

# The Classical Humanism of Cicero's Concept of Friendship

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**Abstract:** Cicero maintains that one should choose one's friends carefully, choosing men of good character. One should moreover freely share all of one's concerns, plans, and aims with one's friends. Friendship should be based on steadfastness, loyalty and trust, with no deception or hypocrisy. Absolute honesty is thus essential for friendship, and one should be congenial and show pleasant manners to friends, treating them as equals, and being generous and helpful to them. One should also encourage one's friends in developing virtue, reprimanding them in a tactful, gentle manner if necessary, and accepting reprimand with forbearance. One should always behave respectfully to one's friends, maintaining particular respect for friends of long standing. He stresses that the excessive pursuit of wealth and power is detrimental to friendship. One can make concessions to friends by agreeing to do improper things if these do not damage our reputation; however, one should not do fundamentally wrong acts on account of friendship. He points out that one should not have unrealistic expectations or be too demanding towards one's friends nor should one engage in behaviour of a flattering or sycophantic nature. One need not give more help to a friend than one is able nor is one obliged to, nor to place pleasing a friend above matters of duty. He allows that friendships can be ended if the friend behaves badly or if common interests change. In that case, one should strive to end the friendship gradually and quietly.

**Keywords:** Friendship, Philosophy, Humanism, Idealism, Virtue

Cicéron conseille de choisir ses amis soigneusement, en choisissant des personnes de bon caractère. On devrait librement partager tous nos préoccupations, nos projets et nos buts avec nos amis. L'amitié devrait être établie sur des bases de fiabilité, loyauté et confiance, libre de mensonge et d'hypocrisie. L'honnêteté absolue est donc essentiel pour l'amitié et l'on se doit d'être sympathique et démontrer de manières agréables en traitant nos amis en tant qu'égaux, et en étant généreux et serviable envers eux. On se doit également d'encourager nos amis à développer la vertu, les réprimandant si nécessaire, tout en acceptant soi-même des réprimandes avec patience. On se doit de toujours se comporter d'une manière respectueuse envers nos amis, en ayant un respect particulier envers les amis de longue date. Cicéron maintient que la poursuite excessive de richesse et de pouvoir est nuisible pour l'amitié. On peut faire des concessions envers nos amis en acceptant de faire des choses inappropriées, si ça ne nuit pas à notre réputation. Par contre, on ne doit commettre des actes mauvais au nom de l'amitié. Il spécifie qu'il ne faut pas avoir d'attentes irréalistes ni être trop exigeants envers nos amis et non plus adopter des comportements de flatteries et de sycophante. On n'est pas obligé de donner plus d'aide à un ami qu'on en est capable ni placer le désir de plaire à un ami plus haut que les choses qui relèvent du devoir. Il concède qu'on peut mettre terme à une amitié si l'ami se comporte mal ou si les intérêts communs ont changés. Dans ce cas, il recommande de terminer l'amitié d'une manière graduelle et discrète.

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In the year forty-five B.C., exiled from politics following the establishment of Caesar's dictatorship, having recently divorced his wife, quarrelled with his brother, lost his daughter, and divorced his new wife, Marcus Tullius Cicero retired to his house in the country and began to devote himself to writing works of a mainly philosophical character. In less than two years, he would produce, among others: *Hortensius*, *Academica*, *De Finibus*, *Tusculanarum Disputationum*, *De Natura Deorum*, *De Divinatione*, *De Fato*, *De Officiis*, *Cato Maior de Senectute*, and *Laelius de Amicitia*. The impact these works would eventually have had prompted Zielinski to remark that the "history of civilization knows few moments equal in importance to the sojourn of Cicero at his houses in the country during the brief period of Caesar's sole rule" [qtd in Grant, 1971:12].

