

IS FRIENDSHIP A PROPER TOPIC FOR ETHICS?

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THE STARTING POINT of this paper is an observation about the very differing degrees of attention that have been paid to the topic of friendship by the great figures of the Western tradition. While Plato devoted an entire dialogue to it and Aristotle thought it worth two full chapters of his *Nicomachean Ethics*, modern philosophers have usually treated it as a minor footnote or ignored it altogether.¹ Apparently, then, friendship no longer counts. But why not? And is the modern tendency to avoid discussion of friendship justifiable or regrettable? These are the questions I will seek to answer in this paper.

My initial guiding assumption is that the disappearance of friendship from ethics is not simply a matter of changing taste or fashion. I assume there must be deeper reasons, which will have something to do with a changing understanding of what the discourse of ethics can hope to achieve. Or, to put it another way, I assume that in asking the question “is friendship a proper topic for ethics?” I am committing myself to answering the question “how has ethics changed, such that in one epoch friendship can appear to be a central element of it, while in another it can seem marginal or irrelevant?” Furthermore, in asking whether friendship should be reinstated I am asking primarily whether ethics should change (again) in order to (re-)accommodate it, and if so how. The paper is thus considerably more about ethics (specifically, meta-ethics) than it is about friendship, for the question of *what friendship is* has little bearing on the question of *whether it is a topic for ethics*. Friendship as a concept I consider only as an element of the broader ethical position of modern thinkers who would re-instate it, as then it is of interest to see how it would fit with their revisionist view of the nature of ethics.

The questions I treat in this paper are large ones, and considerable restrictions both of scope and depth of analysis are required in order to make it manageable in the space available to me here. I will proceed as follows. First, I very briefly contrast ancient and modern conceptions of what ethics is to show how friendship is a natural part of the former and is naturally excluded from the latter. Next, I try to put up a basic case for this historical

¹ As Lorraine Pangle notes in her comprehensive study of the treatment of friendship in the history of Western philosophy, “in the four centuries since Bacon and Montaigne wrote,...friendship has virtually disappeared as a theme of philosophical discourse.” Lorraine Pangle, *Aristotle and the Philosophy of Friendship* (Cambridge: CUP, 2003), p. 3.

transformation of ethics, which contains both normative and metaphysical elements. Then, finally, I briefly consider two modern thinkers, both of whom discuss friendship and have deep critiques of the modern ethical framework: MacIntyre and Nietzsche. Though others could also be discussed, there is a clear logic to considering this pair. In the Anglo-Saxon world, MacIntyre has been at the forefront of efforts to question the grounding questions of ethics and propose alternative frameworks for debate. And he himself suggests that if there is to be any “third way” apart from the “liberal modernity”² he opposes and the resurrected Aristotelianism he proposes, it will be provided by Nietzsche.³ Up to this point I largely go along with MacIntyre, but I diverge from him radically when it comes to judgement of the relative merits of his and Nietzsche’s approaches. I am much more sceptical than MacIntyre about the prospects of neo-Aristotelianism overcoming the objections of “liberal modernity”, while conversely I think the Nietzschean alternative offers a way of breaking out of the dilemma that we would otherwise be left in, and therefore of helping us find a way back to friendship in ethics.

1. WHY FRIENDSHIP DISAPPEARED FROM ETHICS.

In this first part of the paper I want to present, as neutrally as I can, the reasons why friendship seemed a central topic in ethics to Aristotle but is perceived as a marginal one by most modern ethical theorists. At this stage I am merely interested in making explicit the different conceptions of ethics that lead to this divergence, not in judging which conception, if any, is superior (that discussion is reserved for the later sections of the paper).

When Aristotle first introduces the topic of friendship he justifies the move on the grounds that “it is a kind of virtue, or implies virtue, and it is also most necessary for living.”⁴ I will not consider at this stage whether Aristotle is correct about either of these assertions; my interest is rather in the criteria for inclusion, namely that friendship is a virtue and/or is necessary for living. This has to be compared with Aristotle’s opening remarks on the general nature of ethics, which he considers to be an inquiry into the nature of the good life; and with his general formula for what the good life is,

² MacIntyre has a number of ways of referring to the modern period in ethics, but I will generally use this one, both because it is a convenient way of denoting the intimate connection MacIntyre sees between modernity and liberalism, and also because when it comes to discussion of MacIntyre’s position the contrasts I will draw will in the first instance be with liberal theorists.

³ Alisdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (London: Duckworth, 1981), pp. 111-2.

