

Suzanne Stern-Gillet & Gary M. Gurtler, SJ (eds.) *Ancient and Medieval Concepts of Friendship*. State University of New York Press : Albany 2014, 327 p. US \$ 34.95 (pb). ISBN 978-1-4384-5364-4.

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This collection of essays gathers twelve contributions on the topic of friendship, ten of which span from Plato's time to Aquinas', with the last two chapters devoted to examining the thought of Kant and Hölderlin, two Modern thinkers. It purports "to direct a spotlight on the most salient points in what proved to be an enduring theme in philosophical literature" (ix). The collection is presented as having a "modest aim" (*ibidem*), if compared to ambitions such as to provide a comprehensive survey of the notion of friendship in Western thought. It is indeed restricted to its expressed aim, and it succeeds in large measure in achieving it, for we do find in this collection a very interesting and illuminating string of studies on how friendship was conceived from Ancient to Medieval times according to its major moments, each paper striving to clearly present the pith of what such an impressive array of thinkers as Plato (chap. 1), Aristotle (chaps. 2 and 3), the Stoics (chap. 3), the Epicureans (chap. 5), Cicero (chap. 6), Augustine (chap. 8) and Aquinas (chap. 10) said about it. We might expect to find philosophers poring over the main aspects of this human, sometimes all too human, affection that serves as the cement of our intimate ties with other people. It ends up, however, disclosing some sort of obsession philosophers had with what one may call perfect friendship, that so virtuous an intimacy amongst friends that we are inevitably lifted up to the moral heights thanks to it – or else that friendship only those who are already there can display.

It should not have been so, though, as we learn already from the first chapter that Plato was eager to distinguish between three forms of *philia*. The chapter on Plato is written by Dimitri El Murr, who endeavours to present a three-layered notion of *philia*: a friendship arising from opposites, which proves to be nothing other than the search for bodily pleasures, aiming at sensual repletion in which the beloved is but a means to the lover's pleasures; a friendship from resemblance, to which reciprocity is

crucial, so that the parties linked by this bond are similarly driven by a desire of virtue to the effect that each seeks the good of the other; and a third one, a mixed friendship, resulting from a combination of the two others, in which the drive to make the beloved an instrument for the satisfaction of bodily pleasures is countered by the opposing drive of a genuine concern for the beloved's own good. To do this, El Murr bases his analyses on a less discussed passage of Plato's last dialogue, *Laws VIII* 836e-837d, in which the Athenian discloses these three forms in a conversation with Cleinias. By so doing, El Murr wants to shed light on other much more famous passages, making us thus read retrospectively the aporetic *Lysis* and the so much celebrated description of love in the *Phaedrus* in line with the lessons given at the *Laws* passage. This approach makes him privilege the political aspect of friendship, and consequently he devotes the last part of his paper to examining civic friendship in the *Laws* and in the *Republic*. By the same token, Diotima's speech on love has no longer the lion's share in the treatment of Platonic love, and the reader has to wait for other papers to find an analysis of the *Symposium*.

As we shall see, the *Symposium* is key to understanding how friendship became that moral ascent friends have to go through as they abandon the bodily pleasures and turn themselves towards the intelligible Realm of Beauty and Forms. One may thus worry that El Murr's strategy somehow misfires. But I think his strategy pays off, and a lot. For by so doing he puts his finger on a very important issue Plato and the late Academy are tinkering with, namely, the problem of concepts whose unity falls short of a genus, so that they can no longer be expressed in terms of a universal whose defining traits are separately necessary and collectively sufficient for an item to be subsumed under it. The very notion of pleasure seems to elude generic unity, and that causes much trouble to its definition in the *Philebus*. In the same vein, in the *Phaedrus*, love proves to be a two-sided notion, a left side replete with bodily pleasures, but also a right side, thanks to which one ascends to knowledge and the pure Forms, going definitely past all bodily pleasures. Both are cases of love, and genuine cases of love; they overlap one another, but neither collapses into the other or can be reduced to it without remainder. The Greek term for friendship, *philia*, can also designate love, which causes some trouble in its semantical analysis, but the point is that *friendship* gets contaminated with this falling short of generic unity, and this is a true philosophical trouble. As the Athenian puts it, we call *friend* (i) what is similar regarding virtue, but also (ii) what is needy to what is rich, in spite of their

dissimilarity (*Laws* VIII 837a6-9). Still, there is the third form, resulting from the combination of the two others. Three cases, only one word; to quote the Athenian again, ἐν ὄνομα περιλαβὸν πᾶσαν ἀπορίαν καὶ σκότον ἀπεργάζεται, “one term covering <them all> engenders the whole *aporia* and obscurity” (837a3-4).

