

# Epistemic Partiality in Friendship\*

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Analytic moral philosophers have been taking a renewed interest in friendship in recent years. They have been especially liable to consider friendship in connection with debates over partiality and impartiality in ethics.<sup>1</sup> Many important styles of ethical theory hold up impartiality and equal treatment—under one or another interpretation—as central moral concepts and ideals. Yet friendship and other close relations between persons seem to involve partiality and differential treatment. We care more about what befalls our friends than about what happens to strangers, and we are more motivated to advance our friends' interests than those of strangers. We seem even to have special responsibilities toward our friends which we don't have toward strangers. If friendship necessarily involves such partiality, then there is a tension, at least, between the constitutive elements and dispositions of friendship and those of morality: they seem to pull in opposite directions.

Contemporary moral theorists have responded to this tension in a variety of ways. Some have sought to bring the apparent partiality of friendship under the wing of a more fundamental impartiality, thus reconciling friendship and the moral. Others have insisted on the primacy of friendship, and partiality, over impartial moral conceptions—

\* Earlier versions of this article were given at the 2003 SOPHA (Société de philosophie analytique) congress in Montreal, at the 2004 Bellingham Summer Philosophy Conference at Western Washington University, and as colloquium talks in the departments of philosophy of the University of Texas at Austin and Northwestern University. I am very grateful to the audiences on those occasions for stimulating discussion, and to Adam Elga and Jennifer Lackey for their commentaries at Bellingham. I would also like to thank Marcia Baron, two anonymous referees for *Ethics*, and the associate editors of *Ethics* for further helpful written comments.

1. See, e.g., David Archard, "Moral Partiality," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 20 (1995): 129–41; Marcia Baron, "Impartiality and Friendship," *Ethics* 101 (1991): 836–57; Lawrence A. Blum, *Friendship, Altruism, and Morality* (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), chaps. 3, 4; John Cottingham, "Ethics and Impartiality," *Philosophical Studies* 43 (1983): 83–99, and "Partiality, Favouritism, and Morality," *Philosophical Quarterly* 36 (1986): 357–73; Troy A. Jollimore, *Friendship and Agent-Relative Morality* (New York: Garland, 2001); Susan Wolf, "Morality and Partiality," *Philosophical Perspectives* 6 (1992): 243–59.

*Ethics* 116 (April 2006): 498–524

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either to the detriment of particular moral theories, such as utilitarianism, or against the claims of morality in general. This article does not directly contribute to those debates about the relation between friendship and morality. Rather, it pursues an analogous yet, so far as I know, novel line of inquiry, drawing attention to a type of partiality which has gone virtually unmentioned in that body of literature<sup>2</sup> and which I believe has interesting implications of its own. I shall argue here that friendship involves not just affective or motivational partiality but *epistemic* partiality. Friendship places demands not just on our feelings or our motivations, but on our *beliefs* and our methods of forming beliefs. I shall also argue, however, that this epistemic partiality is contrary to the standards of epistemic responsibility and justification held up by mainstream epistemological theories. We may thus have a further interesting problem on our hands. What if friendship goes against not just our moral ideals, but our epistemic ideals?

The forthcoming discussion is divided into two sections, corresponding roughly to internal affairs and foreign affairs. In Section I of the article I conduct an internal examination of friendship: I begin with some methodological remarks and then move on to a phenomenological analysis of friendship. I aim in particular to bring out the distinctive doxastic practices which are characteristic of the good friend, practices which seem to amount to a form of epistemic partiality or bias toward our friends. In Section II I consider some implications of the phenomena described in Section I, focusing in particular on their relation to epistemic norms. I argue that these differential doxastic practices really do constitute partiality or bias and that they contravene the epistemic standards held up by mainstream epistemological theories. If this is

2. Judith Baker, "Trust and Rationality," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 68 (1987): 1–13; Jack W. Meiland, "What Ought We to Believe? or The Ethics of Belief Revisited," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 17 (1980): 15–24; Adam Morton, "Partisanship," in *Perspectives on Self-Deception*, ed. Brian P. McLaughlin and Amélie Oksenberg Rorty (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 170–82, esp. 176–78; Michael Slote, *Morals from Motives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 126; and Baron ("Impartiality and Friendship," 854–55) present cases which could be seen as illustrations of the type of partiality to which I draw attention (or make passing remarks supportive of such an idea). None, however, develop these cases or remarks into an argument or theory like my own. By contrast, there is now an admirable paper (Simon Keller, "Friendship and Belief," *Philosophical Papers* 33 [2004]: 329–51, which appeared while the present article was being reviewed for publication) which develops many of the same themes I highlight here, although without linking them to the general notion of partiality. Keller is concerned in that paper to bring out the doxastic implications of friendship and to consider their epistemic status (as I also do here), and many of his conclusions, I find, anticipate and parallel those I advance in Sec. I. (Keller attributes similar features to patriotism in his "Patriotism as Bad Faith," *Ethics* 115 [2005]: 563–92.) Section II of the present article diverges more sharply from Keller's treatment, however: see n. 29 below.

right, then friendship constitutively involves belief-forming practices which are epistemically irrational or otherwise objectionable by the lights of mainstream epistemologies. I close by pondering what we might do in light of such a conflict between a constitutive element of friendship and our standard conceptions of what is epistemically rational or reasonable. Here I take my lead from the structurally analogous range of responses which we find in the moral domain. There are a number of reasonable ways to respond to the observation that friendship involves dispositions which run counter to the ideals held up by leading moral theories, and I shall suggest that the same range of responses ought to be available to us in the epistemic domain.

## I

Let me begin with a methodological plea for some phenomenological analysis. It is best, I think, to start by really attending to friendship, its features and its texture, before we consider its relation to other things, such as impartial moral (or epistemic) demands. We should first try to excavate the distinctive demands of friendship from the inside, as it were, by conducting an unprejudiced inquiry into the nature of that relation and what it involves and requires. With that analysis on the table, we can subsequently ask how friendship stands from various evaluative perspectives, such as those of morality and epistemology, but the two parts of our inquiry should be conducted independently to the extent possible. This sequential way of proceeding, I believe, is preferable to taking as our very point of departure a comparison of friendship with one of those other modes of normative assessment. If we take that approach, we are likely to end up with a less detailed and nuanced picture of friendship than we otherwise might.<sup>3</sup> Worse, our theoretical commitments in that other domain may creep in and corrupt the picture we paint of friendship. So I propose that we put blinkers on now and take a close look at friendship, postponing any worries about the epistemological (or moral) status of what we may find.

Our phenomenological exploration of friendship will follow and extend a path marked out by (among others) Michael Stocker. Stocker's classic paper "The Schizophrenia of Modern Ethical Theories," while

3. This worry is borne out by the recent literature on friendship. Those primarily interested in the implications of friendship for partiality and impartiality in morality (see n. 1) have tended to offer relatively thin characterizations of friendship; this is not surprising, given that their main concern is usually the nature of morality, not the nature of friendship. Other writers have offered more purely phenomenological analyses of friendship (e.g., Dean Cocking and Jeanette Kennett, "Friendship and the Self," *Ethics* 108 [1998]: 502–27) but have not then sought to relate their results to issues in moral theory. By contrast, the present article aspires to take both an internal and an external perspective on friendship—in that order.

more famous (or infamous) for its sweeping rejection of modern ethical theories, is also important methodologically for the prominent role it gives to the kind of phenomenological analysis of friendship for which I have just pleaded. Stocker is centrally concerned in that paper to bring to light certain constitutive features of friendship—*aspects*, that is, of what is involved in being a good or true friend. Stocker's main claim is that some important components of friendship concern not just the friend's actions but his motives: his *reasons* for performing those actions. In particular, Stocker seeks to defend the idea that "love, friendship, affection, fellow feeling, and community . . . essentially contain certain motives and essentially preclude certain others."<sup>4</sup> I think it is easy to see that this claim is correct, at least with respect to friendship. I am not really your friend, for example, if I hang out with you only because your mother pays me to. That motive rules out our relation as one of friendship, no matter how I behave toward you.