⁴ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. J. A. K. Thomson and H. Tredennick (London: Penguin, 1976), 1155a4.

namely “an activity of soul in accordance with virtue.”⁵ Thus to name friendship as a virtue and necessary for (the good) life is in Aristotle’s terms already to designate it a topic for ethical discussion, since the bulk of Aristotle’s ethics is simply a delineation of the various virtues. Having friends is part of a virtuous life, so we need to consider what friendship truly means to ensure that we have the right type of friendship, friendship that conduces to good life.

Why then has modernity generally seen no need to treat friendship as part of ethics? It could be, of course, that modernity does not share Aristotle’s judgement that friendship is a virtue or a necessary element of a good life. Certainly, as we shall see shortly, one of the general reasons for liberal modernity’s rejection of Aristotle is that it considers him too ready to make substantive ethical judgements about the nature of the good life, which a liberal ethos prefers to leave to the individual. Moreover apart from the general point of liberal principle that each person should be allowed to decide his good for himself, I suspect that the influence of the Christian ideals of the monk and the hermit, cut off from the world and devoted to God, has created considerable scepticism towards Aristotle’s claim that friendship is “necessary” for the good life.⁶ Aristotle’s judgement about the necessity of friendship for the good life is thus liable to seem somewhat rash to moderns.

But this is not the main reason why friendship is no longer discussed by ethicists. The key change is not in our judgement about the value of friendship for the good life, but in the general preoccupations of ethics: for ethics today is, by and large, no longer about the good life or about the virtues. Instead, modern ethics focusses almost exclusively on the nature and grounds of *moral obligation* (e.g. whether I am morally obliged to tell the truth in all circumstances and why/why not). Given this central preoccupation, the disappearance of friendship as a topic is perfectly understandable. For whereas it makes perfect sense to discuss whether friendship is a key element of a good life, it is clearly absurd to suggest that friendship is morally obligatory. Moral obligation concerns actions that we are *always* required to do or refrain from doing in a given set of circumstances, whereas friendship is by its very nature a selective affair – as Aristotle says, we cannot be intimate with a large number of people.⁷

⁵ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1098a18.

⁶ On this point Pangle suggests that “Christianity’s call to devote one’s heart as completely as possible to God, and to regard all men as brothers, made the existence of private, exclusive and passionate attachments to individual human beings seem inherently questionable.” (p. 2.)

⁷ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1171a3.

Why, though, has ethics shifted its focus in this way? Though the reasons are obviously many and complex, I think two grounds – or rather clusters of grounds – are worth highlighting. Both provide serious reasons for thinking that the shift towards impersonal moral obligation is justified, and will therefore need to be addressed by any revisionist account which would seek to re-instate the “good life” concerns such as friendship that were central for Aristotle. The first set of reasons are normative, or moral/political, and are connected with modernity’s emphasis on the values of (negative) freedom and equality. It is a fundamental tenet of liberalism that individuals should be free to determine and pursue their own ends to the extent that this does not interfere with the ability of other individuals to do likewise; and this jars with the Aristotelian belief that philosophers can determine “the best life” for man. For if there is an objectively “best life” this undermines the view that society is best off leaving everyone to freely determine their own ends – it might be better for society to “encourage” its members to follow the best life, rather than allowing them to make their own choices and therefore, perhaps, choose sub-optimal paths. Conversely a focus on obligation fits the liberal political framework nicely, since it concentrates attention on what we owe to others irrespective of the goods that each of us pursue: ethics becomes focussed on setting the boundaries of the permissible in our interaction with others. As well as the value of freedom, however, modern ethics also clearly incorporates the value of *equality*, since the major systems (Kantianism, utilitarianism) assume that whatever the nature and grounds of our moral obligations they are not partial with regard to their object: what we owe depends purely on the situation and on the action in question, *not on who is involved*. Otherwise, we would be violating the ethical principle of impartiality. It is thus a basic assumption of modern ethical theory that an ethical system should be describable in universalist terms, without reference to any particular facts about those who are involved in it.

