BARTOLOME DE LAS CASAS ESSAY SERIES

First Essay: The Closing of the American Heart?

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Something lost

To study the classics of Greek and Roman civilization is a bit like a mature man reflecting on his hopes and dreams as a young man. There was so much potential: Has he fulfilled it? There was so much he had wanted to do, perhaps, but did not: Where did he go wrong? Western cultures are derived from those of Greek and Rome. So how do we stand in comparison with them? Look at the ferment, the inquisitiveness, the childlike creativity and speculation of a Sophocles, a Plato, or a Euclid. Have we used this inheritance well?

There can be no doubt that in most domains we have indeed done well. LaGrange, Gauss, and Goedel are worthy successors of Euclid; Shakespeare excels Sophocles; Michelangelo aimed to surpass Pheidias, and he did. In matters of philosophy,

however, things are not so clear, and also in simple reflection on ordinary social life. Consider something so ordinary as old age. Old age is its own time, with its own meaning and challenges. Recognizing this, the ancients wrote essays on the subject, and it became a distinct genre: a discourse *de Senectute*. If you were wise, you had something to say about how to live well in old age. Yet, although we have our self-help and health books, we do not see 'old age' as an interesting moral entity. Old age is for retiring; traveling around the country, perhaps; and awaiting death in an 'assisted living environment'. We do not think that old age presents us with a specific task, or that it is meant to elicit a distinctive contribution.

Something similar is true of friendship, also a part of ordinary life. If you scan the history of thought, and look for discussions of friendship, you will see something rather remarkable. All of the great philosophers in ancient Greece and Rome wrote on friendship. Plato devotes a couple of dialogues to it and is constantly intrigued by how Socrates practiced it. Nearly one-fifth of Aristotle's great treatise on the moral life, the *Nicomachean Ethics*, is devoted to friendship. Cicero, the Roman orator and popularizer of Greek philosophy, wrote a famous treatise "On Friendship". Plutarch, the most famous moralist of antiquity, wrote several essays on the subject, including the very practical, "How to Tell a Flatterer from a Friend". And the trend continues throughout the Middle Ages, Renaissance, and early Modern period, largely in creative imitation of the ancient exemplars.

Yet in the 18th century, or thereabouts, the long tradition of practical writing on friendship begins to dwindle, and by the 20th century it has vanished. Immanuel Kant gave a lecture on the subject in a derivative work of his, and Emerson writes on friendship along with other topics in his *Essays*, but besides this, no important philosopher after 1700 has written on the subject. (Friendship is not alone: no important modern philosopher discusses marriage or the family. But that is another matter.) All the great treatises on ethics in modern times—Hume's second *Enquiry*; Mill's *Utilitarianism*; Kant's second *Critique*—ignore friendship altogether. Even the anti-moralists, such a Nietzsche, have nothing to say about it. And this trend in writing is reflected similarly in teaching: until very recently, it was unknown for friendship to be discussed in a university classroom.

Now in some cases, when we look back to the ancients and see that they did or thought something that we ignore, we do not think we are the losers for all that. Slavery was a constant in the ancient world; we've abolished it. The ancients were preoccupied with 'Fate'; we've largely escaped the fate of dwelling upon that. But with friendship it's different. We sense that we are the ones who are at fault. We lack something human, which the ancients more easily appreciated, and which somehow came to them effortlessly and naturally. To take up that image of a mature man looking back on his youth: we look back upon the spontaneous generosity of character described in the ancient discussions and wonder why our nature, in comparison,

seems so crabbed and confined. It's as though, in this topic at least, we've become embittered, and smaller in moral stature than the ancients.

Something gained

But what explains this change? Why is it that a topic so important to an Aristotle or a Plato, is as nothing to the modern mind? Socrates used to ask his companions, "How many friends do you have?" and he would chide them when they could give no definite answer. "You mean you can tell me how many oxen, or goats, or horses you have, but you can't tell me how many friends you've got--when friends are so much more valuable?" Socrates was of course lampooning the very human tendency we have, to put great concentration into secondary things, and to avoid thinking about truly important things. But what was then a flaw in particular individuals has become a vice of an entire culture. As a result, although an Athenian in 400 BC gave no thought to who his friends were; an American of today, although he's perhaps studied quasars and quarks and DNA, hasn't the slightest clue, even, of what a friend is.

