

The Inner Ring: C. S. Lewis and Ciceronian Friendship

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Anyone even vaguely familiar with the life and writings of C. S. Lewis will not need to be persuaded that his thinking was steeped in his training for the study of classics. He attained a remarkable facility with the Greek and Latin languages while in his teens (Zaleski 84), and his early professional ambition was to write and profess classical philosophy. The happy turn (for us at least, I think) to medieval and renaissance literature came later, of that necessity often experienced by academics trying to find a way into the groves of academe. The turn to Christian apologetics and theological writing came later still. That Lewis knew his Greek and Latin writers well is simply true. It is also true that while he may have been a typical academic in having a twist or two in his career path, he was atypical among humanities professors and fiction writers in the way he is associated in our minds with friendship. Perhaps some of you could name a *coterie* of the close friends of William Empson, Stanley Fish or Stephen Greenblatt, but I could not. With Lewis the case is different. His name conjures other names: Tolkien, Barfield, Williams, Sayers and Coghill, to name a few. Moreover, he wrote about friendship, beyond the working out of examples in his fictions, specifically in an oration he made at King's College in 1949 later published as "The Inner Ring" and the chapter on Friendship from his 1960 book *The Four Loves*. These two facts—his deep classical training and his association with friendship as a concept and as a way of being in the world—suggest to me that we might profitably ask what, if anything, Lewis' thinking on Friendship owe to classical writers—Plato and Aristotle, obviously, but more specifically to their great Latin synthesizer, Cicero.

This will require a brief summation of what Aristotle and Plato left to us on the subject of Friendship, and what Cicero made of all that in his late essay *Laelius: On Friendship*. There is very little friction to be found between Aristotle's section in the *Nicomachean Ethics* on Friendship and Cicero's views, although they emphasize quite different aspects of the matter, and Cicero's

temperament as a writer lends itself to producing flights of prose that inspire us where Aristotle's more diagnostic aims might leave us cold. Lewis is working in the shadow of the entire tradition, but his aims, his temperament, is Ciceronian in this rhetorical sense at least. But more interesting is what Lewis does to situate his essays in the matrix of questions and aspects this classical conversation on Friendship entails. In most ways he adopts their assumptions—on the centrality of Friendship to human happiness (so neglected in the mid-twentieth century, in Lewis' view) and its essentially ethical nature. On other points he engages that conversation by eliding or reconfiguring, as I will suggest he does on the homoeroticism that permeates Platonic discussions of Friendship, and its attendant question of even the possibility of male-female friendship. Lewis' handling of these matters is of course informed, and occasionally contorted, by the Christian orthodoxy he allied himself to in the second half of his life as a writer. In the final analysis, Lewis was, like the medieval and renaissance humanists he studied, profoundly Ciceronian, which makes the moments of departure from Cicero all the more telling.

Plato and Aristotle on Friendship

One thing Plato is quite clear on is that friendship is an important and interesting aspect of living a good life. There the clarity seems to stop. In the *Lysis*, for example, we have a dialogue that takes the investigation of the friendship of two young boys, Lysis and Menexenus, as its main purpose, but that investigation is haunted by the silent, hovering presence of a young man, Hippothales, interested in taking the eponymous Lysis as his beloved. Is the dialogue about the same matter discussed by Pausanias in *The Symposium*, or is it about the relatively non-erotic friendship of two barely-teens? It hardly matters, since while the *Lysis* covers some of the “desire-equals-need” ground covered earlier in *The Symposium*, it concludes with this disheartening valediction: “Well, Lysis and Menexenus, we have made ourselves rather ridiculous today . . . for our

hearers here will carry away the report that though we conceive ourselves to be friends with each other . . . we have not as yet been able to discover what we mean by a friend” (Plato 1911, 168). I will not bore you with my summary of the more familiar dialogues, *Phaedrus* and *Symposium*, both ostensibly about *philia* and *eros*, but the former veers off to reveal its essential interest in rhetoric, and the later famously climbs a ladder away from both erotic and friendly love of individuals to proclaim the superior call of philosophy itself: the desire for Goodness and Truth. Neither is really *about* friendship, in the final analysis. Plato teaches us more about friendship in his dialogues by showing us *philia* at work in the narrative of Socrates’ last night, the *Phaedo*, and in the amiable conversation among friends in the *Symposium*, than in the *Lysis*. The Platonic dialogues do accomplish this for posterity: classical discussions of friendship are inextricably tangled in homosocial/sexual male bondings to the exclusion of women. Plato argues that getting stuck on the homoeroticism of Pausanias (in *The Symposium*) is to exchange “gold for bronze,” and to remain perpetually at the bottom rung of Diotima’s ladder, and while Diotima is the excluded “hero” of the piece, there are still no women at the table—not even flute girls.

