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Published by: University of Illinois Press on behalf of North American Philosophical Publications
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/20014212
Accessed: 06/01/2009 02:44

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THE MEANING, VALUE, AND DUTIES OF FRIENDSHIP

David B. Annis

A friend may well be reckoned the masterpiece of nature.

—Emerson

But what is the analysis of this “masterpiece,” and what explains its undoubted value, and are there duties of friendship? Although these issues received considerable attention from classical philosophers, friendship has been a relatively dormant topic among recent philosophers.

I. THE CENTRAL ELEMENTS OF FRIENDSHIP

Friendship requires mutual liking, where liking involves being attracted to, having a preference for, being pleased by, or enjoying the other person. It is hard to imagine that two people could be friends and yet not typically like each other. Friendship certainly allows for periods of irritation, anger, and even dislike, as long as there is overall attachment or fondness. But consistent dislike is inimical to friendship. Furthermore the fondness must be mutual. Both Plato and Aristotle stressed the reciprocal or mutual nature of friendship. ¹

Although mutual liking is necessary for friendship, it clearly is not sufficient. You may like someone, and yet never have the opportunity to develop a friendship. A sharing of experiences also is necessary. This involves shared activities where one of the goals is the mutual contact or companionship. As Plutarch notes, “it is a fact that the enjoyment of friendship lies in its intimacy, and the pleasantest part of it is found in association and daily companionship . . . .”² Friends do things together, seek each other out, and enjoy each other’s companionship. There is also an epistemic aspect, a sharing of information about one’s experiences, beliefs, values and so on; friendship requires getting to know the person.

Besides the mutual liking and sharing, friendship involves caring for our friend and being concerned about his or her welfare. Ordinarily we expect the caring person to act and be motivated to act in various ways directed to the other person’s welfare. But there is also an “inner aspect” sometimes referred to as fellow-feeling or sympathy.

This requires (a) at least some ability to imagine what the other person is experiencing, and (b) being affected by this. We participate in the fortunes of others through the affective internalization of their welfare. Nicholas Rescher has described this in terms of utility. If X has sympathy for Y, then alterations in Y’s welfare affect X’s satisfaction.³ Thus caring implies being upset when our friend is harmed, happy when the person is successful, angry when he or she is mistreated, and so on. As Spinoza comments, “He who conceives that the object of his love is affected pleasurably or painfully, will himself be affected pleasurably or painfully . . . .”²

The cognitive element of sympathy has been described in different ways. For some it merely involves being able to project one’s self into the other person’s objective circumstances, his or her financial condition, job, etc. How would I feel with my beliefs, preferences, outlook, etc., if I were in Y’s situation?² But this just results in my imagining what I would experience, not what Y is experiencing. Fellow-feeling or sympathy at a deeper level requires a shift of outlook, a shift from how I would feel to how the other person feels. The attention is on the other person, his or her wants, needs, beliefs, and what that person must be feeling.⁴

At least part of the concern involved in friendship must be altruistic, that is, a concern for our friend’s welfare for the sake of the friend. As Seneca puts it, “He who begins to be your friend because it pays will cease because it pays.”⁵ A relation based
on concern for X’s welfare solely because this will help me (a selfish concern) is not really friendship. Jones may like other people, enjoy being with them and share experiences with them, but it still wouldn’t be friendship if Jones had no altruistic concern for them. Both Aristotle and Aquinas stress that friendship involves wishing and acting for the good of another for the other’s own sake.\(^8\)

Interpersonal trust is another important element of friendship. It involves honesty and integrity where the latter includes fair dealing.\(^9\) Can we rely on the person to tell the truth and keep promises, not deceive us nor reveal confidential information about us, and will the person treat us fairly?

But the interpersonal trust of friendship involves more; it requires some degree of altruistic concern. Is the person genuinely interested in my welfare for my own sake? Some have even suggested that this altruistic concern is the defining feature of trust.\(^10\) But this is incorrect. Suppose X were concerned about our welfare. If X lied to us, revealed confidential information about us, or failed to keep promises, even if done for what X perceived as paternalistic reasons, that is, for our own good, we might very well conclude that we couldn’t trust X. X is well-intentioned, but simply can’t be trusted. Thus trust seems to involve not simply good will, but honesty and integrity in addition. Furthermore it requires that the person have at least a minimal degree of good judgment. X may be concerned about you and be honest, but still not be trustworthy, since the person lacks good judgment.

