



## Friendship in Mark Venon: Implications for Family Relationship

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### Abstract

The increasing cases of domestic violence, divorce/annulment, cybercrimes, betrayal, assaults and deception among friends raise much questions on the authenticity of friendship in the society and in the family. The aim of this paper is an application of soul friendship in Vernon as the right model of friendship in the family and the larger society in order to mitigate the impacts of disordered friendship. The study applies John Bowlby and Ainsworth attachment theory to determine the quality of attachment in relationship and friendship. Using the APA manual of style in documentation of findings and with analytic method of research, the paper tries to deconstruct the complexities of friendship in Vernon while drawing favorable implications for healthy family relationship. The Primary source of data collection is Vernon's popular book, *Philosophy of Friendship* where he highlights the major tenets of friendship to include; Friends and lovers, friends at work, online friendship, and spirituality of friendship/soul friendship. According to Vernon, the highest level of friendship is the third degree; spirituality of friendship which regards mutual respect, treating another as oneself, honesty, integrity. Spirituality of friendship in Vernon grows through shared experiences, trust and mutual understanding. These approaches provide adequate platforms to analyze family relationship and concepts of friendship in the larger society. The findings show that friendship in Vernon is not just a social construct rather his spirituality of friendship provides the right model of friendship in the society and a guide to family relationship. This will enable families to regain the lost values in their relationship, eliminate possibilities of domestic violence, fear, deceit, disrespect. In conclusion, this paper shows that spirituality of friendship in Mark Vernon is a transformative force towards reshaping family bonds and restoring the dignity of friendship in the larger society, hence this model of friendship is highly recommended both to families and the larger society.

**Key words:** MarkVernon, friendship, family, relationship, etc.

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## Introduction

The increasing cases of domestic violence in families, poor parenting, aggression among siblings, cybercrimes, murder cases, abuses/violence, numerous case files in both ecclesiastical and civil courts seeking annulment and divorce respectively call attention to investigate the root causes and prospects of restoring the right attitude and models of healthy family relationship and friendship in general (Obi, 2007). One of the core responsibilities of philosophy is to restore values and integrity to humanity and society. It is upon this background of degeneration in models of family relationship and friendship in the larger society that this research was motivated. Like Aristotle, “man as an animal needs the company of another to be complete”. This company must not be toxic or frustrating but suiting, hence this paper creates pathways towards making this natural inclination towards friendship more nourishing.

It is in the attempt to address this great concern on denegation of family relationship and friendship in the larger society that this paper seeks answers in Vernon’s concept of friendship in order to discern how the latter is capable of a transformative force towards reshaping family bonds and restoring valuable friendship. Thus models of friendship are capable of influencing family bonds and valuable guidance for building stronger and more harmonious relationships in families. By extension, when stronger family ties are created, it assures more cohesive, peace and ordered society. No doubt that the importance of friendship to human life, family, development and preservation is obviously indisputable.

The concept of friendship is derived from the Greek word *φιλία* (*philia*) which translates as love, storge, eros and agape. According to Berger (2017), friendship accounts for the effective bond between persons as against mere acquaintances who share special concern for one another. In the same vein, Ogbunkwu (2018) states that friendship accounts for a relationship of mutual affection between two or more people. It co-notes a stronger form of interpersonal bond than ordinary association. Friendship can be true or false/pretentious. While the former entails total trust and self-sacrificing as in the case of David and Jonathan (RVS: I Sam 8.1ff), the latter entails deceit and betrayal as in the case of the Roman emperor Julius Caesar and Marcus Brutus who betrayed him (Ogbunkwu, 2018). For Bacon (1909), friendship is so important in life such that without friends Aristotle (2011) says “no one would choose to live, though he possessed all



the other goods”. According to Aristotle (2011), friendship can be categorized into the following types; utility, pleasure and virtue which are parallel to Kant’s (1997) categorization as friendship of need, taste and disposition. In all, Cicero (1795) states that goodwill is the most important factor such that “if you take away goodwill, the very name friendship is removed, whilst that of relationship remains”.

