

Preface: Friendship as an Art of Living

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I've come recently to the question of friendship, come contingently, as it were, from a number of convergent lines of preoccupation. I put it this way so as to underline the fact that I do not approach friendship from some supposed organic or a priori appreciation of its essential virtue. Rather, friendship as a value to think and live with comes into view for me within a certain problem-space or conjuncture. And it is from within this historicized perspective that I want to reflect briefly on friendship as a dimension of an *art of living*. Part of what is inspiring about the conversations between Céline Condorelli and her friends (Nick Aikens, Avery Gordon, Johan Frederik Hartle, and Polly Staple) collected in *The Company She Keeps* is the way they question the conventional conception of friendship's virtue.¹ The literary and philosophic story of friendship has depended so fundamentally on a certain picture of who friends are and what friends do with each other: typically, two white men of a certain age, wise, retiring, privileged, without pressing obligations or urgent projects, swapping confidences and memories and consolations. Friendship here, charged with sublimated love and charity and goodwill, and sustained by the recognition of an ineffable bond, is often meant to mark out a kind of haven, or anyway a relational space of *exemption*. This is doubtlessly an important description, but what Condorelli and her friends invite us to consider are some of the senses in which a conception of friendship can suggestively be embodied in a different picture of associative relations and cooperative solidarities less visible, perhaps, to the normative gaze of social convention—black slaves, for example, learning together to practice freedom on the run

1 Céline Condorelli, *The Company She Keeps* (London: Book Works, 2014).

from plantation bondage; or middle-class women learning to practice dissenting companionship away from the constraining norms of family. This seems to me generative for a consideration of friendship as a dimension less of a mysterious and elite intimacy than of a quotidian art of learning to live and think together *differently*.

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What is the idea here of an “art of living,” and why should an idea of friendship be connected to it? I borrow this felicitous phrase from Alexander Nehamas’s compelling book, *The Art of Living*, published now more than a decade ago.² It is true, of course, that Nehamas doesn’t himself make a systematic connection between an art of living and the practice of friendship—though it is interesting to note that he has, recently, published a wonderful book on friendship that arguably embodies that relationship in more ways than one.³ Certainly I would be inclined to read it that way. However, I believe that the ideas of an art of living and of friendship belong to the same *family* of ideas—namely, ideas meant to help us unlearn the conceits of a *disembodied* practice of thinking and being and to reenchant or *revivify* the human scale of living and working and loving together.

Now, Nehamas’s idea of an art of living is activated as part of an attempt to work out a contrast between two rival conceptions of philosophy: on the one hand, the dominant conception of *academic* philosophy, understood as a professional, theoretical, and systematic discipline, with an arcane and highly technical language, addressed to universal questions and therefore only indirectly connected to individual and collective lives in their worldly condition; and, on the other hand, a conception of philosophy thought of as a “way of life,” that is, as a creative (and sometimes experimental) discursive activity not necessarily tied to academic philosophy departments but that grows out of, and reflects on, individual and collective lives as these are shaped by concrete historical circumstances and intellectual-aesthetic traditions.⁴ Notably, in the former conception, the philosophizing self is largely an abstraction having little or no bearing on the philosophic voice, which is meant solely to be an incorporeal or dematerialized vehicle for the content of truth. By contrast, for the latter conception, the philosophizing self is an embodied and integral dimension of the whole philosophic activity and consequently is inescapably marked by the distinctive *experience*, the distinctive *style*, and the distinctive *voice* of that situated self. As Nehamas writes early in his book, “Those who practice philosophy as the art of living construct their personalities through the investigation, the criticism, and the production of philosophical views. . . . More important, the philosophers of the art of living make the articulation of a mode of life their central topic: it is by reflecting on the problems of constructing a philosophical life that they construct the life their

2 Alexander Nehamas, *The Art of Living: Socratic Reflections from Plato to Foucault* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

3 Alexander Nehamas, *On Friendship* (New York: Basic, 2016). Nevertheless, see *The Art of Living*, 5, for at least one moment in which Nehamas uses friendship to illustrate his claims.

4 See Pierre Hadot, “Philosophy as a Way of Life,” in *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, trans. Michael Chase (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 264–76.

work constitutes.”⁵ For these thinkers, in other words, the *work* and the *life* are inextricably bound together; their intelligibility reciprocally imprinted on each other. As I understand it, while Nehamas has no interest in an invidious contrast between the two ways of doing philosophy he describes (they are both, he says, part of the Western tradition), I take it, nevertheless, that he is concerned to rescue philosophy thought of as an art of living from the margins of “serious” discourse and to demonstrate its worthiness as a dissenting and even *changeful* mode of thinking. And though this may not have been his explicit intention, its instructiveness to me is that it helps to loosen the hold on us of the conceit of a single way of thinking seriously and so opens out the terrain on which to consider other reflective traditions. But also, and more than this, it points us in the direction of a form of thinking aimed at changing *ourselves* as much as (or as part of) changing the world.

