

Page, James S. (2002). 'Is Mateship a Virtue?' *Australian Journal of Social Issues*. 37(2): 193-200.

Copyright 2002 Australian Council of Social Services

## IS MATESHIP A VIRTUE?

James Smith Page

### Abstract

This essay seeks to examine the concept of mateship from the perspectives of consequentialist and virtue ethics. It is suggested that mateship is a prominent concept in the way Australians think of themselves. However it is also suggested that mateship is linked to solidarity and commitment in time of war. It is suggested that what we should recognize mateship is one of the factors that facilitates and perpetuates war. It is suggested that mateship is also questionable as a character virtue, given what mateship entails. It is suggested that ultimately we need to examine more closely the consequences of the solidarity that we define as mateship, and we need to query more closely what we regard as virtues.

### Article

The phenomenon of mateship is often claimed within public discourse to be a defining characteristic of what it means to be Australian. Recently there was a suggestion that there be a specific reference within the Australian Constitution to the value of mateship for Australians (Howard 1999). One could even suggest that mateship is beginning to take on the status of a national ideology, that is, something a nation believes to be a defining characteristic. Mateship has often been identified as one of the traditional qualities of the Australian bushman, in supporting others in time of adversity. The writing of Henry Lawson did much to cement the concept of mateship within the self-consciousness of Australia. For Lawson, mateship was undeniably a mark of personal nobility, ironically most often displayed by the marginalized underclass of Australian society.

The importance of the concept of mateship within the work of Henry Lawson is interesting, given the influence of his work in forming Australian culture. In numerous stories and poems, Lawson extols the virtue of the person who, in the midst of adversity, is prepared to stand with a comrade and provide help. Indeed, Lawson's understanding of mateship might be described almost exclusively in terms [193/194 page break] of helping another in adversity, and it is to him a particularly Australian quality. Lawson once described Australia as 'the Great Lone Land of magnificent distances and bright heat; the land of Self-reliance, and Never-give-in, and Help-your-mate' (1974: 16). It is perhaps not a coincidence that the poet who prompted the suggestion that the reference to mateship be included within the Constitution (Les Murray) identifies himself very much as a bush poet. Just as Australians like to identify themselves with the bush, so too Australians have long sought to identify themselves with the ideal of mateship.

However, it is in the adversity and experience of war, and particularly the experience of World War One, that the qualities of mateship supposedly developed, and there is a

strong case that the concept now carries unavoidable martial connotations. It is rare that there is any public commentary on the ANZAC experience without a concomitant reference to the value of mateship. This is especially so on official days of war commemoration in Australia, which, with the passing of time, seem to be becoming more rather than less important within Australian society. Within the public discourse surrounding the concept, mateship is assumed to be a desirable defining quality that individuals should aspire to. Yet there seems to be little critical examination of whether mateship is in fact something desirable, or whether mateship should be considered a virtue. It seems appropriate that we should attempt at least some critical analysis of the concept of mateship, and in this essay I attempt to undertake such a critical analysis from the perspectives of consequentialist ethics and virtue ethics.

What do we now mean by mateship? Mateship most simply can be thought of as fraternity. There is also a range of accompanying characteristics of mateship. Mateship involves a state of being. Mateship involves action or at least a willingness to be committed to action. A mate is someone who things with and for certain others (mates) or is prepared to do things with and for certain others (mates). Additionally, mateship involves an affective element of solidarity. Mateship implies a certain bond or feeling of oneness which is felt with and for others. At the same time there is also a crucial yet often ignored dimension to mateship. Mateship is limited to those with whom one has a special connection. This special connection may be technically one of occupation, although increasingly the exclusive connection is a national-military one. We might refer to workmates as such. However it is difficult to examine a sense in which mateship as a concept could be applied to the workplace. Mateship is a concept, which, in current usage, ineluctably connotes solidarity in time of combat.