Perhaps we neglect friendship, in part, because we neglect what the ancients thought friendship was important for. They thought friendship was essential for happiness, yet we deny that there is such a thing as happiness. — "What do you mean? How do we deny happiness? Isn't contemporary society based on the very idea of the 'pursuit of happiness'"? —But I insist that we deny it. Here is my argument: You cannot think

that something exists if it is not objective; we do not regard happiness as objective; therefore, we do not regard it as real. And certainly, we don't regard it as objective. There is no fact of the matter, we think, as to what will make us happy. We do not think that someone can coherently say, "I am convinced I'm happy", yet be wrong about that. We identify happiness with subjective satisfaction. But if that is all that happiness is, who's to say that friends are necessary for it? In fact, no other person could be an essential part of my subjective satisfaction. He might be an instrument for it, or an occasion for my gratification, but not a real element of my well-being.

Moreover, the ancients thought that friendship was necessary to acquire virtue, but we deny that virtue exists. We deny that it exists, because we deny that a human being has a nature or purpose. For virtues are simply what a thing needs in order to do well what it is meant to achieve by its nature. A knife is supposed to cut: that's the kind of thing it is, its 'nature'. What must a knife be like, then, in order to cut well? It needs to have a good blade, which holds an edge, and a sturdy handle. Then these are the 'virtues' of a knife (and we say that a knife cuts 'in virtue' of these things). Deny however that a knife has any purpose or point, and you can no longer say what features would make a knife good or bad. But we effectively deny that human life has any set purpose. We are therefore precluded from thinking that some human traits are virtues and others are not. And since we do not recognize the reality of virtues, we cannot think, as the ancients did, that friends are, so to speak, the naturally appointed means by which human beings are meant to acquire and to grow in virtue.

We neglect friendship, too, because we've lost our sense of the 'middle' of society, so to speak. A healthy society is one with a rich network of associations and institutions; with cross-connections among families, clans, and groups; with neighborhoods and districts. This is what social scientists refer to as 'civil society'; it is where we accumulate 'cultural capital', as economists say. But the tendency in our culture is to split society into 'individuals' who are set up against 'the state' and 'the business world' and 'the media culture'. The 'mediating institutions' that are meant to buffer the individual from the state, and that infuse civic life with softening affections derived from the family and friendships, are weak and withering. This 'loss of the middle', too, is reflected in our patterns of thought. Our social philosophies tend to promote either 'the autonomy of the self' (individualism) or a sense of obligation towards the total well-being of society (collectivism), but they have little to say about the human realm in between.

What is the remedy for all this? Here, in a small way, the study of classical writings on friendship can be of real assistance. It gives us a fresh way of looking at the world; it helps us to escape the false alternatives presented to us by our culture. Aristotle, for instance, says that in a true friendship the very existence of a friend is valued for its own sake; what we love and wish for is simply that he or she exist. Ponder that thought, develop all its implications, and try to put it into action—and there you have a remedy against subjective conceptions of happiness. Again, he writes that

friendship consists essentially in reciprocity, and that friendship involves extending relationships of reciprocity, by recognizing that we are related to those previously foreign to us, in ways analogous to our relationship to family members and associates. It is a natural tendency of friendship, he explains, to look for ways of treating others equal to us as if they are brothers or sisters, those under out authority as if they were sons or daughters. Again, dwell on this idea, appreciate its good sense and wisdom, recognize the reality of reciprocity in one's own life—and there you have a formula for developing bonds of solidarity across society.

I have often thought that there should be an eighth 'capital sin', after pride, envy, lust, and so on: the failure we all suffer from, of taking things for granted. An old man looking back over his life might well conclude that most of the time he's taken his wife and children and buddies for granted; and we, looking back to the ancients and what they wrote on friendship, might conclude that we've similarly taken friendship for granted. To read the classics on this subject is to be startled; to realize that something needs to be recovered. And on that recovery may hinge the recovery of much else that is human and good.

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