What is more controversial in Stocker's paper is his view of *which* motives are precluded, that is, his further contention that "among those precluded we find motives comprising the justifications, the goals, the goods of those ethical theories most prominent today."<sup>5</sup> Stocker tries to support both aspects of his position with his well-known example of Smith's visit to you in the hospital. But whether or not one agrees with Stocker about which motives are constitutive of (or incompatible with) being a good or true friend, his paper serves, at a minimum, to remind us that a proper analysis of friendship should not neglect to look inside, at the motivational and affective states of the good friend. One moral we can certainly take away from Stocker's paper, then, is that there is a distinctive moral psychology associated with friendship.

My aim here is to extend that lesson into the domain of belief, and in seeking to do that I shall more or less follow Stocker's methodology. Stocker's original argument turned centrally on our intuitions about what the good friend would do (or, more specifically, on what would move him), and my argument will also rely on those intuitions. In the phenomenological inquiry on which we are about to embark, if we find that we have a strong intuition that the good friend would (or would not) do or feel or believe *x*,<sup>6</sup> then I shall say that friendship *involves* (not) doing or feeling or believing *x*; that this is part of, constitutive of, or a constitutive element or feature of friendship; or, finally, that

4. Michael Stocker, "The Schizophrenia of Modern Ethical Theories," *Journal of Philosophy* 73 (1976): 453–66, quote on 461.

5. *Ibid.*

6. "Good" here is attributive; I do not mean by "the good friend" "the person who is good and who is also a friend." Thanks to an associate editor of *Ethics* for asking for clarification on this point.

this is a *demand* of friendship: something you owe your friend. Let me insert two caveats concerning these labels, however. First, these constitutive claims need to be understood in a suitably loose sense.<sup>7</sup> Stocker did not claim that if you ever act from duty toward your friend, on even a single occasion, you are thereby instantly disqualified as a friend: that you are ipso facto no longer a friend to that person, because you fail to satisfy one of the necessary conditions for being in a relation of friendship. Constitutive claims about friendship need not be interpreted as tolerating no lapses or exceptions on the friend's part on pain of immediately exiting the friendship relation altogether. They point rather to a general disposition on the part of the friend to do or feel or believe *x*, and they imply that when (and to the extent that) you do not do or feel or believe *x*, this is a failure of friendship.

Second caveat: by calling constitutive elements of friendship “demands” of friendship, or things you owe your friend, I do not wish to imply that they are necessarily moral demands. Suppose it is true, according to our conception of good (competition) diving, that a good diver does not produce much spray when entering the water. Suppose, in other words, that it is constitutive of good competition diving that you not produce much spray on entry. We can call this a “demand,” in my sense, of (competition) diving without implying that a diver is under any moral obligation not to produce very much spray when entering the water. Similarly, I wish simply to leave open here whether what I am calling the “demands” of friendship are also moral demands.<sup>8</sup>

With this terminology on the table, I can now say that my general aim is to show that the demands of friendship extend into the realm of belief. That friendship imposes special demands on our actions is, of course, well recognized. (These are part of the subject matter of the literature on “special obligations.”) That friendship demands particular patterns of emotion and motivation, as Stocker urged, is now also common ground in discussions of friendship and its relation to morality. However, it has not been similarly recognized, or underlined, that friendship also places distinctive demands on our beliefs and our belief-forming

7. Thanks to Josh Parsons for raising a worry about this.

8. One might, perhaps, be willing to grant me the term “demand” but insist that I cannot speak of something you *owe* your friend while remaining neutral as to whether the demands of friendship are moral demands. After all, as an associate editor of *Ethics* pointed out, we wouldn't say the competitive diver owes anything to anybody. I agree with this observation, but don't think it implies that the constitutive elements of friendship generate moral demands. I think the simple fact that friendship—unlike competition diving—is an interpersonal relation makes a wider range of vocabulary for its constitutive features appropriate, even if we are neutral on the *moral* status or force of those constitutive elements.

procedures. That is what I want to bring out in this article: the *cognitive* dimension of friendship's demands.

In order to bring this element of friendship to light, I want to approach the demands of friendship from an unusual perspective. I would like to highlight the demands which hold on you, *qua* friend, in your interactions with third parties. (It is, I think, a neglected insight that the demands of friendship extend beyond your conduct *vis-à-vis* your friend and importantly include how you act toward third parties when your friends are at issue.) It is commonly accepted that loyalty is one of the constitutive elements of friendship. One particular aspect of that loyalty, it seems, is sticking up for your friend. If someone pokes fun at one of your friends, or makes a joke at his expense, or says something false or misleading (and derogatory) about him, it seems to be your responsibility as a good friend not to join in the fun; not even simply to remain silent and withhold comment; but, on the contrary, to stick up for your friend. One might say you owe it to your friend to defend him and his reputation in the court of public opinion. The behavior of someone who simply sits silent and uneasy while others are indulging in cruel gossip about Miss X is not that of a true friend of Miss X: it is *disloyal* to join in the joke, or to let the false accusation pass unchallenged. There thus seems to be a demand of friendship to stick up for your friend.

One might object to calling this a demand of friendship on the grounds that you ought not let such things pass unchallenged for anyone, whether your friend or not. It could be argued that it is morally requisite on everyone to withhold approval of, and indeed actively to combat, cruel jokes or false gossip about anyone. That would be to reduce the phenomenon just noted to a general moral duty incumbent on all agents in relation to all other agents. But this objection will not persuade. Leaving aside for the moment the priggishness of maintaining that there is any such general moral duty, surely, at a minimum, it will be granted that there are additional reasons for you to object and to intervene when it is your friend who is being maligned. So whether there is such a general moral duty or not, there is in any case a special demand of friendship at work here.

The demand of friendship to which I've just drawn attention has to do with how a true friend acts in situations like these. But I now want to suggest that an analogous demand holds in the domain of belief. Suppose again that someone tells a damning story about a friend of yours. Your friend appears in a bad light in this tale; he is portrayed as having acted badly, even disreputably. The speaker is clearly rather shocked and disapproving of your friend's behavior; she has obviously formed an unfavorable judgment of your friend's actions and perhaps even his overall character. And it must be confessed that your friend

comes off looking rather bad from the information conveyed. We need not suppose that this is one of the cataclysmic cases occasionally discussed in the literature in which your friend is accused of espionage or murder.<sup>9</sup> Instead, let's imagine that the speaker is attributing to your friend more everyday sins. For added verisimilitude, we can suppose that the allegations are of disreputable behavior in a context in which people often act badly: when sex is concerned, say, or when professional competitiveness is in play. Suppose, for instance, that a third party reports that your friend Sam recently slept with someone and then cruelly never returned any of that person's calls, knowingly breaking that person's heart.<sup>10</sup> Importantly, though, in contrast with the examples of sticking up for your friend to which I alluded before, let's stipulate that this story is not something which you know to be false. Rather, what is being presented to you is new information about your friend.

The question I now want to pose is, how, as a good friend, should you respond to this new information? I don't mean what actions you should take in this situation, but rather what you should make of this new information. What conclusions should you draw from it? How should you update your set of beliefs about your friend's actions and character in light of it? We need to ask whether the fact that the person under discussion is your friend raises any special issues in this connection: whether, as a good friend, you ought to react differently to this information than you otherwise would, or than a detached observer would.<sup>11</sup> I shall suggest an affirmative answer. Indeed, as we shall see more fully later, I would go so far as to say that you owe your friends something other than an impartial and disinterested review of the evidence where they are concerned. But let's start with the more modest claim.

