

Friendship

BEING called ‘the friend of God’ may seem tame by comparison with being called God’s son or daughter, yet, historically considered, ‘friend of God’ is amongst the boldest of the biblical epithets. For to have a friend is to be a friend, and if Moses is the friend of God, it follows that God is the friend of Moses—a daring claim. Early Christian theologians were impressed in the highest degree to find that the Lord ‘used to speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend’ (Exod. 33: 11). Equally shocking in its way was that Jesus should tell his disciples that they are no longer to be called servants, but friends (John 15: 15). To recapture the strength of this pronouncement, we need to know something of the history of friendship in Western thought.

Christian writings on friendship, right through the Middle Ages, are heavily indebted to Cicero, who is himself already indebted to the Greeks. According to Cicero, the ‘one thing in human experience about whose advantage all men with one voice agree, is friendship’. Some men hold virtue in contempt, others disdain riches or political honours, but ‘concerning friendship all, to a man, think the same thing . . . that without friendship life is not life at all’.¹ In the fourth century, Ambrose

¹ Cicero, *Laelius on Friendship*, trans. W. A. Falconer, Loeb Classical Library, 10 (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1923), xxxiii. 86.

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and Augustine were whole-hearted in their endorsement of Cicero: Augustine thought that Cicero's definition of friendship could not be bettered. Aelred of Rievaulx, writing for twelfth-century monks, finds himself able to cite Cicero almost word for word: 'Friendship is mutual harmony in affairs human and divine coupled with benevolence and charity.'²

Indeed, despite some fretful indications that one *should* be able to carve out a distinctly Christian position on friendship—Aelred insists, for instance, that Cicero 'was unacquainted with the virtue of true friendship, since he was completely unaware of its beginning and end, Christ'—Aelred rarely moves far in form or in substance from his pagan master.³ In this he and other Christian writers were no doubt encouraged by Cicero's own natural theology, notable in the way his definition continues: 'I am inclined to think that with the exception of wisdom no better thing has been given to man by the immortal gods.'⁴ Aelred corrects such sentiments only by changing the plural 'gods' to the singular 'God'.⁵

Cicero writes so well and with such warmth that it is not surprising that his sentiments should resound across the ages. Friendship cannot exist except among good men (iv. 18). It contains nothing false or pretended; it arises not from need or desire for material gain, but from love. In friendship two men are equal; indeed, the friend is 'another self', for 'What is

² Aelred of Rievaulx, *Spiritual Friendship*, trans. Mary E. Laker, SSND (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian Publications, 1977), book 1, §11 (p. 53). Compare Cicero, *Laelius on Friendship*, vi. 20.

³ Aelred, *Spiritual Friendship*, book 1, §8 (p. 53).

⁴ Cicero, *Laelius on Friendship*, vi. 20.

⁵ See, too, Cicero's reproach to those philosophers (probably Stoics) who would say that friendship is a need and a weakness: 'Why, they seem to take the sun out of the universe when they deprive life of friendship, than which we have from the immortal gods no better, no more delightful boon' (ibid. xiii. 47).

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sweeter than to have someone with whom you may dare discuss anything *as if you were communing with yourself?*' (vi. 22).

The Greek and Latin literature provides lists of templates, types, and taxonomies of friendship. In the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle gives a threefold classification of friendships, again much used by Christians, based on pleasure, on mutual advantage, and on shared concern for that which is good. All three have their merits, but the third is the best. In Aelred we see what are recognizably the same three more sharply distinguished into carnal, worldly, and spiritual friendships—the first two, in his monastic setting, entirely eclipsed by the third.

We find lists of qualities a friend must have. Cicero would have us seek good men, loyal and upright, fair and generous, free from all passions, caprice, and insolence, with great strength of character (v. 19), frank, sociable, sympathetic (xviii. 65), candid, affable, genial, agreeable, wholly courteous, and urbane (xvii. 66). This list of desiderata surely must limit the number of likely candidates to be anyone's friend.

In our own time friendship is more frequently discussed by social scientists than by philosophers or theologians. Sociologists, psychologists, and anthropologists study 'friendship' as a 'natural' phenomenon—biologically adaptive and functionally effective—not Cicero's approach at all. Theologians spill more ink on 'love', and understandably so, since some of the most stirring sayings of the New Testament concern love—'love your enemies', 'God is love'. If God is love, then why look further for affective relationships? Love is, indeed, all you need. By comparison, friendship is love's pale echo.

Notoriously, some Christian theologians have tried to rank the Greek notion of *agapē* and that of *philia*, privileging *agapē* as the truly Christian form of love—a love which knows no

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bounds and loves without cause or concern. We need to be cautious about such rankings. In classical writings, 'love' and 'friendship' flow into one another. Cicero several times makes the point that for him it is more than etymological—*amicitia* (friendship) derives from *amor*, and in the Greek of the New Testament *agapē* and *philia* overlap in use.⁶ In any case, it seems fundamentally mistaken to suppose that we can honour love only by disparaging friendship. The latter is not so much love's competitor as a particular manifestation of it. Friendship is best considered not in contrast to love's gold standard, but rather as what friendship 'is', distinct and in itself.

