On the Possibility of a Phenomenology of *Philia*

> Friendship, like the immortality of the soul,
> is too good to be believed.
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> R. W. Emerson, *Essays*, 1841

I

We believe that friends are most important to our life. Without friends, our existence becomes monotonous and meaningless. It constitutes the essence of our happiness. C. S. Lewis regards friendship as the most human form of relationship, because it is "the least *natural* of loves; the least instinctive, organic, biological, gregarious and necessary."[1] Unlike kinship, we freely choose our friends and enter into friendship voluntarily. This form of love, *philia*, is different from *eros* and *agape*, in the emphasis on mutuality and reciprocality: friends, as individuals, bestow goodwill and value onto each other.

Indeed, we all treasure our friends[2] and consider friendship something permanent because we trust that what we have given to and received from a profound friendship should last forever. Of course, we have many friends but only a few good friends, with whom we share feelings, viewpoints, interest, secrets and life in general. We know intuitively who are non-friends, just friends or good friends. To be sure, in everyday life we do not make a very serious distinction between various kinds of friendships. In a civil society friendliness is a polite and courteous way of dealing with people we encounter. Indeed, fraternity is in essence collective friendship, which is a virtue in any modern culture. Thus we call most people friends, with or without any

[1] C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves*, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1960, p. 88.

[2] I take this opportunity to thank my good friend Kwok-ying Lau, firstly for his paper on Derrida's friendship, which has challenged my previous conception of friendship and inspired the writing of this chapter; secondly, and more importantly, for our togetherness in working for phenomenology in the last ten years. We might not be always agreeing with each other, but nevertheless we stand side by side for many common concerns.

knowledge of them, even though we have just met and might never see each other again. Nevertheless, in a reflective manner, we think we can identify who are good or even best friends, because we know friends are not equal: we have preferences.

But do we know what friendship is? Aristotle's treatise on *philia* in Book 8 and 9 of the *Nicomachean Ethics* sets the standard for any philosophical discussion on friendship. From Cicero and Seneca, Montaigne and Bacon, Kant and Hegel to a modern philosopher like Elizabeth Telfer, Aristotelian *philia* finds its variations in all these philosophers of friendship. Friendship is essentially linked with virtue and justice. The best friend is another self. Hence friendship is a moral issue. The discussion on the ideal or perfect friendship tells us what good friends should be. We expect ourselves and our best friends to have mutual goodwill and to take the good of ourselves as one's own, and vice versa. We hope friendship will last. But how do we know whether he or she is a good friend? How do we know whether someone who was a friend in the past will remain a friend? How do I know I was considered as a friend before? How do we know we have entered into "pure" or "perfect" friendship and consider ourselves as best friends?

The aim of this short chapter is to reflect on the phenomenon of *philia*. I would like to show that the tradition of the philosophy of friendship has only demonstrated what friend and friendship is and should be, without showing the *how* of friendship. A phenomenology of *philia* is should be prior to an ethics of Friendship.

II

"My dear friends, there is no such thing as a friend!"[3] Here Kant is lamenting the unattainability of perfect friendship. According to Kant, "Friendship (considered in its perfection) is the union of two persons through equal mutual love and respect."[4] The impossibility of perfect

[3] See "Meine lieben Freunde, es gibt keinen Freund!" in Immanuel Kant, *Metaphysik der Sitten*, Hamburg: Verlag Felix Meiner, 1966, p. 331. English translation in *The Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. & ed. Mary Gregor, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 215. It should be noted that although Montaigne, Derrida and Kant ascribe this apostrophe to Aristotle, nowhere is this quotation to be found in the Aristotelian corpus. Interestingly Kant, in his *Lecture on Ethics*, ascribed this quotation to Socrates instead of Aristotle. See Immanuel Kant, *Lectures on Ethics*, trans. Peter Heath, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, p. 185.