On the other hand, in terms of clarity, Aristotle’s *Ethics*, seems to make some genuine progress in staking out the elements and aspects of friendship as an ethical and social question. The first thing to notice is the position this discussion takes in the design of the *Nicomachean* argument. The capacity for social grace, friendliness, is one of the twelve virtues. But Friendship also becomes the topic of two of the last three sections of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, after the catalogue of Virtues has been deployed, where it is framed as “a *kind* of virtue, or *implies* virtue, and it is most necessary for living. Nobody would choose to live without friends even if he had all the other good things” (200). Here the virtuous disposition of Friendliness has elided into the practical world of external goods, and Books VIII and IX attempt to define what that external good is, what its versions are, and why it is essential to human happiness. Book VIII defines the three types of

friendship by what motivates them: 1) *Usefulness* entails those profitable associations in which people can be mutually beneficial to one another, 2) *Pleasure* is the aspect that exists between lovers, but also entails those who simply find enjoyment in each other's company, and finally those friendships based on 3) *Goodness*, recognized in another, is the form of friendship Aristotle calls "perfect":

Only the friendship of those who are good, and similar in their goodness, is perfect. For these people each alike wish good for the other *qua* good, and they are good in themselves. And it is those who desire the good of their friends for the friend's sake that are most truly friends, because each loves the other for what he is, and not for incidental qualities (205).

The touchstone assumption of classical discussions of friendship is that true, lasting, reliable friendship can only exist between genuinely virtuous people. The problem with *philia* based on either utility or pleasure is that, should the usefulness cease and the fun fade, the very grounds of the friendship evaporate. Good people can, of course, be both useful and pleasant to each other; indeed, Aristotle says that is an essential enactment of his perfect friendship, but its only foundational ground can be excellence of character and sympathy of moral outlook.

Plato emphasized the problem of *need* as the ground of attraction and desire. The mystery of *Lysis* is that this emphasis runs aground with his two exemplary young interlocutors. Their friendship, they insist, is not driven by need, or the sense that one has something the other lacks. It is pure affection of equals. Aristotle consigns the need-driven relations to the Useful variety of friendship, but he takes with relentless seriousness the notion that friendships should strive for an almost perfect *isomia*, equality. If one party of his "good men" has more wealth than his friend, and his ability to bestow material benevolence is greater, the other should naturally provide something different, but of equal value. This leads to the potentially contradictory situation of the complete, virtuous man being in need of absolutely nothing at all. Does such a man need friends? Aristotle's

answer in eminently practical: yes, because experience teaches us that having friends is naturally pleasant, while solitude is abhorrent. Men are by nature social creatures:

If, then, to the truly happy man his own existence is desirable in itself, as being by nature good and pleasant, and if the existence of his friend is scarcely less so, then his friend must also be a thing desirable. But what is desirable to him, he must have, or else fall short of happiness in this respect. Therefore to be happy a man will need virtuous friends (249).

This highest form of friendship, between virtuous men, looks to Aristotle like a complete melding of lives and requires the intimacy of shared knowledge of one another's personal situations (236), which is why Aristotle concludes our circle of true friends can never be very large (250)—there's simply not enough time and attention available to us. The argument rides on an analogy: as the best virtuous men are fully integrated in their character (the unity of the virtues) and as they "know themselves," so must they know their friends in the intimate details of their lives. As we shall see in our analysis of Lewis's *Four Loves*, this is for him a sticking point.