I think a little introspection will confirm that as a matter of general tendency we do react differently to reports like these when they concern our friends. As I shall detail shortly, our ways of dealing with evidence seem systematically to shift when that evidence bears on the actions and character of our friends: we seem in a variety of respects to adopt *dif-*

9. See, e.g., Baker, "Trust and Rationality."

10. Thanks to Adam Elga for this case.

11. It makes things more vivid to cast the issue in terms of your reaction to one specific story, but it would be misleading to put too much weight on that way of framing the question. The real issue is not so much whether, as a friend, you must react differently to this particular bit of information, but rather whether you are required generally or systematically to exhibit different reactions to reports like these when they concern your friends. There could indeed be such systematic differences in the ways friends and non-friends respond to such reports, even if in a specific case there happens to be no difference in their reactions.

*ferential epistemic practices* when our friends are at issue.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, I want to claim not just that we do (as it happens) react differently in these ways, but that these differential doxastic practices are characteristic of—part of our intuitive picture of—the good friend. I do not intend the phenomena I am about to describe merely as interesting empirical facts about how we in fact react when our friends are at issue, reactions which may be widespread but which are entirely optional from the point of view of friendship. Rather, to the extent that they are compelling at all, I think these phenomena present themselves as elements of our intuitive picture of the good friend, just as do certain patterns of motive and action.<sup>13</sup> Just as a certain way of *behaving* concurs with our intuitive picture of the good friend, so also, I wish to claim, does a certain way of *believing* where our friends are concerned. A good friend does not defend her friend outwardly (which we earlier agreed a good friend would do) while inwardly believing the worst of her friend. We do not conceptualize the good friend as manifesting a split of this kind between behavior and belief when it comes to her friend. Rather, the good friend is prepared to take her friend's part both publicly and, as it were, internally. What I wish to suggest, in short, is that the differential doxastic practices of the good friend are a constitutive feature of friendship (in the suitably loose sense discussed earlier).

Let me now outline these differential responses, whose existence I think a little introspection will confirm. They can be divided into two broad categories. The first locus of difference is the cognitive activities we engage in when processing new data about our friends. What is distinctive in this domain is that we tend to devote more energy to defeating or minimizing the impact of unfavorable data than we otherwise would. To start with, we are more liable to scrutinize and to question the evidence being presented than we otherwise would be; we spend more time and energy doing this than we otherwise would. For example, we are more likely to ask ourselves various questions about the person telling the story, the answers to which could discredit the evidence being presented. We might ask ourselves: Is this person generally accurate, fair-minded, and trustworthy? Is she malicious, either in general or toward my friend in particular? Is it somehow in her interest that this story be true, or be thought true? We will spend more mental energy generating and assessing such possible discrediting factors than

12. I shall use both “epistemic” and “doxastic” to mean “having to do with beliefs, and our ways of forming and updating beliefs.”

13. So while I'll often speak in what follows of “what we do” when we hear such stories about our friends, the reader should remember that this is not merely an empirical claim but rather is intended to point toward “what a good friend does” in a more constitutive sense.



we typically do when we hear gossip about someone who is not a friend (just think how rarely we do these things in those cases).

Furthermore, we will go to greater lengths in the case of a friend to construct and to entertain alternative and less damning interpretations of the reported conduct than we would for a nonfriend. This takes effort: these alternative explanations may not be obvious, and we may need to devote considerable mental resources to working them up and considering their merits. In the case of a nonfriend, we would be unlikely even to devote the time and energy necessary to develop these other options and put them on the table. In these various ways, then, we deploy a different or at least a heightened array of cognitive activities in response to unfavorable information which concerns our friends.

In addition to these differences of method, friendship also yields different doxastic outcomes: different beliefs. I want to claim that not just the cognitive procedures we deploy in assessing evidence but the set of beliefs we end up with will systematically differ when the subject of the story is our friend, and in particular that the latter will be more favorable than they otherwise would be. This is the second locus of the differential epistemic practices connected with friendship: where our friends are concerned, we draw different conclusions and make different inferences than we otherwise would (or than a detached observer would). I noted above that we spend more energy generating, that is, coming up with, alternative—and less damning—explanations of the reported conduct when the story we're told is about a friend. But that isn't all, for we are also likely to give such alternative constructions greater credence than we would for a nonfriend. And at the end of the day we are simply less likely to conclude that our friend acted disreputably, or that he is a bad person, than we would be in the case of a nonfriend. Friendship seems to alter not just the procedures we use to process new information but the conclusions we end up drawing.

Let us now look more closely at these differential epistemic strategies and doxastic outcomes. Perhaps some slightly more fine-grained phenomenology will bring out their scope—for it is important to do this before we proceed further. We should ask: Do these distinctive epistemic responses take the form of willfully believing the false, or denying the incontrovertible, when it comes to our friends? Do they (or must they) involve a total imperviousness to damning evidence concerning our friends' conduct? Intuition says "no." What seems to be characteristic of the good friend is not a stubborn denial of obvious, incontrovertible facts about her friend but something more subtle—which we should now try to bring out.

To that end, let's remember that we are talking here about information that paints your friend's actions and character in a bad light. Human actions, however—and a fortiori people's characters—are not

transparent. They require interpretation, and are open to various construals and contextualizations. They can be seen in different lights, put in different perspectives, filed under different labels and concepts. (For example, one person might classify as “refreshingly forthright” behavior that someone else would simply call “obnoxious.”) A person’s actions can be placed in different patterns, and linked to different underlying character traits. (Anna might see Bernie’s behavior as demonstrating his spirit of adventure, while Carol finds it further illustration of his self-destructive streak.) And even when two people describe or classify someone’s action in the same way, or attribute the same character trait to him, they may nonetheless attach different degrees of importance to those attributions. That is, the judgments on which they agree may be more or less dominant in their respective overall impressions of the action or the person. So even when Dominic and Emily agree that Fiona’s comment was obnoxious, Dominic may attach a great deal of weight to that negative verdict, whereas Emily sees it as decisively outweighed by the fact that the comment in question served effectively to puncture Guy’s pretensions. Carol may see Bernie’s self-destructive streak as a minor detail, whereas for Hannah it is the most salient—and scary—thing about him.

Beyond the incontrovertible, then, many interpretive avenues open up. And “the proper bias of a close friend”<sup>14</sup> finds a fertile field of operations in this rather murky and uncharted terrain. What is characteristic of the good friend seems typically to come in at this level of interpreting the reported actions and placing them in perspective, rather than at the level of denying the base-level facts and events being related by the teller of the story.<sup>15</sup> In general, a good friend is likely to interpret what she hears in a less damaging way than is a stranger. As we noted earlier, she is more likely to look for alternative interpretations to the obvious, and damning, ones and—furthermore—to draw different inferences about her friend’s character than would a stranger. This need not be a matter of flatly denying the obvious. It is rather a matter of extending more interpretive charity to your friends than you naturally would to strangers—of offering your friends more leeway. The result, though, is that your beliefs about your friends will be slanted in their favor in various respects.

Let us see how this might go in a particular case. Recall the little

14. Annette Baier, “Trusting Ex-Intimates,” in *Person to Person*, ed. George Graham and Hugh LaFollette (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), 269–81, quote on 277.

