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Aristotle and the Friendship of Soldiers

"...the finest thing that arose out of the war--comradeship."
Erich Maria Remarque

"Friendship's true domain is peace, only peace."
J. Glenn Gray

"Fellow-soldiers are called friends."
Aristotle

The topic of this paper is the relationships that bind soldiers together. I briefly discuss comradeship, especially Combat Comradeship, as presented by Erich Maria Remarque's All Quiet on the Western Front and J. Glenn Gray's The Warriors.¹ Then I relate how Aristotle described philia or friendship as a pervasive binding relationship. We have inherited a post-Aristotelian tradition that lets us see only a few people as friends. However, if we return to Aristotle's perspective, we may regard more than a few soldiers as personal friends and many soldiers as communal friends.²

Of Aristotle's account, Bertrand Russell wrote: "All that is said about friendship is sensible, but there is not a word that rises above common sense" (180). More charitably, Mortimer Adler described Aristotle as a "philosopher of uncommon common sense." My goal is to offer the modest suggestion that we may be

overlooking the common sense importance of the personal and communal friendship of soldiers.

Combat Comradeship

In mid-novel, Remarque has Paul Baumer huddled in his trench. As the artillery's "hailing annihilation" lifts, a whirling slaughter of attack begins. The intelligent, sensitive narrator's bayonet has so often gotten stuck or broken off that it has "practically lost its importance." Now, his sharpened shovel is "more handy" for jabbing, striking, and cleaving. "If your own father came over with them you would not hesitate...If it were not so there would not be one man alive from Flanders to the Vosges."

Baumer is one of The Warriors, a Homo furens, a member of the subspecies of Homo sapiens. At the point of combat, he is merely a "wielder of weapons." Afterwards, if "given freeplay," this aspect of the warrior is capable of transforming the whole man by suppressing his civilian rationality.

In another scene, Paul is hunkered down with two men who happen to be his best friends. Gas shells fall. "Some distance from me there lies someone. I think of nothing but this: That fellow must know." At the front "individuals are no longer recognizable...How can a man look after anyone in the field?" Paul, his friends, and that "fourth man in our hole" are Combat Comrades.

Combat Comrades are interchangeable, anonymous wielders of weapons bound together by an intense feeling of community and an ecstatic liking for any group member. They cooperate for a

necessary goal, common purpose, or shared function. (When their trench was overrun by rats, Paul's group responded as Combat Comrades.) A Combat Comrade is not selfish, self-interested, or intent exclusively on self-survival; he will readily sacrifice himself in the service of his comrades. His fighting morale might pass for loyalty: a "determination not to let down his comrades" and "an assurance that others will act in concert."

Combat Comradeship is caused. Initially, individuals are organized into a community for a purpose. Later, some experience of communal danger evokes the comradeship. Gray felt a Force, an atmosphere of violence. The literary Baumer felt a mysterious whirlpool which sucked him irresistibly into the Front.

Because Combat Comradeship is caused by "feelings in no way dependent on reason," the binding force of the relation requires an involuntary "repression" or voluntary "surrender" of rationality and individual will to the Force of the Front or to the communal will of fellow comrades. I becomes WE as one Homo furens becomes the "center of a force."

Combat Comradeship is not personal comradeship. When Paul cooperated with his close companions to avenge their overzealous drill instructor or when they planned a tryst with three French women, they were neither anonymous nor in communal danger. Combat Comrades are also to be distinguished from anonymous garrison comrades who are drawn together out of harm's way.

Admiral Stockdale has reported that Gray's reflections about comradeship corroborated his own Hoa Lo POW experiences. "People under pressure and united in a common cause" fight because of

"loyalty to the group," for "The Man Next Door." Stockdale targeted these remarks at two contraries of comradeship. Stockdale's POW's who were bound by "Unity over Self" had as one "flip side" a group of selfish "What's in it for me?" individuals. The other contrary is a disorganized herd such as the groups of Russian and German POW's Baumer and Gray observed. Comrades are neither self-interested nor disinterested. Nor are friends. It will be instructive to ask: Are Stockdale's POW's better described as Combat Comrades or as Aristotelian soldierly friends? What is at stake in the choice between the two descriptions?³

Aristotle and Friendship

As Aristotle saw it, friends are necessary, noble, and pervasive (1155); philia binds not just close friends, but also many parents and their children, siblings, spouses, business partners, members of social and religious groups, and fellow citizens.⁴ From his perspective, our modern conception of friendship is deficient and distorted.

