“Unfriend” was the 2009 Word of the Year, a designation awarded by the New Oxford American Dictionary. It is a verb that refers to the act of removing someone as a “friend” on a social networking site such as Facebook. Just as you can “friend” people (add them to the list of those who can access your profile page), so, should you come to regret your promiscuous friending, you can “unfriend.”

That certain friendships must be ended has always been a painful fact of life. Before the era of virtual friendship, however, the act of severance was rare enough that no such verb existed. Aristotle, who devoted two of the ten books of his *Ethics* to the moral complexities of friendship, discussed very sensitively the reasons that might necessitate ending one; being required to deaccession at Facebook’s 5000-“friend” limit, or being bothered by a cyber-stalking “friend,” was not among them. Only in our day can a friendship be dissolved with a click—doubtless, the inevitable consequence of forming friendships with a click.

When the language of friendship is in transition, you can be pretty sure that the experience of friendship is also. Of course, if pressed, most adults would admit that virtual friends are different from real friends. Real friends are fast friends (in the original sense of steadfast or firm), whereas virtual friends are fast friends in the manner of fast food: quick, cheap, and possibly unhealthy. The “friends” on social networks often include an array of close and not-so-close friends and family members; past and present acquaintances, co-workers, and neighbors; old flames and schoolmates; friends of friends, business contacts, fans and admirers; and various joiners, stragglers, and strangers. To accustom oneself to calling this assemblage “friends”—and then to pride oneself on augmenting and managing this human menagerie—debases the meaning of friendship. For young people especially, the way in which the technology of digital connection favors quantity over quality can profoundly dilute the special familiarity of

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friendship. Ask a teenager how he defines the word “friend” and you may find that he doesn’t distinguish a friend from an acquaintance.

The range in types of human connectedness has been contracted because there is now but one mode of recognition, misnamed “friending.” At the same time, those who have been “friended” are treated indiscriminately to the same degree of self-revelation, tending toward the inappropriately intimate. (As the phenomenon of “friends with benefits” shows, even the distinction between friend and lover has collapsed.) Thus, friendship is simultaneously defined down and broadened. The best word to capture both aspects of the transformation might be “leveling.” Friendship has gone from peak to plateau, or maybe from peak to plain.

To Befriend or Not to Befriend

Perhaps just as significant as this alteration in the terrain of human relations is the loss of friendship’s moral content. There is a world of difference between the new verb “to friend” and the old verb “to befriend.” The latter required acting as a friend by extending help and care. The Oxford English Dictionary gives the following instance of usage from 1559: “you may befriend my wretched soule with quicke dispatch in death”; and this one from 1867: “Persons . . . who befriended the negro in his bondage.” At least for that span of 300 years, befriending another was a morally demanding commitment that might entail risks and sacrifice, and certainly entailed action on behalf of someone else (which in turn required wisdom sufficient to know what would truly benefit another—so, in that first instance, should you put your friend out of his death-bed misery?). Today’s “friending,” by contrast, is primarily a route to narcissistic self-display and absorption in the moody minutiae of daily life. “Friending” takes place onscreen; it involves the sharing of pictures and words but does not depend on deeds. Moreover, even the exchange of words is limited to scrawling graffiti messages on a “wall” or “chatting” (there is no cyber-space for conversation). In “friending,” unlike “befriending,” you don’t actually have “to be” or behave as a friend; the “being” has been removed from the relation. That may explain why young people seem to find it increasingly difficult to be fully present in face-to-face interactions. Watch a group of college students dine together—they spend as much time texting absent friends as talking with those gathered around them. Or ask a college admissions director how many prospective students have the elementary social skill of making eye contact during an interview.