[4] Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, *op. cit*., p. 215.

friendship lies in the tension between self-love and general love. "On moral grounds we would choose friendship, but on practical ones, self-love, for nobody could take better care than I of my own happiness. But whichever one of the two I take, there is always something amiss."[5] Hence Kant is pointing to an irresolvable moral conflict: perfect friendship requires a surrender of one's own happiness. Indeed, when I address people as my dear friends, who are friends as long as they are regarded under the three categories of "need, taste or disposition,"[6] I do not have to compare them with the highest standard of perfect friendship. They are "dear" to me because we have performed our duty and caring towards each other on an equal and honorable basis, and as such they are measured against the idea of perfect friendship. But there is no absolute scale for this measurement. Whether we are friends of need and taste, we are friends as long as we are tending to the needs of one another, or as long as we have pleasure together in enjoying life. Our friendship ceases when no common need or pleasure is present. In short, through activities in common need and interest in life we are friends. Yet friends of disposition and sentiment are free of such constraints of social suppression of one's own feelings and sentiment. We are in full communion with each other. While we can have many friends in need or taste, we can only have one or two friends of disposition. "There is no such thing as a friend" refers to a highest level of perfect friendship. There are indeed common, general or sometimes good friends, but it is impossible to have a true and ideal friend.

In this respect, Kant is not far from Aristotle in his discussion on friendship. Perfect friendship, according to Aristotle, is "the friendship of men who are good, and alike in excellence."[7] There are of course different types of friendship based on utility and pleasure. But friends of virtues, that is, friends engaging in a rational and voluntary association with each other, share a common life and spend time together. Aristotle emphasizes the essential contribution of friendship towards human happiness. A true friend is one's other self, "furnishes what man cannot provide by his own effort."[8] But in what sense is a true friend "another self" or "alter ego" of myself? Of course, according to Aristotle, only good and virtuous men can be friends. If a true friend is

[5] Kant, *Lectures on Ethics*, *op. cit.*, pp. 184-185.
[6] *Ibid*., p. 186.
[7] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, VIII, 1156b7.
[8] *Ibid*., IX, 1169b6, see also 1169a29-32; 1170b5-7.

another self, then the condition for the possibility of a perfect friendship is the identity of myself with the other. I am you and you are me! But it is impossible to expect that my friend and I share everything in life. We remain different individuals; only in some activities are we in the same or perhaps identical feeling, thought, moral disposition or sentiment. *Alter ego* is only an idea to be realized. Though the Aristotelian *philia* seems to be different from the Platonic *eros* in the sense that *philia* stresses on reciprocality rather than an egoistic pursuit of the erotic object, be it the good, beauty or truth, in *philia* I am seeking the good of myself in my friend; though it is not for my own sake but his, I desire nevertheless the good in ourselves. The claim of another self, if taken literally, means a reformulation of Aristophanes's myth of the reunion of two separated halves of a whole. Thus we fall back on the discussion of *eros* in Plato's *Symposium*. *Philia* is still a kind of self-love.

"O my friends, there is no friend." Though there is no place to trace the origin of this quotation in the work of Aristotle, it is not unimaginable to think that Aristotle might utter this apostrophe. Where is another self to be found? Where is another Aristotle? If the entire philosophical quest of the ancient Greeks begins with the dictum *know thyself*, then the condition for the possibility of perfect friendship depends on the knowledge of my true self, in order to know if the self of my friend is the same true self. But the knowledge of my true self is surely not given to me readily. It is my task to seek and understand what my *true* and *authentic* (*eigentliches*) self is. Hence the paradox: in order to have a true friend as my other self, I have to know what my true self is; but there is no certainty of knowing myself, let alone my *true* self. Thus how can I be sure to know the self of my friend to be the same or identical self of myself? Here, I think, lies the ambiguity of the concept of self. We believe in good faith that we have goodwill towards each other, hence we assume that the reciprocality of our mutual love in recognizing the Other-another-self to be mine or his/her. Our assumed ideal friendship is after all a beautiful misunderstanding. We can think of the reverse situation: this apostrophe is not uttered by me but by my friend, who has discovered that I am not like his own self. His mournful cry is as painful as mine. We thought we were friends but in reality we are not true friends at all.

