

THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN DEEP FRIENDSHIP AND MORAL DEVELOPMENT: A CONCEPTUAL STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Friendships have a big influence on health and happiness. True friendship is also crucial for living a moral life. However, the conceptual relationships between friendship and moral growth are controversial and understudied. The objective of the research presented in this paper is to advance moral education theory by discussing the core characteristics of friendship and its relationship with moral growth. The research questions addressed in this study are: How is friendship conceptualized in the works of key Western philosophers? How is the interplay between moral growth and deep friendship theorized in recent scientific literature?

Methodologically, the research design is based on content analysis of friendship theory in academic literature. To address the first research question, the works of three key Western philosophers were analysed, namely, Aristotle, C.S. Lewis and A. MacIntyre. The interplay between friendship and moral growth was explored in the works of K. Kristjánsson, L. Polo and A. Rajský. The results indicate that friendship fosters happiness, virtue, and knowledge of truth. It involves intimacy, shared interests, and moral growth. True friendship is rare, selfless, and a gift requiring openness, honesty, and mutual care beyond mere companionship or utility. The discussion about the interplay between friendship and the moral life revealed that, while the ‘friendship for virtue’ approach sees friendship as aiding moral growth, the ‘virtue for friendship’ approach prioritizes friendship as the ultimate moral goal, with virtues sustaining it. This research is coherent with the national priorities of Latvia and with the priorities of the education sector and is a theoretical contribution for generating practical knowledge in the future, investigating empirically the relationship between friendship and moral growth and designing educational programs for promoting virtue-based friendships at school. Suggestions for further research were also put forward.

Keywords: *Friendship, happiness, moral growth, moral philosophy, virtue for friendship*

Introduction

Friendships have been qualified as “our most powerful relationships” (Dunbar, 2021). The state of the art on scientific research regarding the benefits of friendship can be

summed saying that the number and quality of our friendships may have a bigger influence on our health, happiness, and mortality risk than anything else in life (Waldinger & Schulz, 2023; Cuddeback, 2021; Dunbar, 2021). True friendship is also crucial for living a moral life (Kristjánsson, 2022; MacIntyre, 2019; Rajskey, 2023), which, in its turn, is necessary for a meaningful life. Eudaimonia was recently set as the first research priority for the next 10 years, if we are to complete “the well-being revolution” (Helliwell et al., 2023 in UN “World Happiness Report”). However, the conceptual relationships between friendship and moral growth are controversial and understudied. The goal of this conceptual research is to contribute to moral theory development by exploring the interplay between moral growth and friendship.

Several gaps in scientific research and education motivated this study. Most recent research on adolescents’ friendship has addressed the associations between sympathy and mutual disclosure in friendship (Bechtiger et al., 2021), interpersonal behaviour and friendship quality (Dryburgh et al., 2022), the feelings of school belonging and high school students’ friendship profiles (Fan & Bellmore, 2023), the academic benefits of maintaining friendships across the transition to high school (Lessard & Juvonen, 2022), as well as the transformations of friendships from early adolescence to adulthood (Buler & Pustulka, 2021) and irrational beliefs in friendship relationships in adolescents (Yılmaz & Özgüngör, 2023). However, the impact of friendship on moral development is understudied.

Moral education at school has become more urgent (e.g., ICFE 2021; OECD 2021): there is an increasing concern among scholars and educators about teenagers’ peer violence (e.g., Skrzypiec et al., 2019), sleep deprivation and mental health problems (Kansagra, 2020), fear of taking responsibility (Faranda, 2020), and individualism and superficiality (Carr, 2020), among other issues, which are partly due to a lack of support given from adults to youngsters for developing moral character and virtues. Scholars advocate for a shift in youth thinking from survivalist attitudes and hedonism to engaging in society with noble ideals and virtues. Friendship plays a pivotal role in this transformation by linking socio-emotional skills with civic engagement. Developing friendships can enhance both personal relationships and societal involvement. The bond of friendship has the potentiality of strengthening social bonds, because it is a feature of friendship to care about those for whom the other cares.