Online networking, texting, and other forms of constant electronic connectivity have contributed to the decline of friendship, both in its deep form and in its more general
form of “friendliness” (which is listed by Aristotle as one of three virtues of association, along with truthfulness and wit). These new media are not, however, the primary source of the problem. In fact, the unfriending of friendship has been going on for a very long time. The ancients took the phenomenon of friendship seriously, exploring its moral, intellectual, and civic dimensions, but both Christian writers and modern philosophers have treated it slightly, if at all. It is easy to see why. The egalitarianism and universality of the Christian commandment to love all men renders the particularity and exclusivity of friendship suspect. A line-in-the-sand motto like “good to friends, harm to enemies” is hard to square with the Christian precept to love one’s enemies. Charity trumps friendship. Today’s secular communitarians have revived this mistrust of friendship—in the process, of course, making it less a matter of individual conscience and more a matter of social engineering. As reported last year in the New York Times, schools and summer camps have started to discourage youngsters from becoming “best friends”—to the point of interventions by “friendship coaches” who take steps to separate the overly-attached, and instruct kids on how to be friends with everyone. Inclusivity, not exclusivity, is the order of the day. The aim here is to discourage bullying and cliquishness by disapproving of the preferential association that is friendship. After all, friendship is discriminatory.

Meanwhile, the radically individualist strands of modern thought don’t offer any better ground for friendship. If nature inclines us toward a war of every one against every one, as Thomas Hobbes argued, then friendship, strictly speaking, is nonexistent. Friendship is greeted not with disapproval but with disbelief. All friends are imaginary friends. It is enemies that are real. Of course, alliances can be constructed, but one shouldn’t mistake allies for friends. It seems that modern thought either reduces human beings to solitary egoists incapable of generous attachments (à la Hobbes), or it culminates in abstract and dutiful selflessness (à la Kant). Friendship falls into the chasm separating self-interest from idealism and, consequently, a large swath of life as actually lived goes unacknowledged and unexplained.

It’s true that marriage and family have also felt the ground shift beneath them. The seismic shocks began centuries before the sexual revolution, with Locke and Montesquieu both making the case for no-fault divorce in opposition to Christianity’s sacramental view of marriage. At least since Rousseau, however, there have been liberal theorists attempting to bolster marriage (with injections of romance) and reconfigure the family from dynastic to democratic. Sex and blood are still recognized as the source of natural connections that can be fortified by morality and law. Across the spectrum, our public life is saturated with groups and policies concerned with the
conditions of family life: from Planned Parenthood to Focus on the Family, from AFDC (Aid to Families with Dependent Children) to Marriage Works, from “family values” to “gay marriage.” There is no comparable attention to the fate of friendship. Increasingly, the nuclear family absorbs all energy, leaving no truly independent space for either friendship or reflection on friendship.

Because of this long philosophic neglect, our practice of friendship lacks a rich and developed language to sustain and inform it. Although popular culture still offers us models of friendship (in the form of “buddy” movies and television shows like Seinfeld or Friends), those models, unfortunately but not surprisingly, are compounded of equal parts cynicism and sentimentality. The natural longing for friends is still present (even the anti-friendship counselors admit that kids prefer to pair up and have a best friend), but we must go back to the Greeks and Romans in search of materials for a recovery of the art of friendship.

Start with Aristotle

Plato, Epicurus, Cicero, and Seneca all wrote about friendship, but Aristotle is the place to start. Although not regarded as the most affable or approachable of writers, Aristotle does devote one-fifth of his Nicomachean Ethics to an analysis of friendship, which is more space than he gives to the virtues of courage, moderation, and justice combined. What accounts for this privileged position? We perhaps get a clue when we realize that the only exhortation to virtue contained in the Ethics is for the sake of friendship. Aristotle says: “everyone should earnestly shun vice and try to be decent; for that is how someone will have a friendly relation to himself and will become a friend to another.” Aristotle bids his audience be good so that they will be lovable—lovability being required for friendship with oneself (which is the proper, self-improving form of self-love as opposed to the self-indulgent form) and friendship with another (whose goodness is so dear that he becomes, in fact, a second self).

Happily, the view that friends are good things is probably ineradicable. As Aristotle said, “no one would choose to live without friends even if he had all the other goods.” But we tend to forget about the link between friendship and virtue which forms the basis of Aristotle’s entire discussion. He begins by stating that “friendship is a virtue, or involves virtue.” The first formulation—“friendship is a virtue”—points to the social virtue of amicability (a generalized friendliness without special attachment that avoids the opposite vices of fawning and cantankerousness). The second formulation—that friendship involves virtue—is more interesting (and Aristotle spends the next 26 chapters elaborating its meaning). Since the Greek preposition is
meta, a more literal translation would read: “friendship is with virtue.” Aristotle’s curious definition implies that friendship and virtue are themselves friends, for like friends, they are with one another. So, if you want to find friendship, look for virtue, and vice versa.