15. Although an attentive friend will be alert, even hypersensitive, to the encroachment of interpretation on to the supposedly raw data being presented by the teller. For instance, she will notice, and query, the “cruelly” and “knowingly” which were included in the little story about Sam.

story you were told about your friend Sam. Others who heard that story might conclude, “that certainly was insensitive” (or even sadistic) or “what an inconsiderate jerk” (or womanizer) or “I think he does it deliberately—the little devil positively *enjoys* breaking people’s hearts.” As a good friend, however, your conclusions will likely differ.<sup>16</sup> As a good friend, you will tend to file this incident—and Sam’s behavior generally—under other labels. Your reaction to this story might be, for instance, “There’s never any artifice with Sam. You know where you stand with him: if he doesn’t want to see you, he makes that clear. There’s no false politeness, no pussyfooting, no hypocrisy, no stringing you along—Sam’s too genuine for any of that.” In a similar vein, what other people might classify as compulsive womanizing on Sam’s part, you might see as irrepressible but fickle enthusiasm and appetite for female charm in all its many varieties.

These attributions pick up on the same data that other people are observing but put a different spin on them, highlighting certain aspects of Sam’s behavior and placing his actions in a different overall pattern. As we noted earlier, it is not that the good friend necessarily doubts or denies the purportedly raw data with which she is presented (although she’ll look for openings that might permit her to do this). The good friend is not blind to the data she receives about her friend, whether through direct observation or testimony. She sees the data, all right; she just puts a different cast on them. As the previous paragraph suggests, her distinctive doxastic stance toward her friend is signaled especially by the different *vocabulary* she will tend to use at the interpretive level. It is not as if the good friend uses the same concepts other people do and just sticks a negation sign in front of what they affirm.<sup>17</sup> (Still less will she typically affirm the opposite of what they say, positively insisting that Sam acted with sensitivity and tact in that episode.) Rather, the bias of the good friend will normally take the form of casting what she sees or hears in a different light, shading it differently, placing it in a different optic, embedding it in a different overall portrait of her friend. Where our friends are concerned, in short, we become spin doctors.

There is, I think, no specific point at which our epistemic responses must differ from those of the nonfriend on pain of failing to meet the

16. I focus here only on the second locus of the good friend’s doxastic shifts, namely, the actual set of beliefs she ends up with. As we noted earlier, her epistemic responses will also likely differ in terms of the degree of scrutiny to which she subjects this new information. See, e.g., previous note.

17. What is true is that her set of beliefs about her friend will tend not to include conclusions which might seem natural to others. That is, one way in which her doxastic set is distinctive is that it is characterized by the absence of certain beliefs which other people would probably have formed.

demand of friendship I've been trying to bring out. Rather, there are a variety of levels at which a doxastic slant in your friend's favor can manifest itself, and what is required by friendship is, at most, that such a slant enter in at some level or other. The particular point at which the good friend's doxastic practices will depart from those a disinterested observer would employ will vary from case to case, as a function of the resources available to her for assimilating the datum in question. Characteristically, you might first try to discredit the evidence being presented and find a way not to believe your friend did this at all. If that isn't feasible, then you can accept those base facts and move to the interpretive level, where you try to put a different spin on what he did and file that action under some less damning label. If this proves impossible, then you can link the action to a different character trait than the obvious ones. If you can't in good conscience even do that, then you can seek to embed in a larger virtue the negative character trait you are forced to attribute to your friend: seeing his hotheadedness as part and parcel of his passionate nature, for example. As a last resort, if even this last stratagem fails, you can relegate your attribution of a character flaw to your friend to an obscure corner of your portrait of him, rather than making it the dominant element, like a prominent nose.

As I stressed earlier, these claims about the good friend's differential epistemic practices are not intended merely as empirical observations. But it can only enhance their plausibility to note numerous similar or structurally parallel phenomena which are well documented in the social psychology literature.<sup>18</sup> It is well known that people seem consistently to overrate themselves: almost everyone believes he is an above-average driver, for instance, and 94 percent of professors think they do better work than their average colleague.<sup>19</sup> Significantly, however, studies show that we are constrained in our ability to make these self-serving attributions: we cannot simply adopt the belief that it would be most pleasing to have when that belief is too far out of line with other things we

18. Thanks to Alex Rajczi and especially to Sonja Lyubomirsky for pointing me toward relevant literature in this area. That literature is abundant, and I cite only some of the main parallels with the themes I am pressing here.

19. See Thomas Gilovich, *How We Know What Isn't So: The Fallibility of Human Reason in Everyday Life* (New York: Free Press, 1991), chap. 5, for a popular-science overview of such results. Ziva Kunda, "The Case for Motivated Reasoning," *Psychological Bulletin* 108 (1990): 480–98; and Shelley E. Taylor and Jonathan D. Brown, "Illusion and Well-Being: A Social Psychological Perspective on Mental Health," *Psychological Bulletin* 103 (1988): 193–210, offer more in-depth and scholarly discussions of these phenomena. The latter argue that such "positive illusions" about the self promote mental health: "the mentally healthy person," they say, "appears to have an enviable capacity to distort reality" (204).

believe.<sup>20</sup> This point parallels my claim in the last paragraph that the friend's epistemic slant will take different forms in different cases, depending on her resources for assimilating that particular datum into her belief set. And in keeping with my emphasis on the rather murky and indeterminate terrain of *interpretation* as the privileged field for the operation of the bias of the good friend, it has been shown that people's self-serving trait attributions are more skewed when the trait in question is ambiguous rather than specific, thus affording subjects more wiggle room.<sup>21</sup> While the psychological literature has tended to concentrate on biased beliefs about oneself, studies show similar patterns in beliefs about one's friends<sup>22</sup> and spouses or romantic partners.<sup>23</sup>

Let me close this section by articulating two hypotheses about friendship which might help make it intelligible that we should adopt these differential epistemic practices where our friends are concerned.<sup>24</sup> The background assumptions I am about to offer up constitute neither a complete nor an uncontroversial theory of friendship, but they may be useful all the same, in suggesting a broader framework within which the features I've tried to bring out would make sense.<sup>25</sup>

20. See esp. Kunda, "Case for Motivated Reasoning," on this.

21. David Dunning, Judith A. Meyerowitz, and Amy D. Holzberg, "Ambiguity and Self-Evaluation: The Role of Idiosyncratic Trait Definitions in Self-Serving Assessments of Ability," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 57 (1989): 1082–90.

22. Jonathon D. Brown, "Evaluations of Self and Others: Self-Enhancement Biases in Social Judgments," *Social Cognition* 4 (1986): 353–76.

23. The psychologist Sandra Murray is the leading figure in the study of "positive illusions" in romantic relationships and marriages. Murray and Holmes describe in detail the techniques we use to "weav[e] cogent stories that depict potential faults or imperfections in [our] partners in the best possible light" (Sandra L. Murray and John G. Holmes, "Seeing Virtues in Faults: Negativity and the Transformation of Interpersonal Narratives in Close Relationships," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 65 [1993]: 707–22, quote on 707). They note, in particular, two techniques which parallel stratagems described in the last paragraph: interpreting faults "in the light of surrounding virtues" (*ibid.*, 708) and downplaying or minimizing the significance of those faults, assigning them only a tangential role in one's narrative. Similar to Taylor and Brown, "Illusion and Well-Being," Murray and her colleagues (see also Sandra L. Murray, John G. Holmes, and Dale W. Griffin, "The Benefits of Positive Illusions: Idealization and the Construction of Satisfaction in Close Relationships," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 70 [1996]: 79–98; Sandra L. Murray and John G. Holmes, "A Leap of Faith? Positive Illusions in Romantic Relationships," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 23 [1997]: 586–604) hold that these "positive illusions" yield greater relationship satisfaction.

24. The subjunctive "should" can do double duty as a kind of normative "should" here, for I want to make sense not just of our in fact adopting these practices but of its being a part of friendship, i.e., a "demand" of friendship in my sense, that we do so.

25. Keller develops in a rather different way (and at somewhat greater length, in secs. 6 and 7 of "Friendship and Belief") the connections between the doxastic behavior of the good friend, the nature of friendship, and the goods friendship characteristically provides.

