Amicitia

A. C. Grayling takes friendship out of idealization and into moral reality.

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Influenced in some measure by Cicero's texts, De Amicitia and Hortensius, Augustine gave a splendid account of friendship in his Confessions. Looking back on the death of a playmate of his youth, and the consolation provided by other friends, Augustine wrote: “to discourse and jest with him; to indulge in courteous exchanges; to read pleasant books together; to trifle together; to be earnest together; to differ at times without humor…and find zest in our more frequent agreements; sometimes teaching, sometimes being taught…These and similar tokens of friendship, which spring spontaneously from the hearts of those who love and are loved in return - in countenance, tongue, eyes, and a thousand ingratiating gestures – were all so much fuel to melt our souls together, and out of the many made us one.”

In Friendship, A. C. Grayling, the founder and master of New College of the Humanities, London, seeks “to take friendship out of the realm of idealization and into moral reality.” He affirms what we – and Augustine (when he addressed the subject without “its theological overlay”) – instinctively recognize to be true, “namely that shared interests and outlook, a similar sense of humor and a shared past, make potent cement in relationships.” Reviewing the idea of friendship in literature, history, philosophy and “real life,” as it was experienced by famous pairs, including Achilles and Patroclus, David and Jonathan, Voltaire and Emilie, Grayling resists “a single neat definition” of friendship and concludes that it is “plainly silly” to act on the assumption that it conforms to “the contours of this stereotype or that.”

Friendships, he points out, need not inevitably take the same forms they did when gender roles were imposed on people in rigid ways – and men were thought to prefer friendships based on activities while women opted for talking rather than doing. In Friendship, he demonstrates that those who see “individual pebbles in the mosaic” are more likely to be able to step back, see the whole, and “see it true.”

Grayling is precise and rigorous. He demolishes definitions of “true friendship” when they fall prey to the fallacy in informal logic that defines “a true X” so as to exclude a candidate from the class of Xs by moving the goal posts. The fallacy allows some to avoid the problem of friendship leading to dishonorable acts (like treason) by claiming that since virtue is an essential feature of friendship, “true friends,” by definition, would not ask their friends to abet them in wrongful behavior.

Grayling also addresses several perennial and perplexing questions about his subject. Does friendship promote self-interest? Can two people be friends if their status and station is unequal? If reciprocity is indispensable, can a mother be friends with her child? When sex enters a friendship, should we move the relationship “to a different place, psychologically”?
In the twenty-first century, Grayling acknowledges, the social media has “stretched and extended” the words friends and friendship “as to have lost a good deal of their meaning.” Regrettably, he doesn’t elaborate. Because, it seems to me, in this “age of connectivity,” when the Internet promises a safe and sanitized intimacy and encourages us to believe that we are who we pretend to be, or want to be, or think we are, we need help, lots of help, to cultivate and renew a healthy sense of identity that is the sine qua non of friendship, which, along with love, A. C. Grayling reminds us, remains “the most important contributor to the possibility of good human lives.” Without it, after all, “we are less, and in danger of being close to nothing.”