

KANT, NIETZSCHE AND THE IDEALIZATION OF FRIENDSHIP INTO NIHILISM ¹

*Paul van Tongeren**
p.vantongeren@ftr.ru.nl

RESUMO *A amizade ainda é possível em condições niilistas? Kant e Nietzsche são fases importantes na história da idealização de amizade, o que inevitavelmente conduz ao problema do niilismo. O próprio Nietzsche afirma que, por um lado, apenas algo como a amizade pode nos salvar em nossa condição niilista mas que, por outro, precisamente a amizade foi desmascarada e se tornou impossível baseada nas mesmas condições. Parece que estamos presos no paradoxo niilista de não nos ser permitido acreditar na possibilidade do que não podemos prescindir. A imaginação literária, desde o século XIX, parece nos tornar ainda mais céticos. Talvez Beckett forneça uma ilustração de uma maneira que se adapta bem à afirmação de Nietzsche de que apenas “os mais moderados, aqueles que não necessitam de quaisquer artigos extremos de fé”, serão capazes de lidar com o niilismo.*

Palavras-chave *Amizade, niilismo, Kant, Nietzsche.*

ABSTRACT *Is friendship still possible under nihilistic conditions? Kant and Nietzsche are important stages in the history of the idealization of friendship, which leads inevitably to the problem of nihilism. Nietzsche himself claims on the one hand that only something like friendship can save*

* Professor at the Radboud Universiteit Nijmegen (NL) and at the KU Leuven (B). Artigo recebido em 12/07/2013 e aprovado em 10/11/2013.

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us in our nihilistic condition, but on the other hand that precisely friendship has been unmasked and become impossible by these very conditions. It seems we are struck in the nihilistic paradox of not being allowed to believe in the possibility of what we cannot do without. Literary imagination since the 19th century seems to make us even more skeptical. Maybe Beckett provides an illustration of a way out that fits well to Nietzsche's claim that only "the most moderate, those who do not require any extreme articles of faith" will be able to cope with nihilism.

Keywords *Friendship, nihilism, Kant, Nietzsche.*

1 Introduction

Nietzsche, who lived most of his thinking life as a solitary hermit, who searched for, but also complained about his solitude in almost every letter he sent off, wrote rather extensively on friendship in most of his books. In both aspects, Kant seems to be Nietzsche's opposite: while he wrote no more than a few pages on the topic, he met with friends on a daily basis. We know that he used to spend his afternoons having dinner with friends; several pictures, as well as stories, testify to the friendly atmosphere and conversations during these encounters. Kant seems to have known real friendships as much as Nietzsche must have longed for it in vain.

Nevertheless, there is, as we will see, a strong similarity in what they write about friendship. As I will try to show, this similarity has to do with what Nietzsche calls nihilism. My suggestion will be that Nietzsche's awareness of the problem of nihilism, a problem in which Kant unknowingly was involved as well, can explain the similarities, as well as the differences, in their respective views and practices of friendship. But in order not to forget that "we are not thinking frogs, nor objectifying and registering mechanisms with their innards removed" (GS pref. 3),² I will, in conclusion, try to answer the question of what this combination of friendship with nihilism means to us, who live over 100 years after Nietzsche's announcement of the coming of nihilism; what does it mean for us, who probably have hundreds or even thousands of virtual friends on Facebook and who can easily make friends or de-friend people who we don't like anymore; i.e.: what could friendship be in an age of nihilism?

² Sigla used for references to Nietzsche's writings are explained in the Bibliography.

When talking about a philosophy of friendship we cannot, however, simply start with Kant. What he writes about friendship, even the fact *that* he writes about friendship *at all*, can only be understood against the background of the history of (philosophical) thinking about friendship, a history that starts with the history of philosophy itself. Thus, even if we leave aside Empedocles' theory of *philia* and *neikos* as cosmic forces and Socrates' thoughts on friendship as described in Plato's dialogue *Lysis*, we will have to start in antiquity if we hope to understand what Kant and Nietzsche say about friendship, and also if we hope to finally learn something about our own self and our own age. Therefore, I will start with Aristotle, and then go to Cicero and Montaigne, before finally coming to Kant and Nietzsche, and at our own age.