Today we may concede that friends are necessary or personally good. (We sometimes even harbor institutional misgivings about that.⁵) However, the nobility and pervasiveness of friendship alludes us; our moral language itself is so impoverished that it "deadens our noblest impulses" about friendship.⁶ How has this come about?

The Few Perfect Friends Tradition is one culprit. Socrates (in the Lysis and Symposium) bequeathed Aristotle several friendship puzzles. To resolve one of these, Aristotle

characterized a perfect, best friend (1154). Cicero seized this important, but partial, aspect of Aristotle's philia. Plutarch, Montaigne, Emerson, and C. S. Lewis added their elaborations and modifications. Remarque and Gray are squarely in this tradition.

The suggestion that soldiers are bound by friendship is part of a recent effort to make such delicacies as friendship again become "a main course in life's banquet."⁷ On the account I offer, protests of the Few Perfect Friends Tradition notwithstanding, soldierly friendships are necessary, noble, and pervasive.

Let us begin with a general Aristotelian description of friendship. It emphasizes four features. The description not only adequately characterizes our few best friends, but each feature also describes an aspect of both personal and communal soldierly friendship.

Mutual well wishing. The source (arche) of your acts of friendship is your good will or benevolence for your friend: "wishing for him what you believe to be good things not for your own sake but for his" (Rhetoric, 1381).

However, as a spectator in a stadium you do that much for your favorite player (1161). But spectators are not friends because: (i) Their well wishing is not reciprocated or mutual (1155), (ii) It lacks the "intensity and desire which are implied by the loving" of friendship (1166), (iii) When "they [only] have good will people only wish goods to the other, and will not cooperate with him in any action or, (iv) go to any trouble for him" (1167).

Mutual well doing and cooperation. You do go to trouble for a friend. You are "inclined, so far as you can, to bring these things [the good things you wished for him] about" (Rhetoric, 1381). In addition, you cooperate with your friends. Such acts are the goal or end (telos) of friendship.

Cooperation arises from concord, or shared beliefs about what is important (to us).⁸ Because of my shared beliefs with my friend, we make the same decisions--"our eyes look straight ahead"--and we act on a "common resolution" (1167)--"friends stand side by side in their important concerns" (Cicero, 52).⁹

Mutual friendly feeling. This is the "passion or affection" that sets apart a good or decent friend from people who only have the minor social virtue of friendliness and merely "behave as is befitting...in social life" (1126).¹⁰ It is the "delight [friends have] in each other" (1158). It is that "intensity and desire" that separated those friends from the spectators.

"It follows that your friend is the sort of person who shares" your pleasures and pains (1381), is "delighted in and pained by the same things," (1165) and rejoices and grieves with you (1171). These things "will be the token" that someone is your friend (1381).¹¹

Mutual deliberate choice. The mutual love that is characteristic of friendship requires decision or deliberate choice (prohairesis) and is not merely the result of feeling (1157).¹²

Aristotle's general description boiled down to a slogan statement is: Friendship is a relationship between people who

deliberately like each other, and, for that reason, wish well and do well for each other's sake.

Aristotle identified three types of friendship corresponding to the three things people find lovable: advantage (or utility), pleasure, and good character (or virtue).

Consider Stanislaus Katczinsky. He was shrewd, cunning, hard-bitten, and experienced. Because Paul Baumer found these qualities lovable, he was drawn to Kat as an advantage friend. Kat was also a warm, good-natured companion; for these qualities Paul liked him as a pleasure friend. In scenes evocative of the parable of the vineyard, Kat routinely exchanged his scrounged food for tobacco, but in exceptional cases gave it to new recruits who had nothing to exchange. Such compassion was one of the good qualities that made Kat Paul's character (or virtue) friend.

Character friendship is complete. Because of his character, a character friend is also lovable as advantageous and pleasant. Incomplete friends resemble personal comrades. For example, neither advantage friendships, pleasure friendships, nor personal comradeship is enduring (1157 and Gray, 89). Both advantage friends (1157) and personal comrades are prone to disputes as the arithmetic of four comrades and three French women amusingly demonstrated.

