, he always remains radically different and refuses to be reduced to the general or to the individual. He or she is—him- or herself.

For all the unity that characterizes friendships, a final difference remains. The friend’s alterity can never be removed. This alone would call the friendship into question. The closer one gets to know a person, the clearer it becomes that the other person eludes comprehensive access. Many things can be said about what another person is, the many qualities he or she shares with other people. However there is no

final answer to the question, who is this other person? Because the question “who?” asks about the “essential core” of a person, about what makes him or her unique. And this does not allow itself to be determined. The profound mystery of what the other person *is*—or better yet, as which the other person *lives*—reveals itself only in approximations. Linguistically, this uniqueness is referred to with the “proper name,” which, even if it is frequently assigned, is ultimately a name that belongs only to one person and is significant only to that person.

Just as we always remain withdrawn from ourselves, despite all the familiarity with ourselves, so does this apply to the friend. The very attempt to define or describe the other deprives the friend of the possibility of truly being himself. Such attempts are one of the deepest reasons why friendships fail. They can not only fail because you disappoint a friend or have grown apart; they can fail just when you think you know a friend completely, when the friend no longer seems mysterious. Such closeness without distance reduces the other person to the image one has made of him or her. Friendships of utility or pleasure can usually withstand this. But in a real friendship such a reduction of the other would be deeply immoral and unfriendly. Real closeness therefore always requires dissimulation, the recognition of the irrevocable otherness of the friend. For whoever does not grant the friend’s otherness betrays him or her and the friendship. The relationship with a real friend is therefore always already a moral one, which should be characterized by respect for the friend’s own being and selfhood.

The Truth and Hope of Friendship

The truth of a friendship lies in its historical proof. Only in death does one speak the truth about a friend. Perhaps Augustine—who, in the fourth book of his *Confessions*, left behind an impressive testimony of grief over a deceased friend—had only realized after the friend’s death what a person had passed away.⁹ As has been shown, that a person who is still alive is a true friend remains an object of hope. When one cultivates a friendship and remains faithful to a friend and cares for him or her (even through the bad times and disappointments), then one surrenders oneself to a future together with this friend—in hopes that it will be good.

In yet another sense, every friendship is a sign of hope. In Friedrich Schiller’s “Ode to Joy,” Schiller speaks of a vision in which “all men ... become brothers” wherever the “gentle wings” of joy dwell. Indeed, the tension between the special

⁹ Cf. Augustinus, *Confessiones* IV, 7-12.

relationship of brotherhood in the narrower sense, and the general relationship in which people stand to one another as human beings, cannot be escaped. But the hope that all people will become brothers or sisters, or—better—recognize that they are always already related to each other as one human family, is equally inescapable. This is the hope for a world in which people do not only live outwardly unconnected but are inwardly connected, close to one another, and there for each other.

The vision of brotherhood—or sisterhood—of all people can also be understood as a vision of real friendship among all people. Wherever one is a friend to the other, trusts him, keeps faithful and extends to him goodwill, something in the small scale is revealed that has meaning also in the larger scale, for all people: the utopia of real fellow humanity. This is not a utopia remote from life but one that guides action and is linked through an imperative. Even if the chances of this becoming real are small, one should nevertheless act in such a way that more and more people become real friends. Or to put it another way: human action should always take place within the horizon of goodwill, of goodwilled togetherness. From this perspective, every human being presents him- or herself as a possible friend.

Translated by Aaron French.