How to get out of it? Certainly not by proposing a definition by means of conjunctions: *friendship* is (i) *and* (ii) *and* (iii); in classical thought, such a procedure can at most amount to a description of the several types in question, which prepares the path for the definition, but surely cannot be taken as one. Aristotle ruminated a lot over this problem, and came up with two different answers to how to unify the distinct, and genuine, forms of friendship. In the *Eudemian Ethics*, he proposes to put them together by means of a new conceptual tool he seems to have conceived of out of scratch specifically to get out of the muddle friendship puts one in. It is the celebrated notion of *focal meaning*, which, when applied to being, produces the well-known results we read in his *Metaphysics*. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, he drops it however, and substitutes *resemblance* for *focal meaning* as the key notion to keep them together as correctly named cases of friendship, even though no generic unity can be ascribed to them. The topic of friendship, typically at home in moral treatises, spills over logical issues on unity and conceptual reference. And this spilling over help us explain at least part of the interest Aristotle attached so strongly to this topic.

Gary Gurtler devotes his analysis to Aristotelian friendship with two aims in mind: (i) to discern how the different aspects of friendship can be understood in terms of the four causes, and (ii) how to relate friendship towards contemplation, so that it becomes no longer “solely a moral virtue” (36). The first aim is in itself laudable, as it tries to apply an Aristotelian schema to an Aristotelian topic. In a nutshell, good will is the moving cause; the activities flowing from it constitute the formal cause; the character of the individual is the material cause; and the other, the friend, as good is the final cause. However, the three genuine *kinds* of friendship Aristotle acknowledges he has to reckon with – friendship grounded on pleasure, on utility, and on virtue – are presented as three *species* of friendship (38; 39). They are somewhat brought back to order as they can harmlessly be subsumed under a same genus. Instead, the problem lies elsewhere, to wit: in the fact that, although we all strive for the sake of the friend’s good, there always lurks the ambiguity between an apparent good and the real good, as we can take utility or pleasantness for the purposes of a friendship, instead of developing it based on virtue. To quote Gurtler:

While good will can lead to friendship, under certain conditions where the other is seen as good and where each party has good will for the other for the other's sake, there are other situations, where utility or pleasure are the moving causes, that do not lead to friendship, but other relationships beneficial to both parties, but each for one's own sake. The confusion of many commentators can be traced to not recognizing this distinction. (40-41).

That logical issue Aristotle is trying to tackle is put aside, as a matter of fact it completely disappears. There are no longer three forms of friendship, but only one, the perfect, virtuous friendship. We are thrown back to the period before Cooper's seminal paper (*Aristotle on the Forms of Friendship*, published in 1977), in which he convincingly argued how important it is to keep in mind that there are three genuine kinds of friendship, that they do overlap, but cannot be reduced to one of them or be taken as species of a common kind. Gurtler's step backwards, pressing for only one case of true friendship, is quite a controversial move, to say the least: the confusion of many a commentator, if confusion there is, is rather to be traced to the difficulties the non-generic unity in question brings along to the correct understanding of its unifying power, not to the commentators' acknowledgement of this very peculiar problem. The second thesis of this paper (the connection between friendship and contemplation in terms of their not being so much in competition as exclusive choices, but as practical virtue having its end in contemplation as the end that is complete and final) may have interesting outcomes, but it suffers from the downplaying of the three kinds of friendship by means of the apparent-real opposition and the correspondent jettisoning of utility and pleasantness as genuine objects of friendship.