2 Aristotle sets the tone

Right at the start of his treatise on friendship, i.e. in book VIII of his "Nicomachean Ethics", Aristotle expresses some doubts about whether friendship can be called a virtue. This doubt, however, does not mean that Aristotle is unsure about the superb value of friendship. On the contrary: if Aristotle (rather than Plato) is usually considered to be the normative beginning of the history of thinking about friendship, it is, among other reasons, also because he has set the tone of this history, and because this tone is one of great praise and appreciation.

We should not forget, though, that there is a second tone: next to the main tone of high praise (or eulogy) there is the dissonant of melancholia. Derrida has pointed to this dual tone in his "Politics of Friendship" (1994). As we will see, the two do not cancel each other out, but rather intensify and reinforce one another: praise and sadness are related, and this relation has to do with nihilism. But let me first return to Aristotle and his doubt, or hesitation, about whether friendship is a virtue.

Aristotle introduces friendship as *aretè tis è met' aretès*, i.e.: a virtue or something related to virtue (EN 1155a4). We might recognize the same hesitation in the way the treatise on friendship is situated in the framework of his *ethics*: after having finished his treatment of the virtues of character in book V and of the virtues of the intellect in book VI, he first deals in book VII with *engkrateia* (self-control, the opposite of *akrasia*, weakness of will and), i.e.: with something that indeed is not a virtue, but something related to it. After that, he goes on and introduces his treatment of pleasure, which he then will continue in book X, where he will connect it to his concluding thesis that

theoria is the highest possible realization of the ultimate and all-embracing goal of his ethics, which is *eudaimonia* or happiness in flourishing.

In between these appendixes, we find the two books (VIII and IX) that are completely devoted to friendship. They could be read as a separate treatise on a topic that, of course, is related to the happy life, but that does not exactly fit into Aristotle's systematic ethical theory. And Aristotle hardly bothers to make it fit. He does not explain his hesitation about whether friendship is a virtue or not, and he does not make any effort whatsoever to define it in terms of his definition of virtue. Once again: this does not mean that he deems the topic less important. On the contrary!

No less than two whole books are devoted to the topic of friendship. No other subject gets as much attention as this one. Even justice (*dikaiosynè*), which is called the highest virtue, gets only 1 book (V), and *theoria*, which is supposed to embody the greatest happiness, has even less space in Aristotle's ethics. In this famous, or infamous passage, where Aristotle defines the friend as another self (*heteros gar autos ho philos estin* EN 1170b6), he seems to suggest that friendship presupposes, implies, and surpasses all other good qualities. Friendship is, after all, according to that passage, the way in which the perfect man enjoys his own happiness even more, because he sees it mirrored in the equal qualities of his friend (EN 1169b31-1170a4 en 1170a25-1170b8). In that way, friendship seems to double the *kalokagathia*, the goodness and nobility of the happy life, and so to be the absolute top of a flourishing life.

Friendship is, for Aristotle, indeed the crowning glory of the good and happy life. And although he was not the first to praise friendship so highly (e.g. Socrates is quoted by Plato, saying that friendship meant more to him "than all Darius's gold" "Lysis", 211e),³ Aristotle does stand at the beginning of a long tradition in philosophy in which friendship has been raised and praised above everything else.

Of course this does not mean that friendship is more important than morality, or that it could exist apart from morality. It rather is the crowning of all morality's perfection. For Aristotle this is so obvious that it hardly needs to be mentioned. He does explain that there are other forms of friendship than this ideal highest form of the friendship between two perfectly virtuous men, which is the friendship for the good. These less perfect forms of friendship are for utility or for pleasure, and can only be called forms of friendship *prosmian kai prootèn* (EE 1236a16vv), that is: to the extent to which they remain

3 Quoted from: <<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0176%3Atext%3DLysis%3Asection%3D211e>>. Accessed: jul. 22 2013.

an orientation towards the ideal friendship: in other words, towards what can be called friendship *protoos kai kyrioos*.

Aristotle does raise a question about the possibility that one, or both friends, loses the quality for which he is loved. But the only reason that this would be a problem is because the equality of the friends is endangered; and equality is an important condition for friendship.