While most of the texts are lengthy and take the form of philosophical inquiries, the *Cato Maior de Senectute*, (*On Old Age*) and the *Laelius de Amicitia* (*On Friendship*) are more akin to informal essays, albeit in dialogue form. According to Copley:

*On Old Age and On Friendship, are the distillations of Marcus Tullius Cicero's practical synthesis of Greek and Roman philosophical ideas. Early examples of the essay as a literary form, these two pieces combine the clarity of his orations, the easy charm of his political treatises, and the delightful informality of his letters.* [Copley, 1971: xvi]

*On Friendship* is presented as a personal reminiscence of a conversation that he had witnessed between Laelius and his two son-in-laws, Fannius and Scaevola,<sup>i</sup> concerning the latter's friendship with the recently deceased Scipio.<sup>ii</sup> Cicero's account begins on the occasion of Scipio's death and the question of how to deal with the loss of a friend.

He presents his essential views of friendship and proceeds to give practical advice on the business of finding and maintaining friends, making the work a kind of aristocratic etiquette guide for politicians. This essay will focus on the definition of friendship found mainly in chapters 4-9. The structure of the dialogue is however fairly informal, as he often repeats and develops the basic notions in subsequent chapters (10-27), along with practical considerations and historical and literary illustrations. Therefore relevant passages throughout the dialogue will be used as required.<sup>iii</sup>

Cicero begins by presenting friendship as a rare, exceptional moral achievement:

*Well, in the first place I feel that friendship can exist only among the good; but I do not press this statement too far, as those do who go with more subtlety into these matters, perhaps correctly, but with little result for the general good; for they say that no one is good, except the wise man. (5, 18)<sup>iv</sup>*

He also specifies that friendship exists according to a concept of natural law:

*as those who were whom I have just mentioned--let us hold that these, even as they have been thought good, also ought to be called good, on the ground that, so far as men can, they follow Nature, the best guide to living well.(5, 19)<sup>v</sup>*

Fundamentally, he defines friendship as the sharing of a common value system and considers it to be the greatest of human achievements:

*Now friendship is nothing else than perfect agreement on all divine and human things, joined to kindness and affection; and than this, wisdom alone being excepted, I am inclined to think that no better gift has been given to man by the immortal gods. (5, 20)<sup>vi</sup>*

According to Cicero, friendship is founded on a moral and ethical base, and there is a complementary interdependent relationship between virtue and friendship. Virtue is essential for friendship and friendship helps in maintaining virtue:

*Those however who place the greatest good in virtue make an admirable decision; but this very virtue both creates and maintains friendship, nor can friendship by any means exist without virtue. (5, 20)<sup>vii</sup>*

*Friendship has been given by Nature as a handmaid of the virtues, not as a companion of the vices, in order that, since virtue could not unaided arrive at the highest perfection, it might arrive thither when united and associated with another. (22, 83)<sup>viii</sup>*

Moreover, friendship becomes a fundamental source of happiness and comfort:

*Nor am I now speaking of common or ordinary friendship, which nevertheless is both delightful and beneficial, but of true and flawless friendship, such as was that of those few men whose names are proverbial. For friendship makes prosperity more bright, and adversity, by dividing and sharing it, more supportable. (6,22)<sup>ix</sup>*

*Now while friendship comprises very many and very great advantages, in one point she certainly surpasses everything else, inasmuch as she sends forth the light of a good hope for the future, and does not suffer the spirits to be weakened or to sink. (7, 23)<sup>x</sup>*

Friendship is seen as being essentially inspired by love:

*For love, from which friendship received its name, is the chief means to the formation of the bond of kindly feeling. For advantages indeed are often received from those who under the pretence of friendship are courted and have attention paid them as occasion demands; but in friendship there is neither feigning nor pretence, and whatever feeling exists is real and sincere. (8, 26)<sup>xi</sup>*

*Since however a man contracts a friendship, as I have said above, if any sign of virtue shines forth in another to which a like disposition may incline and attach itself; when this happens,*

*love must needs arise. (13, 48)<sup>xii</sup>*

Although Cicero shows a certain aristocratic attitude towards friendship, he nonetheless acknowledges its compatibility with democratic values:<sup>xiii</sup>