Honesty, fair dealing, altruistic concern, and at least a minimal level of good judgment are all important ingredients of trust. When these are present, it seems you can rely on the person and feel somewhat secure or confident about the person, at least to some extent.\(^11\)

Mutual liking, shared experiences, care, and trust are the core elements of friendship. Recent psychological studies provide support for this analysis.\(^12\) Notice the strong interaction and relationships among these core elements. One of the central themes in classical discussions of friendship and love is that these involve or produce a union.\(^13\) The best way to explain this theme is in terms of the core elements noted above and their relationships. Liking implies enjoying being with the person and being concerned about the person. This also frequently gives rise to seeking out the person’s companionship and doing things together. The trust element also implies the caring and concern component, and trust supports self-disclosure, that is, a sharing of personal intimacy and spontaneity.

These core elements and their relations also explain the exclusiveness of and limits on friendship. As Aristotle notes, “It is not possible to have many friends in the full meaning of the word friendship, any more than it is to be in love with many people at once . . .”\(^14\) This is so because of our natural limitations and the core elements of friendship. Getting to know each other thoroughly, sharing experiences, developing the mutual sympathy, concern, trust, and intimacy necessary for friendship tend to limit the number of “close” friends we can have.

II. THE VALUE OF FRIENDSHIP

“Of all the means . . . to ensure happiness throughout the whole of life, by far the most important is the acquisition of friends.” So said Epicurus.\(^15\) There is no question that friendship has significant value. We might try to explain this value from a utilitarian point of view. According to this approach, friendship is to be valued because it promotes the general good. Friendship promotes happiness in many ways. The mutual liking, sharing, concern, trust and intimacy all frequently enrich and deepen our lives. For example, sharing our experience of success with a friend enriches our pleasure, while sharing our grief may help lessen the sadness.\(^16\)

Another important aspect of friendship is the impact it has on self-esteem, a person’s sense of his or her own value. According to John Rawls, self-respect is perhaps the most important primary good, where primary goods are things every rational person wants. Without self-esteem, Rawls says, “nothing may seem worth doing . . . All desire and activity become empty and vain, and we sink into apathy and cynicism.”\(^17\) The core elements of friendship—liking, sharing, altruistic caring, and trust—all foster self-esteem. Knowing that another person likes us, wants to be with us, is
concerned about our welfare for our sake, and deems us trustworthy promotes the belief that we are a person of worth and importance.

From a utilitarian point of view, then, the value of friendship lies in its contributing to the well-being of society and to the pleasure and life-enhancement of the friends. 18

A different explanation of the value of friendship is an approach that has been used to explain why certain character traits or capacities are virtues. 19 According to this "virtue" model, living well or flourishing for a human is different from living well for other creatures. For example human life is characterized by activities possible only in a community with elaborate conventions governing language, commerce, morality, politics and so on. For a trait to be a virtue, it must tend to foster human life in extensive and fundamental ways. It must be a trait that connects with a variety of human goods in such a way that its removal would have a significant detrimental impact for good human life, that is, for living well the sort of life that is characteristic of human beings. Thus honesty, truthfulness, fairness and restraint are virtues, since they make possible activities and institutions necessary for people to live in communities. Aristotle adds that friendship is indispensable for human life and happiness.

The difference between the utilitarian approach and the present one is that, according to the latter explanation, a trait is not a virtue merely if it promotes human welfare; it must also be essentially connected with living a characteristically human life.

To examine the value of friendship from this perspective, imagine our lives without friends. Hobbes described life in the state of nature as "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short." This is a somewhat apt description of life without friendship. Friendship may not be necessary to the very existence of a community, as at least some degree of honesty is. But it is significantly related to living a human life fully.

This seems especially true given the strong relationships between the core elements of friendship. If we don’t like Jones, we usually don’t enjoy Jones’ company, don’t seek out Jones to share experiences with, don’t reveal ourselves to Jones, may not be particularly concerned about Jones’ welfare, probably don’t believe Jones is genuinely interested in our welfare, and so don’t establish much of a trust relationship. This describes our relationships with certain people who aren’t our friends. But now imagine this state of affairs generalized.

It would be a world of cool, thin, and somewhat disinterested relations. We would have acquaintances, colleagues, neighbors . . . but with whom would we share our lives, our joys, our innermost feelings? With whom could we be ourselves, spontaneous, open and fully trusting? It usually isn’t important to us that some people don’t like us. But being liked by some "significant other" is important to us. The kind of caring, concern, and understanding exhibited in friendship affirm our worth and enhance self-esteem. It may be possible to have a community of acquaintances and no friends, but what is lost would be sorely missed. Friendship, it must be admitted, adds an important element to our lives. It isn’t merely that having friends promotes utility; instead our lives would be significantly less full given the universal demise of friendship. The virtue approach to explaining the value of friendship offers, I believe, a deeper explanation than the utilitarian model.

