

## Is There a Politics to Friendship? Derrida's Critique of the Couple in Montaigne, Kant and Levinas

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... (of the friendship of this legendary pair of friends of this century to which, Kant would add, a third reliable friend came to join them, already in fact being there from the very beginning, Levinas [. . .]) (PF, 293)<sup>1</sup>

*Politics of Friendship* is a significant critique of fraternity as a model of community. Yet what is perhaps of equal importance, though less acknowledged, is its major challenge to the couple as a model for friendship. For Derrida, as we will see, it is not only that the Western philosophical tradition understands friendship through brotherhood, but that it also does so through a paradigm of friendship between *two* brothers. In this chapter, I will show how this is a constant target in Derrida's reading of both Michel de Montaigne and Immanuel Kant. In so doing, I will also address an interconnected question posed implicitly in the epigraph of this text: where is Levinas in *Politics of Friendship*? This citation appears in the closing moments of the text and reminds us that Levinas has been entirely absent from Derrida's discussion of friendship and politics. Indeed, as we can see, it is not even Derrida who adds Levinas to this text, but rather Kant who 'would add (Levinas as) a third reliable friend'. This third friend, or even third wheel, is only introduced to shed light on – perhaps with candle in hand – this 'legendary pair of friends', Blanchot and Bataille.<sup>2</sup> Yet Levinas here is represented as a friend, just as reliable as the other two, and 'there from the very beginning'. What are we to make of this cryptic, intertextual passage and what does it say about the notable absence of any discussion of Levinas in *Politics of Friendship*?

By breaking down each part of this curious phrase, I will demonstrate that Levinas is far from absent in this text. Indeed, as we will see, his presence between Bataille and Blanchot here is tacit acknowledgement of the way the Levinasian framework structures Derrida's analysis of friendship. With this approach, Derrida points to a double bind in the *face-à-face* (face-to-

face) of the couple and its relation to other friends and society in *le tiers* (the third party). This is presented as an irresolvable tension between a desire to deploy friendship as an apolitical relation between two individuals, as well as a ground and guide for politics. Yet, looking more closely at Derrida's approach, we come to see that Derrida subtly deploys Levinas's own system against Levinas himself, bringing out how Levinas may still neglect the primacy of the third party and the consequences of this for a thinking of friendship. As such, Derrida demonstrates the necessity to think of friendship as political all the way down, without any apolitical or pre-political moment. Through the figure of the couple of friends, this is a position that Derrida explicitly critiques in Montaigne and Kant, and silently challenges in Levinas.

### This Legendary Pair of Friends

Beginning with the first part of our epigraph, we can follow the reference to this 'legendary pair of friends of this century'.<sup>3</sup> This leads us directly to Montaigne, who maintains – along with Cicero and Kant – that 'there are no friends', because friendship is a rare occurrence: 'a great friendship comes along every three or four centuries' (258). Blanchot and Bataille, then, have truly lucked out, conveniently landing in one of those rare centuries. This subtle reference to Montaigne, many chapters after his first appearance, consolidates Derrida's earlier reading of the couple in Montaigne. At that stage, we saw how Montaigne viewed friendship through a paradigm of the couple of (male) friends. This couple articulates the indivisibility and singularity of friendship, but a singularity which is divided between two bodies: 'the friend *qua* one soul (singularity) but in two bodies (duplicity)' (178). Montaigne maintains that his conception of friendship as 'one soul in two bodies' comes down to him from Aristotle.<sup>4</sup> Yet, in Montaigne we see even greater stress on the indivisibility of friendship. What is important is that while the body can be divided, the soul must remain indivisible, 'for the perfect friendship I speak of is indivisible'.<sup>5</sup> Such indivisibility is an essential part of the couple, as 'an *indivisible* community of the soul between two who love one another [*entre deux qui s'aiment*]' (179). From this perspective, it would hardly be accurate to describe friendship as *between* two different people, but rather as an engagement or commitment that connects one shared soul.

From here, Derrida brings forth how Montaigne's conception of friendship is based on the unity and singularity of each couple, 'not only the indivisibility or the uniqueness of the soul, but the singularity of the couple' (182). We see then that it is not only the model of brotherhood that structures

community, but also the model of the couple as *two* brothers. Indeed, this is one of the motivations behind Montaigne's rejection of natural brotherhood in favour of a chosen or social 'brotherhood'. The former is an attribute, part of 'common, customary friendship', at least in part because we can have several brothers; whereas the latter is a perfect friendship as the couple is both singular and indivisible for Montaigne: 'the fraternity of alliance or election [. . .] is the indivisible essence of "perfect friendship"' (181). Derrida's analysis helps us see that it is not simply brotherhood, but the paradigm of *two* brothers that is at play here.

