

DE AMICITIA (ON FRIENDSHIP)

Dr. D's reading guide

Cicero's On Friendship is, like Plato's Symposium, written as the reconstruction of a conversation that had happened some time before. Cicero (the author) dedicates the work to his own dear friend, Atticus, with whom he was in constant communication. Below is a section-by-section reading guide with notes and questions.

PEOPLE

The Frame:

Cicero, illustrious political leader and man of letters (we met him before in Catullus' poetry and as a critic of Clodia/Lesbia)

Atticus, Cicero's dear friend

The Conversation:

Quintus Scaevola, a dignified politician and augur (a politico-religious office that involved taking omens for political business)

Gaius Laelius, "The Wise," whose ideas the essay focuses on, father-in-law of Scaevola and Fannius

Gaius Fannius, son-in-law of Laelius

Mentioned:

Publius Scipio Africanus, military and political leader greatly respected by Cicero and for that matter most other Romans, and a good friend of Laelius.

SECTION BY SECTION GUIDE/QUESTIONS

Part 1. The scene is set in Scaevola's garden, at a particular time and place. Present are Laelius and two of his sons-in-law, Scaevola and Fannius. So we see a collection of friends/relatives, and a situation alluded to of two former friends, Sulpicius and Pompeius, who now hated each other.

- What mood does the frame set for the ideas expressed in the essay?

Part 2. Discussion of personal loss and how one takes it.

- What is the relationship between loss and duty?

Part 3-4. Discussion of Scipio's death and accomplishments, and Laelius' response to his death.

- What perspectives make the loss of a friend less crushing?
- What is the relationship between envy and grief?

Part 5. Establishing the nature of friendship.

- What is the core element of friendship?
- What do "friendship" and "the good" have in common?

Part 6. The advantages of friendship.

- What are these?

Part 7. More benefits & goodness

- What is the relationship between the friend and the self?
- What kinds of moral good emerge through friendship – esp. in the Orestes/Pylades story?

Part 8. Nature, morality

- What is the role of nature in the essence of friendship?
- How does human love compare to that in the natural world?
- Where in particular is human love/friendship different from that in the natural world?

Part 9. Friendship from want or from strength

- Laelius makes reference to Plato's formulation (in the Symposium) of Eros as the child of Poverty and Resourcefulness. What is his response to the ideas behind Plato's idea of love?
- (32) One of the ideas of the Greek erastes/eromenos relationship is that the older man leads the younger into a superior appreciation of virtue. How does "learning virtue" fit into the Roman idea of friendship?

Part 10. Friendship destroyed

- What sorts of things can destroy a friendship? How do they relate to the ideas of virtue and mutuality described above?

Part 11-12. Friends, virtue, country

- Note: the people mentioned in the first part of the 11 are politicians who had in some way "harmed the republic" of Rome; the latter are examples of virtue sustained)
- What is the relationship between proper friendship and excessive friendship?
- What role does "love of country" play relative to "love of a friend"?

Part 13: Critique of self-centered philosophies

- What is the central flaw of philosophies that describe true contentment and virtue as lying in the separate self?

Part 14: Friendship and benefits:

- Is friendship based on advantage, or does advantage result from friendship?

Part 15: Wealth and power vs. friendship

- Note: Tarquin is an oppressive Etruscan tyrant who held dominion over Rome in its early (almost mythic) history.
- What is the relative value of wealth and friendship? How does tyranny affect friendship?

Part 16: Balance in friendship

- What are the three wrongful notions of balance in friendship Laelius brings up, and how does he refute them?

Part 17: Fragility of friendships

- How do most men value or reckon their friendships?
- What sorts of conflicts bring friendships down?

Part 18: Loyalty

- What should be the effect of loyalty in a friendship?
- How does loyalty come about?

Part 19-20: New Friend vs. old; social status and friendship

- How do the advantages of new and old friendships compare?
- How do people of different social standing act in a friendship?

Part 21: Breaking up is hard to do

- What are the right and wrong ways to break up a friendship?
- What are the right and wrong reasons for doing so?

Part 22: Relationship of friendship and virtue reddux

Part 23: You gotta have friends

- What is the bottom line in human beings of all sorts, with regard to friendship?
- What are the effects of lack of friendships?

Part 24-26: The importance of rebuke

- Why is criticism so important in friendship?
- What is the result of having yes-men as friends?
- Can true friendship exist without criticism?

Part 27: The continuation of friendship

- Why is it important to have cross-generational friendships?
- How does friendship continue to have value and life even after death?