As with Aristotle, for Cicero it is completely clear that there cannot really be a conflict between friendship and (public) morality. Cicero does mention the possibility of such a conflict, but only in order to immediately reject that possibility. According to him, whoever lacks moral quality, cannot be a friend (cf. e.g. “De Amicitia”, XII.40).

This idea changes with Montaigne. When the French essay-writer refers to the dilemma that Cicero only mentions as a theoretical problem (“Essays”, p. 231v: what would you do in case your friend intends to set the temples of the city on fire), *he* makes a different choice: Montaigne puts friendship over morality and defends the one who has a higher esteem for friendship, than for the laws of the state.

In the present framework, I am not so much interested in this inversion (from the identity of friendship with morality to their opposition) as such, nor in the conflict between morality (society, the public sphere) on the one hand and friendship (or the sphere of intimacy) on the other. I only wanted to briefly refer to this development, in order to point to the close relationship between the ideality of friendship and the way it is embedded in morality. This relationship continues to exist where the two are opposed to one another, for only if one feels engaged with both, can one experience that opposition as a problem. I wanted to point to this close alliance, in order to raise the question that I announced already at the beginning: if friendship and morality are so strongly bound together, what happens with friendship when morality is undermined or collapses; can there still be friendship without morality? Or rather: what is the fate of friendship under conditions of nihilism? But let’s first look at Kant and his role in this story.

3 Kant and the inaccessible ideal

In order to introduce Kant, we should first invert the question I just raised. Instead of asking whether friendship would still be possible without morality, we should first ask whether friendship *is* possible *within* morality. For shouldn’t we say that exactly the ideality of friendship, whether it is considered to be

perfectly in line with or rather opposed to morality, makes it impossible for this friendship to exist in reality?

As far as I know, Kant wrote on friendship only twice: near the end of the “Metaphysics of Morals” (MM 1797) and – a bit more extensively – in an earlier text: a lecture on friendship that was part of a course on ethics that he offered at the university of Königsberg from 1775 till 1780 (LF).

According to Kant’s lecture “there are two motives to action in man. The one – self-love – is derived from himself, and the other – the love of humanity – is derived from others and is the moral motive. In man, these two motives are in conflict” (LF 210). This conflict is so deep, the opposition between the two so absolute, that a synthesis of these two motives is actually impossible. We do have, however, a name for this synthesis: friendship. Friendship is exactly this combination of self-love and love of humanity. It is self-love that is completely merged into love of the other. Or, to put it differently, it is love of the other, which is so absolutely sure about its being reciprocal, that it is no longer in conflict with self-love. After having read this, we can hardly be surprised that Kant immediately adds that this friendship cannot be an empirical fact. It will never be experienced in reality, because this coincidence of love of the other and self-love is humanly impossible: “in practical life such things do not occur” (LF 212).

In the “Metaphysics of Morals”, Kant stresses a slightly different reason for the same impossibility of friendship: since friendship is “the union of two persons through equal mutual love and respect,” and since not only the equality in this reciprocity is extremely difficult to realize, but also – and more importantly – since there is an inherent contradiction between love and respect (“For love can be regarded as attraction and respect as repulsion”), “it is readily seen that friendship is only an Idea and unattainable in practice” (MM 261).

That doesn’t alter the fact, though, that we speak about particular relations among human beings as “friendships.” Just like Aristotle, Kant also distinguishes three kinds of such relations, three kinds of friendships, based as they are “respectively on need, taste and disposition.” But whereas for Aristotle these really are three ways in which friendship can be realized, for Kant they all have this mark of impossibility.

Friendship based on need (which equals Aristotle’s friendship for utility) is, according to Kant (in his “Lecture”), less possible to the extent to which someone is more needy; the more needs one has, the more one will be concerned about getting them fulfilled; and the more one is obsessed about taking care of one’s own needs, the less one will be concerned about the

other's well being. Moreover: needs increase with their being fulfilled. Luxury creates ever-new needs. Therefore the conclusion must be a very paradoxical one, namely, that friendship based on need can only exist to the extent that this friendship proves unable to fulfill this need. There is another reason why this friendship based on need is nearly impossible: friendship always (for Kant as for Aristotle) requires equality. But as soon as my friend has helped me, I owe him something, i.e., I am not his equal until I pay off my debt. In other words (and according to the "Metaphysics of Morals"): if one of the "friends" "accepts a favor from the other, then he may well be able to count on equality in love, but not in respect." "Hence," as Kant concludes "friendship cannot be a union aimed at mutual advantage" (MM 262).