The agony is not so much the realization that my friend is not a friend but that he is not a *true* friend. He is still a friend, who is nevertheless deficient in the ethical demand of true friendship. On the other hand, both Aristotle and Kant stress the rarity of true friends. We

cannot afford to have more than one or two friends because it requires exclusive concern, affection, intimacy, sharing of private time, space and thought as well as unquestioned duty towards each other. It is mutual love of very high moral demand. Hence if it fails, part of myself will be dead, because my assumed togetherness with him in past friendly activities is gone. We are demoted from a noble friendship back to a common "we," which in essence is no longer virtue but utility or pleasure (Aristotle), need or taste (Kant).

Thus when Emerson equates friendship with immorality,[9] he desires to attain it in spite of its apparent impossibility. Nevertheless, he says, "The higher the style we demand of friendship, of course the less easy to establish it with flesh and blood. We walk alone in the world. Friends such as we desire are dreams and fables. But a sublime hope cheers ever the faithful heart, that elsewhere, in other regions of the universal power, souls are now acting, enduring and daring, which can love us and which we can love."[10] The aspiration of true *philia* is a dream. Why is that? Is there any pedagogy of *philia*? The ladder of love, so eloquently described by Diotima in Plato's *Symposium*, points to the way to practice love. We can follow the instruction from the pursuit of physical beauty at the beginning and gradually proceed step by step to the highest level at the end of the education. "Then suddenly he will see a beauty of a breathtaking nature, Socrates, the beauty which is the justification of all his efforts so far."[11] To be sure, there is no comparable pedagogical method to achieve the true goal of *philia*. But instead there are criteria or conditions of perfect friendship proposed by Aristotle, Cicero, Kant, Montaigne, Lewis and Telfer. However, even though I have the will to observe all the criteria, I can only fulfill the necessary conditions for a true friendship. There is still a lack of the sufficient condition: the person as the Other of my intended friendship. Unlike the erotic pursuit, in which I have all the will power within myself, to search for the ultimate goal, I cannot force anybody to be my true friend. This Other-another-self is beyond my ability. I cannot ask for it nor produce it. I cannot demand the Other to return the goodwill to me because I have extended mine. Mutuality and reciprocality are conditions but not a necessary outcome of all my efforts to

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[9] See Emerson, "Friendship" in Michael Pakaluk, ed., *Other Selves: Philosophers on Friendship*, Indianapolis: Hackett, 1991, p. 22.

[10] *Ibid*., p. 231.

[11] Plato, *Symposium*, 210e-211a.

perform the good of the Other for his or her sake. I can only pray and hope for this to happen: be my good friend! But this might not happen and most of time the wish is ignored. Then the agony comes back to let me utter again: "O my dear friend, there is no friend!"

III

But is this pain of not finding a true friend necessary? Is it really meaningful to seek this perfect friendship? Perhaps both friendship and immorality are illusory concepts, creating a false expectation horizon of human experience. Derrida's *The Politics of Friendship* begins with the same apostrophe, taken from Montaigne, who ascribed it back to Aristotle. Derrida does not offer any ethics of friendship in both his essay and book of the same title. The *politics* of friendship is a hermeneutics[12] of the ambiguity and subtlety of human experience in the *friendly* relationship between myself and the Other. There is a break from the traditional understanding of friendship in terms of virtue and justice. It opens a different horizon of a dialectics of friendly encounter between friends. It is a dialectics of longing and disappointment, *philia* and *homonia*. Friendship cannot be considered as a state, something accomplished. It is not given but a giving by responding and answering to the call of the Other. Derrida describes this as follows: "Friendship is never a present given, it belongs to the experience of expectation, promise, or engagement. Its discourse is that of prayer, it inaugurates, but reports (*constate*) nothing. It is not satisfied with what is, it moves out to this place where a responsibility opens up a future."[13] Thus, "[…] there is no friend" does not refer just to a disappointment of lacking an ideal friend, but rather it is an appeal, "because it makes a sign toward the future: be my friends, for I love or will love you, listen to me, be sensitive to my cry, understand and be compassionate; I am asking for sympathy and consensus, become the friends to whom I aspire."[14] By appealing to the future, friendship necessarily reveals its past.[15] "O my

[12] Derrida does not use the term "hermeneutics." I take it from Lau Kwok-ying in his paper: "Non-familiarity and Otherness: Derrida's Hermeneutics of Friendship and its Political Implication," paper presented at the OPO II, August 2005.