However, if these moral-political grounds were the only ones then the complete abandonment of the Aristotelian agenda in ethics would be surprising, since although liberty and equality are both extremely popular causes they are by no means universally acclaimed, and those who do not espouse them might have been expected to retain a commitment to the old “good life” framework. That they by and large do not is, I think, largely due to the other major ground for the shift to the modern ethical framework, namely a widespread scepticism about the epistemological/metaphysical foundations of the Aristotelian system. For Aristotle is committed to the view that the human being has an essence which can be expressed in teleological terms: not only do we have a “true nature”, but that true nature is something we must seek to achieve, since it is the intrinsically good in man. The whole point of ethics within the Aristotelian framework is thus to help us to attain

this hidden “true nature” and thereby reach our full potential as human beings. Modernity, though, is sceptical about every step of this argument. It is suspicious of any “essence of man”, but especially one that is conceived, as Aristotle conceives it, as also the goal of man and the embodiment of the good: we are simply no longer this optimistic about who we are. Moreover, even if this teleological “true nature” did exist, many moderns would be sceptical about the ability of philosophers to detect it. It has often been wryly noted that Aristotle’s supposedly abstract “end of man” actually looks remarkably like the ideal of the Athenian gentleman/citizen which prevailed at the time, and there would be a great deal of suspicion that any modern attempt to reconstruct an ideal would be similarly time-bound – that it would be the product more of its author’s unconscious prejudices than of his insights into the true nature of man. Faced with these enormous sceptical obstacles, it is no wonder that ethics has scaled back its ambitions in the modern period and restricted itself to systems of right behaviour which do not require the same leaps of metaphysical and epistemological faith.

Such, then, are the challenges facing those who would shift ethics back to a framework that can incorporate discussion of substantive questions of “the good life” such as the nature and value of friendship. In the next two sections I consider the efforts of first MacIntyre and then Nietzsche to do just that, and try to assess how each in turn fares.

2. MACINTYRE’S NEO-ARISTOTELIAN FRAMEWORK.

2.1 MACINTYRE’S CASE FOR AN ARISTOTELIAN REVIVAL.

MacIntyre’s *After Virtue* seeks to overturn the dominant (liberal) model of ethics in favour of a revived Aristotelianism: here I outline very briefly his negative case against the liberal model, his positive case for neo-Aristotelianism, and his ideas on how friendship would fit within the revised framework.

MacIntyre’s basic case against the framework of “liberal modernity” is that ethics simply makes no sense outside a teleological framework. He asserts that modernity only has fragments of the former system left, which it cannot make sense of in isolation from the broader framework they once belonged to:

Since the whole point of ethics... is to enable man to pass from his present state to his true end, the elimination of any notion of essential human nature and with it the abandonment of any notion of a *telos* leaves behind a moral scheme composed of two remaining elements whose relationship becomes quite unclear. There is on the one hand a certain content for morality: a set of injunctions deprived of their teleological context. There is on the other hand a certain view of untutored-human-nature-as-it-is. Since the moral injunctions were originally at home in a scheme in which their purpose was to correct, improve and educate that human nature, they

are clearly not going to be such that they could be deduced from true statements about human nature or justified in some other way by appealing to its characteristics.⁸

In MacIntyre's view a "catastrophe"⁹ has befallen ethics, analogous to the collapse of the Roman Empire, except that we are not even aware that the catastrophe has taken place but (wrongly) think we still have all the pieces of a working system in place, and are then puzzled by their failure to cohere. He thus interprets the failure of modern foundationalist projects in ethics as inevitable: they were doomed from the start because they failed to incorporate teleology. MacIntyre also has certain normative criticisms of the liberal ethical framework. The loss of teleology means a loss of guidance, and the modern (ethical) subject is thus anomic – lost and confused: 'Moral judgements lose any clear status...(they) become available as forms of expression for an emotivist self which, lacking the guidance of the context in which they were originally at home, has lost its...way in the world.'¹⁰

As MacIntyre sees it, the only way to recover from the failings of the current ethical framework is to return to something like the old Aristotelian approach, since without teleology ethics has become incoherent and modern man anomic. The trouble is that, as we have seen, modernity had good reasons for rejecting the old metaphysical foundations of Aristotelian ethics in a supposed ideal essence of man, and is unlikely to change its mind about this. MacIntyre himself accepts the judgement of modernity on this question, and recognises the need for a different way of grounding the *telos*: 'although this [MacIntyre's] account of the virtues is teleological, it does not require the identification of any teleology in nature, and hence it does not require any allegiance to Aristotle's metaphysical biology.'¹¹ Instead, MacIntyre develops a more socially grounded conception which emphasises the embeddedness of individuals in communities and assumes that the good of the individual cannot be detached from the good of the community. The good cannot be generated as an abstract ideal but must be derived from the practices of communities; "the good life for man" at its most general would denominate the goods that all communities hold dear.