Soldiers routinely are advantage friends, pleasure friends, or personal comrades. Often they are also character friends. (Hereafter, the term 'friend' will refer to a personal character friend, unless otherwise qualified.) Before seeing how soldiers are friends, we must first confront an obstacle.

A Few Perfect Friends

The Few Perfect Friends Tradition is an obstacle for appreciating soldierly friendship, just as the best is the enemy of the better.

Perfect Friends are moral saints or heroes of intellect and character: "good without qualification" (1156) or "models of honor, integrity, justice,...with characters without a blemish...with no vestige of vice" (Cicero, 72). Superlatives announce their arrival. Their concord requires "complete sympathy in all matters of importance" (Cicero, 54) with "no element unlike" (Plutarch, 67). Their friendly feeling rests on "complete intellectual and emotional affinity" (Cicero, 89). Deliberate choice plays no role; these friends "come to me unsought" (Emerson, 224) perhaps by "some secret appointment from heaven" (Montaigne, 85).

There are no Perfect Friends. As Montaigne lamented, "Oh my [ordinary character] friend, there is no [Perfect] friend" (86).

The Few (who are) Friends are real people who are often regarded to be nearly perfect. Cicero scoured Roman history to find "a handful of [such] individuals" (54). Even by more relaxed standards, "many men never had a friend and even the most fortunate of us can have a few" (Gray, 89).

If friends are nonexistent or rare, why is friendship an interesting object of study? Aristotle's answer might be methodological. To discover the characteristics of friendship, we should examine the conceptually most fully realized instance of a

friend. Cicero and Montaigne might answer with Emerson: Friendship is such a "masterpiece of nature" (229) that it "is too good to be believed" (225).

Aristotle did describe the most perfect instance of a friend but he did not mistakenly think that it was the only instance.¹³ Nor should we mistakenly think that the existence of a few best friends precludes having more than a few friends.

If these are plausible suggestions, perhaps we should reread and rethink Aristotle's text. For example, he says "those who have many friends and treat everyone as close to them seem to be friends to no one, except in a fellow-citizen's way" (1171). That statement may appear to deny the possibility of having "many friends." If we look closer, it is more plausibly regarded as an exposure of pretenders for many "extremely close" friends as "ingratiating" or "obsequious." Even so, Aristotle did explicitly state several limitations to having more than a few friends: (i) qualified candidates are limited, (ii) determining trustworthiness takes time, (iii) well doing requires being physically together and is demanding, (iv) friendly feeling or affection becomes attenuated, (v) concord with many is difficult, (vi) being advantageous and pleasant to many is demanding, and (vii) speaking freely with or thinking aloud to more than only a few people is impossible. These limitations have become the substance of the Few Perfect Friends Tradition. My suggestion that we have more than a few friends will be developed with these limitations in mind.

I propose that we proceed while acknowledging a dilemma. If we extend 'friend' too widely, the term will lose its nobleness.

But, if we recognize only a few friends, we risk misdescribing those not so few people who find each other's character lovable and, for that reason, wish well and do well for the sake of each other.

Character Friends and the Personal Friendship of Soldiers

More than a few ordinary, merely decent people do have some character qualities we find lovable. The best of those qualities are less than perfect, and the best of those people have other qualities we do not find lovable. When such people are drawn to and bound to each other because of their generally good qualities of character, they are friends. They are character friends. And their friendship is necessary, noble, and pervasive.

Because our friends have varying degrees of lovable character qualities as well as other qualities we may simply tolerate, I will use two images to illuminate aspects of our friends obscured by the Few Perfect Friends Tradition.

The first image is the gravitational field of my friends. I am at the center. One theoretical limit of the field is the closest point where I would put that Perfect Friend we just dismissed. The other theoretical limit is a distant subjective periphery beyond which I have placed those people whose character I do not know well enough to find lovable, as well as those people I do not regard as my friends just because of what I do know about their character. Between these two limits is a continuum on which I have placed my friends.

I have been with many people long enough to deliberately choose where to place them. I have put most of them beyond the periphery; they are not my friends. Of those remaining, the ones I have placed the closest exert the most pull on my friendly feelings and are the most likely candidates for my well doing. Those I have placed farther away tug less, but, as circumstances provide, they also may be the recipients of my friendly beneficence. Those who are closer I speak to more freely, trust more readily, and so on. And all this is mutual. (See note 12.)