[13] Jacques Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, trans. George Collins, London: Verso, 1997, p. 236.

[14] Jacques Derrida, "Politics of Friendship," in *Journal of Philosophy* 85 (1988), p. 635.

[15] *Ibid.*

dear friends," if uttered in the present, must be grounded in the past experience so that I can address to my dear friends. There is already a distinction between friends and non-friends or strangers made. Friendship is already there. Hence the second part of the apostrophe, "there is no friend," is understood on the basis of that friendship past and thus the appeal to the future.

Friendship has a temporal structure which has not yet been investigated in traditional philosophy. Derrida's unique contribution to the discussion on friendship, I think, lies in the phenomenological description of the temporality of friendship. He said:

> Behind the logical game of contradiction or paradox, perhaps the "O my friends, there is no friend" signifies first and last this surpassing of the present by the undeniable future anterior which would be the very movement and time of friendship. Undeniable future anterior, the absolute of an unpresentable past as well as future, which is to say of traces that one can only ever deny by summoning them into the light of phenomenal presence. A temporal torsion thus knots up the predicative proposition ("there is no friend") within the apostrophe ("O my friends"). The torsion of this asymmetry envelops the theoretical determination or the knowledge within the performativity of a prayer that it will never exhaust. This asymmetry leads us back to what I shall call the *question of the response*.[16]

This is a response to the Other. The traditional ethics of friendship regards reciprocality and mutuality between friends the essence of friendship. We expect, or perhaps demand reciprocal goodwill from friends because we have given our goodwill to them, presumably not for our own sake but for theirs. But why do we need a return? If we can get away from the self-love theory of friendship, then what we are looking for is not the repay of reciprocal goodwill but an appeal. It is because friendship is not an ever present state of affairs. Friends are to be appreciated in their particular temporal context of friendship. I am free to enter into a profound friendship with my friends. But there is no guarantee that this friendship will last forever. The essence (*Wesen*) of friendship lies not in reciprocal virtue but in *friendly* activities between myself and my friend. The present friendship summons the friendly past and appeals to the future because of this past. Friends may have

[16] *Ibid*., pp. 637-638.

been intimate, confident and passionate in the past, but the intimacy, confidence and passion may have faded. This intimate, confident and passionate friendship has nevertheless entered into the historical existence of myself and my friend. If I say there is not friend, I mean the absent presence of intimacy, confidence and passion. I appeal for a renaissance of that friendship. It is not a demand but a request: be my friend again.

However, it immediately enters into the most intricate phenomenon of friendship. On the one hand it is the most ordinary human experience to have friends at various levels, whether it is utility, pleasure, need, or disposition. Friends are everywhere. But on the other hand it is difficult to precisely identify the emergence of friendship. Although we can prescribe all the conditions and essential characteristics of friendship, we cannot describe the how when a friendship appears. Friendship cannot be given to anybody but to one or a few individuals. I am a friend only to this or that particular person. There is an intrinsic preference limited only to a few. The discussion of the ethical meaning of friendship is posterior reflection. Friendship and friends must first be there. There is also an unavoidable implicit distinction between common and true friends. Yet this distinction is ambiguous and difficult to draw. Time and again I thought I have an intuitive grasp of a nascent friendship which turns out to be a good/bad faith in disguise.