*I think, there is between good men and good men a necessary feeling of kindness, and this has been appointed by Nature as the fountain-head of friendship. But the kindness also extends to the multitude. For virtue is not unfeeling or unserviceable or haughty, since she is wont to protect even whole nations, and consult their interests in the best manner, which she assuredly would not do if she shrank from kindness towards the common people. (14, 50)<sup>xiv</sup>*

Finally, he considers a strong sense of empathy towards one's friends to be an essential characteristic of friendship:

*Thus they are destitute of that very lovely and exquisitely natural friendship, which is an object of desire in itself and for itself, nor can they learn from themselves how valuable and powerful such a friendship is. For each man loves himself, not that he may get from himself some reward for his own affection, but because each one is of himself dear to himself. And unless this same feeling be transferred to friendship, a true friend will never be found; for a true friend is one who is, as it were, a second self. (21, 80)<sup>xv</sup>*

After proposing a general definition of friendship, Cicero elaborates several practical principles. Briefly stated, he maintains that one should choose one's friends carefully, choosing men of good character. One should moreover freely share all of one's concerns, plans, and aims with one's friends. Friendship should be based on steadfastness, loyalty and trust, with no deception or hypocrisy. Absolute honesty is thus essential for friendship, and one should be congenial and show pleasant manners to friends, treating them as equals, and being generous and helpful to them. One should also encourage one's friends in developing virtue, reprimanding them in a tactful, gentle manner if necessary, and accepting reprimand with forbearance.

He gives further practical advice such as one should always behave respectfully to one's friends, maintaining particular respect for friends of long standing. He stresses that the excessive pursuit of wealth and power is detrimental to friendship. One can make concessions to friends by agreeing to do improper things if these do not damage our reputation; however, one should not do fundamentally wrong acts on account of friendship. He points out that one should not have unrealistic expectations or be too demanding towards one's friends nor should one engage in behaviour of a flattering or sycophantic nature. One need not give more help to a friend than one is able nor is one obliged to place pleasing a friend above matters of duty. He allows that friendships can be ended if the friend behaves badly or if common interests change. In that case, one should strive to end the friendship gradually and quietly.

At one level, the text can simply be construed as an eloquent exposition of the value of friendship. Yet on a closer reading, one can also sense a series of underlying principles that are inherent to Cicero's notions of a humanistic philosophy. According to Hunt, one can discern in all of Cicero's philosophical works

*a coherent system and it deserves the name of humanism because it was concerned with man first and foremost and with other things only in so far as they were relevant to man's position in the world. First it inquired into man's nature, the validity of his perception, the nature of his highest virtue, the condition of his happiness, the degree of his freedom and his relation to the forces which control the world; it ended by asserting a theory of freedom and a rule of conduct enjoining the highest respect for man and systematically based on the theory of human nature. [Hunt, 1954:188]*

Cicero's concept of friendship is thus not strictly a personal, private affair. Rather, friendship is seen as a commitment that is immediately relevant to the socio-cultural reality and based on natural principles.<sup>xvi</sup> In describing Cicero's political philosophy, Hunt moreover observe that

*the Roman genius for legal forms was transformed by the humanizing and cosmopolitan spirit of Hellenism so that it prepared the way for that high ideal of humanity which has been characteristic of Western civilization in its true forms. [Hunt, Op. Cit.:191]*

Indeed, Cicero's eclectic philosophical mix of critical considerations of Academic, Stoic, Scepticism, and Epicurean schools form the basis of many notions in *Of Friendship*<sup>xvii</sup> and several themes found in books eight and nine of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* are echoed in several of Cicero's ideas.<sup>xviii</sup> Although critical of Socrates, considering him too contemplative, he maintains the importance of the belief in the immortality of the soul as espoused in the *Phaedo*:

*I do not agree with those who have of late begun to argue, that the soul perishes with the body, and that everything is blotted out by death. I am more influenced by the authority of the ancients, whether they be our own forefathers, who paid to the dead the most ceremonious rites, which assuredly they would not have done if they had thought that nothing affected them; (4, 13)<sup>xix</sup>*