Despite its importance, the educational focus on friendship has been minimal, primarily left to practitioners until recent attention was given to it in academic research (e.g., Kristjánsson, 2022). Given its importance, it is necessary to deeply understand this specific kind of relationship we call friendship, distinguishing it from other close constructs, such as ‘friendly relationships’, ‘romantic relationships’, or ‘family relationships’. Topical academic debates regarding the core of moral life also discuss the interplay between friendship and moral development: Is friendship a tool for developing virtue or are virtues at the service of friendship?

The objective of the research presented in this paper is to advance moral education theory by discussing the core characteristics of friendship and its relationship with moral growth. The research questions addressed in this study are:

RQ1: How is friendship conceptualized in the works of key Western philosophers who analysed the concept of friendship?

RQ2: How is the interplay between moral growth and deep friendship theorized in recent scientific literature?

Methodology

The research design is based on content analysis of friendship theory in academic literature. To address the first research question about friendship conceptualisation in the works of key Western philosophers, a careful consideration was given to several works of prominent contemporary academics who have explored the relationship of deep friendship to human happiness. It included, for instance, Dunbar's (2021) conception of friendships as one of the most powerful human resources, Cuddeback's (2021) argument that true friendship transforms virtues into happiness, Rosa's (2019) concept of 'resonance', which suggests that deep friendship can be seen as a mutual resonance with another person, from which human happiness arises, and Stern's (2014, 2023; Wałęjko & Stern, 2023) insights on the negative correlation between loneliness and human happiness. Given the high number of authors dealing with this issue from different perspectives, three key Western philosophers were retained for the purpose of this article, namely, Aristotle, C.S. Lewis and A. MacIntyre.

To answer the second research question, i.e., the discussion of the interplay between friendship and moral growth, key authors representing contrasting views were explored. Kristjánsson's (2022) book "friendship for virtue" was chosen as representing the position that stresses virtue, and the contrasting position ("virtue for friendship") was explored mainly in the works of the Spanish philosopher L. Polo (1999, 2014) and his school (Sellés, 2020; Pérez Guerrero, 2022), as well as in the works of the Slovak moral philosopher A. Rajskey (Rajskey, 2023; Rajskey & Wiesenganger, 2024).

Results

RQ1: Friendship conceptualisation in the works of three key Western philosophers

This section presents the most relevant insights of three key Western theoreticians of friendship: Aristotle, Lewis and MacIntyre. *Aristotle* considers that friends are necessary for happiness. As he wrote in the *Nicomachean ethics* (Aristotle, ca. 350 B.C.E./1925): "We consider a friend to be one of the greatest of all good things, and friendlessness and solitude a very terrible thing, because the whole of life and voluntary interactions are with loved ones". Friends are necessary for happiness, "for no one would choose to live without friends but in possession of everything else that is good". Aristotle distinguishes

imperfect friendships of “shared pleasure” and “mutual utility”, primarily related to hedonic well-being, from the perfect “character friendship” related to eudaemonia. For him, ultimately, only the phronimous (morally perfect) person can really be a good friend. Friendship requires “to know someone thoroughly and become intimate with him or her, which is a very difficult thing to do”. It involves honesty, acceptance, and selflessness. Sharing also is central to friendship, as “friends’ goods are common property” (Aristotle, ca. 350 B.C.E./1925, 217, 1). Friendship “in its essence seems to consist more in giving than in receiving affection ... In a friendship based on virtue, each party is eager to benefit the other ... and as they vie with each other in giving and not in getting benefit, no complaints nor quarrels can arise”.

Lewis, in his essay “The four loves” (1960), distinguished between “Affection love” (in Greek – storge, familiar love), “Friendship love” (philia), “Eros love” (being in love, which is distinct from ‘Venus love’ or sexual attraction, but can also include it) and “Charity” (agape, divine love). Lewis argued that the ancients saw friendship as “the happiest and most fully human of all loves” (p. 87), more elevated and “rational” than Eros and Affection; but since the romanticism (when sentiment, emotion and instinct started to prevail), friendship is often regarded as marginal. According to Lewis, one reason friendship is not valued in modern society is that few people experience it, because in some sense friendship is the “least natural” (p. 88) of loves: it’s not instinctive or necessary, and a person can go through life without it. In addition, true friendship has no “survival value” (p. 90), as companionship has, and friendship’s “exclusivity” may represent a danger for social authority, a “pocket of potential resistance” (p. 115). True friends are harder to correct (by good authorities) or to corrupt (by bad authorities). All this made friendship less popular in individualistic and totalitarian societies.