As regards the question of friendship's place within ethics, MacIntyre hints at a peculiarly important role, perhaps even more critical than within Aristotle's own schema, for a shared vision of the good within a community can only come about if that community is in fact constructed on the basis of the bond of friendship. As MacIntyre puts it:

⁸ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 52.

⁹ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 1.

¹⁰ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 57.

¹¹ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 183.

the application of [a] measure [of human goodness] in a community whose shared aim is the realisation of the human good presupposes...a wide range of agreement in that community on goods and virtues, and it is this agreement which makes possible the kind of bond between citizens which, on Aristotle's view, constitutes a *polis*. That bond is the bond of friendship....which embodies a shared recognition of and pursuit of a good.¹²

Given that MacIntyre does not have access to Aristotle's metaphysical account of the ends of man, friendship appears indispensable for his account of the construction of the good life for man based on his membership of a community; for without the bond of friendship and its shared view of the good there is no community. Friendship may then be more than just one virtue among many; it could actually be foundational for the very project of constructing a moral community.

2.2 ASSESSMENT OF MACINTYRE'S CASE.

How persuasive is MacIntyre's critique of liberal modernity and his argument for an Aristotelian alternative? These are, I think, two logically separable questions which can be taken in turn.

In my view his most effective criticism of the modern ethical framework has to do with the problem of *anomie*. Liberal ethical theory shies away from the question "how should I live?" not just because it assumes that no general answer can be given but also because it holds that individuals are independent and autonomous, capable of giving an authoritative answer to the question on their own and neither requiring nor welcoming external "assistance" in order to do so. MacIntyre is effective at arguing for the social embeddedness of human beings, one important consequence of which is that people look for guidance from their community and society about the roles they should play in life and are liable to feel "lost" when the only message society gives them is "it's up to you". He thus appears to identify a normative need (for guidance about "what should I do?" questions) which is not fulfilled, indeed is completely ignored, by the discourse about normativity (ethics) in its modern guise.

Other elements of his story are less persuasive, however. In particular, the "catastrophe" metaphor, which is important rhetorically for suggesting the intrinsic superiority of the classical framework (playing on our sense of Roman civilisation as superior to that of the Dark Ages), seems completely misleading. It implies that there was some equivalent of the Goths and Vandals standing between modern and ancient ethics, an external disruptive force, whereas much of MacIntyre's own account makes it clear that the transition was largely an organic development, a quite inevitable response to

¹² MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 146.

a loss of faith in key elements of the metaphysical worldview underpinning the Aristotelian ethical theory. Similarly, it is unconvincing to portray morality today as ‘a set of injunctions deprived of their teleological context’, as the *content* of ethics has also quite clearly changed – the starting point for this discussion was the fact that friendship is no longer considered an ethical question at all, which is a development entirely in keeping with the disappearance of teleology and the “privatisation” of concerns about the good life. As we have seen, the concerns of modern ethical theory are those minimal codes of behaviour which it may be possible for us to agree on *without* reaching consensus about “the ends of man” – it is no accident that justice is nowadays the pre-eminent ethical quality. Thus it could be said against MacIntyre that we do not have “fragments” of the old ethical system but a significantly different set of concerns.

MacIntyre’s revived Aristotelianism is no more convincing. His decision to abandon the search for metaphysical foundations of the *telos* avoids one set of criticisms but his alternative of grounding it in a community and tradition creates other serious difficulties. Perhaps the most basic is that while MacIntyre still wishes to speak of *the* good life for man, it is hard to see how any socially-based version can avoid being plural due to the great divergences between societies in their forms of life and core values. This gives MacIntyre’s efforts to characterise the good life an elusiveness which is quite alien to Aristotle; tellingly, he can only define it as a process, not give it concrete form: ‘the good life for man is the life spent in seeking for the good life for man’.¹³ This absence of content raises doubts about the extent to which MacIntyre can deal with the problems of *anomie* he identified in the liberal ethical framework. It also leaves MacIntyre vulnerable to the classic liberal critique of community-based ethical systems, namely that they are only as good as the quality of the community that forms them, and are as likely to instantiate a society’s irrational prejudices as they are its wisdom. MacIntyre is clearly aware of this danger, insisting that he intends the particularity of one’s community to form only a starting point, and that ‘it is in moving forward from such particularity that the search for the good, for the universal, consists.’¹⁴ But having abandoned the “metaphysical biology” which allowed Aristotle to move from the particular to the universal, it is completely unclear what could now guide such a movement – or indeed that anything like “the universal” can still exist given the limitations of MacIntyre’s conceptual resources.

