

Phenomenology of Spiritual Friendship and Discourse about God

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How does reflection on spiritual friendship help us understand ourselves and our fundamental possibilities for being-in-the-world? How does it help us understand the possibilities for discourse about the Infinite, about God? These sorts of questions are not new, but they call for on-going response if they are to inform and guide human life. This paper addresses these questions in dialogue with Aelred of Rievaulx, a medieval Cistercian abbot, whose work on spiritual friendship has much to contribute to contemporary responses to these questions. In addition, this paper places the questions in the context of contemporary phenomenology of religion, especially that of Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer, and argues that the work of phenomenology of religion is a moral task.¹

Heidegger's initial insights, developed in the context of reading Paul and Augustine, clearly show the importance of addressing these questions in the context of human situatedness. In his lectures on an "Introduction to the Phenomenology of Religion," Martin Heidegger begins with the observation that "Philosophical concepts... are vacillating, vague, manifold, and fluctuating"² and that because of this philosophy needs to develop the virtue of "ever turning upon preliminary questions (*Vorfragen*)."³ One of Heidegger's most significant contributions to phenomenology emerges as he turns upon

¹ For recent work in phenomenology that recognizes the importance of friendship see: John Caputo, 'Good Will and the Hermeneutics of Friendship: Gadamer and Derrida', *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 28.5 (2002), pp. 512–522; John A. Cuddeback, 'Truth and Friendship: The Importance of the Conversation of Friends', *Truth Matters*, Ed. John G. Trapani, Jr. (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2004), pp. 26–33; Jacques Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, Trans. George Collins (London and New York: Verso, 1997); Thomas A. F. Kelly and Philipp W. Rosemann (Eds.), *Amore Amicitiae: On the Love that is Friendship* (Leuven, Belgium: Peeters, 2004); James Risser, 'Philosophical Hermeneutics and the Question of Community', *Interrogating the Tradition*, Charles E. Scott and John Sallis (Eds) (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), pp. 19–35; Robert Sokolowski, 'Phenomenology of Friendship', *The Review of Metaphysics*, 55 (March 2002), pp. 451–470.

² Martin Heidegger, *The Phenomenology of Religious Life*. Trans. Matthias Fritsch and Jennifer Anna Gosetti-Ferencei (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2004), p. 3.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

preliminary questions for philosophy of religion. He identifies factual life experience as fundamental to any analysis of religious experience or concepts. Factual life experience is lived human experience that does not separate the activity of experience from that which is experienced. In our factual lives we are engaged such that while we understand ourselves, the form of understanding is not one that objectifies. Philosophy must begin in this human situatedness. It must be concerned with how we, as humans, stand in regard to ourselves, others, and the world in which we find ourselves. Heidegger further emphasizes the importance of the historical for making facticity intelligible. He notes that the historical provides both a positive and negative direction for factual life experience.⁴ The historical directions are both a fulfillment and a burden, and in both respects the historical is disturbing. Our historical consciousness is such that we are always trying to secure ourselves and yet this same consciousness makes us aware of our own transitoriness, our finitude. The task of phenomenology is, in many respects, the struggle of historical consciousness. Phenomenology is a constant fetching back of factual life, a constant recovery of our finitude. It requires that we formulate the questions that will call us back while acknowledging that those very questions already contain a sense of answer in their formulation.

Hans-Georg Gadamer furthers Heidegger's hermeneutic approach to phenomenology. Gadamer's insights, developed in conjunction with his dialogues with Plato and Aristotle, build on Heidegger's work to highlight the importance of friendship.⁵ In particular he develops a logic of question and answer that pushes philosophy to continually focus on the struggle of historical consciousness. In doing philosophy, we must listen for the questions that are addressed to us from out of our situatedness and we must consider the questions that we address, looking for the presuppositions (*Vorurteil*), and so the preliminary answers, that our questions include. In an essay that he writes on friendship, Gadamer notes the weakness of philosophy that is grounded in self-consciousness. This is, of course, a lesson taught by Nietzsche. He identifies the question that is still before philosophy as one of "a structure of self-relatedness that cannot be reduced to the structure of subjectivity, but rather is played out beyond it."⁶ He also identifies the question about how discourse about God is possible. He believes that an exploration of friendship in the Greek context, especially Aristotle, can help us with these questions. Friendship