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As I’ve said, Nehamas doesn’t directly link this idea of an art of living to that of friendship. But one of the lines of preoccupation that has brought me specifically to thinking about friendship turns precisely on my sense of the exhaustion of an idea of *critique* not so far removed from the form of philosophy he expresses doubts about. The familiar posture of critique is that of a discursive strategy of reason—secular, self-conscious, skeptical—that authoritatively lays hold of a problem or a state of affairs and subjects it to an authoritative inquiry so as to uncover the sources of, let’s say, dissatisfaction or discontent or grievance. The model of thinking that critique most often offers is that of a solitary endeavor, the exercise of a singular, sovereign, and penetrating mind excavating the root of ills. Not surprisingly, whatever its supposed attractions—analytical acumen, technical facility, linguistic precision—it has proved difficult for critique to release itself from a certain formation and therefore to unlearn its will to power, its presumption of truth telling, its suspicion of narrative, its masculinist and imperial arrogance, its narcissistic drive to hear the sound of its own voice. The idea of friendship, by contrast, especially the one offered by Condorelli and her interlocutors, seems to me to invite us to consider an alternative model of dissenting thinking, one that is inherently *dialogical* and *collaborative* and one that works less in the direction of truth than of *clarification*, a kind of sorting out of paths and perspectives and assumptions. What friends do with each other is to clarify matters of mutual concern. One might say that friendship as a condition and context of reflective thinking depends on an ongoing provisional and recursive practice assembled, notably, out of both speaking and *listening*. Friends are not only speaking but also listening selves. Listening, after all, is indispensable for clarification. Indeed, I’d say that friends are precisely those who are able to cultivate a practice of listening as a dimension of an elucidating art of living and thinking in each other’s milieu. Not surprisingly, then, the ethical attitude that friendship encourages is one not

5 Nehamas, *The Art of Living*, 6. It is easy to see here the way this book complements and extends Nehamas’s earlier, magisterial *Nietzsche: Life as Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985). Indeed, Nietzsche is one of his three paradigmatic instances of modern European exponents of an art of living, the others being Montaigne and Foucault.

only of generosity but of *receptive* generosity, that is, a way of being with others that is as open to receiving from friends as giving to them.⁶

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I should like to think of the work of the Small Axe Project (www.smallaxe.net), with which I've had the privilege of being associated for more than two decades, as one context in which a conception of practicing this idea of friendship obtains. The Small Axe Project, I believe, though it embodies styles of critical and dissenting thinking, is less concerned with critique as such. As our interlocutors—readers, contributors—well know, the Small Axe Project is a multidimensional endeavor concerned with rethinking the paradigms through which the Caribbean has been brought into being as an object of intellectual and artistic representation. As I keep repeating, our ethos is animated by Antonio Machado's wisdom that "paths are made by walking"—I might only add, walking together, walking cooperatively, learning all the while from our missteps and our blunders. From the outset, therefore, the Small Axe Project has been a space of slowly widening and gradually deepening collaborations, of open-ended relationships that are never completely smooth or conflict-free, never completely devoid of tension, but have always been reciprocally supportive and therefore generative of quite surprising productive creativity. For me, anyway, over the lengthening, unrepeatable years, the Small Axe Project has been the enacted embodiment of an idea of community, of overlapping circles of relationships that, while not necessarily intimate in a private way, while not necessarily chummy with the exchange of cozy confidentialities, are nevertheless lived from the inside out and driven by a shared sense of a collective *project*, that is to say, a desire to think together with a view to activating something new.⁷

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Friendship is a context for learning to live and work.⁸ And what I have been learning is that the idea of friendship as one dimension of an art of living is partly the idea of a form of solidarity and comradeship that, while shaped by a sensibility for nonjudgmental and noninstrumental "letting be," is nevertheless scarcely *aimless*. Friendship, I believe, is a dimension of reciprocal learning conducted with significant others such that who one is in consequence of the paths taken—and not taken—is enriched and enlarged and sometimes even *transformed*. Friendship is neither sentimentalism nor abstraction but a way of living assembled out of what is earned and what is inherited.

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6 I take Stuart Hall to be someone who embodies just this ethical attitude as a dimension of his style. See David Scott, *Stuart Hall's Voice: Intimations of an Ethics of Receptive Generosity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017).

7 See David Scott, "Preface: *Small Axe* and the Ethos of Journal Work," *Small Axe*, no. 50 (July 2016): vii–x.

8 In this context, it may be more instructive to think with Jacques Derrida's late ruminations in *Learning to Live Finally: The Last Interview*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Brooklyn, NY: Melville House, 2007), than with *The Politics of Friendship*, trans. George Collins (London: Verso, 2006).