Friendships are particular and partial. You are friends with particular people and not with everyone, and this gives friendship a different scope from love even within the Christian lexicon. You should, according to the Scriptures, love your neighbour and even your enemy. You cannot be *friends* with everybody without evacuating 'friendship' of all meaning. Cicero marks this as a difference between friendship and relationship (*propinquitās*): good will can be removed from a relationship but not from friendship, since 'if you remove goodwill from friendship the very name of friendship is gone' (v. 19).

Friendship is reciprocal—it involves at least two. A lover may have a beloved, but we can readily think of circumstances where love is not returned. Love can be unrequited or love for an admired figure from the past. Although we may doubt whether we can *love* our enemies (*not* a sentiment to be found

⁶ One thinks here especially of Anders Nygren, but also of Kierkegaard. On this and for many other insights, see Gillian Clark and Stephen R. L. Clark, 'Friendship in the Christian Tradition', in R. Porter and S. Tomaselli (eds.), *The Dialectics of Friendship* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), 26–43.

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in Cicero), the New Testament enjoins us to do so, with no suggestion that they will love us back. We also read that it was not we who first loved God, but God who first loved us. So love, like hatred, need not be reciprocal or symmetrical: I can love without being loved, have an enemy without being one.

I can love without being loved, but friendship is quite different. I might say I love Nelson Mandela, whom I have never met, but I cannot say that he is one of my friends. I cannot say, except in a deliberately contentious sense, 'I am *his* friend but he is not mine.' To be a friend is to have a friend.

If love is divine, then friendship is, in its fundamental aspect, human. Friendship demands a certain distance as well as an intimacy between the one and the other. Christians can and do speak of the love flowing between the three Persons of the Trinity, but it would be unwise, in Trinitarian terms, to say that the three 'Persons' are friends of each other: that would be a sentiment dangerously near to tritheism, although we might be able to say 'the Trinity is friendship' much as one says 'God is love'.⁷

Friendship, I suggest, is fundamentally a creaturely and, more specifically, a human good. There are of course many 'goods for us' which cannot be predicated of God. It is good for us to eat, laugh, swim, and play musical instruments. It is good for us to breathe, walk, and have red blood cells. All these are creaturely goods and, the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation apart, good for God only in so far as we are God's creatures and what is 'good' for his creatures is, in a sense, 'good' for God.

⁷ When Ivo, in the dialogue, asks Aelred, 'Shall I say of friendship what John, the friend of Jesus, says of charity: "God is friendship"?' (cf. 1 John 4: 16), Aelred replies that while this is unusual and does not have the sanction of Scripture, 'what is true of charity I surely do not hesitate to grant to friendship' (*Spiritual Friendship*, Book 1, §§ 69–70 (pp. 65–6)).

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Not all creatures have the same goods. It is good for a bird to have feathers, but not for a snake; good for a rabbit to have warm, furry ears, but not for a fish. We need, then, some anthropology, some concept of the human being, to understand friendship as a distinctly human good. Here I confess myself to be suspicious of those anthropologies that undergird aspirational theories of friendship like that of Cicero—friendships springing from nature rather than from need. I have my doubts concerning this winnowing of men in a search for the truly virtuous, for the flash of soul upon soul. I hesitate over this search for men loyal and upright, fair and generous, free from all passions, caprice, and insolence, frank, sociable, sympathetic, candid, affable, genial, agreeable, wholly courteous, and urbane (xvii. 66). Aelred at least makes our task a little easier, in a departure from Cicero, by listing not *what to seek* in a friend but *what to avoid*. We should avoid the irascible, the fickle, the suspicious, the garrulous, the angry, the unstable, the avaricious, and the ambitious.⁸ Now all this is good advice and, let us hope, advice that could be pursued in a twelfth-century Cistercian cloister; but we may ask, this side of eternity, where could one find such a friend? Even more daunting, how could one be such a friend? Do these directives not presuppose superhuman self-knowledge, as well as a preternatural insight as to the inner workings of our neighbour? I want an anthropology at once more earthly than Cicero's and, at the same time, more genuinely divine.

In 1960 C. S. Lewis published a popular and influential little book entitled *The Four Loves*. Friendship is one of these four, and Lewis, improbably, anchors it in the relations of the primal

⁸ Ibid. book 3, §14 (p. 94), *passim*.