Because friendship is linked to virtue, not every relation commonly called friendship is, in truth, friendship. Aristotle engages in a philosophic version of “unfriending”: gently, he sets out to correct his readers—a correction necessary in every era, but especially ours. Friendships premised on mutual utility, an exceedingly prevalent form of human connection, turn out to be seriously deficient—limited both in scope and duration. Since the friends value each other on account of something incidental, the friendship is truly co-incidental. It was formed because the two happened to be of use to one another and it remains dependent upon continued usefulness. These are implicitly contractual partnerships, more like ephemeral alliances than real friendships. In more explicitly profit-driven settings (a commercial transaction, for instance), individuals are upfront about using people for their own ends. However, problems arise in friendships of utility since the friends disguise the fact that they are more interested in getting than giving. Suspicion and recrimination are endemic to such friendships. I have heard of youngsters with dirt bikes who prefer not to get the bikes out when bike-less friends visit, not because they don’t like to share, but because they worry that their friends might be friends of convenience only. Sensitive youngsters don’t want to tempt others into confirming their suspicions. Along with the opportunistic of all ages, it is the old (intent on gain or perhaps simply survival) who are most given to friendships of utility.

More typical of the innocent young are friendships of pleasure. They are play-mates. These ready friendships receive a mixed review from Aristotle. He doesn’t dismiss pleasure—even in friendships founded on virtue, the friends must take pleasure in one another and in their shared pursuits. Because friendships of pleasure are characterized by equal sharing, they are closer to real friendship than are the disproportionate relations based on utility. Nonetheless, they too are defective. Such friendships are morally indifferent. One’s favorite tennis partner might well be a less-than-stellar individual. In friendships of pleasure, good and bad folks mix indiscriminately, but not durably; their friendships are as fleeting as pleasure itself. Thus, less-than-virtuous individuals could share in the pleasure of a crime spree and then promptly rat each other out when the police end the fun. Among the young, sympathetic intensity makes friends inseparable, until, of course, a few days later when they have bitterly fallen out. The unreliability of such friendships is captured in another of
today's clever neologisms: *frenemy* (the older, less concise version was "with friends like that, who needs enemies").

It turns out that only the friendship of virtuous individuals, for whom the motive for loving is recognition of each other's goodness, can unqualifiedly be called friendship. Such friends love essentially, that is, for the friend's sake. As a result, their friendship is as permanent as goodness itself. Although they do not associate with one another on the basis of either pleasure or utility, they are of course both a delight and a service to one another. Those advantages follow the friendship, however, rather than prompt it. Aristotle admits, indeed insists, that friendship in this authentic and superlative sense is rare.

One can still find glimmerings of this link between virtue and friendship in the popular understanding. Take the public service message: "Friends don’t let friends drive drunk." Here the state, channeling Aristotle, reminds drinking-buddies (friendships of pleasure) that real friendship requires some modicum of virtue: a friend puts the welfare of his friend first; a friend has the courage to speak up when a friend intends to do something wrong or stupid; a friend has the forethought and self-control to be the designated non-drinker for the evening (although this solution does risk introducing a disproportionate element of sobriety into the shared experience) or, even better, to call a cab. Parents also are aware of the linkage. They worry about who their kids' friends are. They sense that friendship, particularly in the formative years, is a school either of virtue or vice. They want friends for their children who will help keep them on track (for most middle-class parents that means college-bound). While the kids focus on pleasure, the parents focus on virtue. Unfortunately, I think, they tend to reduce virtue to its utility (forgetting its beauty). When a parent says, "I'm not sure he's a good friend for you" he risks conveying the message that friends should be chosen in a calculative way on the basis of their usefulness to us. The parent is encouraging the child to shift from friendships of pleasure to friendships of utility (a demotion), rather than preparing the child to be drawn to a higher conception of friendship. If the parent indicates that he thinks of the other child in terms of his use value to his own child, then he has failed to focus on friendship as a matter of giving, or on virtue as lovable. No wonder young people so rarely listen to the admonitions of their morally flat-footed elders.