The first element of this background theory is that—following Aristotle—I am assuming that friendship is in some important sense based on your friend’s character and on esteem for his merits.<sup>26</sup> We needn’t mean narrowly moral character, or specifically moral merits (Aristotle certainly wouldn’t have, given his broad conception of virtue), but I think some such constraint is required in order to respond to the common intuition that we want our friends to love us for who we are.<sup>27</sup> On this conception of friendship, however, it makes sense that we need, as it were, to maintain a favorable opinion of our friend’s character. If friendship were in no way contingent on viewing one’s friend as a good person, the differential doxastic practices I’ve tried to bring out would look inexplicable, unmotivated: there would be nothing internal to the friendship relation that would make sense of our apparent tendency toward biased shading of data that concern our friend’s actions and character. But if, by contrast, friendship *is* importantly contingent on continued esteem for one’s friend’s merits and character, then it is not surprising that we would massage our beliefs about our friend’s character in a favorable direction and downplay any information which might threaten that esteem.<sup>28</sup>

The second remark I want to offer is that friendship is or involves a kind of commitment. Like other commitments, our friendships structure our deliberations, operating as (defeasible) fixed points or parameters within which we resolve the issues with which we are presented. For, in general, we don’t approach new situations and questions with a clean deliberative slate; we don’t resolve every issue from scratch. Quite the contrary: having commitments means not deciding every issue solely on its merits, if we mean by that dispassionately adjudicating an issue “from nowhere,” as an objective and wholly unencumbered being would do. This can be seen by looking at a paradigm commitment, namely, a promise. If you have promised to do *x* at *t*, there is a clear sense in

26. See *Nicomachean Ethics*, bks. 8 and 9. Jennifer Whiting is perhaps the most uncompromising defender in the contemporary literature of the Aristotelian idea of character friendship: see her impressive and ambitious “Impersonal Friends,” *Monist* 74 (1991): 3–29.

27. See Neera Kapur Badhwar, “Friends as Ends in Themselves,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 48 (1987): 1–23, on these themes. Badhwar sharply distinguishes end friendship from unconditional love, which precisely is not premised on your particular qualities.

28. Note that friendship can still be said to be based on esteem for your friend’s merits even when that esteem is to some degree artificially maintained through biased shading. For your original perception of A’s merits—part of the basis for your becoming friends with A—may have been objective, impartial, and unbiased. We could thus see in friendship the operation of the “halo effect” studied by psychologists, in which an initial positive impression colors subsequent attributions of specific traits (see Richard E. Nisbett and Timothy DeCamp Wilson, “The Halo Effect: Evidence for Unconscious Alteration of Judgments,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 35 [1977]: 250–56).

which you do not decide simply on the merits what to do at  $t$ . For whatever the merits of doing something other than  $x$  at  $t$ , your promise serves to constrain your deliberative field and thus to displace those merits from your deliberations. Similarly, our friendships function as commitments. To be someone's friend is to have cast your lot in with his and, indeed, with his good character; and this properly affects how you respond to new situations and new data. Your friend need not prove each day, from scratch, that he is a good person: friendship is not contingent on being continually renewed by objective proofs of that proposition. A commitment to your friend's merits is more something you bring to the various situations which confront you than something you take away from the information you receive. This is reflected in our epistemic partiality toward our friends.

## II

In Section I we were concerned solely with friendship itself. As I pleaded in my opening methodological remarks, it is best to start with an internal investigation before considering how the characteristic features and demands of one domain, such as friendship, relate to those propounded by another, such as morality. We are now ready, however, to consider foreign affairs, and, in particular, friendship's relations with epistemology. The two broad questions I now want to explore are, first, how the feature of friendship I highlighted in Section I would be evaluated by mainstream contemporary epistemologies, and, second, what we ought to do if we find that there is a conflict between friendship and our epistemic ideals.<sup>29</sup> I shall suggest that standard epistemological theories would indeed give the good friend's differential epistemic practices an unfavorable rating and, thus, that we shall need to consider the second question. I begin to do so at the end of the article.

The phenomenological analysis of Section I suggested that the good friend manifests a kind of epistemic partiality or bias toward her friends. Her beliefs and her belief-forming practices seem to shift in her friends' favor when her friends' actions and character are at issue: she seems to be partial toward her friends in her epistemic comportment. I want now to ask two things: whether the good friend is indeed doxastically biased, or partial, and how we should evaluate the doxastic characteristics of the good friend from an epistemic point of view. At the risk of defending the obvious, I will claim that the good friend *is* genuinely biased or partial, and that her distinctive epistemic practices would be unfavorably evaluated by standard epistemological theories. Let me now rehearse

29. It is especially in connection with this second question that my treatment diverges from Keller's, or—at least—that our discussions head off in different directions. Compare the last quarter of the present article with his "Friendship and Belief," sec. 8.

the case for these answers. Note, first, that the good friend's *reason* for adopting these differential epistemic practices seems to be simply that the person in question is her friend. But that someone is your friend is not itself a relevant epistemic reason (as we might put it) to form different beliefs about him than you would about anyone else.<sup>30</sup> So we certainly have at least the appearance of bias, if bias is understood simply as differential epistemic treatment without epistemic justification. It appears that the good friend treats hypotheses concerning her friends differently, for other than epistemic reasons.

Furthermore, if we think back to the specific differential practices and beliefs the good friend adopts, they do not seem to be ones we could endorse from a purely epistemic point of view.<sup>31</sup> Rather than being truth conducive, they seem to lead her into a distorted conception of reality. The fact is that most people act very badly from time to time, and have some more or less serious character flaws. So from an objective point of view your friends are very likely to possess these features as well. Friendship, however, seems to involve a reluctance (although not, as we noted, an absolute refusal) to come to such conclusions about your friends. In that sense friendship involves, if not a blind spot, at least less than perfect vision where your friends' sins and flaws are concerned; the good friend's set of beliefs is to that extent necessarily out of kilter. As a good friend, your belief set is slanted: you actually believe your own spin.

If we look at the matter diachronically, focusing on the good friend's ways of updating her beliefs rather than on the content of those

30. As an associate editor of *Ethics* helpfully observed, there is a parallel here with what Wlodek Rabinowicz and Toni Rønnow-Rasmussen, "The Strike of the Demon: On Fitting Pro-attitudes and Value," *Ethics* 114 (2004): 391–423, call the "Wrong Kind of Reasons" problem. (See also Justin D'Arms and Daniel Jacobson, "The Moralistic Fallacy: On the 'Appropriateness' of Emotions," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 61 [2000]: 65–90; and Derek Parfit, "Rationality and Reasons," in *Exploring Practical Philosophy: From Action to Values*, ed. Dan Egonsson, Björn Petersson, Jonas Josefsson, and Toni Rønnow-Rasmussen [Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001], 17–39, to whom Rabinowicz and Rønnow-Rasmussen are, in part, responding.) Their paper has generated lively subsequent discussion; for a recent response in these pages, see Philip Stratton-Lake, "How to Deal with Evil Demons: Comment on Rabinowicz and Rønnow-Rasmussen," *Ethics* 115 (2005): 788–98.