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 25–26

⁵ Hans-Georg Gadamer, 'Friendship and Self-Knowledge: Reflections on the Role of Friendship in Greek Ethics', *Hermeneutics, Religion, and Ethics*, Trans. Joel Weinsheimer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), pp. 128–141

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.131.

can help us better understand our self-relatedness, our situatedness in community, and our relationship to the divine.

I. Aelred on Spiritual Friendship⁷

Aelred was born into a noble family and was living a life at court, when he visited the new abbey at Rievaulx. Something changed his life, and he entered the monastery in about 1134. By 1147 he returned to Rievaulx as abbot. At the urging of Bernard of Clairvaux, he had already written the *Mirror of Charity*, a work on Christian love. Soon after becoming abbot he wrote the first chapter of *Spiritual Friendship*. The work is a dialogue, with Ivo being the monk who converses with Aelred in Book I. He does not complete the final two chapters until about twenty years later when Ivo is dead and his conversation partners are Walter and Gratian. The work is modeled on Cicero, but is based in Christian scripture. Aelred is concerned about the role and impact of friendship on a Christian community. Aelred suggests that spiritual friendship is vital to the religious community and is the highest stage of the pathway to perfection. In developing human friendship, we become the friend of God.

Aelred maintains by nature humans have a desire for friendship. He explains this in the context of the account of human creation in *Genesis*. He looks at the account in *Genesis 2* where the second human is created from the substance of the first. Aelred interprets this as egalitarian rather than as a basis for domination and hierarchy. He writes, "How beautiful it is that the second human being was taken from the side of the first, so that nature might teach that human beings are equal, and, as it were, collateral, and that there is in human affairs, neither a superior nor an inferior, a characteristic of true friendship" (1:57). He takes the creation account to mean that we, as humans, have a desire for friendship implanted within us. With the fall, this desire is corrupted, but not destroyed. The desire for friendship remains, and our experience increases that desire. Moreover, even in the most corrupt, law regulates friendship in order to preserve its most rational forms. So, the origin of friendship is in our created nature. Because of the perversion of this nature, we must study friendship and discover how to develop and preserve it. It is the basis of our community together and of our community with God. Indeed, Aelred quotes I Jn 4:16 at the end of

⁷ There are two English translations of Aelred's work. Aelred of Rievaulx., *Spiritual Friendship*, Trans. Mary Eugenia Laker, SSND (Washington, D. C.: Cistercian Publications Consortium Press, 1974) and Trans. Mark F. Williams (London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1994). This paper uses the Laker translation. References are given in the text by section and then paragraph number.

Book One: “He that abides in friendship, abides in God, and God in him.”

In the earlier parts of the first book, Aelred explains his agreement with Cicero, the classical philosopher with whom he is most familiar, but he also emphasizes the need for the added influence of scripture. He agrees with Cicero’s definition, “Friendship is mutual harmony in affairs human and divine coupled with benevolence and charity” (1:11).⁸ While he begins with Cicero, for Aelred, friendship will begin, be preserved, and have its fruition in Christ. Our created nature is spiritual, and so friendship must be understood in this context. Aelred presupposes his Christian context in his exploration of friendship. In following him, we share that presupposition in some respect. True friendship is spiritual friendship.