Utilitarian explanations are contrasted with deontological approaches. According to the latter, there are value-making traits other than the impact on utility. Think of ethics from a Kantian point of view. Morality requires us to respect people, to treat people as ends-in-themselves, not simply because of the impact respect has, but because people are special and hence deserve respect. Respect, then, is morally good in itself. The altruistic concern involved in friendship satisfies the Kantian respect principle, and hence such concern also is morally good in itself. Thus friendship in part is to be valued because it involves recognizing the deep value of the person. Deontological considerations thus also help to explain the value of friendship. 20

III. DUTIES TO FRIENDS

According to Aristotle, “the gravity of an unjust act increases in proportion as the person to whom it
is done is a nearer friend. It is, for example, more shocking to defraud a bosom companion of money than a fellow citizen, to refuse help to a brother than to refuse it to a stranger, or to strike one’s father than to strike any other person. It is natural that the element of justice increases with the nearness of the friendship . . . .”21 This suggests that we have special obligations to friends that we don’t have to strangers or other people. But is this so?

We can distinguish special (or in personam) from general (or in rem) duties. The former impose an obligation on some specific nameable individual (or individuals), and usually arise out of some special transaction or relationship between the parties. General duties hold, not against some specific nameable individual, but against “the world at large.”22

The question, then, is: Do we have special duties to friends based on the friendship relation? If X and Y are friends and X promises to pick Y up at a certain time, X has a special duty to do so. But this duty is not derived solely from the friendship, but from the promise. Are there special duties to friends arising solely from the fact that X and Y are friends?

Special relations such as those exhibited between parents and children, husbands and wives, siblings, relatives, etc., frequently give rise to duties between the parties. That people stand in these relations is the basis of legitimate expectations about their conduct. Thus we expect parents to do certain things for their children, when we don’t expect others to do these things. Parents who don’t provide psychological support for their children are viewed as “poor” parents. But we don’t expect strangers to provide this support. Part of our understanding of the notion of being a parent is having primary responsibility for the care and development of the child, and being personally and emotionally involved with the child on a day-to-day basis.23 If the parents fail to care for the child, we speak of neglect and abandonment of the child. But there is also abandonment of the parenting role. We fail to satisfy requirements of being a parent. Thus certain intimate relations generate special duties or responsibilities.24

Friendship is an example of one of these relationships that produces special duties. In friendship there is a mutuality of affection, sharing, concern, and trust. This mutuality is the basis of special responsibilities. It isn’t merely that it is nice for friends to help, to provide psychological support, but that we expect friends to act this way, are surprised if they don’t, and frequently feel betrayed and not just harmed if they intentionally let us down. Friendships are built over time, and the past behavior, understandings, expectations and loyalties create a special bond that produces special responsibilities.

For example, if you have an important job interview, but when you start to leave for it, your car won’t start, you might legitimately expect your friend, who can easily drive you, to help. If your friend refuses, you would justifiably feel hurt and betrayed, and not understand how your friend could treat you this way. It isn’t merely that decent or nice friends act this way, so that helping is supererogatory. Not helping seems inconsistent with the friendship, and if it happens often, the friendship has been abandoned. Notice that we wouldn’t in general expect a stranger to drive us, and we would view it as being “awfully nice” of the person if he or she did help.

If we consider the content of the duties of friendship, we see that they are constitutive of the relationship in the same way that the duties of parenting are. We expect friends to be trustworthy, open and honest, loyal, to be concerned for our welfare, to comfort, help and support us, etc. These are constitutive of being a friend. Thus, if our friend knew we were considering a course of action, and he or she realized it was mistaken, frequently we expect our friend to say something. Upon learning that our friend knew that our plan was mistaken, we are apt to say, “Well why didn’t you tell me!? What do you think friends are for?” If we reveal intimate worries about ourselves to a friend and the friend goes around reporting our worries, again we are liable to feel deeply hurt, resent being let down, feel we have been wronged, simply not understand how our friend could act this way, and expect our friend to feel guilty and be sorry.