There is also a problem regarding the practicality of MacIntyre’s alternative. He makes much of the intimate connection between politics and ethics in Aristotle which has been lost with modernity’s refusal to consider

¹³ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 204.

¹⁴ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 205.

concrete notions of the good, but it is one thing to evoke nostalgia for the holistic nature of Greek ethical life and quite another to explain how something equivalent is possible under the very different conditions of modernity. As we have seen, MacIntyre emphasises the link between friendship and community, insisting that the latter should be based on the bond of friendship which ‘embodies a shared recognition of and pursuit of the good’, but this is surely only possible at any time within a small community, nothing like the scale of the modern nation-state; and the barriers must be even greater in liberal societies where there is by now a “tradition” of disagreement over ends, and an absence of “a shared recognition of and pursuit of the good”. Since MacIntyre himself admits that ‘our society as a whole has [no] shared moral first principles’,¹⁵ his proposals take on a somewhat utopian air, a suspicion not weakened by his invocation at the close of his work of St. Benedict.¹⁶ It is hard to avoid the impression that the only form of social and ethical life MacIntyre finds acceptable is unavailable to modernity as whole, and can at best be created in small communities by groups of “friends” who prefer to withdraw from the modern world.

To summarise, then, MacIntyre has some acute observations about the failure of modern ethics to deal with questions of the good life and the dangers of *anomie* that are likely to attend this failure, but he does not make a persuasive case that his neo-Aristotelian ethical framework is a viable alternative – and consequently the case for friendship’s re-incorporation into ethics remains unproven. As this means we are at something of an impasse there is a clear value in searching for a “third way”, and I have chosen to pursue this possibility by considering Nietzsche’s approach to ethics. This is, I think, a logical place to look, as MacIntyre himself identifies Nietzsche as a key figure, significantly different both from the “liberal modernity” compartment into which he happily places figures as disparate as Mill, Kant and Hume; and also from the neo-Aristotelian model MacIntyre himself proposes. Nietzsche is also one of the few modern theorists (apart from MacIntyre) to discuss the significance of friendship. MacIntyre, naturally, believes that Nietzsche’s challenge is one he can ultimately meet, but I will suggest, to the contrary, that Nietzsche’s approach to ethics is not only considerably more interesting than MacIntyre allows, but also may offer the best way of escaping the bind we would otherwise be faced with as a result of the inability of either the liberal or neo-Aristotelian framework to overcome the other side’s key objections.

¹⁵ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 236.

¹⁶ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 245.

3. NIETZSCHE AND CONTESTIVE ETHICS.

3.1 NIETZSCHE'S POSITION.

MacIntyre builds Nietzsche up as the most trenchant modern critic of the liberal ethical framework, only to conclude that Nietzsche is in the end only the *non plus ultra* of the very tradition he attacks.¹⁷ He exposes the failings of the liberal tradition effectively but according to MacIntyre has as an alternative only a vision of “the great man” who is unconcerned with morality and seeks simply to impose his will on the world. This is equivalent in MacIntyre’s view to ‘moral solipsism’, for ‘to cut oneself off from shared activity in which one has initially to learn obediently as an apprentice learns, to isolate oneself from the communities which find their point and purpose in such activities, will be to debar oneself from finding any good outside oneself.’¹⁸ Not surprisingly, MacIntyre finds this vision deeply unattractive, and if it were true that Nietzsche’s positive contribution amounted to so little then it could indeed be quickly dismissed. However, Nietzsche’s positive philosophy is notoriously difficult to decipher and in my view MacIntyre’s ultra-brief characterisation borders on caricature. There is much more to Nietzsche than the amoral, solipsistic “great man”, and in what follows I will offer a different and, I hope, more interesting account, which can be a serious rival to both liberal modernity and neo-Aristotelianism. It is, I think, a position that can be called an “ethics”, albeit one which challenges many of the current presuppositions about what ethics is. It also has a place for friendship, which would hardly be possible if MacIntyre’s characterisation of Nietzsche as a moral solipsist were correct.