Friendship is not always spiritual. Because of human corruption, we call certain relationships friendship when they are based on carnal or worldly affections. This means that the harmony in the relationship is focused on carnal pleasure or hope of gain. These forms of friendship are impure or corrupt. But they can be improved and perfected if they are moved in the direction of spiritual friendship. (Of course there are other relationships that are the result of human corruption, such as sexual abuse, that are not to be called friendships in any sense.) Spiritual friendship is not a different genus from other forms of friendship. Spiritual friendship is distinguished from these other friendships because in a spiritual friendship we are bound by ties of love, not cupidity. This love is an affection that acts out of good intention. It is focused on similarities in life, morals, and pursuit of the just. Aelred seems to recognize that in this friendship we have transcended our subjectivity and recognize our fundamental inter-relatedness.

Cicero makes a similar distinction, identifying what he calls true friendship. While Cicero believes that true friendship is rare, Aelred thinks that spiritual friendship can be quite common. Friendship is frequent among Christians because it is a virtue that God bestows. Friendship is a virtue which binds human spirits together and which is eternal. Because human nature moves us towards friendship, and because God further facilitates that movement, we are inclined towards friendship. A spiritual friend is a guardian of love or of our spirit.

Clearly, Aelred’s early thought about friendship identifies spiritual friendship with the practical expression of love. It is the most perfect of human relationships on the pathway to God. Years later, when

⁸ The reference to Cicero is *De Amicitia*, 20. Williams uses the following translation of Cicero “Friendship is agreement on both human and divine affairs, combined with goodwill and mutual esteem.” Laker’s translation provides the Christian presuppositions for interpretation that are part of Aelred’s position.

Aelred returns to the written form of his conversation about friendship, he is still deeply committed to this understanding of spiritual friendship. At the beginning of Book II, he speaks with Walter, going on at length about the benefits of friendship. He adds to all of the benefits that he lists, "And, a thing even more excellent than all these considerations, friendship is a stage bordering upon that perfection which consists in the love and knowledge of God, so that man from being a friend of his fellowman becomes the friend of God" (2:14).

Aelred may sound rather utopian at this point. However, it is important to remember that he has lived in religious community for a long time when he makes these remarks, and he has functioned in a position where he is certain to have had to deal with many internal conflicts among the members of the community. He understands human cupidity and corruption. It is surprising that he did not, like many other Christian thinkers and monastics, think it best to resist friendship rather than nourish it. When Walter suggests the Stoics were right, saying, "I almost agree with the opinion of those who say that friendship should be avoided, on the ground that it is a compact full of solicitude and care, not devoid of fear, and even subject to many griefs" (2:45), Aelred argues, using Pauline scripture, that we cannot abandon charity or any other virtue in order to avoid the struggles and grief that come with virtue. In developing virtue, we develop those characteristics that are most godlike. Aelred is confident that the community should not avoid spiritual friendship. It has great potential for directing the members of the community to God. He also realizes that, like all virtues, spiritual friendship must be tended in order to avoid corruption. This tending is the responsibility of the community as well as of the individuals in any particular friendship.

While the third book of Aelred's work is often taken as fairly unorganized remarks, it is best read as an explanation and exemplification of the process of practical reasoning that the community practices in order to tend the virtue of spiritual friendship. Aelred explores what a community does to nurture the virtue of spiritual friendship. His exploration is an exercise in practical ethics for a Christian community.

Virtues are valued by a community not simply because they serve the good of individuals, but because they are part of the common good. When the members, or at least most of the members of a community, are temperate, then that community can be said to be temperate and to enjoy the benefits that the virtue brings to the character of the community. A community that values spiritual friendship will believe that the presence of the virtue in the members of the community improves the community as a whole. A community must provide opportunities for the development of the virtue by its members. These opportunities must enable people to learn through

practice to properly “read a situation” and be able to act virtuously. While Aelred recognizes that spiritual friendship involves an intimacy that will not develop with all members of the community, he also emphasizes the importance of communal practices that are based in reasoned choices and that are aimed at encouraging and nurturing spiritual friendship.