Some have argued that there are no special duties of friendship. What appear to be duties peculiar to friendship really are duties we owe to anyone in the circumstances.25 Thus the duty to help your
friend is simply an instance of the general duty to help others in need, i.e., a duty of beneficence. But if the duty to help a friend were simply an instance of the general duty of beneficence, there should be no differential ethical pull based on special relations. The duty should apply equally to all. But this seems not to be the case. In the interview example described above, we expect our friend to help and can’t understand why he or she doesn’t. But we don’t expect strangers to help, don’t feel betrayed when they don’t, and view it as awfully nice when they do. Nor do we expect strangers to call us up to let us know that a decision we are contemplating which affects only us is mistaken. We might even quizzically ask, “Why are you telling me this?” And in many cases we don’t even want strangers to comfort us, for that involves revealing ourselves to them. The special relation of friendship is similar to parenting and spousal relations in that it creates differential ethical pull.

A second argument against special duties of friendship appeals to the impartiality requirement of the moral point of view. According to this argument, the moral perspective requires one to be impartial, to give due consideration to all, favoring none simply because of personal preference. Since friendship is based on personal preference, one may not treat friends in the preferential manner required by the doctrine that there are special duties of friendship.

There are several responses to this argument. First, suppose that you and your spouse were in a newly constructed hotel and a wall collapsed seriously injuring your spouse and a number of strangers. You intentionally let your spouse lie there while you run around and give needed aid to strangers. If you impartially treat your spouse as just one among many who need your help, we would certainly be surprised, if not shocked. Your action seems inconsistent with the deep personal relation that marriage is assumed to involve. Your moral priorities seem disordered. There is thus reason for believing that morality does not require this kind of impartiality.

Second, it is hard to see how impartiality is inconsistent with special duties. The concept of personhood is essentially linked to being an autonomous agent. But autonomy includes considerable discretionary space. Part of this discretionary space, both from a moral and legal point of view, is freedom of association. It is thus morally permissible for me to form relations with people whom I like. Now the impartialist cannot reasonably deny the existence of special duties, e.g., promising generates special duties. I may promise Jones to help him, since I like him. Once I promise, I have a special duty. There is then differential ethical pull between myself, Jones, and the rest of the world. It thus doesn’t follow that I violate the impartiality requirement when I live up to the special duty. I should be impartial all things being equal, but not all things are equal with special duties.

Furthermore, impartiality seems to be a moral requirement only in certain circumstances. We expect judges, legislators, teachers and many others in their professional roles to be impartial. In such cases, the agent may not let his or her special relation to any of the parties enter into how they are treated. Parents are expected to deal with their children with an even hand, and if they do develop favorites, not to distribute love, time, etc., on this basis. But they frequently aren’t expected to be impartial as between their own children and the children of others. If they are helping to resolve a dispute between the children of the neighborhood, we expect at least some degree of impartiality. But we don’t require this in a situation where rabid dogs are attacking the children.

So far it has been argued that there are special duties of friendship, and that the arguments against their existence are incorrect. But even if it is admitted that there are these special duties, how are we to explain their basis? Although utilitarianism has stressed general benevolence and the impartialist perspective, a utilitarian framework may be able to accommodate the personal point of view (which takes into account the value of one’s own projects, one’s friends, family, etc.). For example, autonomy has high value; we deeply desire self-determination. Furthermore it is a high level global desire, a desire for a way of life. As such it presupposes many other lower level desires. If we consider this hierarchical structure of desires, it is reasonable that satisfying autonomy will have high preference utility. Thus a utilitarian may be
able to accommodate a more personal point of view within a utilitarian framework. Given that autonomy includes freedom of association, the utilitarian may also be able to accommodate friendship.

In attempting to support the existence of special duties of friendship, the utilitarian might argue that, as a general practice, showing concern, comfort, sympathy, support for our friends, being open, honest and trustworthy, loyal, and aiding friends maximizes overall welfare or desire satisfaction. But why would treating friends in these ways maximize total utility? Why wouldn’t the rule that we are to support friends when it maximizes utility, but help others when that has the greatest impact result in more overall utility?

Utilitarians in attempting to accommodate the personal point of view have offered the following reply. At the theoretical level of morality, what acts or practices are right or wrong is determined by what will maximize utility. Since interpersonal comparisons of welfare and estimates of long-run consequences of acts and practices are often difficult to make, since we are limited in time, and our calculations are often distorted by bias, ignorance, or self-interest, from a practical point of view, what maximizes welfare is appealing directly to rules such as help and support friends, and those near and dear to us.