Ciceronian Synthesis

What does Cicero do with all this? We don't tend to look to Cicero for new ideas, or even incisive critique of his Greek philosophical forebearers, but he does provide an intelligent, very Roman, appraisal of how Greek philosophy can be of practical use to practical people. And he does have a way with words. On the matter of friendship, he writes with a degree of urgency in a time when the network of *amicitia* among the senatorial class had completely unraveled as a result of the civil war and in the years following the assassination of Caesar. During the last few years of his life, in self-imposed exile to his villa in Tuscula, Cicero turned his attention to creating a *summa* of Greek philosophy, much as Boethius would do five hundred years later, awaiting, like Cicero, his execution. During this time of intense reflection, Cicero produced an amazing range of works, including a survey of Greek thought, the *Tusculan Disputations*, a work on ethics *On Obligation*, a paeon to the

Platonic/Pythagorean view of the immortal soul, “The Dream of Scipio,” and *Laelius: On Friendship*. Regarding the last of these Michael Grant wrote, “friendship is of universal concern, and to read such an intelligent man, and such a loyal friend, on this theme cannot fail to be of value at any place or time. Indeed, no one has ever dealt with the subject in so memorable a fashion” (Cicero 1971, 174).

On Friendship is largely Aristotelian, but it must also incorporate the Stoic ideals of the brotherhood of man as a universally obligating bond of friendliness. Cicero is relatively uninterested in the first two modes of friendship from the *Ethics*. Instead, he concentrates almost entirely on what Aristotle called “perfect” friendship: the close bond between two or more genuinely good men. Utility and pleasure are not irrelevant to Cicero, but those relationships based entirely on usefulness and pleasantries do not really merit the name *friendship*, and are better thought of as what Aristotle called *companionship*—which seems to satisfy Cicero as a place-holder for the universal friendship advocated in Stoic thought. But that friends of the soul should take pleasure in each other’s company and be of unreserved mutual usefulness is clear to Cicero. He reiterates Aristotle’s assertion that Friendship is of the highest importance, that it can only truly exist among people of genuine goodness themselves, and that the quality of one’s friends is one of the best measures of whether we have lived a good life or not (185). It is essential to our happiness, however morally strong and fortunate in the accidents of life we may be.

One of the aspects of friendship Cicero emphasizes more than Aristotle is the fact that it is the relationship we choose. We don’t choose our families, although we are obliged to love them and serve them. We don’t choose who are our fellow-citizens, although again we have certain obligations of concord and amicability toward them. Friendship is an honor bestowed, and one we should take considerable care about. It should only be given to the Good, but Cicero adds

something more is needed: when Laelius is describing his friendship with Scipio he says, “Both in our public and private lives he and I shared all the same interests. We lived in the same home; we soldiered in the same fields. Our tastes and aims and views were identical—and that is where the essence of friendship must always lie” (184). This point may be original to Cicero, in comparison with Plato and Aristotle at least. *Symposium* is so focused on the Idea of Truth and Goodness, presumably a Goodness quite beyond political affiliations or matters of shared taste, that it may leave all attachment to individual people to the lower rungs of Diotima’s ladder, and Aristotle too is primarily interested in concept of Goodness beyond ideology. So one defining feature of a specifically Ciceronian view of Friendship will be the *and* in this formulation: “Friendships, I repeat, are formed when an exemplar of shining goodness makes itself manifest, **and** when some congenial spirit feels the desire to fasten on to this model” (203). Ciceronian friendship is based on goodness, yes, but also on congenial compatibilities, shared interests, shared tastes.

We can argue about what the Good is, but if Horace is right—*de gustibus non disputandum est*--we can’t argue about taste. Surely people who disagree about some matters of taste or even on certain convictions, can still both be good people—but can they be friends? Cicero seems to think not—and Lewis seems to agree, at least in terms of one’s closest circle. (I am reminded of a perhaps apocryphal remark Eric Bentley is said to have made: “I cannot be friends with someone who does not love Ibsen!”) There is, nevertheless, a crucial tension in Cicero’s view on selecting friends. Certainly, he encourages us to select well, and to not be quick to make attachments (216), but he admits earlier in the essay:

The friends we select ought to be sound and stable and reliable. But such people are distinctly scarce, and besides, it is extremely difficult to pick them except by practical experience: and the problem is that this experience can only be acquired *after* the friendship has actually begun. That is to say, the friendship comes first and the material for estimating

its desirability only becomes available later on; it is impossible to try one's friends out in advance (208).

