

What is the future of friendship? (Some random thoughts prompted by ChatGPT)

Post by “waterholic” of February 19, 2023 at 1:31 AM

Most of our attention in this forum is directed towards the past, the texts from antiquity. This poses a challenge: do the social constructs present back in Epicurean times still exist? The recipes provided by philosophy have to be useful in daily life. But if the necessary social constructs are not there any more, the body of knowledge existing back then needs to be augmented to work in today's or tomorrow's environment.

Case in point is friendship, which plays a central role in the Epicurean philosophy as one of the main ways of achieving tranquility through safety. Cooperation has been credited as the key success factor for our species (see for example <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/S096982219303343> or "Sapiens, a Brief History of Humankind" by Yuval Noah Harari) if success is measured by numbers and dominance, of course.

But friendship (a form of cooperation) has evolved since the 4th century BC Greece. Cities dominated back then and the states combined only a few cities. Cooperation was on a smaller scale and friendship was essential for survival - there was no formalized social net. In fact, the formalized social net began to emerge only in the twentieth century, when the modern state emerged with its social programs for health, unemployment, retirement and education. These are all welcome developments of course, and they provide for more efficient **"institutionalised" friendship**.

Today in most advanced societies this "institutionalised" friendship becomes the dominant form of friendship, as along with fundamental things such as health care, unemployment etc., we begin to source "cooperation" for less fundamental aspects of our lives from technology platforms. In the pre-internet era you still had health and unemployment insurance, so there was no need for friends in this regard. But if you had a problem with plumbing, or you needed good tickets for a concert, or you had to find a decent dentist, you needed "a guy" - a personal reference, usually from friends or family. These days, all of this is replaced by technology platforms, which crowdsource reviews, opinions, arrange food delivery if you are sick, give medical advice and even psychological care "completely anonymously", as if that's a benefit.

We are now in the post-friendship era, when one is simultaneously friends with everyone and no one. The regular form of friendship is relegated to the meaningless and shallow chitchat (not meaning to generalize, but just to observe a trend) without expectation of life-long affection and support. After all, relying on "institutionalised" and monetised friendship is far more efficient and reliable. Except it isn't.

The next stage in our technological development is that of excessive productivity. As an economist I have observed this trend in the past 20 years. Most of the products and services we need can now be produced in greater volumes with fewer people (the reason why productivity growth numbers are low in the US has to do with the way we measure it, and it's a separate discussion). But since as a society we bestow resources and our "friendship" in exchange for work, it becomes more and more difficult to sustain that friendship. What happens when that work is no longer needed?

This brings me to Chat GPT - a tool that scared many because it's imperfect. But it scares me because it is perfect enough. No it cannot replace a senior partner in a law or consulting firm or a headmaster in a school. But it can definitely replace ALL the juniors and teachers with frightening efficiency (it has already done so in some companies I know). Under normal circumstances, these people would find their work elsewhere. But the onslaught of technological change now is across the board: restaurants, supermarkets, elderly care, pizza delivery, teaching, health care - you name it, it is being "disrupted".

And here our "institutionalised friendship" will likely prove woefully inadequate. It has no empathy and feelings. We will (and are currently) have a large number of people in need of friends who have grown unaccustomed to the notion of friendship. They don't know how and why to do it and each generation is worse at it. This may be just an observation, but everyone I know with young adult children appear to agree.

In this sense I feel quite conflicted. On the one hand, the Epicurean philosophy provides the building blocks of pleasurable life that do not fit the society that has moved on and is now facing a serious challenge. On the other hand, the same philosophy can provide the recipe for solving the major challenge we face: our rising productivity ensures that there are more goods and services than we (all of us) could possibly need to satisfy our natural and necessary desires. That means with a minimum amount of work per person, we could dedicate our lives to friendship in Epicurean sense and knowledge.

I will end with this passage from Bertrand Russell (In Praise of Idleness): "Let us take an illustration. Suppose that, at a given moment, a certain number of people are engaged in the manufacture of pins. They make as many pins as the world needs, working (say) eight hours a day. Someone makes an invention by which the same number of men can make twice as many pins as before. But the world does not need twice as many pins: pins are already so cheap that hardly any more will be bought at a lower price. In a sensible world, everybody concerned in the manufacture of pins would take to working four hours instead of eight, and everything else would go on as before. But in the actual world this would be thought demoralizing. The men still work eight hours, there are too many pins, some employers go bankrupt, and half the men previously concerned in making pins are thrown out of work. There is, in the end, just as much leisure as on the other plan, but half the men are totally idle while half are still overworked. In this way, it is insured that the unavoidable leisure shall cause misery all round instead of being a universal source of happiness. Can anything more insane be imagined?"