31. This is particularly true if we focus on the differential doxastic outcomes characteristic of the good friend. If, e.g., one considered only the heightened scrutiny to which the good friend subjects new information about her friend, one might be tempted to say that this change is an improvement from an epistemic point of view. (I have no wish to commend the unseemly hastiness with which we form negative global judgments about people who are not our friends simply on the basis of gossip. Thanks to an anonymous referee for pressing this point.) But it is much harder to maintain that the good friend displays enhanced epistemic virtue if one considers the total package of differential epistemic practices *and beliefs* which she will tend to manifest.



beliefs themselves, it seems we will again have grounds to criticize the friend's doxastic practices from an epistemic point of view. For the good friend's epistemic stance seems to involve a relative (although not, as we noted, an absolute) imperviousness to new evidence, a slowness to update her beliefs in the light of new data, which goes beyond the generic conservatism of belief. It is almost as if the good friend decided once and for all some time ago that her friend was a good person and then absolutely refused to pay heed to a possibly mounting pile of evidence to the contrary. That hardly constitutes epistemic virtue. Recall as well that when presented with new information, the good friend fails to make inferences and to draw conclusions that would come naturally to a disinterested observer. Instead, she gives greater credence than he would to alternative construals of her friend's conduct and character, and does so seemingly out of proportion to how compelling those hypotheses objectively are.

In numerous respects, then, the doxastic stance of the good friend seems eminently subject to epistemic criticism. The good friend's comportment does not live up to our epistemic ideals, and may not even satisfy basic epistemic norms. Many of her beliefs about her friends appear epistemically unjustified or unwarranted—she does not have sufficient epistemic reasons to hold them—and her doxastic practices do not conform to the standard criteria for epistemically responsible believing or epistemic rationality. The beliefs associated with friendship thus appear to contravene the general standards articulated by mainstream epistemological theories. And we will of course find no exception for friendship in those theories: they do not propose different epistemological standards depending on the subject matter at issue. Rather, the canons of epistemically responsible belief formation are content invariable.<sup>32</sup> We thus have a genuine clash between the demands of friendship and the demands of epistemology as understood by mainstream contemporary theories.

I shall take this conclusion as the springboard for the final part of

32. To take but one example, Feldman and Conee's statement of evidentialism reads: "Doxastic attitude *D* toward proposition *p* is epistemically justified for *S* at *t* if and only if having *D* toward *p* fits the evidence *S* has at *t*" (Richard Feldman and Earl Conee, "Evidentialism," *Philosophical Studies* 48 [1985]: 15–34, quote on 15). There is no limitation here on the subject matter of the propositions over which this principle ranges—and, even more obviously, no exception of the form "except when *p* concerns your friends." Note that the ethics of belief, as distinct from the epistemic evaluation of beliefs, might not be subject matter invariable. (Baker, "Trust and Rationality," and Meiland, "What Ought We to Believe?" in effect argue that different ethical standards apply to forming beliefs about friends and loved ones.) This point is not germane to the present discussion, which concerns specifically epistemic assessment. The ethics of belief is part of ethics, not part of epistemology narrowly construed (our concern here).

the article, where I consider what we should do in light of this conflict. But before doing so, I need to forestall a challenge which, if successful, would eliminate the conflict altogether. For one could dispute the two claims I've made about the good friend's epistemic practices: that they genuinely constitute partiality or bias toward her friends, and that they contravene epistemological standards. One could argue that the good friend is merely applying general, impartial epistemological principles to the processing of new information about her friends, and that the conclusions she draws are in fact fully justified. Such a strategy, if successful, would vindicate the friend's doxastic stance in epistemic terms and cancel the charge of bias. For it would supply what seemed to be lacking: sufficient *epistemic* justification for what looks like a biased way of proceeding.

The most obvious route to an epistemic justification of the good friend's distinctive ways of forming and updating beliefs about her friends would be to emphasize the large body of information and evidence that she possesses about her friends as the basis for her different conclusions concerning their conduct. This strategy sees the friend's apparently differential epistemic practices simply as reflections of the very different evidential stances she occupies vis-à-vis her friends on the one hand and nonfriends on the other. According to this argument, it is only right and proper, in evidentialist terms, that you should be so much slower to draw a negative conclusion concerning your friend than you would be about a stranger. For you have so much more evidence of your friend's good character, which must be weighed in the epistemic balance along with the more damning considerations which are now being presented to you. Your differing conclusions when your friends are at issue are perfectly epistemically legitimate, for they are merely applications of the evidentialist principle.

Before explaining why I don't think this argument will ultimately succeed, let me give it all the credit it deserves. There are obviously differences in the prior informational and evidential bases that we can bring to bear when we hear something about a stranger and about a friend. After all, we know a lot about our friends—at least in comparison with people we don't know well. And it seems reasonable to think that those differences in information base can account for some of what might appear to be differential epistemic practices across the two types of cases—and, indeed, to hold that those differences sometimes make the friend's epistemic position superior. For the additional information we have about our friends undoubtedly sometimes provides us with opportunities for justified inferences concerning them which are not available to people who know our friends less well. Our extra knowledge sometimes allows us to draw a more accurate conclusion.

Suppose, for instance, that someone disapprovingly reports that

your friend left a party early without thanking the hosts. You may happen to know (because he is your good friend) that he had just received upsetting news—which fact places his behavior in a completely different light. In this case, your conclusions seem closer to the truth than those of your interlocutor; the additional information you possess seems to improve your epistemic position. And even when you don't know any further specific facts about the incident in question, as you did in this last example, you may possess general knowledge about your friend which can help to place his actions in a different light. Suppose you know that your friend's shyness around women whom he finds attractive takes the form of a seeming standoffishness and indifference. This information allows you to entertain a different, and more accurate, interpretation of what may have seemed to the woman in question to be a haughty brush-off.

So an appeal to differential information can certainly do some work in explaining and vindicating differences in the conclusions we draw about our friends. But I am very doubtful that it can do all the work required under the strategy we are now considering. For our differential epistemic practices where our friends are concerned seem not to track evidentialist principles but rather—at times—to run counter to the evidence. Those shifts in practice do not always seem to constitute an epistemic improvement. Think back to the particular phenomena limned in Section I. We noted that the good friend does not flatly believe the manifestly false, or refuse to believe the incontrovertible, about her friend. But her selection of conclusions and inferences seems, all the same, out of kilter with the objective weight of the considerations she considers. The good friend tends to seize on factors that would discredit negative evidence, to fasten on possible hypotheses that present her friend in a more favorable light. She withholds belief in propositions amply warranted by the evidence at hand and which would be natural inferences for a disinterested observer to make. So the present hypothesis does not fit the data very well. There is also a further problem for the evidentialist vindication of our beliefs about our friends. In order to justify resisting unfavorable construals of your friend's actions, you would presumably cite your knowledge of your friend's character as your basis for doing so. But think how much of that "knowledge" of your friend's character may already have been corrupted and slanted by the interpretive heuristics of the good friend. It is simply not clear that your beliefs about your friend's character constitute evidence in a sense that supplies epistemic justification.

It might also be possible to test directly whether we can account in evidentialist or informational terms for all the shifts in epistemic practice which friends seem to exhibit. The strategy we are now considering proposes that what looks like variation according to whether

someone is your friend is not really variation along that axis; it is in fact nothing more than a reflection of the enhanced background information you happen to possess about this particular subject matter. So a good test for this hypothesis would separate the purely informational dimension on which this strategy relies from the fact that the person is your friend. We could posit that you possess a large body of favorable evidence concerning someone who is not a friend, and see whether your epistemic practices concerning that person mirror those you adopt when your friends are at issue.

To that end, we might imagine a historian doing research on an admirable historical figure: suppose he has read extensively in that person's diaries and letters and talked to people who knew him, and thus possesses an impressively comprehensive (albeit secondhand) body of evidence in favor of his subject's good character. We might also be able to use a former friend as a test case.<sup>33</sup> This latter option is tricky, though, because very often the reasons why someone is only a former rather than a current friend involve disaffection with her character and actions. That would obviously be enough to distinguish the evidential aspects of this case from that of one's current friends, for there would be some unfavorable evidence concerning the former friend which wouldn't be present for one's current friends. Let us suppose, then, that this is not the case—that you are no longer friends with this person not because of any disaffection with her character or actions but simply because you moved away (say). The idea is supposed to be that your informational base remains the same as with your current friends, in terms of both amplitude and polarity; it is only your relationship with the person which is different.