The second image that illuminates important features of our friends is the moral bookkeeper.¹⁴

Cicero rightly insisted that, if we are prudent, "we must test and observe our supposed friends first and then bestow our affections" (81). Aristotle added that we continue testing even after we have become friends.

Only our most flourishing friendships are free of testing. According to Aristotle, in such relationships friends "compete" to benefit each other. However, since each friend "is gracious he retaliates by benefiting his friend in return. Even if one friend excels in this process neither will accuse his friend of anything" (1162). Paul Baumer confirmed this psychological insight after he and Kat roasted a purloined goose, "we are brothers and press on one another the choicest pieces."

As soon as we turn to less than flourishing friendships, prudence requires that we test our friends by becoming moral bookkeepers. "Most people" do this, observed Aristotle, but they bungle their books. They see themselves and their friends as

creditors and debtors who keep an eye on the flow of benefits. Aristotle rejected such bookkeeping because it lacks friendly feeling (1168). C. S. Lewis added an insightful elaboration. More central to friendship than the benefits is the response: "It was nothing." Benefit balancing is crude, defective bookkeeping.

A more plausible version emerges from a story about two merchants.¹⁵ When they first meet, their sole aim is profit. The terms for their exchange of goods are "unambiguous" and "immediate." They exchange money on the spot. Their relationship is "purely commercial". At a subsequent meeting, one merchant likes the other and extends him credit. This "postponement" introduces a "friendly aspect...of trust" into the relationship. As the relationship develops further, the first merchant allows his partner to establish the value of the goods; he "makes a present" of discretion "as to a friend." As a businessman he expects an equal or "more generous" return. However, his friendly gestures have introduced trust and discretion into the relationship.

What happens next depends solely on the second merchant's character. If he abuses the trust of his credit and fails to pay, or if he abuses his discretion and repays too little, his partner will accuse him and dissolve their relationship. On the other hand, if he repays sufficiently, the relationship may develop into an exchange with more or less limited degrees of cooperation, loyalty, friendly feeling, and shared well wishing and well doing. If the relationship does develop, both merchants will enhance their own overall profit and advantage.

To see what is going on here, consider a Trustee Model of Moral Bookkeeping. As the relationship evolved, the second merchant became a long-term Trustee or guardian of his partner's good will. As a businessman, he was expected to repay the goods entrusted to him. As a trustee, he was expected to care for and reciprocate the good will extended to him. The first merchant began keeping vigilant, but loose, long term-books on his partner's fitness as a guardian of goodwill.

The same sort of bookkeeping occurs between wise and prudent friends. Our friends are guardians; we entrust them with our good will, care, and concern. We check the books to ascertain their fitness as guardians; we do this to know where to position them in our gravitational field of friends. The books are neither exact nor short-term, but they have a long-term limit. At some point, if our friend has failed to reciprocate the good will, care, and concern with which he was entrusted, we feel betrayed and may even close out the books and dissolve the friendship.

When two soldiers first meet, they have an opportunity just as the merchants did. They may develop a relationship which will enhance their own overall advantage. However, there is a critical difference as the following pieces of advice reveal.

To those of us who seek to maximize our own advantage, Montaigne offers this advice: If your footman is diligent, your muleteer strong, and your cook proficient, be indifferent if they are chaste, or given to gaming and swearing. For table talk prefer the pleasant before the learned; in bed, beauty before goodness; in discourse, the ablest speaker, even if insincere.

To soldiers who seek to maximize their own personal advantage, Sir John Winthrop Hackett would advise: Search out fellow soldiers of ordinary good character. Put a premium on courage, fortitude, and loyalty. Because of the nature of your enterprise, these qualities are not only good in themselves, they are functionally indispensable to you. If you settle for anything less, you risk disadvantage, perhaps even ultimate disadvantage.¹⁶

To the same soldiers, Aristotle might proffer this advice: You and "your fellow soldiers seek the advantage proper to war" (1160). Take time to test the soldiers you spend your days with. Keep Trustee Books on their good will. Seek out the soldiers you respect as advantage friends. Seek out those whose character you find lovable. They will be the same people. If you yourself are such a soldier, these people will seek you. Your mutual respect and liking will prompt you to wish well and do well for each other's sake. Cooperation will be easy. You will be in concord and act on a common resolve about many matters of importance to you. Do not lament if such soldiers are not perfect. Get closest to the best of them; you will not be as close to the others but they are also your character friends. There is a limit to the number of such personal friends, but these people are not rare.