Friendship based on taste is similar to Aristotle's friendship for pleasure. What Kant writes about this type of friendship in his "Lecture" (in the "Metaphysics of Morals" he hardly touches on it at all) is very peculiar. It seems that, here again, the requirement of equality is the problem. According to Kant pleasure can only be given among those who are different. I quote: "I am not attracted to another because he has what I already possess, but because he can supply some want of mine by supplementing that in which I am lacking." And:

Persons of the same station and occupation in life are less likely to form such a friendship than persons of different occupations. One scholar will not form a friendship of taste with another; because their capacities are identical; they cannot entertain or satisfy one another, for what one knows, the other knows too. (LF p. 214)

On the other hand, however: those who are different will easily annoy one another: a scholar would be rather irritated by a businessman or a soldier than entertained. The examples of businessman and soldier are Kant's. A friendship for pleasure is, therefore, hardly conceivable for Kant. The only way he can imagine something like that is if, and I quote again: "the scholar is not a pedant and the business-man not a blockhead." The conditions seem to imply that such a thing never happens. Or if it happens, it will "after a while [...] go[...] up in smoke" (MM 262).

The third form of friendship is, of course, the highest one. Kant's version ("friendship of disposition or sentiment") is a bit different from Aristotle's "friendship for the good." Here, Kant relies probably more on the romantic tradition or on Montaigne, than on Aristotle. They agree, however, in this respect that, according to both, this highest form of friendship is very exclusive. This type of friendship can be characterized as a relation in which one abandons the distance and suspicion that are normal and required in everyday life.

A friend, in this type of friendship is, therefore, I quote: “one in whom we can confide unreservedly, to whom we can disclose completely all our dispositions and judgments, from whom we can and need hide nothing, to whom we can communicate our whole self” (LF 214). In his “Metaphysics of Morals” Kant immediately adds that such a friendship is very rare (he quotes Juvenal: “*rara avis [...], nigroque simillima cygno*,” “rare like a black swan” MM 263), and if it can exist at all, it cannot be between many people, but at most between two people only. But what is more remarkable, it seems that Kant – at least in the “Lecture” – deems this friendship *morally* impossible or unlawful, and this for two reasons. Firstly, it is, according to Kant, distasteful and repugnant, to give oneself away completely. I quote again: “Even to our best friend we must not reveal ourselves, in our natural state as we know it ourselves. To do so would be loathsome” (LF 215). Instead “we must so conduct ourselves towards a friend that there is no harm done if he should turn into an enemy” (LF 217). In other words, we should conduct ourselves with great reservation. Secondly: such a friendship would be morally dangerous according to Kant, because the close ties between some people exist at the expense of those who are excluded from these close ties.

It is difficult to avoid an ironical conclusion: for Kant the ideal friendship can only exist (or at least be approximated) among friends who are not in need of anything, who are so different that they hardly have anything to say to each other, and who make no distinction between their friends and others. In other words: this kind of friendship does not exist; it cannot exist. With a quote from the “Metaphysics of Morals”:

it is readily seen that friendship is only an Idea (though a practically necessary one) and unattainable in practice, although striving for friendship (as a maximum of good disposition toward each other) is a duty set by reason, and no ordinary duty but an honorable one. (MM 261)

It comes to no surprise that Kant, in his “Metaphysics of Morals”, as well as in his earlier lecture, quotes with approval this famous pronouncement which often is attributed to Aristotle, but which Kant in his lecture ascribes to Socrates: “My dear friends, there are no friends” (LF 212); “My dear friends, there is no such thing as a friend!” (MM 262). With this we hear the melancholia to which I referred in the beginning of my paper.

On the other hand, Montaigne described the perfect friendship, the real friendship that should be distinguished from what is usually called friendship as well as from everyday friendships, as an attainable ideal. He claimed he had experienced this friendship with Etienne de la Boétie, even if he only did so

after his friend's death. Still, for Kant this friendship is an ideal, but from now on it is completely beyond reach.