To the extent that these suppositions are believable, we can use such a case to test the vindicatory evidentialist strategy.<sup>34</sup> We should ask ourselves, therefore, to what degree we would engage in such a case in the epistemic practices which we have associated with friendship. To what degree would you take extra efforts to scrutinize the evidence being presented, and to develop and entertain less damning hypotheses or interpretations than the obvious ones? To what degree would your eventual beliefs about this person's actions and character, in light of this new information, match the conclusions you would draw concerning an actual friend? Are you just as unlikely to conclude that this person acted disreputably? If we are really imagining that we are not this

33. Thanks to Jerrold Levinson and Kris McDaniel for this suggestion.

34. I myself have some difficulty embracing these suppositions: we still tend to consider ourselves friends of people with whom we were friends in the past but with whom we have lost touch due to moving away. It is perhaps easier if we imagine that a great deal of time has passed since the days you were friends.

person's friend at all, that they are now nothing to us, I think intuition will report a diminished tendency to do these things.

For all these reasons, then, I don't think we will be able to mount a complete evidentialist vindication of our differential epistemic practices concerning our friends. Indeed, I think that in believing as we do when our friends are at issue we are not following any generally sanctioned epistemological principle. A full proof of this claim would be tedious, because it would have to take up and treat separately every epistemological principle you might be alleged to be following. I shall not pursue such a mopping-up operation here. Rather, I shall presume that the informational or evidentialist strategy we have already considered was the most promising avenue for vindicating the friend's beliefs and belief-forming practices in epistemic terms. Having rejected that attempt, I shall now simply revert to the commonsensical view that the good friend's doxastic practices, as outlined in Section I, are indeed epistemically objectionable in various respects.

Let us now consider the *implications* of the conflict between friendship and our epistemic standards with which we are presented. The arguments thus far—if successful—have, it seems, led us to the following conclusions. Friendship positively demands epistemic bias, understood as an epistemically unjustified departure from epistemic objectivity. Doxastic dispositions which violate the standards promulgated by mainstream epistemological theories are a constitutive feature of friendship. Or, to put the point as succinctly—and brutally—as possible, friendship requires epistemic irrationality.

These are obviously uncomfortable and unwelcome results. They are particularly so because friendship seems to be an indispensable component of a good life. The importance and even necessity of friendship for a good life guarantees that each of us has very strong reasons to form and to have friendships. Conversely, if satisfying a certain set of demands or ideals would preclude friendship, it follows that we all have very strong reasons *not* to live up to those demands or ideals. That is why it is distressing even to contemplate the possibility that friendship is incompatible with some other important set of standards, be they moral or epistemic. In light of our overwhelming reasons for engaging in friendships, it seems those other ideals and demands, however much we cherish them, *must* come in second if they make friendship impossible. We have no realistic option but to pay the price of admission to friendship, however high that price might be from some other evaluative point of view. If there is a fight here, friendship must—and will—win.

This suggests one possible moral we might draw from our present predicament: that rationality isn't everything. If the canons of epistemic rationality, or the standards for justified belief, are incompatible with

friendship, then—one might say—so much the worse for epistemic rationality or justified belief. If friendship constitutively involves epistemic irrationality—and, conversely, epistemic rationality precludes friendship—then we ought to opt for epistemic irrationality. According to this line, we have most reason overall to be epistemically irrational—at least in the context of a friendship.<sup>35</sup> This response is perfectly coherent, for there is nothing contradictory in the idea that we have most reason overall to do something which is unacceptable from a particular evaluative standpoint. For example, if we arrived at the conclusion that the dispositions constitutive of friendship were incompatible with our moral ideals, one possible reaction would be, well, so much the worse for morality.<sup>36</sup> This kind of response seems then to be available in both the epistemic domain, which is our concern here, and the moral domain.

A second possible response, which also seems available in both domains, is more cautious. It says that given the clash in requirements which we have uncovered, there is simply no answer to the question of what you ought to do overall. There is what you ought to believe from an epistemic point of view, what you ought to believe as a friend, but no adjudication of those competing claims which gives us what you ought to believe simpliciter. This response is thus analogous to Sidgwick's view that there is a "dualism of practical reason";<sup>37</sup> it holds that the demands of friendship are simply incommensurable with those of epistemic rationality (or morality for that matter).

These two reactions, as I noted, are options for both the epistemic version and the moral version of the conflict. What is interesting is that there is another response which seems attractive in the moral domain but which may seem unattractive, even dubiously available, in the epistemic case. I want to close by highlighting and then questioning this alleged asymmetry. Our present predicament, recall, stems from having found that dispositions condemned as irrational or unreasonable by standard epistemological theories are nonetheless essential ingredients of friendship. Because friendship is indispensable for a good life, it follows that complying with the standards promulgated by mainstream epistemological theories would preclude living a good life. We all, then, have most reason overall *not* to exemplify the epistemic ideals, or even to satisfy the epistemic requirements, which those theories propose. We

35. Luckily, there's no implication that we should be epistemically irrational all the time, for the argument in favor of epistemic irrationality turns centrally on the indispensability of friendship in particular to a good life.

36. Indeed, I take this to have been more or less Bernard Williams's attitude. See, e.g., "Persons, Character, and Morality," in his *Moral Luck: Philosophical Papers, 1973–1980* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 1–19.

37. Henry Sidgwick, "Concluding Chapter," in his *The Methods of Ethics*, 7th ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1981), 496–509.

must embrace what those theories consider to be epistemic irrationality. Notice, however, that it doesn't follow that we must embrace epistemic irrationality. We've concluded only that we must embrace something which those theories classify as epistemic irrationality; and those theories could be wrong.

In order to demonstrate that this way out of our predicament is a genuine option, I want now to take a detour through moral theory and document the prevalence of a structurally analogous response in the moral domain. Suppose we were convinced that friendship was incompatible with the ideals or requirements held up by a particular moral theory. One very natural response to that fact would be to question whether that theory could then be considered a correct account of morality's demands. Indeed, one might think the aforementioned conflict constituted sufficient grounds to reject that theory's characterization of morality's requirements. If living up to the demands of a particular moral theory would preclude friendship, and thus a good life, many moral theorists would take that to be a compelling, even decisive, argument against that particular moral conception. They would take such an incompatibility to be very strong grounds for discarding, or at least revising, the moral theory in question. For many moral theorists, the discovery of an incompatibility between morality and friendship would be proof, not that friendship is immoral, but that our previous ideas about morality were too narrow.

To take such a conflict as relevant in this way to moral theorizing is implicitly to accept a certain constraint on moral theory choice—one that I believe many moral philosophers accept. A line of argument like the one I just sketched has, of course, been very influential against consequentialism;<sup>38</sup> so clearly many anticonsequentialists are relying on such a constraint. However, even some consequentialists accept it. Frank Jackson, for instance, summarily dismisses the idea that “it is no refutation of a moral theory that doing as it enjoins would rob life of its shape and meaning.” He writes, “this is a chilling reply and I will say no more about it.”<sup>39</sup> He does, however, say a bit more about it, for he ends his paper by noting that consequentialists “cannot live with the conflict with a life worth living, given the way things more or less are. That would be to invite the challenge that their conception of what

38. For arguments of this kind that turn on friendship in particular, see, e.g., Dean Cocking and Justin Oakley, “Indirect Consequentialism, Friendship, and the Problem of Alienation,” *Ethics* 106 (1995): 86–111; Neera Badhwar Kapur, “Why It Is Wrong to Be Always Guided by the Best: Consequentialism and Friendship,” *Ethics* 101 (1991): 483–504; Jollimore (*Friendship and Agent-Relative Morality*); William H. Wilcox, “Egoists, Consequentialists, and Their Friends,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 16 (1987): 73–84.