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horde. Speaking throughout of ‘male friendship’—since, he tells us, friendship will in most societies and periods be between men and men or women and women—he provides a little creative ethnography: ‘In early communities the co-operation of the males as hunters or fighters was no less necessary than the begetting and rearing of children . . . Long before history began we men have got together apart from the women and done things. We had to.’ He continues with a jovial pun, ‘Palaeolithic man may or may not have had a club on his shoulder but he certainly had a club of the other sort, a sort of “early sacred smoking-club”.’⁹

From this basic ‘clubbability’, as Lewis terms it, friendship arises on the basis of shared insight, interest, and vision. Modern friends ‘will still be doing something together, but something more inward . . . still hunters, but of some immaterial quarry.’¹⁰ This, he tells us, is ‘the luminous, tranquil, rational world of relationships freely chosen’. Friendship on his account is the least organic of loves, and thus differentiated from the tugging of the guts and the fluttering of the diaphragm that characterize *Affection*, which we have for our young, and *Eros*, which we have for the opposite sex.¹¹ Women are to all intents and purposes ruled out of this happy band. Friendships between the sexes easily and quickly pass into erotic love (even within the first half

⁹ C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (1960) (London: Fount, 1998), 60. He continues: ‘What were women doing meanwhile? How should I know? I am a man. I can trace the pre-history of friendship only in the male line’ (p. 61). He does not explain how he knows what *men* were doing in prehistoric times.

¹⁰ Ibid. 62. It will be apparent that this is Lewis at his most insufferably ‘donnish’.

¹¹ Ibid. 56. Lewis goes out of his way to distance this real manly friendship from homosexuality: ‘Hrothgar embracing Beowulf, Johnson embracing Boswell (a pretty flagrantly heterosexual couple)’ (ibid. 59).

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hour, according to Lewis) unless, of course, the two are lucky enough to be physically repulsive to one another. Thus, he says, 'it will be clear that in most societies at most periods Friendship will be between men and men or women and women. The sexes will have met one another in Affection and in Eros but not in this love.'¹² Even with his own wife or lover, then, a man will share Affection and Eros but not friendship.

Lewis's manly friendship is highly streamlined: 'You become a man's Friend without knowing or caring whether he is married or single or how he earns is living. What have all these "unconcerning things, matters of fact" to do with the real question, *Do you see the same truth?* No one cares two-pence about anyone else's family, profession, class, income, race or previous history.' This love (essentially) ignores not only our physical bodies but that whole embodiment which consists of our family, job, past, and connections. Whereas Eros will have naked bodies, friendship is 'an affair of disentangled, or stripped minds.'¹³

Lewis's account of friendship is recognizably Ciceronian, but without Cicero's human warmth. Cicero is at least willing to speak of friendships, not albeit of the highest kind, between children and their parents, or between a man and the nurses and slaves who tended him when a child, and even between animals and their young. Lewis takes to an extreme the Ciceronian ideal of a friend as *alter ego*. And it is important to see that what is unsatisfactory about friendships with women on this account is not their sexual allure, something

¹² Ibid. 68.

¹³ Ibid. 66–7.

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which troubled Ambrose and Augustine when it came to the question of friendships with women, but the fact that women will not share the same interests and activities as men—they are not like ‘us’, for ‘they [men and women] will seldom have had with each other the companionship in common activities which is the matrix of friendship’.¹⁴ What of the emotional world of these ‘stripped minds’? How, we wonder, would Lewis react if another ‘stripped mind’ arrived at the club and told him that his child had been knocked off a bicycle and was mortally ill? Blustering silence?—‘terribly sorry, old boy, didn’t know you were married—had offspring—that sort of thing . . . but let’s get on with translating Beowulf’. How can we love someone or be friends with someone in their distinct particularity without knowing what they love? Stripped of all distinctiveness, the other is an *alter ego* only in a parodic sense—a mirror in which I see myself reflected.¹⁵ It is not the exclusivity of this vision which should concern us, for friendship must always be particular, but rather that it rules out as a possibility friendship with one who is distinctively other. No doubt Lewis’s practice was better than his theory, but there is something sterile and self-regarding about Lewis’s sketch of friendship here, something which took a terrific blow when he fell in love with an other who was an American, a Jew, and a divorcee.¹⁶

It is not surprising that, despite being the most ‘spiritual’ of the four loves in his reckoning (that is, the least biological), friendship has, for Lewis, little directly to do with God. He does

¹⁴ Ibid. 68.

¹⁵ Lewis’s sketch, while not homosexual, is certainly ‘homosexual’ in Luce Irigaray’s sense—a panegyric of love between same and same.

¹⁶ Lewis writes of this movingly in *A Grief Observed*, originally published under a pseudonym in 1961.