True friendship for Kant exists only as an ideal and as an idea. We are reminded of what Nietzsche writes about what happens to the "real world" in Kant's philosophy. I refer to the third step in Nietzsche's extremely short, six-step summary of the history of metaphysics: "How the 'true world' at last became a myth" in "Twilight of the Idols" (TI, 50f).⁴ After the phases of Plato (for whom the true world was "attainable to the wise, the pious, the virtuous man") and of Christianity (according to which the true world was "unattainable for the moment, but promised to [...] 'the sinner who repents'" and thus to everyone, be it only in some "beyond" or "hereafter"), the third phase refers to Kant:

The true world, unattainable, undemonstrable, cannot be promised, but even when merely thought of a consolation, a duty, an imperative. (Fundamentally the same old sun, but shining through mist and skepticism; the idea grown sublime, pale, northerly, Königsbergian.) (TI p. 50)

4 Nietzsche's inverted idealism

I made the link with Nietzsche, because I think that Nietzsche's critique of friendship, which will be my next topic, suffers – despite his own intentions – from this very same idealism, as it is characterized in the earlier tradition of speaking about friendship.

This earlier tradition of thinking about friendship is a good example of what Nietzsche calls 'nihilism', to be more precise: the nihilism of European history since Plato; nihilism as the name for this structure of meanings, constructed with the help of philosophy, morality and religion, which was meant to replace (or to hide) the actual chaotic, absurd and aimless reality. Friendship fits perfectly in this construction: by way of negating the reality of suspicion and deceit, of reservation, distance and solitude, and by inverting this reality into its opposite, an ideal of friendship is being construed. This ideal is itself nihilistic, because it originates from a negation of factuality, and because it takes its energy and attraction from this negation.

This nihilism coincides with the history of European culture, which is one of the reasons why Nietzsche speaks about "European nihilism". A

4 Hollingdale translates "wahre Welt" with "real world" instead of "true world."

second reason for this ‘label’ is that because of the wealth and welfare in Europe, i.e. because life in Europe has become safe and comfortable, this whole structure of philosophy, morality and religion has started to erode. This decline of everything we clung to for more than two millennia introduces a new phase of nihilism. From now on nihilism will show itself in a different shape, more precisely: in several new forms. Partly in the forms of passive nihilism: from ironical skepticism and relativism, to despair and panic. Partly in the forms of active nihilism: the intentional destruction of the old structures and the explicit criticism of the illusionary nature of the world of ideas and ideals. This second⁵ phase of the history of nihilism, the phase in which the implicit nihilism of the meaningful world becomes apparent, is summarized by Nietzsche in his message about the death of God. This nihilism operates to the extent to which it, in its active form, aims at the unmasking of the old ideals, at the destruction of the old structures and at the undermining of the alleged foundations of meaning, or in other words, to that extent it is itself still locked up in the framework it criticizes. The aggressive violence of the critique is proportional to its attachment to what it attempts to unmask and undermine.

It is not difficult to recognize this pattern in what Nietzsche writes about friendship. Friendship is, according to him, only possible through concealment and deceit, i.e. deceit of the other as well as self-deception. The idea that friends could possibly know one another is an illusion. They can only be friends as long as they are ready to hide and to pretend:

For such human relationships almost always depend upon the fact that two or three things are never said or even so much as touched upon: if these little boulders do start to roll, however, friendship follows after them and shatters. (HAH I 376)

Living together is just not a simple thing, “even the best friendships are only seldom able to endure this” (NL 18[38]123 8.325). Conversations among old friends usually make clear that they have grown apart; such conversations will often be “like those in the realm of the dead” (HAH, AOM 259). It is most unlikely that friends will not deceive one another if the occasion arises: “There will be a few who, when they are in want of matter for conversation, do not reveal the more secret affairs of their friends” (HAH I 327). One of Nietzsche’s examples refers to Jesus’ ‘friends’. While he was in agony in

5 It would be more correct to speak of a *third* phase here. Preceding this phase of decline, and preceding the earlier phase of the construction of this illusionary world, there is the first phase or the original nihilism or pessimism of ‘the tragic age of the Greek’. Cf. Van Tongeren (2012, pp. 113vv).