To have a chance of giving Nietzsche a fair hearing it is necessary to understand that he breaks with a very basic assumption of ethical theorising, and indeed of philosophy in the Western (Platonic) tradition more generally – namely that the task of the philosopher is *to discover basic universal truths* about the object of his study. If we return to the question of why ethics shifted away from the Aristotelian framework, we will recall that a critical reason for the transformation of ethical discourse was that modernity no longer believes in the possibility of articulating universally valid truths about the good. Consequently it has shifted instead to the attempt to establish universally valid truths about basic rules of right conduct. This is clearly a retrenchment, since it is more likely that consensus can be reached on the

¹⁷ “...the Nietzschean stance turns out not to be a mode of escape from or an alternative to the conceptual scheme of liberal individualist modernity, but rather one more representative moment in its internal unfolding.” MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 241.

¹⁸ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 240.

minimum acceptable patterns of behaviour within a society than on what substantive good the members of that society should be trying to achieve. Modern liberal ethics is thus ethics *faute de mieux*, more limited in scope because it is now generally agreed that we have more limited insights into the universal than the Greeks assumed possible. As we have seen, MacIntyre does not dare to challenge this assumption (he goes along with the rejection of Aristotle's "metaphysical biology"), and is thus put in the uncomfortable position of gesturing towards *the* good life for man without any longer possessing the metaphysical framework that can show us how we will get there. But the key point is that both sides assume that the task of ethical theory is to achieve universal consensus about the ethical, whether that is conceived as right conduct or the good life.

Now an alternative response to the perceived impossibility of determining *the* good life could be, not to avoid the topic of the good life (as modernity does), nor to retain it as something like the grail, the object of a quest that will never be attained (as MacIntyre does), but to carry on discussion of the good life while openly acknowledging the impossibility of accessing a univocal truth on this matter, on the assumption that it is too important for ethics to drop (and we should therefore rather sacrifice our commitment to universality). Nietzsche, in my view, wants to do precisely this, and his approach is expressed poetically by Zarathustra in a statement which I read as highly significant for an understanding of Nietzsche's *method*:

"This – is now my way: where is yours?" Thus I answered those who asked me "the way". For the way – does not exist!¹⁹

It is clear from this comment that Nietzsche rejects the liberal response to plurality: the fact that *the way* (or *the* good life for man) does not exist is not seen as an excuse for abandoning the topic of "the way" in favour of something else. But equally he diverges from the neo-Aristotelians and their efforts to recuperate the lost unity of "the way" by reference to such entities as "community" and "tradition", which they hope will ultimately enable a consensus to be constructed as a matter of social practice even it is not grounded in "true human nature". Nietzsche is clearly uninterested in such a consensus: Zarathustra's articulation of *a way* is a *gauntlet* laid down to the world; the challenge is not to follow him but to find a suitable alternative.

I would like to describe this approach with the term "contestive ethics", and it is important to emphasise that this operates in Nietzsche both at the primary and at the meta-level. Thus at the primary normative level he advocates what he sometimes describes as "Roman virtues", which include

¹⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin, 1961), "Of the spirit of gravity".

the injunction to “be hard”²⁰ and to be ready for war and conflict.²¹ But the really distinctive feature of his thinking is that he does not seek to show that his own preferred virtues are “the true ones” but rather goes out of his way to emphasise that they are the virtues appropriate only for particular types of people, and encourages contest between these (“his”) virtues and others, notably Christian values.²² If there is “the good” for Nietzsche it is in the form of a world where contest between rival values and value-systems is expected and encouraged; conversely his vision of distopia would be a world in which a single value-system has achieved such hegemony that people no longer even realise that there could be alternatives – which is in fact very close to what he believed Christianity had achieved in nineteenth century Europe. It is something approaching a philosophical duty in his view to attack hegemonic values – making him the “philosopher of opposition” *par excellence*.

Nietzsche’s views on friendship fit seamlessly into this contestive ethics framework, as the main distinctive feature of his account is precisely that it stresses *contest* between friends: ‘In your friend you should possess your best enemy. Your heart should feel closest to him when you oppose him.’²³ This can be contrasted directly with the view of friendship ascribed by MacIntyre to Aristotle as “...that which embodies a shared recognition of and pursuit of the good. It is this sharing which is essential and primary to the constitution of any form of community...” For “shared recognition of the good” Nietzsche substitutes “contest”. The idea seems to be that the friend plays a role akin to a Zen master, obstructing and challenging us rather than supporting and comforting us. And yet though it contrasts with Aristotle, there is still something very Greek about this approach: for the point of the friend/opponent is to challenge us to achieve the best we can achieve, to attain *arete* (excellence). At the same time, it possesses a dynamism alien to the ancient worldview, which assumed that it is possible to tell the truth of the good life and the virtues once and for all. Nietzsche’s ethical framework actually *requires* the existence of a plurality of views of the good life, none of

²⁰ E.g. This new law-table do I put over you, O my brothers: Become hard! Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, “Of old and new law-tables”, #29.