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not want to speak of God as a friend. Surprisingly, for a writer so committed to the Bible, he does not mention any of the biblical passages which speak of friendship with God. On the contrary, it is better, he says, to speak of God as father or as husband, language that cannot be taken literally. Nor *can* Lewis speak of God as 'friend', since a friend is for him, by definition, another self, an *alter ego*, and God must be further away, holier, than that. There is no room for friendship with the genuinely other, and therefore certainly not for friendship with God.

This distortion may allow us to see, amongst the gold, some iron pyrite in Cicero's famous account of friendship, which is, after all, not in the least egalitarian. It goes without saying that for Cicero the highest form of friendship is found only between males, men who are virtuous and wise, share common goals and aspirations, and rich enough so as not to need the friendship in any material way.¹⁷ The *alter ego* is an image of the good man's virtuous self.

Aelred's Christian version is more attractive. His is not a picture of a perfect male society, although to some extent he inhabited one. There are no women in his circle, but he does speak of the creation of Eve from the very stuff of Adam and as his equal, and of the primal pair as a most beautiful inspiration as to what charity and friendship might be. Nonetheless, Aelred's account of spiritual friendship retains some of the static features that limit Cicero's. What, were it ever achieved, would friendship have been like between monastic paragons? Would it be like the friendships of angels or of celestial spheres, whose movements were so perfect they neither needed to be, nor could

¹⁷ In our time this is why it is not enough to put too much weight on the power of 'discussion' if we have not first considered who is, and is not, in fact present as a discussion partner—who is present at friendship's table?

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be, tuned? And is it not the case that, in this world, we bump along—fragile, forgetful, and all too human in our failings?

Let us approach this from a different starting point, not Cicero but the Book of Exodus:

Now Moses used to take the tent and pitch it outside the camp, far off from the camp; he called it the tent of meeting. And everyone who sought the LORD would go out to the tent of meeting . . . Whenever Moses went out to the tent, all the people would rise . . . the pillar of cloud would descend and stand at the entrance of the tent, and the LORD would speak with Moses . . . the LORD used to speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend (Exod. 33: 7–11a).

The Lord would speak with Moses face to face, *as a man speaks with his friend*.

Friendship, I have argued, is not an affective bond which may or may not be requited. It is not, as Aristotle knew, a ‘virtue’ from which some other may or may not benefit, but a *relationship*. In this relationship, ‘the other person enters in not just as an object who receives the good activity, but as an intrinsic part of the love itself.’¹⁸ An anthropology adequate to friendship would be an anthropology of the-at-least-two, the one and the other who may reach out to include a third and a fourth. I suggest that we might look for such an anthropology to the writings of Martin Buber and of his friend and associate Franz Rosenzweig—to Buber’s ‘dialogical principle’ and to Rosenzweig’s philosophy of ‘speaking thinking’. For both Buber and Rosenzweig the human being was essentially a ‘speaking’ being.

While ample and perplexed consideration has been given to the question of how it is that God may speak to us (for instance, in revelation), far less has been paid to the fact,

¹⁸ A. J. P. Kenny, *Aristotle on the Perfect Life* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 43.

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equally mysterious and wonderful, that we speak to each other. We take our capacity for speech for granted, but no other animal speaks one to another in the elaborate, diffuse, and unpredictable way we do. No other animal makes a promise or, in the truest sense, tells a lie.

Let me recall that passage of his *Speeches on Religion* where Schleiermacher pauses to reflect on Adam alone in Eden.¹⁹ As long as Adam was alone, he says, God addressed him in various ways; but Adam did not understand, for he did not answer. Adam's paradise was beautiful, but he could not fully sense it. He did not 'even develop within his soul'. Naming the animals brought no solace to Adam, but only greater dereliction. It was not until there was another human being that his silence was broken and Adam could, for the first time, see the glory of what lay about him and praise its Creator.²⁰ Schleiermacher turns this mythical reverie into an anthropological observation whose truth is empirical as much as metaphysical. Without other persons, one would not speak. This is true of any individual—no infant, apart from being taught to speak by other people, would do so. It is also true of the human race in general: were there only one man, there could not be language—this is Wittgenstein's point in the private language argument. Language is a social possession and a social phenomenon. Without others we would not have language, and without language we would not be ourselves. Even those human beings not yet fully in the realm of language (for example, newborns) and those

¹⁹ I discuss this at greater length in J. M. Soskice, 'Incarnation, Speech and Sociality in Schleiermacher and Augustine', in M. M. Olivetti (ed.), *Incarnation*, Proceedings of the Castelli Colloquium (Padua: cedam, 1999).

²⁰ Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers*, ed. Crouter; *idem*, *On Religion*, ed. R. Crouter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 119.