This is a somewhat startling form of “justification.” Because we are defective in calculating what will maximize utility, friendship and our special treatment of those near to us is justified! This hardly seems an adequate justification of what most of us take to be ethically legitimate and very important close relationships. Furthermore, if the practical level of morality is infected by bias, ignorance, etc., then why doesn’t this affliction carry downward to the theoretical level? If it does, then utilitarianism as a decision-theoretic approach to morality is undermined. If the theoretical level is not so infected, then why can’t we often revert to that level in determining what is right or wrong? But then what becomes of our special responsibilities to our friends and family? In particular cases, they are responsibilities only insofar as they maximize utility. Utility once again directly determines what our duties are. But then we don’t have special duties to help our friends; we only have duties to do what will maximize utility. Thus a utilitarian approach to the duties of friendship faces major problems.

Although I don’t wish to exclude the possibility of utilitarian support for the special duties of friendship, I want to argue they also have a deontological basis. Sorting out the basis of a moral or legal duty is frequently difficult. Although promising initially may seem to wear its deontic basis on its sleeve, exactly what generates promissory duties and when they occur has proven controversial. This is true in both law and morality. That one is minimally competent, and voluntarily, in good faith, with adequate understanding, informed the addressee that he or she would do something that was manageable, not immoral (illegal), something in which the addressee or others normally have an interest, where the addressee is competent and freely accepts in good faith the promisor’s representation are some of the elements that help to explain promissory duties in the law and morality. We might summarize the deontological basis of promissory duties in terms of having voluntarily pledged oneself. Now let’s look at friendship.

Friendship involves various voluntary and consented to interactions and shared activities. As the friendship develops, an intricate web of reciprocal and mutual dispositions, beliefs, understandings, feelings, etc., develops. The understandings frequently are not even explicit. The pattern of interaction and understandings give rise to legitimate expectations about caring, support, honesty, etc. This is true of particular friendships, but also true of friendship as a general pattern of interaction. Given our understanding of typical interactions in friendship, this reinforces and plays a role in the development of understandings in particular friendships. When a friend doesn’t live up to those expectations, we feel that there has been a breach of understanding.

Friendship develops over time, and it is difficult to say exactly when two people become friends. Instead of viewing the formation of a friendship diachronically, over time, we might compress its development into a moment. A reasonable rational reconstruction of the formation of a friendship thus might be two people voluntarily pledging that they will show concern, comfort, sympathy, support, be open, honest and trustworthy, and help one
another. Given this model, without pledging themselves, there are no duties of friendship, but no friendship either. Although friends rarely explicitly pledge themselves in this way, such a model helps us to understand the deontological basis of the duties of friendship. Thus even if helping friends didn’t maximize utility, the special bond between friends would still be a basis of duties.

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Received November 13, 1986

NOTES


4. Spinoza, Ethics, Part III, Prop. XXI.


7. Seneca, Epistulae ad Lucilium, Epis. IX sec. 9.


9. “The word ‘integrity’ comes from the same roots which have formed ‘intact’ and ‘untouched.’ It is used especially often in relation to truthfulness and fair dealing . . .” Sissela Bok, Lying (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), p. 27.


13. “Two friends, two bodies with one soul inspired.” Homer, Iliad, Bk. XVI I.267; “ . . . through love the one loving is made one with the beloved . . . .” Aquinas, Commentary on Sentences I, d.27, q.1. a.1.4. See also Aristotle, Spinoza, Descartes, The Passions of the Soul I, art. LXXIX, and more recently Sidgwick, The Methods of Ethics, op. cit., p. 244.


16. “For there is no man that imparteth his joys to his friend, but he joyeth the more; and no man that imparteth his griefs to his friend, but he grieveth the less” Francis Bacon, “Of Friendship,” The Essays of Francis Bacon, ed. by Clark Northup (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1936), p. 85.

18. This is the approach of Elizabeth Telfer, “Friendship,” *op. cit.*


20. Aristotle notes that friendship is not only indispensable as a means to a good life, but that it is “noble” in itself. *Nicomachean Ethics*, VIII.i.5. See also Lawrence Blum, *Friendship, Altruism and Morality*, *op. cit.*


24. “The claims of justice also differ in different relationships. The mutual rights of parents and children are not the same as those between brothers; the obligations of members of a comradeship not the same as those of fellow-citizens . . .” Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, VIII.ix.2.


31. See David O. Brink, “Utilitarian Morality and the Personal Point of View,” *op. cit.*, on utilitarianism as a decision theory vs. a criterion of rightness.

