

Maximus of Tyre

How to Distinguish a Flatterer from a Friend

Translated by Thomas Taylor in *The Dissertations of Maximus Tyrius* (1805), Dissertation IV. Some of Taylor's notes have been omitted and there are some changes to the text to facilitate easier reading. This document is in the public domain.

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Prodicus, in a fable which he composed, introduces Heracles, now in the flower of youth, and conducting himself in a manly manner, at the entrance of two roads, of one of which he places Virtue as the leader, and of the other Pleasure. Of these leaders, likewise, one had an engaging appearance, as her form was elegant, her step gentle, her voice musical, her aspect mild, and her garb simple; but the other was delicate, painted, gaudy, of an impudent aspect, with disordered step, and immusical voice. Heracles saw these, and as being the son of Zeus, and naturally good, he bade farewell to Pleasure, and committed himself to the guidance of Virtue. Let us also invent a fable, and introduce into it two roads, and a good man; and leaders of these roads, instead of Virtue a Friend, and instead of Pleasure a Flatterer. Let these also differ in figure, in aspect, in garb, in voice, and in gait; and let the one be most pleasant to the view, but the other be void of all guile. Let the one be full of mirth, extending his right hand, and calling on the man to follow him, employing for this purpose praise, alluring words, and supplications, and relating certain admirable pleasures to which he will conduct him, such as flowery meadows, gliding streams, birds melodiously singing, mild gales, trees thick with foliage, smooth paths, ample racing grounds, and flourishing gardens, where pears grow upon pears, apples upon apples, and grapes upon grapes.¹ But let the other of the leaders speak but little, yet let what he says be true, such as that the greater part of the way is rough, and but a small part of it smooth, and that it is requisite that he who strenuously undertakes the journey should be prepared to endure labour when necessary, and to consider ease as gain.

These two thus addressing him, by which will he be persuaded, and which road will he take? We may answer the author of the fable, that if the traveller is a miserable Assyrian, or the Phœnician Strato, or the Cyprian Nicocles, or that Sybarite, he will hate the latter of the leaders, and will think that he is rustic, unpleasant, and inelegant, but that the other is amiable, placid, and very philanthropic. Let the fine leader then conduct this man. Will he not lead him into the fire with the Assyrian, or to poverty with the Phœnician, or to chains with the Cyprian, or into some other real evil through false pleasure? But if the man should resemble Heracles, he will make choice of the true leader, that is, the friend, in the same manner as he took Virtue for his guide.

And thus much for the fable. Resuming therefore the discourse, let us consider how a flatterer may

¹ Maximus here alludes to the verses on the gardens of Alcinous. *Odyssey* viii 120.

be distinguished from a friend. The Lydian stone, indeed, tests gold when rubbed upon it; but by what artifice shall we test friendship and flattery? Shall we say, by the end of each? But if we wait for the end, another evil will precede our knowledge, since it is requisite to judge before we begin to use. For if judgement is posterior to the use of a thing, repentance will be the consequence, and no advantage will be derived from the exercise of judgement. Are you willing, therefore, that we should judge a friend and a flatterer by pleasure and pain? But, indeed, a flatterer in excessive prosperity is intolerable, and most troublesome; but a friend, on the contrary, is then most pleasant. Shall we then judge the men by advantage and detriment? But this also you will find to be dubious; for the flatterer either inures the wealth of him whom he flatters, or precipitates him into pleasure, of which the former is most light, but the latter most delightful. But through friendship many have been partakers of exile with their friends, have shared with them disgrace, and for their sakes have submitted to death.

By what then shall we distinguish a flatterer from a friend, if neither by the end, nor by pleasure and pain, nor by detriment and advantage? Let us then consider each apart from the rest. Is not he a friend whose company is attended with pleasure? It is very likely. For if he is an enemy who procures us pain, he will be a friend from whom we receive pleasure. This, however, is not the case; for he who is the most philanthropic of physicians is the cause of the greatest pain. This is likewise the case with the most skilful general and the most cautious pilot. Fathers also love their children, and disciples their preceptors, and yet what is more irksome than a father to his son, and a preceptor to his discipline? Odysseus, who endured so many dire calamities, certainly loved his associates, since he was so anxious,

Safe with his friends to gain his natal shore.²

But when he met with an intemperate and voluptuous race of men, who lived like cattle, eating the honeyed lotus³ (for thus Homer denominates pleasure) he forcibly brought back his associates to the vessel, who were reluctant to return, and weeping, in consequence of mingling with the luxury of the Lotus Eaters, and having tasted the portentous sweetness of the lotus. Eurymachus, among the suitors of Penelope, was not a man of this kind, but a flatterer; for he permitted his associates to slaughter fat swine and sheep, to drink wine immoderately, to have connection by night with the female servants, to plunder the house of a king, and insidiously attempt to gain his wife.