²¹ In conscious opposition to Christian values he asserts at one point that “War and courage have done more great things than charity.” Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, “Of war and warriors”.

²² The *locus classicus* for the value of conflict between Roman and Christian ideals is *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. W. Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1967), I, #16, where Nietzsche states: “today there is perhaps no more decisive mark of a “higher nature”, a more spiritual nature, than that of being divided in this sense and a genuine battleground of these opposing values [Roman and Christian].”

²³ Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, “Of the friend.”

which can claim hegemony, articulated by our friends/opponents as a set of challenges to us: “will you live like this?...if not, then how?” It is thus entirely appropriate that Nietzsche *performs* the value of contest in his own texts, through his own belligerence and refusal to seek consensus through extensive appeal to shared principles in his argumentation. As I see it this is not just an interesting rhetorical feature, but an enactment of the theory of “contestive ethics”. For a modern to articulate a substantive view of the good life as if it were of universal application would in Nietzsche’s view be an act of *mauvaise foi*, and since Nietzsche insists on the importance of broaching the good life he must also insist at every step on constructing the view he expresses as a provocation, and not (in the usual philosophical manner) as a truth for Everyman.

3.2 ASSESSMENT OF NIETZSCHE’S POSITION.

Nietzsche’s approach to ethics and, within that, to friendship, is an important alternative to neo-Aristotelianism because it is not vulnerable to the kind of counter-attack liberal modernity can offer to MacIntyre. MacIntyre assumes that ethics needs to recover a shared sense of the good and that friends who share common ideals can help recreate communities with a sense of common purpose; but liberal theorists, as we have seen, have good reasons for supposing that modern societies neither can nor should rediscover a unitary sense of the good, and that friendship therefore deserves to be kept off the ethical agenda since it cannot help with regard to the modern ethical quest for minimal, universally applicable moral obligation. Nietzsche, like MacIntyre and Aristotle, sees connections between friendship and the search for the good life, but in his case friendship is seen as conducive to *contest* between rival ways or views of the good, rather than as supporting the formation of a unitary vision of the good life for man. It is thus entirely consistent with the pluralistic nature of modern societies in a way that MacIntyre’s vision of an Aristotelian revival is not.

However, while I think Nietzsche’s “third way” allows ethics to retain attractive features of both Aristotelianism and liberal modernity (namely on the one hand a focus on the good life and on the other a commitment to pluralism), it will still face major objections from both sides. As we have seen, MacIntyre accuses Nietzsche of ‘moral solipsism’, and while I think he overstates his case,²⁴ Nietzsche certainly places considerably more stress on

²⁴ Notably, MacIntyre’s suggestion that Nietzsche does not take seriously “shared activity in which one has initially to learn obedience as an apprentice learns” is plain wrong: Nietzsche is insistent on the importance of obedience as a precondition for achieving mastery. For instance in *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. W. Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1966), #188 he goes as far as to

the individual and considerably less on the community than does MacIntyre. There is, I think, an unbridgeable gap between the two outlooks on this point. MacIntyre's focus on *anomie* leads him to see the answer in a strong, unitary, coherent community which will be capable of providing individuals with a large proportion of their identity, and he assumes that in a healthy society there will be fundamental and widespread agreement about the good life. Nietzsche, by contrast, sees the need to have one's goal or purpose given to one from the outside as a sign of weakness, and understands a healthy society as one in which the highest individuals are encouraged to give themselves their own purpose and to compete among each other in setting goals and trying to achieve them: he therefore assumes that in a healthy society there will be fundamental and widespread *disagreement* about the good life.