Suzanne Stern-Gillet paper on *megalopsuchia* is a very illuminating analysis of "the crown of the virtues", as Aristotle has it. Her aim is to make Aristotle's eulogy of it appear less distasteful to those who take pride as a vice (and they are legion in Modern times) or see humility as a virtue. (*Pride*, she remarks, is the least acceptable translation; *magnanimity*, *high-mindedness*, *great-soulness* or *great-heartedness* are more acceptable, but none of them carries the semantic connotations Aristotle attaches to his *megalopsuchia*). She does succeed in her task, as she shows that, despite its aristocratic hues, *megalopsuchia* is "best understood as an asset to any city-state with a sound constitution, although an aristocratic regime in which government is in the hands of the best among the citizens would give him the greatest opportunity for putting his overall excellence at the service of the *polis*" (74-75). The *megalopsuchos*'s self-sufficiency calls into discussion whether he needs friends or not, and how to equate self-love with friends. Stern-Gillet shows very convincingly

that “we can safely assume that he is capable of the highest of the three kinds of friendship distinguished in both *Ethics*” (67). We have here a glimpse that she adopts what we take as the sound Aristotelian doctrine of three *kinds* of friendship, but unfortunately her discussion of *megalopsuchia*, which is very illuminating in itself, is not in position to recall that distinction and put it back on the right track. It should be noticed that she devotes the last part of her paper to show that *mikropsuchia*, the vice opposed to *megalopsuchia*, “is not to be thought as the Greek counterpart of humility” (70) for this is to conflate the reticence to lay claim to goods of which one is worthy, which is the meaning of the Aristotelian *mikropsuchia*, and the propensity to value others above oneself (our notion of humility), thus distorting Aristotle’s meaning.

The second part of the book, devoted to the Hellenistic philosophers, shows how influential Plato’s *Symposium* became to any treatment of friendship, thus making subside, to the point of burying it completely, the issue of bringing together three irreducible kinds of friendship. From now on, it is basically a report (with some exceptions, such as the Epicureans) on how to ascend from bodily desire to virtue friendship, which is the real and only friendship. Bernard Collette-Ducic examines the Stoic philosophy, showing very clearly how indebted they are to Plato’s *Symposium*. Focusing on the sage, he mounts a convincing case about the pedagogical interest the sage has in associating with young boys, as the sage sets the ones he loves onto the path of virtue by being friends with them (all love is ultimately to be replaced by friendship, which is a good, whereas love is an indifferent). But here a paradox seems to loom. The young boys are non-sages; what benefit will the sage obtain from these associations? One answer would be: nothing, but the young boys will profit a lot, as they are thus set onto the path of virtue. The relation would then be directed to the beloved own good. Is this a sign that the Stoic sage is altruistic? The point Collette argues for is that he is not altruistic: “if a sage seeks to make a friend, it is first of all because he is eager to exercise his virtues and benefit from them” (107). The beloved provide the Stoic sage with an opportunity to exercise one of his virtues. The key notion in their being friends is not altruism, but that of exercise, *usus*, which is central to Stoic philosophy. Having a friend is an outcome of *having made a friend*, but this is rather a bonus, for what really matters is that, while making friends, the Stoic sage puts into practice, he makes use of his virtues, and this is the “the greatest of all possible goods” (106). Moreover, by doing this, the sage is not only gazing at his own navel, but connecting himself to the whole world, for the world will also be benefitted

(included the beloved), given that “it is a law of nature that an act cannot benefit its author without also contributing to the common good, that is, to the good of everyone else” (103). With such a law, the loop is closed – but could it not be closed with such a law?

Harry Lesser brings us back to earth in his “Erôs and Philia in Epicurean Philosophy” (117-131). Essential to Epicurean ethics is the long-term satisfaction of our wants and the peace of mind that comes as a result of it. In Book IV of *De rerum natura* Lucretius states the one should not avoid the “fruit of Venus, but rather takes the advantages without the penalty” (1073-74). Those who satisfy their sexual impulses are healthy; what comes as a surprise, notes Lesser, is that *amor*, love, is called frenzy and madness, some lines later. Erotic love is thus negatively contrasted with sexual desire; the reason seems to be that erotic love is a desire that cannot be satisfied, and so is incompatible with peace of mind: “to be in love, as opposed to merely feeling sexual desire, is necessarily to be in mental pain: consummation of the love brings a short temporary relief from the pain, but it will soon start again” (120). In fact, according to Lucretius, there is actual hatred in love, as the behaviour of lovers shows that both occur at the same time (Lesser quotes IV 1079-83, as the lovers hurt the body, *faciunt dolorem corporis*, and often set their teeth in the lips and kiss roughly, *dentis inlidunt saepe labellis osculaque adfligunt*, which is a nice poetic passage on our human messy relationships). All this comes together to hinder us from attaining any stability, let alone *ataraxia*. This explains also why the possibility of converting *love* into *philia*, which has a typical Platonic ring, is ruled out by the Epicureans. For friendship is a long-term relationship, accompanied by goodwill, not concerned only with obtaining pleasure, but also, and primarily, directed to the good of the person with whom we are friends, whereas love has the opposite characteristics: it is only concerned with obtaining pleasure and is not accompanied by goodwill. This much sets the contrast between love and sex, and why friendship will not come about as a result of erotic love.