The Communal Friendship of Soldiers

"In every community there seems to be some sort of...friendship" (1150). This type of "friendship would seem to hold cities together" (1155). "Those who have many friends...seem

to be friends...in a fellow-citizen's way" (1171, and cf. above.) Our best translation of this philia is 'civic friendship' or 'communal friendship'. Aristotle regarded it as a form of advantage friendship (1160).

Communal friendship is a partially impersonal philia.¹⁷ Our personal friends have "spent their days with us" and "actually treated us well." Our communal friends are "disposed to be [our] friends" and "inclined to treat us well," even though we may not be personally acquainted with them.

A successful community is animated by a spirit or attitude that binds its members together. In such a well-arranged community, people who are not otherwise related more or less casually like others they recognize as fellow members of their community. They wish them well for their sake and are inclined to do well by them when an occasion presents itself.

Such well wishing has an impersonal aspect. If we opt to approach any fellow community member in a spirit of good will, then everyone in the community is a communal friend. However, communal friends are private and personal to the extent that deliberate choice is involved. Not all members of a community choose to be communal friends; some members opt out and others disqualify themselves. On the other hand, some members do deliberately choose to be communal friends.

Consider a vignette. Some time ago I was in my Dress Blues struggling with a flat tire when a passerby stopped, identified himself as a fellow Marine, and offered to help. (Assume he would

not have stopped had I been wearing a tux.) What is the best explanation?

The tux rules out general benevolence or the suggestion that it was just a nice thing to do. Justice played no part. He had no duty or obligation. (An appeal to supererogation backslides into the moral outlook that I am trying to transcend.) If he had not stopped no one would have accused him. (Except perhaps a fellow Marine--but that's the point.) No reduction to his own personal gain is convincing. A Skinnerian suggestion that my Blues made him stop by evoking his DI's Semper Fi lecture is out of line.

He stopped for the sake of a fellow Marine for whom he wished well and had an opportunity to do well.¹⁸ After all, communal "friendship would seem to hold [the Marine Corps] together." Its leaders are "concerned about it" because they know that even if Marines "are just they need friendship in addition" (1155). They have the uncommon common sense to know that friendship is necessary and noble and they do what they can to make it more pervasive.

Comradeship and Friendship

Remarque's portrayal of World War I trench warfare made Paul Baumer an ideal Combat Comrade, as well as a personal comrade (or pleasure friend and advantage friend) to a few fellow soldiers. The best friendship of Paul and Kat was also effectively depicted as making "life doubly dear" (Gray, 93).

All Quiet was ill-suited for any other relationships. Baumer's war was a war of expediency; everything was permissible, nothing forbidden. The Homo furens could have been given "free play" without consequence; Baumer could not have committed a war crime. Remarque's war was apolitical; Baumer was "shepherded" in, trained as a "circus pony" and told "to forget everything." He was given little civilian rationality to suppress. And he had little need for the friendship of soliders.

As soon as we move beyond a twenty year old narrator characterized solely as a soldier in fear of life, war becomes more than expedient. If war is a rational activity even by the "skin of its teeth" with rules, however minimal, some things are forbidden.¹⁹ If war is not entirely apolitical, soldiers may fight or cease fighting for a reason.

We need not demand that Paul Baumer, at the point of combat, embroil himself in just war proportionality and ensure that his sharpened shovel conform to the Hague Conventions. However, Colonel Hartle is now asking soliders to wage war with a professional military ethic. If that is what war is, soldierly friends of good character are at a premium.

Seigfried Sassoon, the decorated British poet who fought in the same war as Baumer, quit in protest in 1917. He deliberately chose by "an act of willful defiance" to dissolve his relationship with those whose "political errors and insecurities" betrayed a lack of well doing for him and his fellow soldiers.²⁰ If war has a purpose, the concord of fellow soldiers, their leaders, and

their policymakers is at a premium. So is communal soldierly friendship and civic friendship.²¹

Should we characterize those Hoa Lo POW's as Combat Comrades or Aristotelian soldierly friends? Either description acknowledges that after they were organized and put in communal dangers, many of them responded with well wishing and well doing for the sake of each other.