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who may never fully acquire language are spoken to, spoken of, and cared for by speaking beings whose shared power of speech enables them to do all they do. We are brought into life by those others who bring us into language as much as by those who bear us physically in their wombs. Even our private thoughts are framed and formed in the language we share with others.²¹

A sustained meditation on the sociality of speaking is to be found in Martin Buber's philosophy of 'dialogue', presented in 1923 in *I and Thou*²² and developed in other essays. It is a mistake to read Buber as an existentialist, as I was directed to do when I first read him, if we mean by that a solitary, fraught soul in search of meaning. Indeed, Buber rejects any quest for human identity that begins with the solitary self or, indeed, with the collective 'mankind'. The essence of man is found neither in the individual nor in the collectivity, but only in the reality of mutual relations 'between man and man'.²³

What Buber called his 'turn to the other' accompanied a dramatic change in his understanding of 'the religious'. In the essay 'Dialogue', written in 1929 to clarify the dialogical principle of *I and Thou*, he writes—somewhat elliptically—about this:

²¹ This is not the same as saying that our thought is predetermined by language. It is interesting to note that Aelred and Cicero have similar thought experiments to Schleiermacher's. Aelred asks his young monastic if, had he all the possessions, riches, and delights in the world—'gold, silver, precious stones, turreted camps, spacious buildings, sculptures, and paintings'—but no companion, would he enjoy all these possessions. Walter answers 'not at all'. Aelred then says, 'But suppose there were one person, whose language you did not know, of whose customs you were ignorant, whose love and heart lay concealed from you?' Walter says, 'If I could not by some signs make him a friend, I should prefer to have no one at all rather than to have such a one' (*Spiritual Friendship*, book 3, §78 (p. 110)).

²² M. Buber, *I and Thou: With a Postscript by the Author Added* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1958).

²³ Martin Buber, Foreword to M. Buber, *Between Man and Man*, trans. Ronald G. Smith (London: Kegan Paul, 1947), p. vii.

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In my earlier years the 'religious' was for me the exception. There were hours that were taken out of the course of things. From somewhere or other the firm crust of everyday was pierced... 'Religious experience' was the experience of an otherness which did not fit into the context of life.²⁴

One forenoon, 'after a morning of "religious" enthusiasm, I had a visit from a young man...'. Buber's account of this meeting is sketchy, but while being friendly and even listening attentively, Buber felt that he had failed to hear this young person. He failed to discern in him an anguish about which he found out only after the young man was dead, it is implied by his own hand:

Since then I have given up the 'religious' which is nothing but the exception, extraction, exaltation, ecstasy; or it has given me up. I possess nothing now but the everyday out of which I am never taken... I know no fullness but each moral hour's fullness of claim and responsibility. Though far from being equal to it, yet I know that in the claim I am claimed and may respond in responsibility, and know who speaks and demands a response.

Here we have the this—here—now of existentialism, but always tied by Buber to the presence of the other: 'I do not know much more. If that is religion then it is just *everything*, simply all that is lived in its possibility of dialogue.'²⁵ This is more than a speaking *at* one another. It is more than just exchanging pleasantries or pieces of information: 'the most eager speaking at one another does not make a conversation (this is most clearly shown in that curious sport, aptly termed discussion, that is

²⁴ Martin Buber, Foreword to M. Buber, *Between Man and Man*, trans. Ronald G. Smith (London: Kegan Paul, 1947), 13.

²⁵ *Ibid.* 13–14.

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“breaking apart”, which is indulged in by men who are to some extent gifted with the ability to think).²⁶ It has equally little to do with those fictitious conversations which pass for religious dialogues ‘where none regarded and addressed his partner in reality’.²⁷ As a meeting of the open-hearted with the open-hearted, dialogue can even be found expressive in appropriate moments of silence. Those who have been consoled by a good friend in grief or in sorrow will know the moment.

Monologue, or rather monologue disguised as dialogue, is treated by Buber with contempt. If the basic life of dialogue is a turning towards the other, then the basic life of the monologist is not a turning away from, for to turn away, one needs already at least to have *noticed* the other, but rather a ‘reflexion’, where the other is not met as an other at all, but merely as an aspect on the monological self. An example Buber gives is the lover’s chat, which, far from being an ideal of intimacy, is little more than a dual monologue ‘in which both partners alike enjoy their own glorious soul and their precious experience.’²⁸ (This is rather like that of Mme de Stael—‘*égoïsme à deux*’.) Just as the verbose do not necessarily speak, the monologist is not necessarily a solitary. He may be in the midst of the social swim, a politician, a preacher, a campaigner for good causes, but never stop to speak ‘from being to being’ with a fellow man.²⁹ In a parallel way (and here Buber anticipates elements of environmental philosophy), the natural world is treated either as a glorious state of the soul (an *état d’âme*) or as a passive object of knowledge, either completely internalized in the life of feeling or completely externalized to the

²⁶ Ibid. 3.

²⁷ Ibid. 8. Buber, writing in 1929, seemed to anticipate a new dawn of conversations between the faiths—a tragic hope when we reflect that the Shoah followed.

²⁸ Ibid. 20.