The singularity and unity of the couple is a fundamental part of Montaigne's thinking of friendship. Yet the couple also serves as the ground of politics, and it is here that Derrida pulls at the contradictory threads of Montaigne's reading. Montaigne wants this singular friendship to be withdrawn from society and politics, the couple of friends wholly united and complete within themselves, attaining 'a certain transcendence of friendship with respect to the public or civic realm'; and yet, he also presents this friendship as a ground for and guide to the political, whereby this couple is 'regularly engaged in an extremely politicized scene' (182). As Derrida stresses, this conception of friendship 'marks off the simultaneously political and apolitical, or a-civic, structure of a perfect friendship which accepts (*assume*) the impossibility of honouring multiple demands and doing one's duty beyond the couple of friends' (182). And yet, as Derrida also stresses in the term 'a-civic', the *civitas* is also at play, acknowledging that 'all the couples of friends which serve as examples for Cicero and Montaigne are citizen couples' (184).

The consequences of this citizenship cannot easily be dismissed, not least because it forms a structural part of how Montaigne believes these rare friendships are guided. They are guided by reason and virtue: 'this pair were guided by virtue and led by reason (*without which it is impossible to harness them together*)' (183–4). And for Montaigne, both virtue and reason are not private, but rather these concepts are 'brought to bear in advance on the space of the *res publica*' (184). Indeed, within this tradition it is not possible to think a conception of reason or virtue 'that would not be in essence homogeneous to the best reason of State' (184). As we will see when we turn to Kant, Montaigne is far from alone in tying the comportment of these two friends to the state.

What Derrida's analysis of Montaigne brings out is not only that the couple serves as an essential model for friendship, but that it is also caught between a desire to withdraw from the political – as a unique and singular relationship – as well a desire to found the political realm. The couple for Montaigne is this dream of an apolitical moment that can at the same time

guide the political: 'Yet Montaigne seems to continue to dream of a fundamental apoliticism or transpoliticism [. . .] [which would] divide reason or virtue' (184). Importantly, Derrida's aim here is not to resolve this conflict, to find a framework where we can accommodate these demands, but rather to fully exhibit this conflict for what it is: a double bind. Indeed, 'this *double bind* does not happen to fraternity like an accident, but draws an interior and tragic structure out to its limit' (184). This aporia is precisely the tragic choice 'between the sovereign fraternity of secrecy between two, in the friendship of exception, and, on the other hand, the brotherhood or the conjunction of political secrecy, which begins with three' (184). In this conflict, therefore, we see that the couple plays a fundamental role as both sides of the same precious coin. One shares the secret uniquely between two, whereas the other involves the political and public connection, itself presented as another type of secret. The latter, importantly, begins with the third friend. And this leads us to the next part of our epigraph, the 'third reliable friend' which 'Kant would add' to Blanchot and Bataille.

### Kant Would Add

In Montaigne, we have seen the importance of the couple as the model of friendship, but also the aporia that Derrida exposes; two singular and unique friends as removed from the political but caught by the desire to present this as a foundation of the political. Derrida's reading throughout *Politics of Friendship* confirms this but takes on a particularly interesting form in his reading of Kant. Indeed, as we will see, if Derrida selects Kant to be the one who would 'add Levinas' to the discussion, there is good reason for this.

As in Montaigne, for Kant it is the paradigm of the couple which determines the concept of friendship. And Kant ties this even more explicitly to the secret. Here, moral friendship is defined as 'absolute confidence, a confidence such that "*two people*" must share not only their impressions, but even their secret judgements' (257).<sup>6</sup> By this Kant means that the couple must be capable of sharing their whole opinions on politics, religion and a series of other topics, some of which might lead them to being pursued by the state. And it is this commitment to not share the secret which is the condition of friendship whereby friends commit 'to renounce all public profit, all political or institutional consequence, to the possession or circulation of this secret' (258). It is for this reason, like Montaigne and so many others in *Politics of Friendship*, that Kant insists that true friendship is a rare thing. The couple of friends is tied directly to an absolute secret, one shared only between two people.