II. Aelred and the Communal Practice of Spiritual Friendship

Aelred writes *Spiritual Friendship* so that both the form and content of the work will help the Christian community develop practices that nurture spiritual friendship. This dual emphasis serves as a constant reminder that the structures a community develops will shape the concepts to which it is open and has access. In turn, those concepts will provide the possibilities for developing the structures and relationships that form the community of daily life.

II.A. *The Form of the Dialogue*

The form of Aelred’s work on spiritual friendship exhibits an important feature of communal practice. Aelred does not write a rule for the community. Rather, he writes a dialogue; he engages in conversation. His dialogue can be read as modeling the practice which is its subject matter. Fundamental to the development of spiritual friendship is the regular practice of conversation. Three important characteristics of such conversation can be identified. Those engaged in the conversations make time apart for the conversations. A degree of intimacy is required. These conversations exhibit equality. Each listens and responds to the others in the conversation. Moreover, the conversations do not isolate or remove them from the community. The conversations are always aware of the larger community and open out to that community. Aelred frames each of the three books to clearly exhibit these characteristics.

In the first book, he begins by telling Ivo that he recognizes that Ivo wants to be alone with him to talk. Aelred has made time for that and Ivo expresses his appreciation. Yet, in the opening line, Aelred makes it clear that they are not alone. He says, “a third, Christ, is in our midst” (1:1). Moreover, he notes that they have just come from a larger conversation with the brethren. There is no implication that conversation can only take place among a few. There are, however, times when conversations need to pull back to a few so that some things can be said more freely. It is important that Aelred emphasizes that Ivo does not want to be apart with him to talk “empty and idle pursuits” (1:4). Ivo is concerned about how spiritual friendship can exist in the community. Aelred also makes it clear that this dialogue

is not to be understood as a teacher instructing a student. These are friends, members of the community, addressing a common concern about how to foster and preserve friendship in the community. Aelred says to Ivo,

I am not going to teach you anything about these matters but rather to discuss them with you. For you yourself have opened the way for both of us, and have enkindled that brilliant light on the very threshold of our inquiry, which will not allow us to wander along unknown paths, but will lead us along the sure path to the certain goal of our proposed quest. (1:9)

He then asks Ivo to set the direction for the conversation. At the end of the first book, Aelred again makes it clear that this conversation is taking place in the context of the community. He notes the need to take a break in the conversation. He is not ending it, but saving it for future times. Ivo quickly affirms that the schedule and needs of the community are such that they need to break the intimate conversation and return to the community.

We have no record of the conversation resuming with Ivo, but when it picks up again in Book Two with Walter, the framing which emphasizes the interconnection of intimacy, equality, and community again is evident. Aelred tells Walter that he has noticed his desire to speak with him away from the conversations that are about the material affairs of the abbey. They both note that time is limited and that rather than make excuses about not having time, they should get right to the heart of the matter. Walter tells Aelred that the written dialogue that Aelred began (Book One of the final text) has reemerged and that he has read it. Aelred is concerned that it not be distributed widely in the community at this point. It seems clear that he now wants to add to the original text in order to better serve the community. The conversation with Walter will facilitate this. They will talk about friendship and the stages of perfection. There is again an emphasis on equality. Aelred says, "But what happiness, what security, what joy to have someone to whom you dare speak on terms of equality as to another self" (2:11). The importance of the conversation being situated in the community and serving the good of the community is emphasized in the framing of the second book. Gratian joins the conversation. He is clearly a younger member of the community. Rather than turn the conversation to another topic when he appears, they pull him into the conversation. Walter notes that Gratian is "friendship's child" because he so desires to love and be loved. Walter believes that engaging in the conversation will help Gratian better discern the pathway to spiritual friendship and not be led in his eagerness to embrace the "counterfeit for the true" (2:16). It is worth noting that Walter says this in the presence of Gratian. He is open and honest with him. It is also worth noting that the end of the second book,

like the first, indicates that the conversation will be continued, but that the needs of the community cannot be neglected.

