Introduction: the Ambiguity of Friendship

Their relationship consisted
In discussing if it existed.
Thom Gunn

For a long time I was single. I relied heavily on friends for company, support and affection. And most of the time I was happy about that. Implicitly, I agreed with Aristotle: who would choose to live without friends even if they had every other good thing, he said. Moreover, I regarded myself as exceptionally lucky with my friends and still do.

But for all that, I was often alone and sometimes lonely. The friendships I enjoyed only went so far.

The limits were most obvious when compared to the relationships I witnessed between lovers or within families. It seemed to me that notwithstanding the occasional exception, friendship simply cannot bear the demands and intimacies, great and small, that are the very stuff of these other relationships of love and blood.

This set me thinking because my experience seemed very different from the way friendship is portrayed at a cultural level. Here it is frequently heralded as nothing less than the defining relationship of our age. In TV soaps, the characters always have their friends to return to when their sexual adventures fail; lovers come and go, but friends remain. Or, according to agony aunts, friendship is the ingredient that makes partnerships work (a suggestion that would have surprised many of those same agony aunts’ aunts who ironically might have suggested the ingredient of partnership to make relationships work). For sociologists, a common assumption is that friendship is now most people’s relationship of choice, and people often see their friends in opposition to traditional relationships of obligation: as marriage and family
flounders, to say nothing of lifestyles becoming more mobile, the belief (or hope) is that friendship will carry them through the serial monogamies and speedy pace of life. And for politicians, the idea of civic friendship is also gaining ground. Here the thought is that modern democracy can be revivified by a notion of citizenship that includes a concern for others’ wellbeing. Such civic friendship would counterbalance the dominant economic and individualistic model of politics which is mostly about rules and rights, and therefore tends to marginalise the civic space.

All in all, friendship is conceived of positively, as the new social glue to paste over networked lives: because it is ideally structured to cope with the stresses and strains, great and small, that modern life throws up, it will stop them falling apart.

But will it? My experience told me that whilst friendship can be great, its affections and commitments are often ambiguous. When a lover calls they automatically get first priority and family commitments are, well, family commitments. So perhaps the soaps are romanticising friendship, the agony aunts are resorting to it too quickly, and the sociologists and politicians are being overly optimistic?

In fact, this question is also regularly debated in the same TV programmes, newspaper columns, learned journals and political speeches. It is not one that will be decided here. However, upon further reflection it seemed to me that another, perhaps even more fundamental, question is rarely being asked – and it is one with which philosophy should be able to help. What exactly is friendship? What is its nature, its rules, its promise? How can one differentiate between its many forms? How does it compare to and mix with the connections shared between lovers and within families? If at least a kind of friendship is elastic enough to survive the relational stresses and strains of our flexible ways of life, is that friendship also strong enough to bear the burden of the human need to belong, to be connected, to be loved?

These questions are trickier to answer than it might first seem because friendship is hugely diverse. Although it is relatively easy to come up with definitions that account for part of it, it is much harder to find one that does not exclude any of its facets. Aristotle, whose writing on friendship still sets the philosophical agenda to this day, found as much 2,500 years ago. Friendship, he proposed, is at the very least a relationship of goodwill between individuals who reciprocate that goodwill. A reasonable starter for ten. However, as soon as he tried to expand it, the definition seemed to unravel.