Gethsemane, they weren't sleeping (as the New Testament has it), "but they were lying on the grass, playing cards and laughing" (NL 7[219] 9.363).

The tone of disappointment and even bitterness cannot be misheard and is symptomatic for the critic's suffering from his own critique; i.e.: it shows how strongly the nihilism of the critique is tied to the nihilism that is criticized. Against this background it is not surprising that we find in Nietzsche's writings quite a few texts on friendship that are very similar to what we have seen in the idealist tradition. When we read in "Human All Too Human" that many people "would be mortally wounded if they discovered what their dearest friends actually know about them" (HAH I 376), we hear the echo of Pascal's saying that "si tous les hommes savaient ce que disent les uns des autres, il n'y aurait pas quatre amis dans le monde" ("Pensées" 101). Just like Kant, Nietzsche, or Zarathustra to be more precise, also rejects the idea that friends should be completely open toward one another. We remember that Kant called this "loathsome" (repugnant, "ekelhaft"), Nietzsche/Zarathustra calls it "empörend", which is "shocking" or "revolting". But just as Kant, despite his skepticism, continues to long for a friend "in whom [h]e can confide unreservedly, to whom [h]e can disclose completely all [his] dispositions and judgments, from whom [h]e can and need hide nothing, to whom [h]e can communicate [his] whole self" ("Lecture", p. 214), Nietzsche also writes about the "full happiness of love, which resides in *unconditional* trust" (D 216). The attachment to the ideal makes for the bitterness of the criticism.

This might give the impression that the criticism is less radical and in a certain sense less revolutionary than it claims to be. Indeed: it only reveals the unreality of the ideal, of which the criticized tradition was already aware. That is exactly the reason why we find in this tradition time and again this reference to what Aristotle allegedly would have said (possibly his last words on his deathbed), words that Nietzsche ascribes to an anonymous "sage": "'Friends, there are no friends!' thus said the dying sage" (HAH I 376).

This does not mean, however, that there would not really be something new in Nietzsche's critique of friendship. One of the reasons that I put Nietzsche's thoughts on friendship in the broader framework of his critique of nihilism is precisely this; in his critique of nihilism he is constantly aware of its self-referentiality. This is most apparent in the critique of the will to truth or truthfulness, which is itself motivated precisely by what it criticizes (BGE 1). But the same is the case in all domains of Nietzsche's critique of nihilism. He is aware of the fact that in his critique of the traditional ideals he repeats the old idealism. That is the reason why the third essay of his "Genealogy of Morals" is about ideals; not only about a particular, 'ascetic' ideal, but rather

about the asceticism of all ideals, and about the way these ideals continue to work through everything we think and do and create. Nietzsche's critique of nihilism repeats the criticized structures, but does not do so naively. It expressly demonstrates how this critique necessarily gets entangled in these ideal structures, and concludes that the recognition of this inevitability is a point beyond which one can get no further: "what meaning would *our* whole being possess if it were not this, that in us the will to truth becomes conscious of itself as a *problem*?" (GM III 27).

Nietzsche's thoughts on friendship, as briefly summarized above, therefore give a perfect example of what according to Nietzsche is the ultimate problem of nihilism, the problem that he foresees and of which he describes the future history. In his criticism of the unreality of the ideal of friendship, we clearly hear the longing for precisely this ideal friendship. But this longing for friendship is always already affected by the skepticism about the possibility of its being realized. This is a perfect characterization of the nihilistic catastrophe of our age: we inevitably realize that we remain attached to those things that we can, no longer, believe in. With the words of the famous Lenzer Heide note:

This antagonism – not to esteem what we know, and not to be allowed any longer to esteem the lies we should like to tell ourselves – results in a process of dissolution. (NL 5[71] § 2)

At the end of section 346 of the "Gay Science" Nietzsche uses an even more dramatic expression. There he speaks of:

an inexorable, fundamental, and deepest suspicion about ourselves that is more and more gaining worse and worse control of us Europeans and that could easily confront coming generations with the terrifying Either/Or: "Either abolish your reverences or – *yourselves!*" The latter would be nihilism; but would not the former also be – nihilism? – (GS 346)

Who abandons or abolishes his or her reverences, including his or her ideal of friendship, will as a result abolish him – or herself. For without friendship, without this commonality, without any release from our choking solitude, we would not be able to live as human beings. Therefore: when we lose our faith in the possibility of friendship, a faith that for a long time was nourished with descriptions of the ideal and for which doubts about its possibility were relegated to the melancholic quote from Aristotle, we might lose faith in ourselves, we might lose ourselves and sink into nihilism.