So, the choice of friends must be based on both moral goodness and coherence of taste, temperament and ideology—but most of that you cannot know until after the choice has been. This may account for why Cicero spends more time on the limits of friendship (don't do anything dishonorable for a friend; a real friend would never ask you to!) and on how to extricate oneself from a bad friendship than did Aristotle. An even greater practical difficulty arises from the fact that even very good people, regardless of any secondary coherence of temperaments, are Cicero tells us extremely rare. If two such people finding each other is the *sine qua non* of friendship, then friendship itself must also be rare.

We can add one further defining feature to Ciceronian friendship. It transcends death and time. When friends are physically absent, we understand they remain a presence in our lives, but Cicero adds an idea he thinks may be difficult to follow: “Even when he (the friend) is dead, he is still alive. He is alive because his friends still cherish him, and remember him, and long for him . . . he ennobles the existences of those who are left behind” (189). One of the main legacies Cicero left to the Christian middle ages and renaissance was a notion of the friendships we might have with even those long dead—which might mitigate the scarcity problem. *On Friendship* is set a generation and a half earlier than Cicero's own life; its narrative is cast as an old man, Laelius, exhorting his two sons-in-law to live as virtuous a life as his deceased best friend, Scipio. For Laelius, Scipio remains ever-present. This framing structure places Cicero himself in a kind of conversation with a seemingly alive and present Laelius, who he and his readers can interrogate about how to live well. It is no surprise then that Ciceronianism to the Florentine humanists and their followers was, in part, entering into a kind of friendship with people from the past, as Machiavelli expresses in his well-known “Letter to Vettori”:

On the coming of evening, I return to my house and enter my study; and at the door I take off the day's clothing, covered with mud and dust, and put on garments regal and courtly; and re clothed appropriately, I enter the ancient courts of ancient men, where, received by them with affection, I feed on that food which only is mine and which I was born for, where I am not ashamed to speak with them and to ask them the reason for their actions; and they in their kindness answer me; and for four hours of time I do not feel boredom, I forget every trouble, I do not dread poverty, I am not frightened by death; entirely I give myself over to them.

This became a Christian humanist trope. Erasmus and Montaigne felt the same, as did Gabriel Harvey as we know from his essay, "Ciceronianus."

One final point about Ciceronian friendship before we turn to Lewis. Cicero's *bete noire* in all this is the calculating and unscrupulous but plausible politician who proffers friendship, but who means no one any good but himself. As someone who has spent his entire life in the dangerous corridors of Roman power, Cicero knew many of these. His *Phillipics* cast Mark Antony in this role, and that is what cost Cicero his life. As we shall see, this element of Cicero's perspective will matter a great deal to C. S. Lewis.

Lewis on Friendship

C. S. Lewis discusses friendship ubiquitously in his fiction, essays, autobiography and scholarship, but for our purposes I will confine my remarks to two essential texts: The chapter on "Friendship" in his late set of essays entitled *The Four Loves* (1960), and a speech delivered as the Commemoration Oration at King's College in 1949. Of the two pieces, *The Four Loves* chapter takes friendship as its central focus and tries in the mode of the *Laelius: De Amicitia* to be encyclopedic in its handling of the subject, while "The Inner Ring" is ostensibly about the seductive call of being an

insider. However, “Friendship” in the *Four Loves* is a problematic piece for contemporary readers on several counts, while “The Inner Ring,” though focused on a specific notion about social relationships, is in my view the more profound and more moving essay on the nature of friendship as Lewis saw it.

The Four Loves could be taken as Lewis’ final word on the matter of friendship, and in many ways it is an admirable, modern, decidedly evangelical Christian, riposte to the classical conversation on friendship. Its most Ciceronian element is its function as a cultural and social intervention. Lewis sees his culture as devaluing friendship when compared to the views of Aristotle and Cicero, suggesting that we see friendship as “vegetarian substitute” for more red-blooded forms of romantic love. His aim is a rehabilitation, much as Cicero’s aim was a last-ditch appeal. He is aligned with Cicero on most of his main points: true friendship is only possible between good men, it is predicated on and conducive to the development of virtue, it is an essential feature of a life well lived. For both, it is the most important relationship we can form, and essential to human thriving.