39. Frank Jackson, “Decision-Theoretic Consequentialism and the Nearest and Dearest Objection,” *Ethics* 101 (1991): 461–82, quote on 461.

ought to be done had lost touch with *human* morality.”<sup>40</sup> Luckily, Jackson thinks consequentialism can dodge this challenge, because it *is* compatible with living a good life. But he nonetheless accepts the constraint.

One might feel justified in wielding this constraint as a weapon not just against a particular moral theory but against a whole family of moral theories, or indeed against all prominent moral theories. Stocker, as we noted earlier, famously rejects all “modern ethical theories.” He charges that “as ethical theories, they fail by making it impossible for a person to achieve the good in an integrated way.”<sup>41</sup> This remark makes it clear that Stocker endorses something like the present constraint on moral theorizing: he takes it to be a requirement on an adequate conception of morality that its demands be compatible with leading a good life in an integrated way. Many other moral philosophers would agree with him on that point even if they disagree with him that no “modern ethical theory” meets that condition. Thomas Nagel, for example, believes that “it is the task of a moral theory to tell us not only what we are morally required to do but also how to lead a good life.”<sup>42</sup> Nagel does not share Stocker’s view that such a test will doom all “modern ethical theories,” but, like Stocker, he accepts the legitimacy of such a constraint on theory choice in ethics.

Despite this broad agreement, not all moral theorists would react in this way to the discovery of a conflict between friendship (or the good life more generally) and the demands held up by an otherwise compelling moral theory. Not all theorists would wish moral theory to, as Nagel puts it, “open itself to possible criticism from the point of view of a more comprehensive idea of what it is to live well.”<sup>43</sup> David Brink, for example, thinks such conflicts should be filed under “foreign affairs”: that they indicate a tension between morality and rationality, rather than being reasons to alter our conception of morality itself.<sup>44</sup> Samuel Scheffler thus classifies Brink as an advocate of the “ideal of purity” in ethics, which holds that “morality’s concerns are specific, distinctive, and in particular, sharply to be distinguished from the standpoint of the individual agent’s interests. To those who attribute this kind of purity to the moral point of view, the idea that morality is moderate involves the confusion of supposing that morality’s distinctive content is capable [of] being diluted by concerns external to it.”<sup>45</sup> Scheffler is right to highlight

40. *Ibid.*, 482.

41. Stocker, “Schizophrenia of Modern Ethical Theories,” 455–56.

42. Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 195.

43. *Ibid.*, 193.

44. David O. Brink, “Utilitarian Morality and the Personal Point of View,” *Journal of Philosophy* 83 (1986): 417–38.

45. Samuel Scheffler, *Human Morality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 101.



the continued appeal of the “ideal of purity” for some moral theorists, even as he himself rejects it. There is broad, but not universal, agreement that the choice of a moral theory must be responsive to the possibility of a good life for the agent who would comply with it.

I want to put on the table a structurally analogous response to the conflict which we have uncovered between friendship and the standards articulated by mainstream epistemologies. Perhaps the present investigation demonstrates that mainstream epistemological theories are simply wrong in the standards they set for rational belief formation. If standard epistemological theories condemn as irrational something which is indispensable for a good life—so that we all have compelling reason *not* to comply with the demands of those theories—then perhaps we should question whether those theories offer an adequate account of epistemic rationality after all. Why accept a conception of epistemic rationality on which it is something which we have very strong reasons to avoid? It might be better to rethink the assumption that epistemic rationality requires the kind of epistemic objectivity or impartiality from which friendship seems necessarily to depart. To do this would be to adopt a less purist, more fluid approach to epistemological theorizing, on which epistemological theories are in principle open to criticism from data like these. As in the moral case, rather than concluding that friendship is epistemically irrational, we could instead conclude that our previous ideas of epistemic rationality were too narrow.

I am sure, however, that this suggestion will be resisted, for in the epistemic domain the situation seems exactly the reverse of what we found in the moral domain. Most of us believe that moral theories are in some way answerable to what we have most reason to do overall, or to the possibility of living a good life. Most of us take considerations of these kinds to constrain the search for an acceptable account of morality’s demands. Epistemological theorizing, however, initially seems more autonomous. We don’t typically think of the search for the correct standards of epistemic virtue as being in any way constrained by considerations having to do with a good life. We don’t normally view it as the business of an *epistemological* theory to be compatible with important human goods, such as friendship. In the epistemic domain, most theorists would embrace the “ideal of purity,” holding that epistemology’s concerns are specific, distinctive, and not to be corrupted by considerations stemming from the believer’s interests or the pragmatic utility of holding a certain belief. Few, I think, would endorse the opposite view. Indeed, many would view it as only dubiously available in the epistemic context.<sup>46</sup>

46. Peter Railton could perhaps be cited as one of the rare exceptions to this consensus. “I am insisting that questions about what it would be rational to believe belong

If friendship proves to be incompatible with an otherwise compelling account of epistemic rationality, we don't feel the same pressure to revise our beliefs about epistemic rationality. But should our minds be closed to that option? If the epistemologist wishes to stand by his purist approach, he will have to relinquish any claim to overridingness for the epistemic standards he is busy formulating. Given the very strong reasons we have to engage in friendships (which by hypothesis contravene his standards), the epistemological theorist will have to concede that his standards are not authoritative with respect to what we ought to believe all things considered.<sup>47</sup> This is a nontrivial price to pay: many epistemologists no doubt assume that in formulating standards for epistemic rationality they are limning the rationality of belief simpliciter. Furthermore, there might in fact be good reasons to think that mainstream epistemologies are too narrow in evaluating the friend's doxastic practices unfavorably. For example, if we take a leaf from the moral theorist's book and shift evaluative focal points, we might see some epistemic merit in the contribution that the good friend's beliefs make to social learning and to the accuracy of the social distribution of opinion concerning her friend.<sup>48</sup> Like a defense lawyer, the friend who consistently advocates the more charitable hypothesis serves an important social epistemic function: without her input, negative views (which propagate rapidly through gossip) might become entrenched with little resistance, leading to a decrease in the overall accuracy of the social set of beliefs about her friend. A move to a social perspective could thus highlight recognizably epistemic values that transcend the narrower confines of evidentialism. But the epistemological purist, who feels no pressure to reconsider his epistemic standards in light of what he considers to be foreign considerations, might never even consider such a move.

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to practical rather than theoretical reason," he writes. "What it would be rational for an individual to believe on the basis of a given experience will vary . . . with respect to what he desires" ("Moral Realism," *Philosophical Review* 95 [1986]: 163–207, quote on 167). Gilbert Harman has also been attentive to the role of pragmatic considerations in theoretical reasoning, while being careful to preserve some respects in which practical considerations are, as he puts it in a recent treatment, "not properly relevant to your theoretical reasoning" ("Practical Aspects of Theoretical Reasoning," in *The Oxford Handbook of Rationality*, ed. Alfred R. Mele and Piers Rawling [New York: Oxford University Press, 2004], 45–56, quote on 49). See secs. 1.2 and 1.8 of his "Rationality," and his "Pragmatism and Reasons for Belief," in his *Reasoning, Meaning, and Mind* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1999), 9–45, 93–116, for more discussion.

47. I discussed how best to formulate and defend overridingness claims in the moral context in my "Moral Overridingness and Moral Theory," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 79 (1998): 170–89.

48. Peter Railton suggested this possibility to me in conversation.

Let me close by saying that while I have not advocated any one response to the present predicament over others, I do think the problem sufficiently interesting that the full range of possible responses should be on the table for our consideration.