In spite of their apparent differences, Nietzsche and Kant might end up quite close to each other: Nietzsche seems to have made explicit the nihilistic consequences that were already present, be it implicitly, in Kant's ideal picture of friendship. Except that Kant's attempt to escape from this consequence by making the real impossibility into a moral duty (MM 261) doesn't work any more for Nietzsche. What does this mean for us? I leave both Kant and Nietzsche at this point, and just want to ask, how we – more than 200 hundred years after Kant and more than 100 years after Nietzsche – should think about friendship in order to prevent that we should have to abolish ourselves. Is friendship still possible under nihilistic conditions? What kind of friendship would that be?

5 Nihilistic friendship?

Our philosophers have diminished our expectations for finding some form of friendship under nihilistic conditions. We might need something other than philosophy to find what we are searching for. Can, for example, literary imagination help us here? Let us try and leave philosophy behind for the moment.

At first sight, it looks like literature will make us even more skeptical than we already were. We are not surprised to find the topic of nihilism strongly present in literature since the 19th century. After all, it is a serious experience, certainly for sensitive people like artists (i.e. literary authors). We're not surprised either to see that the relation between nihilism and friendship or love is very often dealt with. But we have to acknowledge that usually the import of the message is that nihilism makes these kinds of relations among human beings impossible. Let me briefly point at a few examples.

Nietzsche encountered the concept 'nihilism' probably for the first time in Turgenjew's novel "Fathers and Sons", which he read shortly after the French translation appeared in 1876. An important line of the story is the impossibility for the nihilist, Bazarov, to admit his feelings of sympathy and love for Anna Sergejewna. Dostoyevsky's "Notes from Underground" was read by Nietzsche in the time he was writing his notes on nihilism, and praised by him as a "brilliant feat in psychology".⁶ It gives a kind of self-presentation of the nihilist through the condemning lens of Dostoyevsky. One of his main

6 Letter to Friedrich Overbeck (23-2-1887). In: NIETZSCHE, F. "Sämtliche Briefe". Kritische Studienausgabe (München/Berlin: dtv/de Gruyter, 1986). Vol. 8, p. 28 (my translation).

characteristics is his absolute solitude and the way he cannot help but destroy all his human relations.

In the nihilistic literary imagination of our own age, the picture looks even worse: we hardly find a *conflict* between nihilism and human commonality any longer, but simply the impossibility of the latter because of the prevalence of the former, i.e. of nihilism. One example is the French novel “Les particules élémentaires” by Michel Houellebecq. The two main characters are completely different but equally unable to engage in affective human relations. Another example, but which might also point to at least some way out, is the German novel “Spieltrieb”. The novel is about two extremely intelligent, but absolutely nihilistic, high-school students. They call themselves “post-nihilists”, for, as one of them says: “nihilists still believe that there is something they don’t believe in, we don’t have anything in which we can’t believe anymore”. The story about what they say and do makes it clear that they are unable to engage in any real human relationship. They play with one another and especially with other people, but they play in the way predators play with their prey. They do not recognize any limits and are continuously aware of the meaninglessness and absurdity of existence. The novel gives us a chance to see what such a life would look like. Can one live under such conditions? Can one live as a human being? One of the two main characters, Ada, summarizes her life-view once in a conversation with one of her teachers, a cynical historian who, himself, has also experienced the nihilistic emptiness of the world. She says that, sometimes when she is running on the athletics track, she imagines the line that separates the tracks being a mountain ridge, with abysmal deep slopes at both sides. She explains:

Life is a permanent movement on that line. As long as you think it’s just a line drawn between two lanes, everything is o.k. But as soon as you see that it really is a mountain ridge, along an unfathomable abyss, you start to stumble and are in danger of life. [...] I can’t forget this abyss. (p. 174v)

