Michael H. Mitias


Michael Mitias introduces his book with the claim that there is an urgent need for a comprehensive analysis of the concept of friendship as a central moral value in human life (p. 1). His view is that the concept of friendship is conspicuously absent from, or dismissed by, the theories of moral philosophers since the late Stoic period. Michael Pakaluk (ed., _Other Selves: Philosophers on Friendship_ (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1991)) while referring to the prominence Aristotle once gave friendship as a topic of moral philosophy, agrees that discussion of friendship in this context did disappear for some time; specifically, Pakaluk notes that, “between the writings of Emerson [1841] and the contemporary work of Telfer [1970], one finds a relatively long period in which philosophers were largely silent about friendship” (ibid., p. vii). Mitias significantly extends the lacuna, but his suggestion of a complete absence or dismissal of friendship until the present is curious. The list of works cited in his book includes Pakaluk’s collection, but does not engage with the literature that Pakaluk includes in his bibliography; these are works produced since 1970 on the topic of friendship in the context of morality by Michael Stocker, Lawrence Blum, John Cooper, Nancy Sherman, Julia Annas, Neera Kapur Badhwar and Jacques Derrida, not to mention Elizabeth Telfer herself, who is one of the contributors to Pakaluk’s collection. Other contemporary commentators with whom Mitias might have engaged are Mark Vernon, Lorraine Smith Pangle, and myself.

Mitias’ treatment of friendship in the work of the philosophers with whom he does engage is well-documented and quotations are often apposite. The view that friendship is an essential ingredient of the good life and can be justifiably included in the spectrum of moral values indispensable to the attainment of happiness is central to Mitias’ argument. He uses Hellenic and Hellenistic philosophy as his starting point to insist that, “[o]nly by understanding how the classical philosophers understood friendship and justified it as a human need can we understand why it is entailed by the moral vision implicit in their cultural paradigm” (p. 65). The notion of a cultural paradigm and the moral vision implicit within such a paradigm is fundamental to the argument of the book. Mitias argues that the cultural paradigms of Hellenic and Hellenistic philosophers are commendable because they recognise that friendship is a central value in moral life. However, on his view the cultural paradigms of the medieval, modern, and contemporary periods are inferior by comparison because they fail to recognise friendship’s moral value.
No doubt, Mitias is correct to argue that a particular cultural paradigm or world view will influence the beliefs and values held by those who operate within that paradigm (p. 14). Mitias repeatedly emphasises the importance of this claim for his argument, but he uses an unfortunate example to support his view:

A certain action in our society may seem to us unjust, but in a different society the same action may seem just to the members of that society. For example, in our society it is unjust to enslave human beings, but in ancient Greece, indeed in most of the ancient world, it was just to enslave human beings. Slavery was viewed as a natural human practice (p. 19).

The view which Mitias expresses here is an example of moral relativism. Slavery was customary, viewed as a natural human practice, under certain cultural paradigms and therefore it was seen as just under those paradigms, but it is no longer just under the current cultural and moral paradigm. Mitias takes a similar view of friendship; some cultural paradigms (the Hellenic and Hellenistic) have proved capable of recognising the moral value of friendship, while others have not. In the context of Mitias' argument for the superiority of cultural paradigms which recognise the moral worth of friendship, the argument for the relativity of the justice of slavery appears contradictory and undermines his claim that the medieval, modern, and contemporary paradigms are inferior because they fail to recognise friendship as a central moral value.

Mitias' argument is unconvincing because of its commitment to the totalising narrative noted above, a narrative which assigns different moral visions to competing cultural paradigms, criticising those which on Mitias' view fail to recognise friendship as a central moral value in human life. It is not that Mitias' assessments of the differences between the medieval, modern, and contemporary cultural paradigms do not have some weight. For example, the medieval cultural paradigm did privilege a God-centred world view; and the contemporary cultural paradigm does privilege “the realization of one's life project as ‘authentic’” (p. 187). But the narrative Mitias pursues ignores or minimises data or perspectives which might challenge the conclusions he draws; a consequence of this is his romanticisation of both the notion of “true” friendship—from Hellenic and Hellenistic philosophical perspectives—and ancient notions of democracy (p. 177). In criticising the contemporary moral paradigm, Mitias concludes that on this paradigm “friendship is not either a condition or an element of the good life” (p. 191); but to draw this conclusion is to fail to appreciate the sophistication and the ethical significance of what the philosophers of existence have to tell us about close interpersonal relationships such as friendship. Sartre's views can lead us to reflect on friendship as a