### **Friendship in Mark Vernon**

Mark Vernon was born in 1966 and lived for about fifty seven years. He was trained as a British psychotherapist and a writer with keen interest in ancient philosophy and illumination of inner life. He worked as a priest in the Church of England which he resigned after twenty years. He studied physics, philosophy, theology, etc. He authored about eighteen books in philosophy, psychology and theology. For the interest of this paper, a special consideration is given to his *Philosophy of Friendship* published in 2005. Here Vernon expressed his concept of friendship from the following perspectives; Friends and lovers, friends at work, online friendship, unconditional love/spirituality of friendship, etc.

**Friends and Lovers:** In friends and lovers, Vernon extensively exposed the dichotomy between friends and lovers. This dichotomy is not very exclusive as friendship presupposes love but in different degrees. Thus there cannot be friendship without some bits of love implied. This bit of love implied in friendship could be hinged on pleasure, usefulness or virtue which correspond to the three levels of friendship in Aristotle (2011, 14). However, it should be noted that lovers as referred in Vernon here implies erotic love.

In as much as there are mutuality between lovers and friends, there is a growing trend of syncretism such that the lines of boundaries are petering out. The world today turn blind eyes to the fact that there is a degree of intimate sharing permissible only to lovers in marriage forms but not to friends. A classic example in this regard is John Stuart Mill who had close friendship with Harriet Taylor before their marriage. To draw the lines clear enough Gordon (2024) said; “we disdained as every person not a slave of his animal appetite must do, the abject notion that the strongest and the tenderness friendship cannot exist between men and women without sensual relation”. Little wonder Vernon (2005, 48) claims, “erotic possibility rather than a sexual



inevitability is no less a powerful manifestation of the possible damaging play between sex and friendship”.

According to Vernon (2005), the major difference between friends and erotic lovers is that friendship is calm, reasonable, harmonious and sober whereas erotic love is spontaneous, irrational, wild and orgiastic. While friendship tends towards the mind, conversation and spiritual, erotic love is nothing without the body, touch and lust.

**Friends at Work:** According to Vernon, one of the dynamisms of friendship is at work place. This is the type of friendship that exists between persons working together in a place. For Vernon, this type of friendship can be referred as “pseudo-friendship” or “pseudo-intimacy” as the parties though spend more time than they do in their families yet their bond is business minded or usefulness to one another. No doubt, friendship routinely emerges among workers in different fields. Friendship here increases employee’s job satisfaction and employers’ confidence by about 50% (Vernon, 2005). This condition enhances work performance, peaceful co-existence/sense of belonging and conducive work environment and experience.

This form of relationship is based on utility and once the usefulness is out-lived, the friendship comes to an end/ceases. For Aristotle (2011), “those who are friendly with each other because they are useful to each other not because of their person ... they like each other so long it does them good. This is why Vernon (2005) asked,

why is it that you may have known a colleague for years, enjoyed their company day after day, worked with them, even helped them with personal matters split into the work place, and yet, when they left, it was an overnight, almost as if you have never known them? (17)

**Online Friendship:** According to Vernon (2005), this is the most risky form of friendship. It can be very tricky and capable of creating panic. The contemporary age is the age of computer and significant growth in artificial intelligence. With the advent of social media network; facebook, whatsapp, Electronic mails, etc; there is a wave of addiction especially among the youths.

These are wonderful platforms which people employ to get new friends, sustain old friends and reach out to family members. This raises some fundamental questions of integrity in the use of



these social media handles. According to Vernon (2005), this platform raises some levels of anxiety and scam/frauds, hence questioning the safety and honesty of virtual world to sustain friendship. The common vices associated with this practice include; cyber bullying/character assassination, sexual abuses, fake news, cybercrimes, deception, hacking, etc (Vernon, 2005:105). These factors sometimes leave the party in great panic, anonymity and emotional trauma. One of the fundamental denials imposed by the online/virtual space is eroding people solitude and privacy which is an essential element towards self-mastery, hence leading to tethered self. According to Turkle (2017), tethered self here implies an internet connected personality. While online friendship simply means a “to link to” which differs from befriending which involves getting to know someone very closely (Vernon, 2005). By online presence and friendship one loses his privacy which is invaded at all times.