The ground for my intuitive but unreflective understanding of a nascent friendship is that we, as everyday Daseins, live in a world determined most of the time by the They (*das Man*). Our being-with-one-another (*Miteinandersein*) is in the mode of idle talk and ambiguity. In a rare discussion on friendship, Heidegger writes:

> A friendship may no longer and not primarily consist in a resolute and thus mutually generous way of siding with one another in the world, but in a constant and prior watching out for how the other sets out to deal with what is meant by friendship, in a constant check on whether he turns out be one or not. Inasmuch as such a being-with-one-another can now come into play from both sides, it can lead to the most profound conversations and discussions, and one thinks one has a friend (*man sei befreundet*).[17]

[17] Martin Heidegger, *History of the Concept of Time*, trans. Theodore Kisiel, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985, p. 280.

Heidegger's insight into the understanding of the ambiguity of friendship is most revealing. Traditional philosophy of friendship does not take into account of the *existentiell* condition in which everyday Daseins encounter one another. Accordingly, we are assumed to be rational and conscious persons entering into the communion of people and we should have the measure for common friend or true friend, so that we know how to distinguish a common friend from a true friend. But our everyday life is governed by ambiguous situations. We are for the most part inauthentic (*uneigentlich*), i.e. our own selves are being covered. I am not myself because I belong primarily to Others. "By 'Others' we do not mean everybody else but me—those over against whom the 'I' stands out. They are rather those from whom, for the most part, one does not distinguish oneself—those among whom one is too."[18] Under this condition we are all wearing a definite *persona*, a certain social mask, through its prescribed role by the Others and the corresponding etiquette, to interact with each other. Friendliness is surely a preferred atmosphere for all human encounters. Hence we think we are always making friends.

IV

"O my dear friends, there is no friend." The reading of this apostrophe is shifted through Heidegger's analysis of the Others. The accent now is on the ambiguity between common friends and true friends. From a vocative to a reflective mode, this apostrophe becomes: "O I have many friends but I have no friend." But where can I find my friend from friends? The answer depends on how I know when true friendship manifests. Unfortunately I do not know any definite way. True friendship is not something present-at-hand. It is also not subjective, in the sense that it is not a psychological disposition or mental state. It is something already there. As such, it is a mode of attunement (*Stimmung*).[19] According to Heidegger, attunement is not a feeling, not

[18] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie & Edward Robinson, London: SCM Press, 1962, p. 154.

[19] Heidegger's phenomenological description of attunement is one of the most important parts of *Daseinsanalysis* of Being-in in *Being and Time*; cf. §29. For a more detailed discussion on attunement see *The Fundamental Concept of Metaphysics*, trans. William McNeill & Nicholas Walker, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995, esp. §16.

a subjective or objective thing. "An attunement is to be awakened. Yet this means that it is there and not there. If attunement is something that has the character of 'there and not there', then attunement itself has to do with the innermost essence of man's being, with his Dasein. *Attunement belongs to the being of man.*"[20] The fundamental attunement which Heidegger thus interpreted in *Fundamental Concept of Metaphysics* has no apparent relationship to friendship: *philia* is not present in my friends but it is to be awakened in my friend. The inability of having a true friendship with my friend is the recognition of the radical finitude of human beings. Friendship is something beyond my control. I cannot will it to happen, though I can hope for that. However, it is already there if it is to be awakened. As such true friendship is a kind of mysterious gift to myself and my friend. When it is awakened it can be recognized and appreciated intuitively and immediately. Perhaps a short story from Zhuangzi may illustrate what I want to say.

> Three men—Zisang Hu, Meng Zifan and Ziqin Zhang—were talking together when one of them said, "Who can befriend others without showing any friendship and help others without leaving any trace? Who can transcend the world and wander in the universe, forgetting about life and death until infinity?" They looked at one another and smiled. They were of the same mind, and so they became friends at once.[21]

There is no answer to the questions raised. In fact, there is no need to answer. Yet these three men smile and they know they understand each other because they are of the same mind. *Philia* is there and they are friends, *true* friends.

Perhaps the apostrophe should be amended. There is no need to mourn for the absence or lacking of true friend. Instead of saying "there is no friend." I should say: "O my dear friends, we are all friends and we can be friends!"

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[20] *Ibid*., p. 63.

[21] *Zhuangzi*, trans. Wang Rongpei, Changsha: Hunan People's Publishing House, 1999, p. 103.