²⁹ Ibid.

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world 'out there'.³⁰ The one living the life of monologue, above all, 'is never aware of the other as something that is *absolutely not himself* and at the same time something with which he nevertheless communicates'.³¹ Whereas 'Being, lived in dialogue, receives even in extreme dereliction a harsh and strengthening sense of reciprocity; being, lived in monologue, will not, even in the tenderest intimacy, grope out over the outlines of the self'.³²

Religion is the most deceptive retreat for the monologist, especially when this represents an attempt to find union with the One by casting off the dross of 'mere humanity'. 'This person is not nearer but more distant from the God who is turned to men and who gives himself as the *I* to a *Thou* and the *Thou* to an *I*'.³³

It is important to see that, despite his expressionist rhetoric, Buber is not calling for a 'universal unreserve' that requires intimacy with every one we meet, and indeed, that he has put a serious question mark beside some interpretations of the Christian 'Love your neighbour'.³⁴ He is saying that one must be ready to stand in relation to others, and even to meet and be changed by others who are not one's *alter ego*/own type, but rather, 'absolutely not' oneself. Buber's is, in the end, a disciplined and austere religious vision. In it one seeks not perfection, but just a 'breakthrough' into 'nothing exalted, heroic or holy, into no Either or no Or'. He describes this in a beautiful phrase as the 'tiny strictness and grace of the everyday'.³⁵

³⁰ Martin Buber, Foreword to M. Buber, *Between Man and Man*, trans. Ronald G. Smith (London: Kegan Paul, 1947), 19, 20.

³¹ Ibid. 20, my emphasis.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid. 25.

³⁴ Buber's style does not please all readers, yet one can see why, in an effort to burst through the starched formality of the philosophical writings of his day, his writing verges on the vatic.

³⁵ Ibid. 36.

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In what is one of the most theologically revealing moments in his 'Dialogue' Buber says, 'Only when two say to one another with all that they are, "It is *Thou*", is the indwelling of the Present Being between them.' The 'indwelling of the Present Being' here is the Shekinah, 'the place where the Lord God causes his name to dwell.'³⁶

I and Thou is the fruit of reflections that absorbed Buber between 1918 and 1923, influenced by his reading of Hermann Cohen and his conversations with Franz Rosenzweig. By 1919 Buber had written a draft of the book and was already describing Jewish teaching as 'two-directional, as a reciprocal relation existing between the human I and the divine Thou'.³⁷ The deeply Jewish nature of the book was to some extent concealed from its first audience, partly by Buber himself, who wished to give the book a broader appeal, and partly by a readership little attuned to his religious message.³⁸ *I and Thou* came late as a title. Buber had earlier referred to it as the 'Prolegomena to a Philosophy of Religion' or, more tellingly, 'Religion as Presence'.³⁹ In 1922, and thus a year before the publication of *I and Thou*, he gave a course entitled 'Religion as Presence' (*Religion als Gegenwart*) at a Jewish college.⁴⁰ Evident in these lectures, though downplayed in

³⁶ Ibid. 30. Cf. Deut. 12: 11 (see the Translator's note on p. 207).

³⁷ Ibid. 20.

³⁸ Rivka Horwitz says that those whose orientation was to social philosophy read *I and Thou* as social philosophy, and judged its references to God and religion to be inessential. The truth, according to Horowitz, is the other way around: the social aspects were added to a work 'whose original and primary concern was the attempt, prompted by the disillusion with mysticism, to reformulate the concept and position of religion' R. Horwitz and M. Buber, *Buber's Way to 'I and Thou': An Historical Analysis and the First Publication of Martin Buber's Lectures 'Religion als Gegenwart'* (Heidelberg: Schneider, 1978), 29.

³⁹ Ibid. 22.

⁴⁰ These lectures were published for the first time only in 1978 by Rivka Horwitz, in the book cited in n. 39 above.

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the published *I and Thou*, is the fact that the template for the meeting of man with man is the meeting of Moses with God on Sinai. This is the *God who is present* to Israel, the God who addresses Moses from the burning bush, and who is, in turn addressed by him. For Buber, as for Rosenzweig, this moment is of decisive importance. When translating the Bible the two pondered at length over the proper translation of the Hebrew 'name' given to Moses in Exod. 3: 14, the name frequently rendered in English language Bibles as 'I AM WHO I AM'. In their opinion—and scholarly opinion both Jewish and Christian is with them on this—'I AM WHO I AM' is not, in Exodus, a metaphysical utterance. Here is a gloss of Rosenzweig's, expressing a translator's viewpoint that the two shared,

... all those who find here notions of 'being,' of 'the-one-who-is,' of 'the eternal,' are all Platonizing ... God calls himself not 'the-one-who-is' but 'the one-who-is-there,' i.e. there for you, there for you at this place, present to you, with you or rather coming toward you, toward you to help you. For the Hebrew *hayah* is not, unlike the Indo-Germanic 'to be,' of its nature a copula, not of its nature static, but a word of becoming, of entering, of happening.⁴¹

This relationship with the Absolute Thou stands, for Buber, behind all our being present to others: the German *Gegenwart* indicates both 'presence' and 'present'. The Absolute Thou is the presence which guarantees that religion cannot be past—only present. In the lectures, though not in the book, Buber is pleased to identify this presence with the Shekinah.