The reference to Nietzsche is obvious, and especially to his early essay on truth (TL: the essay he wrote under the influence of contemporary Kantianism). Only by forgetting about our condition or by hiding it behind metaphysics, morality and religion, can we endure life. In a related text, Nietzsche used the imagery of the dreaming, sleeping person lying on the back of a tiger: safe as long as he keeps dreaming, but threatened as soon as he comes to know his condition (PT 1.760). The problem of such a life is obvious. But the teacher, to whom Ada is talking, has found a solution for this unbearable situation. He replies to Ada, saying:

Two people, who both on their own line (or ridge), walk together, hand in hand, have four legs; they won't fall down, even if they see the abyss below. (p. 186)

The suggestion is that precisely because of this abyss, because of our nihilistic condition, only something like friendship can save us. But didn't we say that the ideal of friendship has been unmasked and that friendship under nihilistic conditions has become impossible? Are we struck in a paradox? In the paradox as Nietzsche phrased it, the paradox of not being allowed to believe in the possibility of what we cannot do without? Or is there a conceivable form of friendship that can help us to survive under nihilistic conditions? If such a friendship does indeed exist, it should definitely be a more modest form of friendship.

Let me conclude with one more example from literature. I think we might find an example of this modest kind of friendship in one of the masterpieces of nihilist art, Beckett's famous play "Waiting for Godot". There we find a comic, melancholic, but also comforting picture of the relation between the two main characters, Vladimir and Estragon, or Didi and Gogo. They do not have an intimate relationship, their relation is not marked by mutual benevolence as Aristotle wants it, not by the production of beauty as Plato says, not by the "complete melting together of two wills" like in the perfect friendship of Montaigne. Vladimir and Estragon scold, but also help each other, they play together but also irritate one another, but they know that they keep each other alive:

Estragon: There are times when I wonder if it wouldn't be better for us to part.
Vladimir: You wouldn't go far. *Estragon:* That would be too bad, really too bad. –
 Wouldn't it, Didi, be really too bad? (p. 372)

These people are not well suited to one another; it's just that fate has brought them together:

Vladimir: We can still part, if you think it would be better. *Estragon:* It's too late now.
Vladimir: Yes, it's too late now. (p. 411)

They literally keep one another alive, as is clear from the passage in which they plan to commit suicide. Paradoxically, by trying to help each commit suicide, they fail and continue to live. Let me quote the scene from the first Act:

Vladimir: What do we do now? *Estragon:* We wait. / Yes, but while we wait. / What about hanging ourselves? / [It makes you come / You come?] / With all that follows.

Where it falls mandrakes grow. That's why they shriek when you pull them up. Did you not know that? / Let's hang ourselves immediately / From a bough [*bao*]? (*they look at the tree*) I wouldn't trust it. / We can always try. / Go ahead. / After you. / No no, you first. / Why me? / You're lighter than me. / Just so! / I don't understand. / Use your intelligence, can't you, jij. / (*Vladimir reflects*;) I remain in the dark. / This is how it is. (*he thinks*) The bao... the bao... (*angrily*;) Use your head, can't you? / You're my only hope. / (*with effort*;) Gogo light – bough not break – Gogo dead. Didi heavy – bough break – Didi alone. Whereas – / I hadn't thought of that. / If it hangs you it'll hang me. / But am I heavier than you? / So you tell me. I don't know. There's an even chance. Or nearly. / Well, what do we do? / Don't let's do anything. That's safer. (pp. 373f)

The meaninglessness is not canceled, but becomes bearable, simply because they are not alone. At some point Estragon says: “Don't touch me! Don't question me! Stay with me!” (p. 413).

At the end of the Lenzer Heide note, Nietzsche asks the question, who will be able to cope with nihilism, “who will prove to be the strongest in the course of this?”. His answer reads: “The most moderate; those who do not require any extreme articles of faith” (NL 5[71] 12.217, Kaufmann p. 38). Maybe we should extend this to a statement about friendship. In an age in which the great ideal of friendship erodes together with all ideality, we can only survive as long as we know that we're not alone. Maybe that's friendship: to know that you're not all alone. No perfection, no virtuosity, no lofty ideal, but simply this: to know that one is not all alone. Maybe even Facebook-friendships can give us that.

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