The third book again begins with elements that set the level of intimacy and equality and that keep the context of the community within the awareness of the conversation. Two passages reinforce this reading. At the beginning of the book, Gratian arrives first but does not want to begin until Walter has arrived. He says, "I confess, I do need his presence. He is quicker in grasping things, better at questioning, and has a better memory, also" (3:1). The intimacy of the conversation is not one that rejects others. Rather it is one that allows for freely pursuing the questions that are important, pulling in the voices of several in order to enrich the conversation. Aelred concludes the third book with a passage that emphasizes the importance of spiritual friendship for the entire community. It moves the members of the community to the vision of a perfect community (the one that was there in the garden). Aelred ends with the vision, "this friendship, to which here we admit but few, will be outpoured upon all and by all outpoured upon God, and God shall be all in all" (3:134).

II.B. Practice for Friendship

While the form of the dialogue exhibits much about the practice of spiritual friendship and so the conceptual self-understanding of the community that emphasizes the importance of friendship, the content of the dialogue explores these concepts in much more detail and so contributes to how to practice in order to develop such friendships. This is particularly the case with the end of Book Two and all of Book Three.

Towards the end of Book Two, Aelred sets out the starting point that the community must provide for the individuals within the community. Since friendship has its origin in human nature, and since that nature is corrupted, the community must take care so that friendships develop as spiritual. All friendships begin in love. The community must provide a place for friendships to have the love of God as their source. Attraction is needed for friendship, but it is easily corrupted. The community must provide opportunities for discernment, such as the conversation with Aelred, so that its members recognize the importance of beginning with purity of intention. The basis of friendship ought not to be carnal or material desire, but rather sincere affection. This affection needs to be directed by reason and restrained by moderation (2:59). The community needs to provide opportunity for friendship to develop and opportunity and reasoned processes for reflection on friendship and specific relationships. Not all whom we love will be our friends, and not all whom we love are worthy of friendship. In the third book, Aelred sets out four stages

for the perfection of friendship. These stages are stages of practice, intended to direct with reason and restrain with moderation. They shape the conceptual approach of the community and reveal the importance of a commitment to practical reasoning and to reflection on that reasoning.

II.C. The Four Stages of Practical Reasoning in Relationship to Friendship

The four stages are selection; probation; admission and cultivation; and “perfect harmony in matters human and divine with charity and benevolence” that is spiritual friendship (III, 8).

Aelred is clear that friendship must proceed from affection and reason. His remarks on the stage of selection seem to assume affection and so focus on the role of reason and restraint in the selection. Aelred begins his comments on selection in recognition that friendship must be between those who are good. Because of this, he identifies vices that, if identified in a person, should exclude them from being selected as a friend. He suggests that people who are quarrelsome, irascible, fickle, suspicious, and loquacious should be excluded in the process of selection. Walter and Gratian challenge him on this exclusion pointing out that Aelred has a close friend who has quite a temper. In reflecting on his own friendship, Aelred tempers his remarks about exclusion. He explains that, at least in their friendship, his friend controls his anger out of the affection that he has for Aelred. Indeed, Aelred says that a person who has such passions and restrains them is to be praised and accounted virtuous. So, clearly selecting friends is not an easy matter. Some who at first appear to have characteristics that would exclude them from possible friendship may in truth prove to be the best candidates for friendship. On the other hand, a person can select someone for friendship who has one of these traits and then may be injured by that person. One must be cautious in the selection of friends, but it would seem that one must also take some risks. Aelred says that if a person has been admitted into friendship and then harms the friend, the friendship should be slowly dissolved by withdrawing confidence. But the love and willingness to provide aid and advice should never be withdrawn. Familiarity should only be withdrawn if the person is harming others. He says, “Love for one man should not take precedence over the ruin of many” (3:58). Aelred’s final recommendation is that among those who are basically good, it is best to let one’s own character serve as a guide. In selecting friends, select those who do “not differ too much from your own character” (3:58).