However, deliberate choice was paramount. Most were free to leave, at the cost of betrayal. A few did. The majority who stayed had deliberately "decided to imprison ourselves."²² Concord was everything. Paul Baumer aimed to survive. For that he needed Combat Comrades. The POW's aimed to "Survive With Dignity." For that they needed the friendship of soldiers.

Notes

"Comrades"
"withhold of the spirit"

1. Gray (and Remarque) warned: "For anyone who has not experienced [comradeship] it is hard to comprehend" (94). Like John Keegan, "I have never been in battle; nor near one...." My disclaimer is especially germane because of the irrationality of war and Aristotle's emphasis on the rational. For the significance of the reference to Keegan, see the introduction to Clark's Waging War.
2. Professor Brennan has kindly shared sketches of his paper. The last fifteen years has enjoyed a revival of scholarly interest in Aristotelian friendship. My gentle polemics with Professor Brennan reflect the reassessment of Aristotle

ushered in by John Cooper. On all important points of this paper there is vigorous controversy.

3. Paul Baumer described the front as a "Cage." Our term 'comrade' comes from the French term for 'one who shares the same room'. Stockdale explicitly described his experience as "comradeship," which he contrasts with "friendship."
4. All Bekker citations are to Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics, except as noted. I have used both the Ross and Irwin translations.
5. C.S. Lewis: "colonels and ships' captains can feel uneasy when close and strong friendships arise between little knots of their subjects" (88). Chaplains Duke and Dillon have shared a draft of their "Camaraderie." It expresses a similar reservation.
6. The expression, if not its use here, is a leitmotiv from Admiral Stockdale.
7. This expression is from C. S. Lewis (88) who attempts the restoration very differently. Other "delicacies" include cooperation (Ewin), trust (Baier), loyalty (Oldenquist), and civility (Kekes).
8. C. S. Lewis (98) gave concord prominence. "Friendship is born with these words: Do you see the same truth?" Contrary to Aristotle, the "vision need not be nice" (113-15).
9. For communal friendship this feature may be only a disposition.

10. Friendliness is the moral virtue which is the basis of the Duke-Dillon camaraderie.
11. This observation explains why I was pained and grieved when I discovered that Bertrand Russell was "repulsed" by Aristotle's "emotional poverty" in the Ethics and its "tepid" account of friendship. (Cicero repeatedly stressed the love (amor) which provides the impulse toward friendship (amicitia).) See Cooper for a reply to Russell.
12. I bypass the psychological roles of friendly feeling and deliberate choice in creating and sustaining a binding friendship. Either one makes friendship private and personal. Either my friendly feeling for or my deliberate choice of my friends distinguishes my friendly well wishing and well doing from my general benevolence or brother's love and from my general beneficence or charity. Either also explains the intensity of friendship; to closer friends we have a more intense feeling or a choice with more resolve.
13. The suggestion is Cooper's (629).
14. I owe the idea of moral bookkeeping to Card, despite our disagreement about details.
15. The story is taken from Book VIII, Chapter 13. See Cooper, Alpern, and Shuchman.
16. The "advice" is an individual adaptation of Hackett's institutional argument (80-1). Neither of us is attempting to "whittle" character down to expediency. See Hartle (1) for a similar claim.

17. Cooper, Kekes, Sherman, Telfer, and Annas offer various assessments of Aristotle's extension of philia to include civic friendship.
18. The vignette is frivolous. However, the communal friendship of soldiers is a character friendship for the same reason that the personal friendship of soldiers was. In a less frivolous circumstance, ultimate advantage may rest on the communal friendship of a soldier.
19. The idea is the guiding thesis of Ian Clark's Waging War.
20. Fred Crawford, a colleague, has pointed out to me such limitations of the World War I novels, and the role of its poetry. See his British Poets of the Great War.
21. Stockdale has put these relationships on the American agenda as issues of "public virtue." (In Anderson and Bark (eds.) Thinking About America, Hoover, 1988.) James Webb cited Sassoon's protest for the same purpose in the Winter, 1988 Naval War College Review.
22. The quotation is from Stockdale's "Epictetus' Enchiridion: Conflict and Character," a presentation at Georgetown University, October, 1985.

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