The contemporary military connotation of the concept assists in demonstrating the exclusive nature of the concept of mateship. In time of war one does not think of the enemy as being mates. Similarly one does not think of citizens of another country [194/195] as being mates. It would be doubtful if employees at another workplace would be thought of as mates. We can think of fellow players in a game of contact sport as being mates, although it would be doubtful if we would refer to players on an opposing team as being mates. Mateship may be an inclusive concept, in that certain persons are defined as being members of a group. However mateship also has quite exclusionary characteristics, in that the group-sentiment which mateship serves to support only assists in defining others as outside that scope of the group.

It would be wrong not to mention that one of the obvious exclusionary characteristics of the concept is that women tend not to be included in most understandings of mateship and what it means to be a mate. Mateship is a particularly male-oriented concept. Thus when we seek to define mateship it is appropriate for us to do so in terms of fraternity rather than sorority. It is often said that whilst men have mates, women have friends. It is interesting to speculate whether this will change, especially as women become increasingly involved in all aspects of social and economic life. Sadly, the key aspect of whether the concepts of mate and mateship remain male concepts as such will probably depend on the future involvement of women in combat roles within the military in Australia. Of course, one could well argue that even if there is a lexical change, in that mateship does include women, nevertheless the cultural understanding of mateship is still a male-dominated one. The values of mateship are arguably male values, and the extension of mateship to include women

can be seen within the context of the virilization of contemporary society. In simple terms, it may be that in the future mateship is considered to include women, although this will probably be because women have been actively involved in the male practices of war and warfare.

Should mateship be considered a virtue? It is not within the scope of this essay to develop any detailed exposition of virtue ethics or of consequentialist ethics. However, in fundamental terms it can be said that within moral philosophy there are two sciences: the science of virtue, or aretaics, and the science of happiness, or eudaemonics. Virtue is defined here to denote a desirable character trait or moral quality, while happiness is defined as denoting a relative absence of human suffering. In simple terms it can be said that we do things because to undertake such actions is inherently worthwhile (roughly speaking, virtue ethics) or we do things because of worthwhile consequences (roughly speaking, consequentialist ethics). Virtue ethics is also sometimes called agent-based ethics, in that the focus is on the moral integrity or character of the doer of the action. Eudaemonics is related to consequentialist ethics, as the focus is on what happens as a consequence of the actions. Technically, when we ask whether mateship is a virtue, we should only be focusing on virtue ethics. However for the purposes of this essay I take the question to mean both whether mateship is inherently worthwhile and whether mateship has worthwhile consequences. [195/196]

Consequentialist ethics (sometimes inaccurately referred to as utilitarian ethics) can be considered very much a pre-eminent modern ethical theory. The vocabulary of consequentialism seems to be of recent origin (see, for example, Anscombe 1958). Nonetheless the view that ethics is concerned with making the world a better place for all is one which has a long history, and is also one that resonates very much with the rise of democratic theory in the modern world. The dictum of Jeremy Bentham, that morality should be concerned with the greatest good for the greatest number, perhaps expresses the democratic appeal of what most philosophers now know as consequentialism. The view that we should measure the ethical value of actions and attitudes by the results that such actions and attitudes produce is very much contingent upon an organized (modern) society which can measure and analyse the results of actions and attitudes. Another way of expressing this is through the concept of outcomes. The concern with outcomes, a concern which seems to dominate so many areas of social and economic life, very much reflects the unspoken dominance of consequentialist ethics within so many areas of modern life.

Virtue ethics has a long history, resting most famously on the work of Aristotle in *Nicomachean Ethics*, wherein one finds not only a definition of a virtue as an excellence of character and also a schematization of differing virtues or aspects of virtues. Indeed for most of the history of ethics, ethics was automatically assumed to mean virtue ethics. In other words, the value of actions and attitudes was to be assessed through the aspects of character this revealed about the doer of the actions. In recent decades virtue ethics has been undergoing something of a renaissance, commencing with the work of Anscombe (1958). There has been a resurgence of interest in virtue ethics and education (Carr and Stuetal 1999). Perhaps what is most interesting, however, is the way that virtue ethics or systems relating to virtue ethics seem to be impacting upon popular literature and popular culture (Bellah 1986, Dorwick 1997, Hinkley 2000, and Kavelin-Popov 1997). The bumper sticker

exhorting us to 'practice random acts of kindness and senseless acts of beauty' reflects what might be called a virtue ethics sentiment. If the actions are random and senseless, then the action clearly cannot be based upon any rule or consequences. There must be something inherently good in such practices; that is, such practices represent an excellence or virtue of human character.