The father of philosophy's influence on Cicero, however, goes beyond the matter of the soul's immortality. Like Plato, Cicero marries literary eloquence and philosophical discourse with underlying political considerations featuring dramatizations of actual historical figures. Hence, despite Cicero's specific criticisms of the *Symposium*<sup>xx</sup>, *Of Friendship* seems close to the spirit of a dialogue on Platonic love such as the *Phaedrus*<sup>xxi</sup> and the *Symposium*,<sup>xxii</sup> in the sense that the latter two dialogues present the concept of friendship and love as inspiring virtue through the appreciation of moral beauty

and higher values. Moreover, he even uses the cosmological notion of Love and Strife of the Pre-Socratic philosopher Empedocles as part of his concept of natural law (7, 24). Although the exalted erotic and mystical aspects of those dialogues are incompatible with Cicero's sense of Roman gravitas.

It is perhaps in Cicero's philosophy of history, that his idealistic tendencies are best exemplified. He portrays Roman historical characters as belonging to an ideal era, thus presenting Roman history conceived as a tradition of exemplary forefathers who represent an ideal standard that one can aspire to. The studies of Georges Dumézil have shown that Roman Historians had a marked inclination to formulate early Roman historical narrative according to mythological structures, so that history takes on an archetypal character. In the same respect, Cicero's idealism can be seen to be expressed in more concrete historical and moral terms rather than in Platonist metaphysical concepts :

*But since human affairs are frail and perishable, some persons must always be sought, whom we may love and by whom we may loved; for when affection and kindly feeling has been removed, all pleasure has been removed from life. To me indeed Scipio, although he was snatched away suddenly, nevertheless still lives and ever will live; for it was the virtue of the man which I loved, and that has not been extinguished; nor does it dwell before my eyes alone, who always had it at hand, but even to posterity it will be a bright and shining light. No one will ever either in thought or in hope undertake greater tasks than ordinary without thinking that he must keep before him a remembrance and impression of that man. (27, 102)<sup>xxiii</sup>*

Ultimately, Cicero's notion of friendship is a highly idealistic one, conceived in reference to impersonal, collective moral standards predicated on a common recognition of values such as duty, responsibility, and integrity. His humanism is based on the idea that the essence of humanism essentially resides in what is considered most perfect in human nature or higher than the human condition, mankind's potential to embody essential values. In that sense, it is a kind of transpersonal humanism.<sup>xxiv</sup> It is, thus, a humanism implicitly based on the acknowledgment of reason as the essential human faculty:

*Like most of the philosophers of antiquity, nature and reason are for him inseparable terms. The order that reigns in nature becomes, in a person capable of reflection, self aware; and so this self-knowledge leads man to recognize his kinship with the organizing principle, God, supreme legislator. [Appuhn, 1965:119]<sup>xxv</sup>, <sup>xxvi</sup>*

Yet despite the emphasis on an austere, selfless pursuit of integrity, Cicero appreciates the importance of warmth, affection, and the soft skills.<sup>xxvii</sup> His occasional emotional, nostalgic and sentimental digressions provide an inspirational eloquence that contributes to the exhortative quality of the work. Overall, he achieves a timeless appeal by striving to emphasize what are the essential and

most edifying aspects of friendship based on his belief that an idealistic collective value system is a quintessential key for social and political stability and harmony.

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<sup>i</sup> Gaius Fannius Strabo, was consul in 122 B.C. Quintus Mucius Scaevola Augur was consul in 117 B.C. Gaius Laelius Sapiens was consul in 140 B.C. Publius Cornelius Scipio Aemilianus the Younger was consul in 147 and 134 B.C.

<sup>ii</sup> Cicero also feature Scipio in "Scipio's Dream" (from his treatise *Res Publica*), which became an important eschatological text in Roman Neoplatonism [Grant, Op. Cit.:33-34].

<sup>iii</sup> The reference to quotes from *On Friendship* will indicate the chapter number followed by the paragraph number. The English quotes are from Copley.