For Lewis, while it is possible to experience both Eros and Friendship for the same person, there are some strong distinctions between these two kinds of love: lovers are always talking about their love, while friends seldom discuss their friendship; lovers are absorbed in each other, while friends are normally absorbed in a shared interest; and though Eros occurs between two people, two is not the best number for friendship, because no single friend can throw light on every single facet of another, which is why having more than one friend is beneficial. This is also why friendship is “the least jealous of loves” (p. 92): friendship is not lessened, but only strengthened, when a new friend joins two friends.

Discussing the formation of new friendships, Lewis argued that companionship is the “matrix of friendship” (p. 94). It starts with shared activities such as religion, studies, hobbies, or work. Often friendship arises from a question, a discovering or an interest that companions agree to be important: Friendship cannot be sought for its own sake—it has to be about something. Mutual help is natural, but it is not the core of friendship (because it can be even a distraction from the common interest). And, unlike Eros, friendship is “uninquisitive”: ordinary facts about a person are less interesting than the question “Do you see the same truth?” (p. 97). Mutual knowledge and Appreciative Love of the other develops over time little by little, causing trust, respect, and admiration for a friend to

deepen. Friendship is also “arbitrary”, i.e., it is a gift: Nobody has a duty to be anyone else’s friend.

Morally speaking Friendship love is somehow ambivalent: can be a school of virtue or a school of vice, it can both benefit and endanger a community (p. 115). In fact, Lewis argue that friendship as a form of love has some particular weaknesses: there is a danger of moral and intellectual closure to the views and needs of those outside their group; and there is the danger of pride, which can make it difficult to see the weaknesses of the group of friends, and can give rise to an ill-founded sense of superiority. If this danger is not combated, the ‘common interest’ supporting friendship can even be centred on nothing more than excluding others, and then friendship disappears.

MacIntyre (2019) dismissed the views of Aristotle on “friendship only for the good” for being too idealistic and proposed a new paradigm of friendship. He characterized a friend as “someone who cares enough to listen attentively and patiently to what we say, someone who knows us well enough to ask the right questions, someone sympathetic enough to be able to understand how things look from our point of view, someone objective enough to recognize the limitations of our point of view, what is it about ourselves or others that we are failing to recognize or understand listen for someone able to tell us the truth” (*MacIntyre*, 2019, 44:31–45:02).

For *MacIntyre*, what is distinctive of friendship is truthfulness and care. He argues that “friendly relationships”, however important, are not “true friendships”, because they are not stable over time and there is no personal commitment to mutual care. For arguing this, *MacIntyre*’s anthropological start is that humans are “dependent rational animals” (*MacIntyre*, 1999) who share both a capacity for distinguishing the true from the false and a need to judge truly. Therefore, we need truthful others to make rational choices. A true friend is concerned not just that the other be rescued from error and delusion in general terms, but more particularly that the other learn to recognize those errors and delusions to which she or he is peculiarly liable to fall victim (*MacIntyre*, 2019, 55:34–55:50). Therefore, while virtues are necessary for friendship, friendship itself is a school of virtue.

MacIntyre proposes a new framework for friendship: Friendship as a gift (*MacIntyre*, 2019, 1:16:54–1:17:23). The rationale for this proposal is that there is always more to good friendships than what each of the friends brings to their relationship: friendships are beyond deserve, they are a gift. He draws two implications of this new framework:

- 1) the necessity of openness: as friendships can come suddenly, the person should be able to distinguish “friendly relationships” from “true friendship”, and to be “responsive” when friendship appears. The main obstacles for openness are pride (which can be manifest for instance in a lack of gratitude or a desire of independence), greed (a lack of temperance which instrumentalises and strangles true friendship) and insincerity (acting, like playing a role, and even believing the role one plays sometimes unconsciously).
- 2) a new way of looking at virtue growth and friendship: friendship is not primarily the result of moral goodness, as Aristotle said (*Kivle*, 2018), but a school of virtue.