Once a friend has been selected, the next stage is probation. Friends test each other during this period. Aelred identifies four qualities that

must be tested: loyalty, right intention, discretion, and patience (3:61). Loyalty is best tested by adversity. A loyal friend loves at all times, not simply when someone has wealth or position. Gratian notes that in forming friendships, one cannot always count on adversity to help test the loyalty of a friend. Aelred suggests stages of developing trust. Trust a friend with little confidences and see what happens. If the friend is faithful, trust the friend with greater confidences. Rumor also serves as a means of testing loyalty. A friend will not believe or repeat harmful rumors. The period of probation also tests right intention. Spiritual friendship must be “gratuitous” not “mercenary” (3:70). If a person befriends another with hope of advantage and gain, that intention will become evident. One with more honor, glory, or riches will catch the eye of the friend. Aelred says that friendships among the poor are more secure. The wealthy are likely to be flattered, but the person who has no riches can trust that affection is freely given. Discretion and patience are also tested during probation. Friends must be able to both congratulate and correct each other. Discretion is the ability to determine when it is appropriate to do these things. Friends should not flatter each other over every small thing. But friends are mirrors and should help each other see and enjoy merits. In a similar manner, friends should correct and challenge each other. But some things do not need correction, even if they are small faults. Friends must particularly be patient in the process of correction. If friends are to be able to speak honestly with each other, they must be able to accept the honesty when it is a correction. They must also be patient in giving criticism.

After the discussion of these first two stages, Walter suggests that the Stoics have it right. It is better not to move on to the stage of admission. There are too many risks and too much trial involved in friendship. Aelred replies that without friends, no one can be happy. He argues that we might even say we are happier in proportion to the more people we gather into our circle of friends. He even suggests that all the members of the community are his friends.

The day before yesterday, as I was walking the round of the cloister of the monastery, the brethren were sitting around forming as it were a most loving crown. In the midst, as it were, of the delights of paradise with the leaves, flowers, and fruits of each single tree, I marveled. In that multitude of brethren I found no one whom I did not love, and no one by whom, I felt sure, I was not loved. I was filled with such joy that it surpassed all the delights of this world. I felt, indeed, my spirit transfused into all and the affection of all to have passed into me, so that I could say with the Prophet: ‘Behold how good and how pleasant it is for the brethren to dwell together in unity.’ (3:82)

At this point the form of the dialogue again clearly contributes to the content. (Aelred’s humor is also evident.) Gratian is discrete and

patient, and so is Aelred. Gratian asks Aelred if it is really possible for him to be friends with all of the members of the community whom he loves and who love him. Gratian could have said something to the effect, "Look, you are abbot, of course they will act like they love you" but he does not. Aelred could have insisted on their love, but he does not. He retracts his enthusiasm, recognizing that many who are loved do not become spiritual friends, even if that is wished. Aelred is a realist and responds to the insights of his friends. If we admit only some into the circle of friendship, the stage of admission needs to be examined and further explicated. This is clearly a threshold, but still a step along the way. Admission to friendship is like planting. Cultivation must still take place.

The stage of admission is the beginning of intentional cultivation. Aelred begins this discussion emphasizing the importance of loyalty. Friends must be able to trust each other before any other growth is possible. In addition, one should never be suspicious of a friend. Friends should be relaxed and congenial. Friends should recognize their equality no matter what differences there may be in their positions in society or organizations. In this final section Aelred seems to drift. He goes from example to example. Yet, as with all of the rest of his text, there seems to be very measured development. Cultivation involves both affection and reason. Both of these are fundamental to spiritual friendship, but may be emphasized differently depending on the circumstances. Aelred talks of two friendships. One began with affection, the other with reason. Because of the contingencies of life, it was the friendship begun in reason that lasted the longest. The other friend died. Yet, Aelred uses this to exemplify the importance of testing over time. Affection grows when the friend who is chosen rationally remains a friend. Spiritual intimacy is a growing together where the flourishing involves development of the rational component of life.