Should mateship then be considered a virtue? The assumed answer to the above question within public discourse is overwhelmingly affirmative. The term is used with a connotation of strong approval, especially within Australian military history. However, from the standpoints of both consequentialist and virtue ethics, I believe the answer must be no. [196/197]

From a consequentialist ethics perspective, one must say that the solidarity and commitment that we encapsulate within the concept of mateship is one central factor that facilitates and perpetuates the phenomenon of war. There are two ways in which this happens. One is that mateship establishes a sense of the enemy as the Other, that is, someone who is, definitively, not a mate. It is the de-humanizing notion of human beings as enemy which allows individuals to participate in killing - something in which such individuals otherwise would not participate. The second way that mateship facilitates the phenomenon of war is that mateship enables individuals to endure the unendurable in war, and thus ultimately to keep the killing process continuing. Normally it is asserted that mateship is something, which has developed out of the experience of war. However the reverse proposition might be more accurate. Perhaps war has developed out of mateship.

One illustration of this nexus is to be found in the course of World War One, an appropriate historical illustration, given that it is in reference to the Australian involvement in the war that the rhetoric of mateship is so often used. One might suggest that the war came to an end in 1918 precisely because the mateship (or solidarity) of the Germans broke down, under a combination of military reverses, hunger and war weariness. Such a breakdown might be perceived at surface level to indicate something of a failure of character. After all, the Allies had persevered under the testing and trying circumstances of trench warfare for the past four years. However the fact that we are tempted to see lack of resolve in war as something of a character weakness is in itself instructive. Put simply, without mateship the war and the killing could not have continued for four years from 1914 to 1918. One could state the point even more forcefully and suggest that without mateship the process of killing could not have commenced.

Exactly what kept the 1914-1918 conflict continuing so long is one of the questions that concerned Niall Ferguson in his book *The Pity of War*. Ferguson suggests a range of factors, including, interestingly, the common practice of shooting prisoners and the prospects of being shot if one surrendered. However one of the other factors which Ferguson identifies is comradeship, the 'cement' (446) that held things together within the trenches. For Ferguson, a sense of loyalty and commitment to one's fellow soldiers was even more powerful a motivating force for fighting and continuing to fight than patriotism. Patriotism, although obviously cultivated by political leaders tended to be regarded with some cynicism by the common soldier. By way of contrast, loyalty and commitment to one's fellow soldiers had a powerful emotional appeal,

made all the stronger by the terrors and daily threat of death that men experienced together. [197/198]

It is easy to empathize with this. After all, most Australians will never be forced to experience the terrors of combat, It is arguable therefore that we should be sympathetic to any coping mechanism that allowed soldiers to survive the ordeal of war. However, the point is that by eulogizing mateship we are in a sense legitimizing or reinforcing the institution that mateship so strongly undergirded modern organized warfare. If it is true that mateship (or comradeship) facilitates modern war, then perhaps we should be more critical about such concepts, and certainly less eager to eulogize and commemorate them.

Further, a close examination of mateship from the perspective of virtue ethics also raises some serious questions. Is it such a desirable moral or character trait that an individual should feel solidarity with comrades in the process of killing others? The idea that human beings are not socially or physiologically suited for killing other human beings is an idea dating back to Renaissance Humanism (Erasmus, 1974). It is also an idea which has received renewed emphasis in recent biological research (Seville Group, 1986). Humans have no natural external body armour and neither is there any part of the body which can naturally and of itself be used as a weapon. It is difficult to see how solidarity and participation in the process of killing other human beings could lead or enhance the inner harmony of the individual, as in the Platonic view of ethics. Equally, from the perspective of Aristotelian ethics, it is difficult to see how solidarity and participation in the process of killing could be considered an inherently desirable action or state of affairs.