<sup>iv</sup> "*Sed hoc primum sentio, nisi in bonis amicitiam esse non posse; neque id ad vivum reseco, ut illi, qui haec subtilius disserunt, fortasse vere, sed ad communem utilitatem parum; negant enim quemquam esse virum bonum nisi sapientem.*"

<sup>v</sup> "*Qui ita se gerunt, ita vivunt, ut eorum probetur fides, integritas, aequitas, liberalitas, nec sit in eis ulla cupiditas, libido, audacia, sintque magna constantia, ut ii fuerunt, modo quos nominavi, hos viros bonos, ut habiti sunt, sic etiam appellandos putemus, quia sequantur, quantum homines possunt, naturam optimam bene vivendi ducem.*"

<sup>vi</sup> "*Est enim amicitia nihil aliud nisi omnium divinarum humanarumque rerum cum benevolentia et caritate consensio; qua quidem haud scio an excepta sapientia nihil melius homini sit a dis immortalibus datum.*"

<sup>vii</sup> "*Qui autem in virtute summum bonum ponunt, praeclare illi quidem, sed haec ipsa virtus amicitiam et gignit et continet, nec sine virtute amicitia esse ullo pacto potest.*"

<sup>viii</sup> "*Itaque in iis perniciosus est error, qui existumant lubricum peccatorumque omnium patere in amicitia licentiam; virtutum amicitia adiutrix a natura data est, non vitiorum comes, ut, quoniam solitaria non posset virtus ad ea, quae summa sunt, pervenire, coniuncta et consociata cum altera perveniret. Quae si quos inter societas aut est aut fuit aut futura est, eorum est habendus ad summum naturae bonum optimum beatissimusque comitatus.*"

<sup>ix</sup> "*Neque ego nunc de vulgari aut de mediocri, quae tamen ipsa et delectat et prodest, sed de vera et perfecta loquor, qualis eorum, qui pauci nominantur, fuit. Nam et secundas res splendidiore facit amicitia et adversas partem communicansque leviores.*"

<sup>x</sup> "*Quomque plurimas et maximas commoditates amicitia contineat, tum illa nimirum praestat omnibus, quod bonam spem praelucet in posterum nec debilitari animos aut cadere patitur.*"

<sup>xi</sup> "*Amor enim, ex quo amicitia nominata est, princeps est ad benevolentiam coniungendam. Nam utilitates quidem etiam ab iis percipiuntur saepe, qui simulatione amicitiae coluntur et observantur temporis causa, in amicitia autem nihil fictum est, nihil simulatum et, quidquid est, id est verum et voluntarium.*"

<sup>xii</sup> "*Cum autem contrahat amicitiam, ut supra dixi, si qua significatio virtutis eluceat, ad quam se similis animus adplicet et adiungat, id cum contigit, amor exoriatur necesse est.*"

<sup>xiii</sup> See Nicolet & Michel for a discussion on the intellectual and cultural nature of Cicero's aristocratic perspective [Nicolet & Michel, 1961:21-24].

<sup>xiv</sup> "*Quid, si illud etiam addimus, quod recte addi potest, nihil esse, quod ad se rem ullam tam allicit et attrahat quam ad amicitiam similitudo? Concedetur profecto verum esse, ut bonos boni diligant adsciscantque sibi quasi propinquitatem coniunctos atque natura. Nihil est enim appetentius similitudinis sui nec rapacius quam natura. Quam ob rem hoc quidem, Fanni et Scaevola, constet, ut opinor, bonis inter bonos quasi necessariam benevolentiam, qui est amicitiae fons a natura constitutus. Sed eadem bonitas etiam ad multitudinem pertinet. Non enim est inhumana virtus neque immunis neque superba, quae etiam populos universos tueri eisque optime consulere soleat; quod non faceret profecto, si a caritate vulgi abhorreret.*"

<sup>xv</sup> "*Ita pulcherrima illa et maxime naturali carent amicitia per se et propter se expetita nec ipsi sibi exemplo sunt, haec vis amicitiae et qualis et quanta sit. Ipse enim se quisque diligit, non ut aliquam a se ipse mercedem exigat caritatis suae, sed quod per se sibi quisque carus est. Quod nisi idem in amicitiam transferetur, verus amicus numquam reperietur; est enim is, qui est tamquam alter idem.*"

<sup>xvi</sup> According to Hunt: "Moreover the law of nature applies not only to the relations of men within society but also to the relations between nations. There is a common brotherhood of mankind that transcends nations" [Hunt, Op. Cit.:192].