Secrecy, for Kant, defines friendship. We should have no secrets between ourselves and the friend and should protect the secrets they share. Yet the problem emerges when another friend comes along, a third friend, with whom we should also have no secrets. As in Montaigne, we see that the couple is interrupted precisely at the moment that makes them perfect friends, at the arrival of that third friend:

If there is a problem with the secret, on the other hand, it is in so far as there are two friends *plus one* ('another friend, believed equally reliable', notes Kant) and to the extent that this discourse on the secret supposes the couple's rupture. (259)

The third friend arrives to interrupt the unified relation between the two: the couple would secret itself away from the social, but this is resisted by the possibility of having more than one friend. Importantly, this problem of the third party and the secret carries political problems with it, and once again this same fractured desire of the political and the apolitical.

This split desire – one which we have seen already at work in Montaigne – is best captured in Kant's conception of the *friend of man*, one who loves all of humanity, not just one friend, but all friends. Importantly, this *friend of man* is defined by an Idea of equality between all human beings, but also a sense of obligation towards this idea: 'Equality is *necessary* [*il faut*]. [. . .] For it is *obligation* that the soundness [*la justesse*] or justice of this *consideration* adds to the representation' (260). This obligation is important because it moves us towards a political conception where the *friend of man* is obliged and indebted to men. Importantly, debt and obligation for Kant are wholly political and public concepts. As in Montaigne, it is the morality or virtue of friendship, and particularly reason, that moves friendship directly into the political realm, which 'intersect(s) in the ethics or virtue of friendship: responsible friendship *before* reason, when reason makes the Idea of equality an obligation' (276). It is this connection between these public values of reason and virtue, and particularly obligation, which disrupts the possibility of a purely apolitical, singular and undisrupted friendship. Indeed, this point is far from a secondary aspect in Kant's work, but tied to some of his most significant political concepts. Derrida states this clearly: 'It goes without saying that cosmopolitanism, universal democracy, perpetual peace, would not have the slightest chance of being announced or promised, if not realized, without the presupposition of such a friend' (261).

We can see, therefore, that this couple and the third friend structure Derrida's reading of Kant as much as Montaigne. Again, we have a singular,

unified and fusional couple presented against political community, but at the same time presented as a foundation for the political. It is at this point in Derrida's reading of Kant that we see Levinas arrive on the scene. This crucial moment in his interpretation is couched in Levinas's vocabulary:

In principle this double dimension maintains the absolute singularity of the other and that of 'my' relation to the other, as a relation of the other to the other I am myself, as its other for itself. [. . .] This discourse on universality can determine itself in the regions of morality, of law or of politics, but it always appeals to a third instance [*tiers*], beyond the face-to-face of singularities. (276)

Here, therefore, we see that this couple is presented precisely as a *face-à-face* and the third instance, party or friend as *le tiers*. This appeal to the Levinasian concepts is far from accidental. The face-to-face marks a moment of singular relation to alterity, the third party the moment of the interruption by society and politics; presented in this way, we can see that these categories have structured Derrida's reading of friendship from the outset. Indeed, though the idea in our epigraph that Kant would be the one to 'add' Levinas to the discussion may at first seem surprising, we can see that it is a quite direct allusion to the role Levinas played in Derrida's interpretation of Kant. And, as we have already shown in Montaigne, this is not an exception, but rather plays a key structural role in Derrida's reading throughout the text. In this sense, in spite of the lack of explicit reference to Levinas, an engagement with his work plays a major role in structuring Derrida's own readings of these canonical figures of friendship.

### Already in Fact Being There from the Very Beginning

Yet, if Derrida's engagement with Levinas plays an important structural role throughout the text, that is not to suggest that this is a simple 'application' of a Levinasian framework to this tradition. Instead, there is good reason to understand this as a critical engagement with Levinas, one which suggests that Levinas himself is not immune to the conception of fraternity that Derrida targets so persistently.

It is difficult to summarise the complex dialogue between Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida, which extends far beyond *Politics of Friendship*, but one constant point at issue is the status of the third party. In 'Violence and Metaphysics', Derrida criticises Levinas for presenting the third party as a secondary instance in *Totality and Infinity*.<sup>7</sup> In many ways, Levinas's next

great text, *Otherwise than Being*, serves as a response to Derrida, placing a great deal of further emphasis on the third party and proposing that this plays a fundamental role within his thinking. However, unlike 'Violence and Metaphysics' where the difference is reasonably clear, it is difficult to decipher to what degree Derrida found Levinas's response convincing, and particularly as to whether Levinas has resolved all of his concerns around the priority of the third party. As we have seen above, this question is of major significance in a thinking of friendship, fraternity and political community.