But MacIntyre is wrong in thinking that Nietzsche's individualism places him squarely in the camp of liberal modernity, for Nietzsche praises the individual in a way that sets him apart from liberal ethical theory. Whereas the latter is concerned with establishing minimal codes of moral obligation and the essentially *negative* task of limiting the interference of other individuals and the state in our private lives, Nietzsche is interested not in protecting the individual but in encouraging him to *become great*, which he typically expresses in the formula: "not freedom *from what*, but freedom *for what*?"²⁵ Liberal ethical theory's focus on treating others fairly is thus a matter of indifference to Nietzsche. He is quite ready to sanction interference with others if that will lead to their development; indeed, it may well be approaching a duty to do so: Zarathustra's *Übermensch* teaching after all begins with the words, "man is something to be overcome. What have you done to overcome him?"²⁶ From a liberal standpoint, then, Nietzsche is an individualist only in a very qualified sense: he is for the individual who is *engaged in a process of (self-) overcoming*. And his commitment to pluralistic societies is not, as it is for liberal modernity, a consequence of a commitment to letting individuals choose their own path; rather, pluralistic societies are seen as conducive to greater possibilities of "overcoming", since the contest of rival traditions stimulates those who take part in it. Not difference *per se*, but the *contest* between different ideals and traditions is where Nietzsche locates value. And this, needless to say, is also very different from the liberal ethical tradition which generally seeks to ringfence differences and places a keep out sign marked "tolerance" in front of them.

suggest that "What is essential "on heaven and earth" seems to be, to say it once more, that there should be *obedience* over a long period of time and in a *single* direction: given that, something always develops, and has developed, for whose sake it is worth while to live on earth..."

²⁵ Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, "Of the way of the creator".

²⁶ Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Prologue, #3.

To summarise, then, Nietzsche does clearly present a “third way” which, while it has certain overlaps with both neo-Aristotelian and modern liberal approaches to ethics, is nevertheless radically distinct from both of them and not in my view assimilable to either of the other two. To the extent that he combines an Aristotelian stress on the goal of life with liberal theory’s stress on the primacy of the individual, he might be considered a hybrid between the two; but the martial side of Nietzsche’s thinking, his stress on opposition and contest, marks a radical break with both the other approaches, and indeed with Western approaches to ethics in general. Hitherto, it has always been assumed in our tradition that disagreement on ethical questions is a problem requiring a solution: the great divide has concerned whether agreement should be sought at the level of substantive questions of the good, or rather at the level of a framework of right conduct which would render any disagreement on substantive questions harmless. Nietzsche turns things on their head, seeing disagreement as healthy and consensus as suspect: he would *create*, rather than resolve antagonisms. Since in his view the true friend is also the true antagonist, we can conclude that his unconventional notion of friendship is an integral part of his unconventional view of ethics.

CONCLUSION: HOW FRIENDSHIP CAN RETURN TO ETHICS

If I am right, it is no accident that Nietzsche and MacIntyre are among the very few modern philosophers who even mention friendship. For modernity has generally assumed that it is impossible to articulate a universally valid view of the good life for man and that the topics of ethics have to be redrawn accordingly, to concentrate instead on basic moral obligations, about which we might still hope to discover general truths. Friendship, as a form of human interaction which is non-universal, selective, and particular by its very nature cannot hope to fit in this scheme; hence its exclusion. And the great challenge for those who would like friendship and other more substantive elements of “the good life” to be returned to the ethical table is to show how this will still be possible after the discrediting of “true human nature”, the concept around which the original Aristotelian discussion of the good life was constructed.

So is friendship, then, a proper topic for ethics? In the sense that people have never stopped asking themselves “how should I live?” there is and always has been a “market” for an ethics of the good life which would include topics such as friendship, but the great inhibitor in modernity has been the pervasive sense that “the” good life is an illusion, and consequently that philosophers no longer have a right to enquire about it. MacIntyre has tried to find a way back to the good life without recourse to Aristotelian

metaphysics, but in my view he is better at the negative task of showing the deficiencies of the liberal ethical tradition, and hence the *need* for a return to good life concerns, than at the positive task of resuscitating Aristotelianism. As he himself admits, his approach sets him on a collision course with the modern world, and a retreat to some sort of vaguely monastic life would seem to be the only way that the sort of Aristotelian community he hopes for can in fact come about under present conditions. Nietzsche's approach, on the other hand, avoids this sort of head-on confrontation with modern pluralistic societies. He accepts unreservedly modernity's judgement that "the" good life does not exist, but in contrast to the liberal ethical tradition he still insists on the need for philosophy to discuss it anyway. He can do so because he is not signed up to the usual philosophical assumption that the task of ethical theory is to seek universal consensus – indeed, he insists on the importance of contestation and disagreement, promoting and exemplifying what I've called "contestive ethics". This approach would allow a return of friendship to ethics and is consistent with key assumptions and characteristics of modernity, but we followers in the footsteps of Plato should be under no illusions about how radical a break with tradition is involved in taking up Nietzsche's gauntlet – nothing less than abandonment of "the truth". If we are ready to accept this challenge, then we are ready for a return of friendship to ethics.