⁴¹ 'A Letter to Martin Goldner', in M. Buber and F. Rosenzweig, *Scripture and Translation*, trans. Lawrence Rosenwald with Everett Fox (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 191.

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The same themes run through Rosenzweig's philosophy of 'speaking thinking'. This is thinking always done in genuine response to another and allowing of difference. It is modest, in allowing that the other may have something to tell us, yet not fearful. In contrast to the Hegelian pattern, where thesis and antithesis sublate one another to be mutually annihilated in synthesis, in dialogical thinking the one and the other one are not destroyed by their encounter, but become more truly themselves. In contrast to philosophy's claim to speak from a timeless nowhere, actual speech is 'bound by time and nourished by time'. Because of this, dialogue 'does not know in advance just where it will end. It takes its cue from others.' Unlike the *faux* dialogues of Plato or Hume, where the philosopher controls and brings the dialogue to a predetermined destiny, 'In actual conversation, something happens.' We are changed. 'Perhaps the other person will say the first word for in a true conversation this is usually the case; a glance at the Gospels and the Socratic dialogues will show the contrast.'⁴²

These two Jewish writers, Buber and Rosenzweig, can provide the foundations for an anthropology of the-at-least-two, remedial to Christian, or Western, tendencies to privilege the solitary self. We are told that young people take friendship more seriously than they do marriage, but what kind of friendship? Is the ideal put before us that of a friendship that does not

⁴² 'The New Thinking: Philosophy and Religion', in F. Rosenzweig, *Franz Rosenzweig: His Life and Thought*, trans. N. N. Glatzer (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett, 1998), 198–9. I am warmed by Rosenzweig's suggestion that the Gospels, and he must mean their accounts of Jesus, show someone who is a 'speaking thinker', someone who is actually hearing and responding. Christianity has not proved so good at this.

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disturb us too much? A friend can be a friend as long as he or she does not make too many demands? While the ‘self as solitary cogito’ characteristic of much early modern and Enlightenment philosophical writing has been subjected to damning philosophical criticism, what might be called the ‘popular’ modern self (that is, the notion of self, placed, flattered, and cajoled by the advertising industry, the media, self-help gurus, and even some philosophy) is still fundamentally autarchic after the eighteenth-century pattern and pictures of the self as (ideally) fully self-ruling and self-possessed, dipping into association with others as this suits a private end. Cicero would more likely call this *propinquitias* than *amicitia*.

But within an anthropology of the-at-least-two, the friend is not a blank sheet for the free play of my emotions or a mirror for my virtues. Nor are the friends aligned in Cicero’s symmetrical and essentially static perfection; rather, I am becoming myself in and through who I am for others and who they are for me. Friendship is in this sense an eschatological relationship, for it has as much to do with what I may become as with what I now am.

Who can be my friend? Not *everyone*, and certainly not everyone at once. Friendship is a relation with particular persons and not with generic humanity. But if we cannot be friends with everyone, we should not dismiss the un-Ciceronian possibility that we might be friends with *anyone*. Buber prompts us to consider the possibility that a friend may come—as a surprise—a grace. Friends cannot after all be mechanically generated. Like the divine ‘You’, there is a sense in which the human you encounters me by grace—it cannot be found by seeking. And because friendship is not based on shared perfection in virtue, and is not static, within this way of thinking there is room to say that we might become the friends of God.

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We become who we are, and know who we are to the limited extent in which we genuinely ‘know ourselves’, through our relationships with other people. Because our speaking to one another in true conversation is never complete, we can never know ourselves to be completed, finished products.

CONCLUSION

From the very beginning every thought of Dostoevsky’s heroes (the ‘underground man’, Raskolnikov, Ivan, etc.) feels itself to be a *speech* in an uncompleted dialog. Such a thought does not pursue a rounded-off and finalized monological whole. It lives a tense life on the border of another idea and another consciousness.