**Citizens and Families**

Aristotle has instructive things to say about friendship at the very different levels of the city, the family, and the self. Virtue-generated lovableness could solve a lot of
problems—perhaps even the problem of discord and faction in the state. As he writes, “friendship would seem to hold cities together, and legislators would seem to be more concerned about it than about justice.” Still, despite the advantages of citizen-friendship, Aristotle endorses only a moderate form of political fraternity or comradeship. Friends may indeed share all (or nearly all) things in common, but citizens cannot, and should not, be expected to do the same. Aristotle is a critic of the communistic attempt to institutionalize and extend intimacy. Friendship proper is found in pairs. There is, however, a lesser, political version of friendship that Aristotle recommends, called “concord” or “like-mindedness” (*homonôia*).

American history offers dramatic instances of what *homonôia* can mean for national life—both in its salutary presence and its disastrous absence. The United States began with a declaration of what its citizens were agreed on: “We hold these truths. . . .” That revolutionary like-mindedness went deep enough that the proponents of independence were prepared to support it with active friendship: “we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes, and our sacred Honor.” They did not pledge themselves each separately to independence, but rather pledged themselves to one another in support of independence. Underpinning the cause of national independence were bonds of blood brotherhood. Not all countries have been as explicit about their creed, but Aristotle implies that some notion of shared standards and beliefs is necessary in every political community—the happenstance of shared location or the utility of commercial alliance is not sufficient.

Since the Civil War (itself evidence of a profound collapse in *homonôia*), race relations in the United States have shown the needfulness of civic affection. At issue has been not simply justice (“let justice roll down like waters”) but the less thunderous, more delicate matter of “concord.” How can concord be achieved between the descendants of a race once masters and the descendants of a race once enslaved? As Frederick Douglass put the question:

> Can the white and colored people of this country be blended into a common nationality, and enjoy together, in the same country, under the same flag, the inestimable blessings of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, as neighborly citizens of a common country?

Douglass emphatically believed the answer was yes, but he was under no illusions about the main difficulty: progress in racial accord requires virtues of character (those qualities that are intrinsically lovable) in both blacks and whites.
Turning from citizenship to those nearer and dearer, Aristotle shows the family to be the indispensable nursery of friendship (and thus virtue), but his account is certainly not sentimental. He is fully aware of the tensions and limits of familial friendship, rooted as it is in the indigence of embodied life. He identifies the procreative love of the parents for the child as the foundation of all other domestic affections. Because he is theirs, a child is loved before he has shown himself to be lovable; indeed, he is loved before he has shown himself at all. Yet even when the child comes to take an active part in the relationship, loving his parents and honoring the goodness of his birth and their care, the parents’ love continues stronger, partly because the child’s parentage is known with greater certainty by the parents (particularly the mother) than by the child, and partly because of parental possessiveness—the parents feel the child’s belongingness, whereas the child, though acknowledging his origins, must yet feel his individuality. Thus, the stage is set for the problem of competing loyalties: how much allegiance is due to the sources of one’s being and how much to other formative influences (teachers and fatherland) or simply to what is sovereign in one’s soul? Decorously, Aristotle hints at the likely conflicts between what is by blood (the voice of tradition) and what is best (the voice of reason), between filial piety and philosophy.

Your Own Best Friend

Can you be a friend to yourself? With this intriguing question Aristotle enters the deepest realms of friendship. How should we regard self-love? Aren’t the lovers of self “selfish” and thus debarred from either loving or being loved by others? Aristotle begins from the common opinion which holds that to be selfish is reprehensible. A bad man is self-serving, whereas a good man—dedicated to others: family, friends, and country—is self-sacrificing. Aristotle, however, shows that common opinion fails to grasp something important: the good man is in fact a great self-lover. While the good man gives unspARINGLY of those things that most people overvalue (money, honors, and even life itself), he takes for himself the larger share of nobility. Aristotle knows that “for himself most of all, each wishes good things”; the only difference is that the good man, unlike the rest of us, knows what the truly good things are. As a result, “the good man is of one mind with himself and desires the same things with his whole soul.” By contrast, base men “are at variance with themselves and have appetite for one thing and wish for another.”