Friendship helps virtue growth in two ways: friends help to improve self-knowledge with their truthfulness; and maintaining friendship is a strong motive to moral development because, when pursuing the goods of true friendship (sharing, enjoying, connecting deeply, collaborating), we realize that we can reach them only through virtues: acting more justly, more generously, more temperately and more courageously.

RQ2: The interplay between friendship and the moral life: “friendship for virtue” versus “virtue for friendship”

This section summarized the state of the art in the recent debate about the question whether friendship is a tool for virtue growth, or virtue is a tool for cultivating deep friendships. While both approaches are complementary, different positions are held about the question of what should be the priority in moral development: virtue or friendship?

On the one hand, the “friendship for virtue” approach sees friendships as a tool for moral growth and flourishing, which is posited as the goal of moral life. In this view, friendship is an important but collateral positive outcome of the virtuous life, which is at the centre. The tenets of this view acknowledge that moral virtues are a requisite for having friends, but their approach is closer of MacIntyre’s “friendship as a school for virtue”. The most relevant contemporary tenant of this view is the Neo-Aristotelian moral philosopher K. Kristjánsson, who, in his recent book “Friendship for virtue” (2022), acknowledges that the current virtue ethics literature gives less importance to friendship than Aristotle did and pretends to give the virtue of friendship the pride of place it deserves in contemporary Aristotle-inspired virtue ethics. He also highlights Aristotelian friendship as a moral educational concept, where ‘friendship for virtue’ is to be understood as ‘friendship for virtue development’. Friendship is important because it is both a virtue and a tool for virtue growth. Critics of this view have recently pointed to the necessity of moving beyond the cultivation of Aristotelian virtuous character (Carr, 2023a, 2023b) in moral development theory.

On the other hand, the “virtue for friendship” approach sees virtues as a tool for friendship, a “strategy of love” (Wadell, 2009). Two relevant tenants of this view are the Spanish philosopher L. Polo (1999, 2004) and his school (Sellés, 2020; Pérez Guerrero, 2022), and more recently, the Slovak moral philosopher A. Rajský. While Polo acknowledges that it is not possible to be true friends with someone who lacks the necessary loyalty, for him virtues are at the service of friendship. Friendship is the most advanced, mature state of virtue (Sellés, 2020) and it is the goal of moral education, whose culmination is to be the best friend possible (Pérez Guerrero, 2022). Friendship presupposes all the other virtues (prudence, sincerity, openness, frankness, service, etc.), which are resources that serve friendship. Friendship as a special kind of virtue has two particularities: 1) while the other virtues are moral habits the person possesses, friendship is not about possessing; in friendship, the person gives herself to another; and 2) friendship is a reciprocal virtue, a form of mutual love: in true friendship, both friends are active. This is what makes friendship different from philanthropy or compassion, which do not

have necessarily this reciprocal character. Rajský, in his most recent works (Rajský, 2023; Rajský & Wiesenganger, 2024) also considers friendship (Greek: “philia”) to be the highest virtue. His argument challenges the importance given to phronesis as the integrating virtue in Aristotle’s ethics. In his view, since primarily virtue is the actual performance of a virtuous act, not merely the knowledge of a virtuous act, the primary integrating virtue cannot be an intellectual virtue, which is the case with phronesis, but it should be a (genuine) virtuous act which embraces all the other virtues, which is the case of friendship love. For Rajský, friendship is a special and unique human good in which one realizes one’s humanity.

Summarizing the result section, friendship, according to Aristotle, Lewis, and MacIntyre, fosters happiness, virtue, and truth. It involves intimacy, shared interests, and moral growth. True friendship is rare, selfless, and a gift requiring openness, honesty, and mutual care beyond mere companionship or utility. Friendship is constituted not only by mutual sharing a particular common interest, but also by deep conversations (opening of intimacy), and a mutual strong bond (identification with the self of the other). Spending time together in a common interesting activity (cooperation) is necessary for friendship to arise and stay. The discussion about the interplay between friendship and the moral life revealed also that, while the ‘friendship for virtue’ approach sees friendship as aiding moral growth, the ‘virtue for friendship’ approach prioritizes friendship as the ultimate moral goal, with virtues sustaining it.