<sup>xvii</sup> See [Grant, Op. Cit.:15-30] for an overview of Cicero's philosophical influences.

<sup>xviii</sup> For example: "But it is only between those who are good, and resemble one another in their goodness, that friendship is perfect" [Aristotle bk. 8, 233].

<sup>xix</sup> "*Neque enim adsentior iis, qui haec nuper disserere coeperunt, cum corporibus simul animos interire atque omnia morte deleri; plus apud me antiquorum auctoritas valet, vel nostrorum maiorum, qui mortuis tam religiosa iura tribuerunt, quod non fecissent profecto, si nihil ad eos pertinere arbitrarentur,*"

<sup>xx</sup> In Chapter 7, 29, Cicero criticizes Platonic notions love such as the myth of Poverty and Plenty from the *Symposium* (203).

<sup>xxi</sup> For example: "*So, if the higher elements in their minds prevail, and guide them into a way of life which is strictly devoted to the pursuit of wisdom, they pass their time on earth in happiness and harmony; by subduing the part of the soul that contained the seeds of vice and setting free that in which virtue had its birth they will become masters of themselves and their souls will be at peace*" (Plato, *Phaedrus* 256, 65).

<sup>xxii</sup> For example: "*But his next advance will be to set a higher value on the beauty of souls than on that of the body, so that however little the grace that may bloom in any likely soul it shall suffice him for loving and caring, and for bringing forth and soliciting such converse as will tend to the betterment of the young; and that finally he may be constrained to contemplate the beautiful as appearing in our observances and our laws, and to behold it all bound together in kinship and so estimate the body's beauty as a slight affair*" (Plato, *Banquet* [210c]).

<sup>xxiii</sup> "*Sed quoniam res humanae fragiles caducaeque sunt, semper aliqui anquirendi sunt, quos diligamus et a quibus diligamur; caritate enim benevolentiaque sublata omnis est e vita sublata iucunditas. Mihi quidem Scipio, quamquam est subito ereptus, vivit tamen semperque vivet; virtutem enim amavi illius viri, quae extincta non est; nec mihi soli versatur ante oculos, qui illam semper in manibus habui, sed etiam posteris erit clara et insignis. Nemo umquam animo aut spe maiora suscipiet, qui sibi non illius memoriam atque imaginem proponendam putet.*"

<sup>xxiv</sup> Similarly, in modern times, Maslow describes humanistic psychology as the "perceiving of Platonic essences, the intrinsic values, the ultimate values of being, which in turn is a therapeutic-like help toward both the curing-of-sicknesses kind of therapy and also the growth toward self-actualization, the growth toward full humanness" [Maslow, 1973:177].

<sup>xxv</sup> "*Comme pour la plupart des philosophes de l'antiquité, nature et raison sont pour lui des termes inséparables l'un et l'autre. L'ordre qui règne dans la nature prend, dans un être capable de réflexion, conscience de lui-même; et ainsi la connaissance de soi conduit l'homme à reconnaître sa parenté avec le principe ordonnateur, c'est-à-dire avec Dieu, législateur suprême.*"

<sup>xxvi</sup> According to Hunt: "*Here again the high regard for man is shown in the thought that justice must be sought in man's nature. It is here and in the conception of man's common endowment of reason as the basis of morality that is to be found the ultimate sanction for the doctrine of human brotherhood*" [Hunt, Op. Cit.:200].

<sup>xxvii</sup> His emphasis on social skills is something he has in common with modern times, though perhaps not quite to such a self-serving, individualistic extent. According to Christopher Lasch, in modern times, the "management of interpersonal relations came to be seen as the essence of self-advancement" [Lasch, 1979:114].

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