Friendship with oneself is possible only because the self is composed of parts—parts inclined toward disordered cacophony. Friendship within brings harmony to our
self-division, achieving a psychic version of like-mindedness. With our whole soul—our composite or synergic self—we ought to love and obey what is highest in us: the ruling element of mind. We still have some perception of this today, for we say things like: “Do yourself a favor, stop . . . [lying, cheating, stealing]” and if the wrongdoer doesn’t take our advice we say, “He is his own worst enemy.”

Aristotle presents two main types of mindful self-love. The first is the man of practical reason who orients himself toward noble deeds (great statesmen and benefactors would be examples). The second is the man whose activity is the exercise of mind simply: the philosopher who aims not at the beautiful or noble, but the true. For both, self-friendship is the original—the well-spring and standard—of all friendship. Friendship with another is possible because “a friend is another self” who further repairs our self-division by keeping us morally and intellectually energized. The spectacle of a good friend’s beneficence is pleasing to a man who likes to do well himself and a spur to his own virtuous activity. There can by an element of good-natured rivalry in philanthropic activity, like Bill Gates and Warren Buffet competing to see who can give away the largest chunk of his fortune.

The thinker, meanwhile, is aided not by the sight of a friend’s noble deeds, but by speech shared with a friend. For Aristotle, the friendship nonpareil consists in synaisthanesthai, a consciousness of one another’s existence achieved by living together and sharing in speech and thought. At its peak, Aristotle’s teaching about friendship becomes a teaching about the life of contemplation. Of course, all friends discuss their common pursuits, be they card-playing and carousing or bicycling and business ventures; however, that talk, if not exactly extraneous to the activities that constitute their life together, is nonetheless not identical to those activities. One talks of tennis when not playing tennis. With philosophy, however, conversation is not a second best activity. There is no loss of thought in speaking thoughts, as there is a loss of tennis in speaking of tennis. Since thought is furthered by its expression, friendly philosophic activity is uniquely self-sufficient. Moreover, the common object of philosophic friends—the truth—is perfectly shareable, in other words, shareable not by apportionment, but by communication. As a result, the philosophic love of oneself as mind is compatible with perfect friendship; cooperation replaces rivalry.

Now, this might seem too pie-in-the-sky, as if the only real friendships were those within and between the rarefied minds of Plato and Aristotle. Rarefied it may be, but relevant nonetheless, for it has been the modern demotion of reason—reconfiguring
the self so there is no higher and lower—that has pulled the rug out from under friendship. The restoration of friendship depends on a renewed sense of ourselves as rational beings. We need the notion of a justifiable and sublime self-love. We need the concept of best friends. We need the understanding that friendship both requires and contributes to virtue. We need an appreciation of the incomplete friendships proper to certain settings, especially the like-mindedness of fellow citizens. Above all, we need to start thinking and talking about friendship again—preferably with a few friends.
Boyd and Jill Smith Task Force on Virtues of a Free Society

The Virtues of a Free Society Task Force examines the evolution of America’s core values, how they are threatened, and what can be done to preserve them. The task force’s aims are to identify the enduring virtues and values on which liberty depends; chart the changes in how Americans have practiced virtues and values over the course of our nation’s history; assess the ability of contemporary associations and institutions—particularly schools, family, and religion—to sustain the necessary virtues; and discuss how society might nurture the virtues and values on which its liberty depends.

The core membership of this task force includes Peter Berkowitz (cochair), David Brady (cochair), Gerard V. Bradley, James W. Ceaser, William Damon, Robert P. George, Tod Lindberg, Harvey C. Mansfield, Russell Muirhead, Clifford Orwin, and Diana Schaub.

For more information about this Hoover Institution Task Force please visit us online at www.hoover.org/taskforces/virtues.