Discussion

The question whether this research is consistent with the national priorities of Latvia and with the priorities of the education sector is discussed further. This project on friendship and morality is linked to several priorities and objectives of the National Development Plan of Latvia for 2021–2027 (Saeima, 2020). In this plan, the Priority 1 is “Strong families, a healthy and active population”, whose Objective 3 is “Support strong family structures and intergenerational connectivity”. This research on friendship has the potential of strengthening friendly relationships among family members of different generations, which can contribute to achieving this objective. In addition, the research effort implemented in this project is in line with the Objective 3 “Enhance scientific research” under the Priority 2 “Knowledge and skills for personal and national growth”. Moreover, the Priority 6 “A united & open, safe and secure society” includes as Objective 1 to “Strengthen social cohesion and foster an inclusive society”. The advanced understanding of friendship and its interplay with developing moral attitudes, promoted by this research, is also a contribution to enhance social cohesion.

This research project also addresses several of the six priorities identified in the Latvian guidelines for scientific, technological development and innovation for 2021–2027 (Cabinet of Ministers, 2021a). Concretely, it addresses the priorities “Research for society” (the project responds to recent societal and educational need analysis), “Integration of higher education and research” (this conceptual friendship research is a first step

for developing future research projects involving both students and senior researchers), “Digital transformation and open science” (open access publications of this friendship research are foreseen), and “Innovation: stimulating development, promoting implementation” (the project puts the scientific foundation for further implementation of friendship education). The project also responds to several of the Key challenges for the R & D sector in Latvia (p. 10): for “Building a knowledge base for promoting excellent research” (the research produced advanced knowledge in the field of friendship and moral education).

The project is also in line with the Education Development Guidelines 2021–2027 Latvia (Cabinet of Ministers, 2021b), which states that one of the future emphases of Latvian education at individual level is on “developed character traits, values and habits” (p. 16), which, according to the task 2.1.1., should be reflected in general education by “the development of value-based habits” (p. 50). The topic of friendship addressed by this research is simultaneously a value, a moral habit to develop, and a motif for further moral development (Fernández González, 2019).

This research also contributes to the achievement of the objectives of the Strategy 2021–2027 of the University of Latvia (University of Latvia, 2021), in particular regarding the Development direction 1.1. “Research excellence”, and the Development objective 1.1.2. “To ensure excellence-oriented quality of scientific results”. It should be noted that, based on this friendship research, international partnerships are being strengthened and created. The cooperation network includes academic partners interested in the research topic, such as specialists in friendship and phronesis (the Trnavská univerzita v Trnave in Slovakia, the University of Navarra in Spain, the University of Reading in the UK), specialists in virtue research (The Jubilee centre for character and virtues at Birmingham University in the UK, the University of Gdansk), and specialists in promoting value education and friendship at school (the “Community of Research on Excellence for All” – CREA in Spain, the Centre of Ethics of Tartu University in Estonia). These partnerships will increase future research development opportunities.

Conclusion

This research discussed the theorization of deep friendship in key Western philosophers and the debate about the interplay between friendship and moral growth in recent scientific literature. The research contributed to strengthen the conceptual bases for generating new practical knowledge in the future, by investigating empirically the relationship between friendship and moral growth and designing educational programs for promoting virtue-based friendships at school. This line of inquiry is coherent with the national priorities of Latvia and with the priorities of the education sector.

Further research directions could include investigating the “vices of friendship” (Pisemny & Brogaard, 2022), i.e., the influence of friendship on moral standards (group violence, the mass effect), given the need of belonging and the fear of missing out typical of this age and the ambivalence of friendship. Also new directions in friendship research

going beyond Aristotelian virtue ethics (e.g., Akrivou & Fernández González, 2021) and the impact of friendships in deep connections among youngsters (Way, 2011) could be explored further. Another future line of inquiry regarding the practical implementation of friendship interventions is the potential of conversations as a moral education action (Noddings, 1994), in particular the use of dialogical gatherings, which were introduced to the scientific community by R. Flecha (2015) as successful education actions, and are being successfully implemented in different settings (e.g., García-Carrión, 2015; Khal-faoui et al., 2023; Padrós-Cuxart et al., 2021; Ruiz-Eugenio et al., 2023).

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