The following chapter is devoted to Cicero’s *De amicitia*, in which Robin Weiss endeavours to show that Laelius’ contradictions are only apparent. The debt to Plato’s *Symposium* is again highlighted, with this important correction that love is not born of need (and so Socrates’ and Aristophanes’ positions in that dialogue are not vindicated, for neither has the whole truth). To do this, she revisits the Stoic notion of *oikeiôsis*, showing that we rather reach out for what preserves our being, so that, in

the Stoic perspective advanced in Cicero's dialogue, "love is actually born of an internal abundance of the very thing we seek outside ourselves in another – virtue" (162). Her vision of the Stoic friendship is quite optimistic, as she writes that it "involves all of the erotic components of romantic love, but without its shortcomings and imperfections" (*ibidem*).

Among the papers devoted to Medieval philosophy, two of them are rather descriptive. As friendship itself is a sort of journey along which we get acquainted with our friend's nature, John Manoussakis' paper on Gregory Nazianzen and Basil the Great espouses the very unfolding of their common path in a sort of narrative of the ups and downs of their friendship, intertwined as it is with the history of the Church. Sommerfeldt's chapter on Aelred of Rievaulx gives us interesting information on how Aelred conceived of friendship in his treatise *On Spiritual Friendship*. On the other hand, the paper on Augustine and Aquinas are much more analytical. Tamer Nawar insists on the rather negative role friendship plays in the first books of Augustine's *Confessions*, but comes to the conclusion that friendship is not, in the *Confessions*, exclusively negative, for in the later books a more positive role is attributed to it in fostering virtue, even though "Augustine takes care to note that friendship may not only point us toward virtue, but also towards vice" (214). Fergus Kerr writes on Aquinas, and tries to show that the notion of *charitas* underwent an important change from the early *Scriptum* on the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard, to its treatment in the *Ila Ilae* of the *Summa*. He contends that, in the *Summa*, owing to a direct influence of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, there is a new model for charity, in which the persons involved should resemble each other in being virtuous, and this new stance on charity is modelled after Aristotle's doctrine of friendship. The relationship is grounded on shared goodness, and this novel model "is a daring model for charity" (251). The novelty resides in this, that each loves the other for the sake of the friend, there being friendship only between equals. According to Kerr, what is crucial in this new model is that "there is no question of one partner's losing his or her identity in the other" (265). The consequence, in theological terms, is that it is "at last possible for us to let God be *God* in the knowledge that God let us be *us*" (264). In a less theological tone, there is, in charity as conceived according to the Aristotelian model of friendship, no submission to, or annihilation of the self in the absolute other, or God (as, apparently, it was still supposed to be the case in the *Scriptum*). However, Kerr stresses that this new model of envisaging charity "has had little success in

Christian theology and spirituality” (251). It is worth noting in philosophical terms that as he engages in a reconstruction of the Aristotelian doctrine of friendship, Kerr admits of three kinds of friendship, but seems to credit this non-uniform version of friendship to an alleged Aristotelian “analogical vision of the world”, which he does not elaborate further.

The last two chapters deal with Kant and Hölderlin. The latter, written by Sandra Ducic-Collette, remains at two removes from the other essays, as it concerns a Modern thinker, and a poet. In the chapter on Kant, Andrea Veltman sketches a contrast between Aristotle and Kant, based on which one might be entitled to say that on the one hand Aristotle has some reason, but on the other hand Kant has his reasons as well. According to Aristotle, I can only know who I am (from the moral point of view) through inspection of who are my friends as moral agents, as if I am seeing myself in them through a mirror, whereas, in Kant, I look forward to having a friend in order to be able to disclose my deepest nature without fear of being betrayed. The contrast, however, is too strong, for in one case introspection is barred; in the other, introspection is more than allowed, and the only problem is that I am not sure whether I can tell other people who I really am without fear of suffering later from the knowledge I have imparted to them, a knowledge that I previously obtained through introspection.

To sum up, this is a valuable collection, scholarly written, which is worth reading, and quite helpful for academic studies on friendship. It makes the reader ponder what friendship is through showing him or her what an impressive array of thinkers thought it to be.

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