Mikhail Bakhtin

We might ask what it is for us today to write philosophy in a way mindful of ‘the-at-least-two’? Can the *writing* of philosophy be separated from what it is to *read* philosophy? And what is it to write philosophy when one’s subject is ‘reverence for the other’, or even intersubjectivity? The philosophical writer has a dilemma; to write a piece of philosophy is in most cases to write a monologue. It is to write a work in which the author, in prescriptive mode, lays down definitions, imposes structure, and provides analysis. As a monologue, the text of philosophy has no capacity and no textual place to *listen* to another. Even texts of philosophy that are putative dialogues, like Hume’s *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, are, on closer observation, tightly controlled by their authors. This may be more than a problem of style, for an anthropology of the-at-least-two is at odds with the

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autarchic subject cultivated by so much modern philosophy—self-contained and self-ruling, for whom the rupture towards the other could come only as a wound.

To challenge this modernist conception of individual autonomy was the aspiration of a truly great twentieth-century theorist of dialogue, Mikhail Bakhtin. Hailed in the West by Left-leaning intellectuals in the 1960s as a Marxist standard-bearer, Bakhtin now emerges, subsequent to the opening of Soviet archives in the early 1990s, as one whose ‘first and most obvious context is not Marxism but Orthodoxy’,⁴³ perhaps even a *staretz* or saint. The attentive reader can see the clues in works like *Problems in Dostoevsky’s Poetics*. Dostoevsky’s genius, according to Bakhtin, is to break with the monological tradition of the novel in which the author controls the plot, the characters, the sentiments of the hero who is an object of the author’s word.⁴⁴ It was the genius of Dostoevsky to create an entirely new form in which the author creates not ‘voiceless slaves (as does Zeus), but rather *free* people who are capable of standing beside their creator, of disagreeing with him, and even of rebelling against him’. Responding sharply to an anti-Semitic remark by one of his disciples, Bakhtin said, ‘The Jews have argued with God, made peace with Him, accepted and rejected his Grace . . . And we Russians, what have we done? Thrown Perun into the river?’⁴⁵

This is Bakhtin’s ‘polyphonic’ novel, and its antecedents are as much in biblical narratives as in Marxist dialectics. When Bakhtin praises Dostoevsky for affirming ‘the next man’s “I” not as an

⁴³ C. Lock, ‘Reviewing Bakhtin’, *St Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly*, 43/1 (1999), 86. See also A. Mihailovic, *Corporeal Words: Mikhail Bakhtin’s Theology of Discourse* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1997), Introduction.

⁴⁴ M. M. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, trans. R. W. Rotsel (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1973), 3.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* 14–15. Perun was a Slavic pagan deity.

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object but as another subject', and adds that 'The heroes must affirm another man's "Thou art" in order to overcome their ethical solipsism', it is difficult not to hear echoes of Buber.⁴⁶ Certainly Bakhtin has read and been influenced by both Husserl, on intersubjectivity, and Hermann Cohen, whose writings inspired the dialogical theories of both Buber and Rosenzweig. Bakhtin tells us clearly that his vision is not *dialectical*: 'if the ideas in the novel were arranged as links in a unified dialectical series, then each novel would be a complete philosophical whole—the final link in the dialectical series would be the author's synthesis, cancelling out the previous ones as superseded.'⁴⁷

The important thing is not a dialectical unfolding within a monological conception, but rather 'the important thing is the final dialogicality' of the whole, and the template for this would seem to be the Bible, whose heroes are never objects but always subjects, predestined to be free (and argumentative) by the divine author. Bakhtin's own theory of dialogue is also a meditation on the Word made flesh, the Word becoming real when people speak to one another.⁴⁸

How might this dialogical polyphony work in texts of philosophy of religion? Patristic and medieval theology make use of epistolary genres, the contrapuntal style of medieval *Quaestiones Disputatae*, and prayer. Perhaps the text most redolent with what Bakhtin admires in Dostoevsky is Augustine's philosophical prose-prayer, the *Confessions*, which, despite appearances, is not a

⁴⁶ Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 7. Bakhtin is citing another critic, Ivanov, with approval. I am told by Paul Mendes-Flohr that Bakhtin was a reader of Buber, although neither he nor I can find now the source for this.

⁴⁷ Ibid. 21.

⁴⁸ This essentially Johannine theme runs behind his theory of discourse (*slovo*), for in Russian *slovo* is the term used to translate *logos* in the Fourth Gospel. See Mihailovic, *Corporeal Words*, ch. 1, for an extensive treatment of this theme.

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monologue. Augustine's silent interlocutor is God. Nor is Augustine's the only human voice in the text: by constant immersion in the words of Scripture, Augustine invokes his teachers in faith—the psalmists, prophets, and disciples—whose voices stream across the pages to a new audience of the faithful who are Augustine's addressees. His 'introspection' leads to no aut-archic self and no clear-lit chamber of subjectivity, but to the acknowledgement that we remain mysteries to ourselves, known by God. Because the work is a work of praise (*confessio*), it can never be completed or will be complete only in the *City of God*. In the meantime, we must all live, attentively and like Dostoevsky's characters, on the 'tense life on the border of another idea and another consciousness'. In speaking and listening to one another, we grow and change. This is friendship.