This cultivation leads to the fourth stage which is spiritual friendship in its perfection. Aelred says,

And thus a friend praying to Christ on behalf of his friend, and for his friend's sake desiring to be heard by Christ, directs his attention with love and longing to Christ; then it sometimes happens that quickly and imperceptibly the one love passes over into the other, and coming, as it were, into close contact with the sweetness of Christ himself, the friend begins to taste his sweetness and to experience his charm. (3:133)

Spiritual friendship moves people to the bonds of friendship that unite all with the source of the spiritual community. Here the dialogue ends without need to discuss a return to the conversation. Spiritual friendship leads to the outpouring of friendship on all.

III. Friendship and Phenomenology of Religion

In light of Aelred's work on spiritual friendship, I want to return to the phenomenological issues with which I began. Specifically, I want to suggest that a focus on friendship helps show that the task of phenomenology of religion is a moral task. Within the context of this claim, I want to ask if a phenomenological focus on friendship can reveal fundamental ways in which we are situated in the world and so fundamental possibilities for our being-in-the world. I also want to ask if such an approach can at least hint at possibilities for discourse about the Infinite, about God.

Aelred's dialogue shows that friendship helps us grasp a way of life that is of fundamental significance for understanding what it is to be human, to be the kind of being that we are. Robert Sokolowski, in reading Aristotle, makes a similar claim. He says that "friendship involves a special categorical form, an identificational form in which we each take the good of the other, as such, as our good."⁹ Friendship shows us the best of moral reasoning and so also, as Gadamer says, draws us nearer to the divine.¹⁰ Aelred helps us understand two ways in which friendship draws us nearer to both self-understanding and to the divine. It shows us our fallenness and our capability to be called back from this fallenness and it shows us the importance of conversation for drawing closer to others and to God.

Friendship shows us that our fallenness is such that we can be called back into authentic facticity. How shall we understand this claim? Aelred understands human fallenness as cupidity, as a love that focuses on the self and so does not heed the call of the other. In friendship, we come to heed the call of the other and so to recognize our interrelatedness with others. We are called back from self-absorption into a world with others. How are we to understand what it means to be fallen in terms of our contemporary situation? Friendship shows us that to understand ourselves as isolated subjects, as being autonomous in the world, is to withdraw from our relational identity. As philosophers, this means that we need to be called to explore concepts of identity that recognize the fundamental significance of relationship. While it is not within the scope of this current paper, it might be fruitful to look at betrayal and broken friendships as revealing the relational nature of human life in very powerful ways (much like Heidegger's broken hammer). However, what Aelred shows is that it is spiritual friendship that most fully reveals the possibility in lived experience for being called back to our own relational facticity. We are always in the world with others. Gabriel Marcel expresses this as the experience of ontological

⁹ Sokolowski, p. 462.

¹⁰ Gadamer, p. 140.

need, of the recognition that there is that which “withstands” in our existence.¹¹

Conversation is a fundamental way of being with others and of standing with others. Friendship, more than any other relationship, helps us develop the art of conversation. Remember that Aelred identified three important characteristics of conversation. Those engaged in the conversations make time apart for the conversations. Time and a degree of intimacy are required. These conversations exhibit equality. Aelred himself is moved to take time for conversation because of his friendships. The recognition that spiritual friendship must be directed by reason and restrained by moderation leads to a specific type of intimacy and equality. Conversation is not empty and idle. In conversation, those who are engaged are focused on the issues and the importance of the issues for the community. Conversation is a give and take that requires us to withhold, out of affection or love both for the persons and for the common goal. We sometimes hold back to allow other voices to be heard. If we understand a primary goal of the conversation to be the establishment of relationships of friendship, relationships that will further the common goal, then the conversation always has this as an underlying presupposition, or as a subtext.