**Spirituality of Friendship:** The hub of spirituality of friendship for Vernon is what he referred as the “soul friendship”. This implies a connection in friendship that is beyond mere physical or emotional connection rather a bond that involves two souls that are intertwined with one another in understanding, love, mutuality and peace. This is the level of friendship Aristotle describes as “another self” where a friend mirrors one’s thought, beliefs and feelings (Vernon, 2005). Friendship at this level is telepathetic such that even from a distance, one feels and hears the other. It is a perfect friendship model which is though rare but meant for virtuous men. This form of bond is characterized by Unconditional Love.

According to Vernon (2005), one of the major characteristics of spirituality of friendship is unconditional love. This is a form of love with no strings attached but offered freely simply for the happiness of the other. For Vernon, a classical example of this experience is Augustine’s encounter with the Manicheans when Augustine (1975) stated thus;

All kinds of things rejoiced in my soul in their company, to talk and laugh, and to do each other kindness; to read pleasant books together, to pass from lightest jesting to talk of the deepest things and back again; to differ without rancor, as a man might differ in himself, and most rarely dissention arose, to find our normal agreement all the sweeter for it; to teach each and to learn from each other, to be impatient for the return of the absent, and to welcome them with joy on their homecoming, these and such like things, proceeding from our hearts as we gave



affection and received it back, and shown by face, by voice, by the eyes, and by a thousand other pleasing ways, kindles a flame which fused our very souls together, and made us one (122-123).

### **Soul Friendship in Vernon as Foundation for Family Relationship and Friendship in the Society**

It has been established that the current experience of friendship in the society is greatly challenged. Ose (2009) notes that this challenge permeates family relationship leading to institutional compromise such as; domestic violence which is an intentional and persistent abuse of anyone in the home hence causing pain, distress or injury. This can be in the forms of physical, emotional or verbal assault, sexual abuse, marital rape, infidelity, harmful traditional practices against women, etc. Friendship experiences other challenges such as deceit, fraudulent activities, cyber-crimes, murder, etc.

The attempt to vitiate these challenges was the motivation to the choice of friendship in Vernon as lessons towards assuaging the prevalent challenges in family relationship and friendship in general. Vernon has different classification of friendship such as; friendship and lovers which exists basically for the sake of sexual satisfaction or erotic pleasure. Aristotle (2011) notes that friendship of pleasure is the most temporary and fragile of his three types; utility, pleasure and virtue because when the pleasure diminishes, the friendship dissolves. Thus a relationship founded on this manner of friendship will likely not last long. When banked on pleasures, friendship here considers physical endowment like beauty, handsomeness, height, complexion, shape, etc. Unfortunately, when these qualities wither away, the love fades away as individuals get older in age. When marriages are founded on these qualities the relationship/bond weakens when these attractive features erode and the love disappears. This form of love is mere infatuation and works of imagination which grows weary when the qualities that tickle their fancy fade away. Thus love based on erotic pleasures and material gains is grossly insufficient to carry the massive weight and challenges of marital life.

The next level of friendship in the categorization of Vernon include friendship at work. While the friendship at work occurs among professionals or people working in the same office who



have strictly business or office relationship. Even though they spend hours together in the office or at work place but they are not bonded together. It is referred as pseudo-friendship because the parties are deceived into thinking that there is a bond because of the office togetherness whereas such togetherness disintegrates when the office work ceases. When this form of friendship leads to marriage, parties begin to experience other sides of each other, hence leading to misunderstanding, anger, hate, violence, etc. There is a dichotomy between work/office character and home character. In most cases, people pretend in their offices and/or may have been trained in work ethics whereas they do not have family/home values such that when office relationship is transposed to marriage relationship, there is a possibility of gradual outburst of self-revelation that might destroy than build a family.