It is because solidarity and participation in the process of killing is so inhumane that the process is also so dehumanizing to those involved in the process. The process is destructive of character and debilitating of creativity. Often this reveals itself in what was previously known as war-neurosis, although now more obliquely known as post-traumatic stress disorder. The destructive effects of killing can be perhaps most clearly seen in societies committed to such processes, such as various totalitarian states in which sociopathic individuals have gained control of the apparatus of the state. However, even within democratic societies, the destructive results of involvement in killing other human beings is now well researched (Grossman 1995 and 2000, Marshall 2000). In some ways the process of emphasizing military solidarity can be seen a coping mechanism for dealing with the difficulties of killing. The coping mechanism is understandable. However it seems wrong to argue that the idea of solidarity or mateship in itself should be celebrated as some kind of natural virtue. The ultimate paradox of mateship is that it is precisely the unvirtuous nature of the activity which it undergirds that provides the social impetus to describe mateship as a virtue. The process of the ideologization and validation of war experience, processes encapsulated in the concept of mateship are ultimately processes of denial of the reality of the past, and processes of attempting to live within that denial. [198/199]

What we can gain from an analysis of rhetoric of mateship is an understanding of how military concerns underlie much public discourse within Australia. In many ways the validation of military endeavour is an extremely important task for those involved public discourse in Australia. From a perspective of consequentialist ethics we need to

query more closely the effects of the solidarity which we understand as mateship. Perhaps too the analysis of the concept of mateship from a virtue ethics perspective reveals that we need a more qualified virtue ethics, one that questions the purpose and nature of what we regard as virtuous.

## References

Anscombe, G.E.M. (Elizabeth) 1958. 'Modern Moral Philosophy'. *Philosophy*. 33: 1-19.

Aristotle. 1955. *The Ethics of Aristotle: The Nicomachean Ethics*. Translated by J.A.K. Thomson. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Bentham, Jeremy 1996. *An Introduction to Principles of Morals and Legislation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Carr, David and Stuetal, Jan. Eds. 1999. *Virtue Ethics and Moral Education*. London: Routledge.

Dorwick, Stephanie 1997, *Forgiveness and Other Acts of Love*. Ringwood: Viking.

Erasmus, Desiderius. 1974. *The Complaint of Peace*. Translation of *Querelapacis*, 1517. La Salle: Open Court.

Ferguson, Niall. 1999. *The Pity of War*. London: Penguin.

Grossman, Dave. 1995. *On Killing: The Psychological Costs of Learning to Kill in War and Society*. Boston: Little Brown.

Grossman, Dave. 2000. 'Human Factors in War: The Psychology and Physiology of Close Combat', In: Michael Evans and Alan Ryan (eds.) *The Human Face of Warfare: Killing, Fear and Chaos in Battle*. (5-24). Sydney: Allen and Unwin.

[199/200]

Hinkley, Gordon B. 2000. *Standing for Something: Ten Neglected Virtues that will Heal our Hearts and Homes*. Rockwood: Compass Press.

Howard, John. 1999. *The Prime Minister Draft Preamble*. Accessed 23/3/99 on [www.home.aone.net.au/byzantium/preambles/pm.html](http://www.home.aone.net.au/byzantium/preambles/pm.html).

Kavelin-Popov, Linda. 1997. *The Family Virtues Guide: Simple Ways to Bring Out the Best in Our Children and Ourselves*. New York: Plume.

Lawson, Henry. 1974. *The Romance of the Swag*. Sydney: Ure Smith.

Marshall, Samuel L.A. 2000. *Men Against Fire: The Problem of Battle Command in Future War*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press. Originally 1947.

Plato. 1974. *The Republic*. Translated with an Introduction by Desmond Lee. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Seville Group. 1986. *The Seville Statement on Violence*. Paris: United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization. [end200]