However, one of the points of agreement between Lewis and the classical writers is one of the most problematic elements of the essay: his near-dismissal of women as candidates for the office of “friend,” except of course with other women. It is difficult enough to overlook the Athenian misogyny encoded in *The Symposium* as an unavoidable extension of the assumption that only the potentially well-educated and good should be object of love, which in 5th century Athens left women beyond the pale. Plato does at least argue for a change in that cultural reality in the *Republic* by advocating the education of promisingly gifted girls. Aristotle largely ignores *eros* entirely in his discussion of friendship, although he nods occasionally to the lover-as-educator of the young male ‘beloved’ phenomenon. Cicero ignores the issue entirely, except for an interesting observation that

the Latin word *amicitia* is derived from *amor*, although we know from other sources the difficulties he had with his wives—but also the deep love he had for his daughter.

Lewis uses the gender-divide endemic to classical culture to ground his claims about friendship between the sexes. After describing the “golden sessions” he has known with his male friends, at an inn after a long day’s hike, smoking pipes and sipping beer, saying “life has no better gift to give,” he turns to this observation:

From what has been said, it will be clear that in most societies at most periods Friendship will be between men and men or between women and women. The sexes will have to meet one another in Affection and in Eros, but not in this love. For they will seldom have had with each other the companionship in common activities which is the matrix of Friendship. Where men are educated and women not, where one sex works and the other is idle, or where they do totally different work, they will usually have nothing to be friends about. But we can easily see that it is this lack, rather than anything in their natures, which excludes friendship (72).

He goes on to say that in his own profession “where women and men work side by side, friendship is common” (72). If only he had stopped there. He doesn’t. The ensuing pages become a diatribe against “silly women” who impose themselves on male gatherings, much to the disadvantage of Friendship as a platonic ideal and perhaps western culture itself. Sensible women, he writes, “if they wanted, would certainly be able to qualify themselves for the world of discussion and ideas, are precisely those who, if they are not qualified, never try to enter it or destroy it. They have other fish to fry” (76). So saying, he leaves the door slightly ajar for the Dorothy L. Sayers and Helen Gardners of the world, but only a crack.

He also departs from both Aristotle and Cicero on the point of knowing one’s friends intimately and personally. Indeed, the most enduring image readers have extracted from this chapter has been Lewis’ distinction between Lovers and Friends as a matter of positioning: Lovers look into

each other's eyes "face to face" while Friends look at something else, a "third thing" they both value, "side by side" (66). This idea that the predication of friendship is some third thing two men both find agreement on or interest in leads him make a claim that likely will seem strange to us, and certainly would have been strange to Cicero:

For of course we do not want to know our Friend's affairs at all. Friendship, unlike Eros, is uninquisitive. You become a man's friend without knowing or caring whether he is married or single or how he earns his living. What have all these "unconcerning things, matters of fact" to do with the real question: Do you see the same truth? (70)

Cicero's new feature, coherence of taste or conviction, has taken on the primary position rather than that of an addendum. Not only does this not square with Aristotle and Cicero's need to know every corner of a friend's personhood, it doesn't even square with Lewis' own practices. It may reflect a profound personal reticence of Lewis' to have his own private affairs a matter of conversation among his Inking friends, but it also reflects through over-statement his interest in de-coupling classical thought on friendship with the least taint of homoeroticism that thought evokes. The early part of this chapter spends several pages debunking pseudo-freudian assumptions that all close male friendships, the kind found throughout classical, medieval and renaissance poetry, are not really homoerotic bonds. Of course, he is right about that: some are, some might be, but most aren't. But to complete the de-coupling he takes too strong a position regarding how little friends need to be on intimate terms of knowledge regarding their private affairs. This does not stem from some homophobia of Lewis' own—he was aware from his youth that his "first friend," Arthur Greaves, was homosexual and that never made the slightest difference to him before or after his conversion. This position, articulated quite late in his career as a public apologist for Christianity is, I think, a distortion of his actual views about how intimate and personal friendship ought to be, perhaps showing the subtle influence of an increasingly American and evangelical popular readership.