The third level in Vernon categorization is the online friendship. This is considered as the most risky form of friendship as it sometimes leaves the party in great panic, anonymity and emotional trauma. Online presence has been upgraded minding technological advancement in the internet and artificial intelligence. Thus friendship is greatly aided with the advent of social media handles; facebook, whatsapp, twitter, electronic mails, etc; making people connect faster with one another globally. Some common notable vices are associated with internet friendship such as; cyber bullying/character assassination, sexual abuses, fake news, cybercrimes, deception, hacking, etc (Vernon, 2005). Like friendship at work, online friendship can sustain false personality in relationship minding that there is the possibility of pretense and fake self-revelation through online communication devices such as exchange of fake pictures, voices, etc. Even after marriage, some couples keep other online relationships that constitute distractions to their union leading them to spend quality time online while denying their families such precious times. Unfortunately, they exhaust quality time and burn emotional energies with other friends online leaving them tired afterwards, hence emotionally unavailable for their husband/wife or children. This presents a great challenge and distraction to family bond as it cracks and compromises already existing family bond and this sometimes peters out into infidelity and other nefarious practices acquired online.



For Vernon, the ideal form of relationship is the soul friendship. This is the form of friendship between parties which goes far beyond the physical or emotional but a bond that is spiritual. When this is the type of friendship upon which marriage is contracted, the two souls selflessly get along with one another in good understanding, mutuality, etc. This is mirrored in the scriptural quotes, “love your neighbor as oneself” (RSV: Leviticus 19.18). In this case, there is no need for rancor, quarrels, hates, greed, jealousy or violence against oneself. This ideal form of friendship has understanding and tolerance as its foundation. When parties involved in friendship relate from this background then there is an assured healthier relationship especially in the family. Each person involved; wife, husband and children come to a level of understanding, love, mutual respect while accepting their strengths and weaknesses/limitations.

In a family, when husband, wife and children love and mutually respect one another then there are no chances of rancor, bitterness, intimidation/violence, jealousy, hates, etc. The wife could love and cherish her husband even in the midst of the worst error and financial limitations. They would protect and mutually make sacrifices for the interest and welfare of all members while everyone enjoys right sense of belongingness. It is at this instance that the members of a family can be referred as soul mates.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Our society is swiftly drifting towards physicalism and materialism, hence petering out core values of friendship in family and society. Montaigne (1984) decries the prevalent deceit, violence, fraud and divorce or annulment of marriages, because of wrong foundations of friendship and marriage/family relationship. Thus there is urgent need to restore sanity and values in human relationship and family integrity. It is to be noted that philosophy has as one of its core responsibilities as restoring values and integrity to humanity. It is upon this need that this paper makes a pledge to the works of Mark Vernon on friendship in order to understand the ideals for human relationship and family hood.

Thus this paper x-rays Mark Vernon’s concept of friendship such as; friendship and lovers, at work, online and of soul/spirituality. These are different degrees at which friendship is enjoyed which are comparable to the works of Aristotle and Kant in their various degrees of friendship.





In Aristotle (2011), it is friendship of utility, pleasure and virtue while in Kant (1997), it is friendship of need, taste and disposition. In Mark Vernon the highest level of friendship is the spirituality of friendship which is similar to friendship of virtue in Aristotle and friendship of disposition in Kant.

This spirituality of friendship/friendship of the soul in Vernon is the highest level of friendship. It is a human relationship model that is capable of engendering stronger bond, mutual respect and peace. It lays less emphasis on materiality while emphasizing spirituality. It reduces the tendencies of hypocrisy in relationships while maintaining authenticity. This level of friendship impacts more meaningfully in marriage relationship as all parties mutually build up genuine confidence and trust in one another. It is established that man is always relational and designed to be with others such that, those who have no need of friendship are either beasts or gods. Thus Vernon's ideas on spirituality of friendship makes this natural tendencies in man as "being with" a possible and better reality. It is so practical towards healthier relationship in families between father, mother and children. Not only in the family setting, it offers better friendship model to the larger society especially in this age when human relationship is experiencing lots of abuses.

Upon these conclusions that this paper strongly recommends that families anchor their relationship models according to the pattern of Vernon's spirituality of friendship or soul friendship. Also, this is highly recommended as a relationship model to the larger society, hence this paper calls on individuals, religious bodies, government and non-governmental organizations to engage in campaigns capable of promoting this model of friendship both in the families and larger society.

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