And so the work of phenomenology of religion would seem to be the work of practical ethics, tending the thought of the community so that the virtue of friendship can flourish. Aelred is clear that in fostering friendship, we also address the realities of human cupidity and corruption. Several examples from Aelred’s work illustrate the benefit of friendship to the community. His friend who tends to have an angry personality, out of affection controls his temper. The control benefits the entire community in multiple ways. It enables them to be more at peace with each other and it also enables this individual’s voice to be heard in a way that it might not otherwise. It helps the entire community address and limit human anger. Aelred also uses the example of the friend that he selected based on reason, not affection. In practicing friendship he comes to have real affection for the person. Our initial emotions may keep us from an appreciation of others, especially those with whom we may have strong differences of opinion. But if we consciously seek to develop at least some level of friendship, we often come to appreciate and have sincere affection for the other person. This too serves the good of the community. Fostering friendship in our community would seem to help us address our individual and corporate shortcomings. We learn to control ourselves out of affection, and we come to have affection for those whose personalities at first seem not to illicit

¹¹ Marcel, Gabriel. *The Philosophy of Existentialism* (New York: Citadel Press, 2002 [1956, 1984 Philosophical Library]), p. 14.

any affection. This may be the greatest benefit of friendship to the community.

If then, friendship does contribute to the health of community and to our common task, can Aelred help us define some practices that will foster friendship? I want to make several suggestions, none of which is fully developed here.

Aelred shows us that not only does friendship foster the art of conversation, but how we practice conversation fosters friendship. The practice of conversation should set an atmosphere of trust and equality. It should not seek to instruct or dominate. While intimate, conversation should be open to others and done in the context of the community. It should be guided by reason and moderation. Such a model could guide our public and more private dialogues.

In addition, the stages of development of friendship might well provide us with help in how we acculturate ourselves and new members of our various communities. In bringing new people into a community, they need to be introduced to a wide range of people so that they can begin the process of selection of friends. This is not a process of determining who has authority and should be obeyed or should obey. It is a process of identifying various gifts and how each person relates to others. How do we engage each other in conversation and determine the extent to which openness is possible in those conversations? This is a selection process that probably begins in reason. In order to accomplish my work, it will be helpful to know this person. If this is done in a context of fostering friendship, then the question is more than the usefulness of the other person to me. It is a question of coming to know.

We need to provide venues for testing so that friendships can be nurtured. Can we provide processes and structures that accommodate trust so that relationships of trust can flourish? We need to provide members of the community with opportunities to work in trusting relationships with each other. We need to structure ourselves so that we trust people to carry out their assigned roles. We need to allow for honesty and open disagreement.

Perhaps at this point, we agree with Walter and prefer structures of domination and obedience. But we ought to take seriously Aelred's caution, that we might well be discarding virtue in our attempt to control cupidity rather than correct and counsel. Aelred serves as an example of how important it is for those in positions of power to recognize the added responsibility that is theirs for being reflective about ways in which they can provide means for the members of the community to nurture spiritual friendships.

If we provide opportunity for selection and testing, we also need to provide time and opportunity to cultivate these relationships. We need to grow together as we reason about our work, allowing affection to develop under the guidance of reason and moderation. And

finally, we need to celebrate the friendships and loves that nurture the community.

A phenomenology of spiritual friendship opens up the tasks of practical ethics. As such, friendship also opens up the possibility of discourse about God. Gadamer says that in exchange with friends, we draw nearer to the divine. This drawing nearer also provides the possibility for a discourse about the divine that is not shaped by structures of domination, but rather is open and receptive of the thought and experience of the other. It is a discourse that learns to take time, to be reasoned and moderate, to recognize the needs and character of the other. In the religiously fragmented world in which we find ourselves, this discourse is of vital importance. A phenomenology of friendship would seem to be an important contribution to providing for the possibility of such discourse.

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