Are you willing, therefore, in short, that we arrange a flatterer according to depravity, but a friend according to virtue, bidding farewell to pleasure and pain? for neither is friendship without pleasure, nor flattery without pain, but each is mingled with each, pleasure with friendship, and pain with flattery. For mothers and nurses love infants, and find pleasure in obsequiously attending them, yet you will not deprive them of love because they find pleasure in the employment. Agamemnon exhorts Menelaus

The troops to praise, forgetful of his rank.⁴

But do you think it was his intention that Menelaus should flatter him? Odysseus, when he swam from the sea to the land of the Phæacians, and had risen naked from his bed, met with virgins sporting, and recognising among them a royal maid, compares her to Artemis,⁵ and again to a beautiful plant, and yet no one will call Odysseus on this account a flatterer; for by intention, and use, and disposition, a friend is distinguished from a flatterer. Thus too both a brave and a mercenary soldier use arms, and yet no one estimates their works from manual exertion, but separates the use of each according to the intention of each; for the one acts the part of a preserver through friendship, but the other for the sake of gain. The conduct of the one is spontaneous, that of the other venal. The one is faithful to those with whom he contracts a league, the other is unfaithful even to his friends.

2 Odyssey I.5.

3 Odyssey X.94, 97.

4 Iliad XI.69.

5 Odyssey VII.151.

After this manner conceive that a flatterer differs from a friend: for it often happens to both that they engage in the same employments and the same associations; but the one differs from the other in use, in the end, and in the disposition of the soul: for the friend considers that which appears to him to be good to belong also in common to his friend; and, whether this proves to be painful or pleasant, he partakes equally of it with him; but the flatterer, following his own desires, conducts the association to his own advantage. The friend desires an equality of good, the flatterer his own private good. The one aspires after equal honour in virtue, the other after superiority in pleasure. The one in conversation desires an equal freedom of speech, the other servile submission. The one loves truth in association, the other deception; and the one looks to future emolument, but the other to present delight. The one requires to be reminded of his good actions, the other wishes them to be involved in oblivion. The one takes care of the possessions of his friend, as of things common, the other destroys them, as being the property of another. The company of a friend in prosperity is most opportune, and in calamity is most equal; but a flatterer can never be satiated with prosperity, and in adversity he is never to be seen. Friendship is laudable, flattery detestable; for friendship attends to equality of retribution, but this flattery mutilates: for he who pays servile attention to another through indigence, that his wants may be supplied, so far as he does not receive an equal submission in return, will reprobate the inequality. A friend, when his friendship is concealed, is unhappy; on the contrary, a flatterer is miserable when his flattery is not concealed. Friendship when tried is strengthened, flattery is confuted, by time. Friendship requires not to be corroborated by advantage, but flattery cannot subsist without profit; and if men have any communion with the divinities, the pious man is a friend to divinity, but the superstitious is a flatterer of divinity; and the pious man is blessed, but the superstitious is miserable.

As the one, therefore, confiding in his virtue, approaches to the gods without dread, but the other, in consequence of being abject through depravity, with much dread, and without hope, and fears the gods as if they were tyrants; after the same manner I am of opinion, that towards men friendship is full of hope and confidence; but that flattery, on the contrary, is deserted by hope and courage. No one is a friend to a *tyrant*, no one is a flatterer to a *king*, but a kingdom is more divine than a tyranny. And if friendship is an equality of manners, but a depraved man is neither equal to himself nor to a good man, the good will be a friend to the good, for there is equality between them; but how can the flatterer be a flatterer of a good man? for he will be detected by the worthy man. But being the flatterer of a depraved character, if he should happen to be equal to him he will no longer be a flatterer; for flattery cannot endure equality of condition, and if he is not equal, he will not be a friend. Thus also with respect to politics; an aristocracy is full of friendship, but a democracy of flattery, and an aristocracy is better than a democracy. In Lacedæmonia there was no Cleon nor Hyperbolus, base flatterers of a luxurious people. But Eupolis, in his Bacchics, derides Callias, a private man, who was flattered at banquets, where the reward of flattery was cups and harlots, and other grovelling and servile pleasures. But in what theatre and in what Bacchics will some comic poet deride that people who were spectators of the raillery of Eupolis, together with those numerous flatterers, whose rewards were not grovelling, nor such as proceeded no farther than the belly and venereal delight, but the calamities of Greece? But if the Athenians, dismissing these flatterers, had been persuaded by Pericles and Nicias, they would have had their governors instead of flatterers for their friends.

If, now, you proceed to monarchies; Mardonius flatters Xerxes, one barbarian another, one stupid man another, a base servant a luxurious despot. But the end of this flattery was the subversion of Asia, whipping the sea, joining the Hellespont, digging mount Athos; and the end of these labours was defeat, exile, and the death of the flatterer himself. The Macedonians also flattered Alexander, and the effects of this flattery were, Persian drawers, barbaric adoration, and forgetfulness of Heracles and Philip, and of the family of the Argeadæ. Why should I speak of tyrannies? for where fear and despotic authority govern the subject people, there flattery necessarily flourishes, and friendship is buried. In studies and

arts also flatterers may be seen, in appearance, indeed, resembling, but in reality differing from the arts. Thus spurious music flattered men when the Dorians, leaving their country and their mountain music, which they sang among their flocks and herds, became enamoured with Sybaritic pipes and dances; virtue herself thus becoming spurious together with music. Spurious medicine also flattered men; when, abandoning the healing art of Asclepius and his followers, they evinced that the medical science in no respect differed from the art of cooking, being the base flatterer of base bodies. The sycophant likewise flatters the rhetorician, by opposing argument to argument, and building the unjust on the just, and the base on the beautiful. And, lastly, the sophist flatters the philosopher; and his is the most accurate of flatterers.