If Derrida does not explicitly address fraternity in Levinas in *Politics of Friendship*, we might look to his last significant engagement with Levinas, *Adieu*.<sup>8</sup> This work is at once both helpful and unhelpful for our purposes. It is helpful as Derrida proposes that alongside hospitality and humanity, fraternity is one of the three great themes of Levinas's *oeuvre*. Yet having maintained that it represents such an important position, Derrida then only offers us eight lines, stating, 'I will not pause here to discuss this further, since this is really not my theme.' In spite of this claim, this footnote does offer a range of citations of Levinas demonstrating the prominence of fraternity in his thought,<sup>9</sup> both in *Totality and Infinity*, 'fraternity is the very relation with the face', and *Otherwise than Being*, which describes 'the structure of the-one-for-the-other inscribed in human fraternity'.<sup>10</sup> There's good ground, then, to suggest that Levinas relies on fraternity and the couple as much as any of the thinkers referenced in *Politics of Friendship*.

Furthermore, the footnote in *Adieu* takes on an even more significant position as Kant is invoked yet again and serves as the prism through which Derrida understands fraternity in Levinas. In fact, Derrida suggests that Kant and Levinas share a similar position on fraternity, and he directs us to the pages on Kant in *Politics of Friendship* where he brings forward *le tiers*: 'Levinas here comes to, among many others, the Kant of the *The Doctrine of Virtue* [. . .] I analyse this [fraternal] relation at some length (*Politics of Friendship*, pp. 252–63)'.<sup>11</sup> In Kant, as we have seen, it is the arrival of the third party that disrupts the singular and unified couple which was represented as apolitical. And this should make us pay particular attention to the chronology of the third party. In citing Levinas in this footnote, Derrida suggests that though the third party is at times on equal footing with the face-to-face, this is not always the case, pointing out that first there is relation to fraternity in the face-to-face, and 'next' comes the deduction of the "third" and of the socio-political "We" (145). This is a crucial and suggestive 'next', pointing to Derrida's earlier concerns about the primacy and chronology of the third party in Levinas. Indeed, given that this formed a core part of his reading of Kant, whom Derrida makes complicit with

Levinas, we can see that this engagement with a Levinasian framework is far from neutral.

In this respect, Derrida suggests that Levinas repeats the errors of Kant, Montaigne and others; he begins with the couple, the *face-to-face*, as a model of ethics, and then addresses the third party. Even if Levinas might take steps to evade this, there is still a suggestion of some mode of relation to the other outside of the political, which might later guide the political. Yet Derrida insists that this third friend or brother needs to be thought at the same time as this couple. In this, therefore, we can begin to see not only an engagement with Levinas's framework, but a critique of it. This recalls Derrida's previous critique of the lack of prominence of the *tiers* in *Totality and Infinity*. Importantly though, Derrida does not limit his argument around fraternity to that text alone, but includes citations also from *Otherwise than Being*, suggesting that there still remains a suggestion of the privilege of the face-to-face over the third party.

Indeed, this problem of the chronology of the third party or friend, relative to the face-to-face or couple, appears to be carefully and consistently stressed by Derrida throughout *Politics of Friendship*. In discussing the secret in Kant, he states: 'It supposes in any case that the third-party, *qua friend*, as reliable and as equal as the other two, is *already* around' (259);<sup>12</sup> or, similarly, returning to the epigraph of this chapter which speaks of Levinas as 'a third reliable friend [. . .] already in fact being there from the very beginning' (293).<sup>13</sup> This repetition of the 'already' is crucial in light of the importance of this chronology, not only in Derrida's previous readings of Levinas, but also in his overall reading of friendship and the couple. If Levinas's work is not a prominent reference in *Politics of Friendship*, therefore, this does not suggest that it is not implicitly engaged with throughout the text. Indeed, not only does this Levinasian framework structure much of Derrida's reading of the couple, but *Politics of Friendship* also marks a significant departure from it.