That is not to say that his prioritization of “the third thing” in his philosophy of friendship is not a genuine tenet. His idea that the mainspring of the best friendships is grounded in the discovery of shared enthusiasm for something external is a recurring motif. In his second letter to Charles Williams, inviting him to an Inklings gathering, he says the qualifications for joining the conversation are few—you must be “a writer and a Christian.” Even the Christianity was a very broad church, as demonstrated in his “second friend,” the oddly esoteric mystic Owen Barfield, whose dedication of *Poetic Diction* to Lewis used a line from William Blake’s *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*: “opposition is the truest friendship.” This bonding over the ‘third thing’ is the main idea at stake in his essay “The Inner Ring.”

This ‘sermon,’ delivered primarily to undergraduate students at King’s in 1949, is an exhortation about how to get on in their professional lives without losing their souls after leaving school. The “inner ring” of the title is that unofficial circle of power-brokers one finds in any organization. There is the organizational flow-chart reflecting power *de jure*, and then there are the *other* channels of movers and shakers where the actual policies are drawn up and strategies adopted. Lewis is clear that such extra-legal cadres and systems are not in themselves evil—they are, as he says, necessary and not even a necessary evil. His selection of Prince Andre from *War and Peace* as an opening example demonstrates that “good people” can and do find themselves in this inner ring. He is clear that it is not the exercise of unofficial power by such systems that is the critical danger, but the *desire to be* in such a circle that can be morally corrupting (148). It is a powerful desire: “I believe that in all men’s lives at certain periods, and in many men’s lives at all periods between infancy and extreme old age, one of the most dominant elements is the desire to be inside the local Ring, and the terror of being left outside” (146). Since such circles are informal, the overtures and invitations to join can look very much like the extension of genuine friendship. The danger arises

when the measure of how one might qualify for inclusion entails a willingness to cut ethical and moral corners.

And of course, to exclude. There is no point to being *in*, if no one is left *out*. Lewis argues that a life left to drift along its natural course will bring one to being, without noticing the moment it happens, an “inner ringer”; regardless of whether one has been invited in and can actually pull strings, we become the kind of person whose friendships are about power, whose desire is an ever-restless appetite for more power and an ever-more exclusive inner ring. Because there is always an even more privileged circle than the circle we are presently in. Thus, the path of Ciceronian virtue is one of relentless watchfulness. He calls the inevitable destiny of ‘inner ringers’—those who desire power, not those like Prince Andre who simply find themselves having to lead—‘scoundrelism’ (153). Here the resonance with Cicero’s late writings show their keenness influence. This blend of the desire for power, with the desire for a strange kind of belonging, is—Lewis believed—ethically fatal: “of all the passions the passion for the Inner Ring is most skillful in making a man who is not yet a very bad man do very bad things” (154). Cicero’s best friend, “Atticus”—because he loved all things Athenian—distained Roman politics. For Cicero, he was the ideal friend: urbane, generous, wise, witty—Bailey Shackleton said he “sparkled” (19-20)—and immune to the call of the inner ring. I’m not sure we can say the same thing about Cicero himself, but he was the unrelenting foe of “scoundrelism” as he saw it.

Lewis advances an alternative to the Inner Ring that has remarkable echoes of the friendship of Cicero and Atticus, as well as his own circle of Inklings:

The quest for the Inner Ring will break your hearts unless you break it. But if you break it, a surprising result will follow. If in your working hours you make the work your end, you will presently find yourself all unawares inside the only circle in your profession that really matters. You will be one of the sound craftsmen, and other sound craftsmen will know it.

This group of craftsmen will by no means coincide with the inner ring . . . but it will do those things which that profession exists to do and will in the long run be responsible for all the respect which that profession enjoys (156)

Nor is it, in its ideal form exclusive, except insofar as it sets self-filtering qualifications: we are going to talk about writing and we are going to talk about Christianity, said the Inklings. It may look exclusive, like a cabal from the outside but, Lewis claims:

The difference is that its secrecy is accidental, and its exclusiveness is a by-product, and no one was led thither by the lure of the esoteric, for it is only four or five people who like one another meeting to do things they like. This is friendship. Aristotle placed among the virtues. It causes perhaps half of all the happiness in the world, and no Inner Ringer can ever have it (157).

I don't think even Cicero could have said that any better.

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