Derrida's approach, therefore, presents Levinas as one of several thinkers who prioritise the ethical or apolitical couple as the ground for friendship, but who also seek to later move this to a ground of the political. Yet, Derrida's objection then is to the assumption of a prior apolitical and pure engagement with singularity which the couple – but we can now see also the *face-à-face* – as a model of friendship assumes. While Levinas, Kant and others acknowledge that society or the third party comes to interrupt this moment, this is not without a nostalgia for a prior singular relation, like Montaigne who continues 'to dream of a fundamental apoliticism or trans-politicism' (184). This 'interruption', therefore, becomes an undesirable afterthought or secondary event, rather than, as Derrida insists, *already there*.

Yet where is 'there'? This captures the interruptive *topos* that Derrida seeks to expose in *Politics of Friendship*, this 'strange *atopia* of the friend', which never has 'a place of his own [*un lieu propre*]' (177/8). A truly interruptive friendship, one which takes account of the politics of *le tiers* and indeed the true alterity of the infinite number of other friends, would have to think about this separation as the site of friendship. Unlike Montaigne's couple, who took the site of friendship to be the unified and indivisible shared soul, the site of the friendship that Derrida seeks to elaborate looks instead to the interruptive *tiers*.<sup>14</sup> It is in this friendship that we find Derrida's answer to the question, 'How can a politics of separation be founded?' (55).

## Politics in Friendship

Though Levinas may at first appear absent in *Politics of Friendship*, we can see that his work is engaged throughout this dense volume. This is taken as an implicit structure, one which Derrida uses to exhibit the *double bind* at work in thinkers like Montaigne and Kant, but in so doing also demonstrates the limits of this structure. This can help us see that what is at stake in Derrida's text is not simply brotherhood, but the model of the couple or pair of brothers. In Montaigne and Kant, but we can now also see in Levinas, this is taken as a form of singularity or unity to which the third friend only arrives late. This unity carries with it a form of relation to others that would transcend the political and allow for a pure engagement with singularity, on which a politics can *later* be built. Approaching *Politics of Friendship* through the perspective of the couple, we can see that Derrida's insistent aim is to reject this. His reading maintains that there is always an inescapable politics to friendship and our relation to singularity. It is that commitment to the irreducible and unavoidable politics which offers the potential for a new *politics* of friendship: one which acknowledges that there is no neutral site from which to conceive of politics, no anti-political moment to begin with, and no apolitical ways to care for and relate to others.

## Notes

1. For my friend Connla Ó Dúláine – *ní bheidh a leithéid aríst ann*. I am grateful to Emily Fizzell for her generous and insightful comments on earlier stages of this work. This work was financially supported by The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation via The Gates Cambridge Trust (Grant Number: OPP1144). Jacques Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, trans. George Collins (London: Verso, 1997); Jacques Derrida, *Politiques de*

*l'amitié: suivi de L'Oreille de Heidegger* (Paris: Galilée, 1994). Hereafter, page references to the English translation are given in parenthesis in the text (PF). Translations modified.

2. The French for third wheel is *tenir la chandelle*, to hold the candle.
3. Throughout this chapter I have used the term 'couple' to describe what Derrida at times references as a 'pair' and at times a 'couple'. This is not to elide the different potential meanings around them, but to highlight the main focus of my attention here: the relationship between *two* (male) friends as between self and other. Of course, one important resonance of such a 'couple' that is only lightly explored in *Politics of Friendship* is a romantic homosexual couple. As we will see, this is tied closely to Montaigne's dismissal of marriage as having an 'imaginary resemblance' to the 'holy bond' of '[male] friendship' (180).
4. Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, trans. Donald M. Frame (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1958), p. 141.
5. Montaigne, *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, p. 141.
6. My emphasis.
7. Jacques Derrida, 'Violence and Metaphysics', in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), pp. 79–153; Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981); Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969).
8. Jacques Derrida, *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999).
9. Derrida, *Adieu*, p. 67.
10. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 278; Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 166.
11. Derrida, *Adieu*, p. 144.
12. My emphasis.
13. My emphasis.
14. I have considered the site of such a politics in relation to Derrida's own political engagements elsewhere. See Cillian Ó Fathaigh, 'Critical Institutions: Alternative Modes of Institutionalisation in Derrida's Engagements', *Derrida Today*, 14.2 (2021). This chapter forms part of the activities for the research projects: (1) "Differential Ontology and the Politics of Reason," funded by the Regional Government of Madrid; and (2) "The Politics of Reason" (PID2020-117386GA-I00).