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# Introduction to Great Philosophers of Friendship and Solitude

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# **Introduction to Great Philosophers on Friendship and Solitude**

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## 1 Purpose and description of the collection

Consider your friends.

Who all comes to mind when you read that sentence? Your cycling buddies? Your closest sibling? Coworkers or classmates you go out with on Fridays? Or did your mind go straight to your most intimate and longest friend, in whom you confide your deepest fears, and with whom you celebrate life's best moments?

The last sort seems to represent a *friend* in the most restricted sense—a *true* friend, a *best* friend. What is it that differentiates your true friend(s) from the others; what does one have to do, to think, to feel, to *be* in order to be your friend in this special sense?

Shifting gears—are you better off for having your true friend; are they for having you? If yes, why? What does that friendship add to your lives that enhances them?

Friendships seem to make us better off in many ways. They can make us happier; they can help us make prudent life-decisions by giving us needed perspective on our circumstances and on ourselves; they can also challenge us to become better, including to be a more *moral* person.

But sometimes friendship comes into conflict with our values. A friend might disagree with, and even fight with us about politics or religion. Our devotion to a friend might, at times, pull us away from our most cherished projects, even leading us to abandon the projects in some cases. Finally, a friend might call upon us to do something immoral in order to help them—or simply in order to *join* them!

Friends can make us smarter, wiser, happier, and more virtuous, but they can also make us lazy, foolish, miserable, and vicious. At what point do such bad effects render the friendship defunct? At what point *should* we break the friendship off? And if these bad effects are a risk of friendship, should we be careful about even forming them in the first place?

*Great Philosophers on Friendship and Solitude* is an openly accessible collection on OpenBU of short essays addressing these long-standing questions about friendship and its value, drawing from the history of philosophy. These essays were selected from among those written as an assignment for my course of the same name at Boston University in the Spring of 2019 (CAS PH 110 A1). These papers were selected by fellow students and myself as the best-written and most engaging.

The purpose of this collection is to showcase student work as well as to make freely and publicly accessible thought-provoking philosophical discussion on a topic of interest to us all. I am proud to introduce these excellent, readable, and thoughtful essays to anyone interested in thinking further about one of life's greatest treasures.

Readers who are curious about the basis for these essays—or who simply wish to read further on the issues raised in them—are encouraged to peruse the several philosophical readings from the course that have been included in this collection. A full list of readings for the course is also included at the end of this Introduction (see Condensed course syllabus).

I am indebted to Eleni Castro, OpenBU and Electronic Theses and Dissertations Librarian, at Boston University's Mugar Memorial Library for her enthusiasm and hard work, without which this collection would not have been possible.

### **Note to educators**

For those who may be interested in organizing a similar collection for their students, or at least in learning more about the process, I have included below the detailed assignment directing the students' original essays as well as a condensed version of the syllabus.

I presented the opportunity to students as a chance to go through a process analogous to the peer-reviewed publication that professional academics go through with their work, and as bearing the potential of the analogous reward of seeing work made available to a wide audience.

The selection process involved having students nominate by email the papers they thought best based on in-class presentations in small groups. Those papers with the greatest number of nominations are included here. When there were ties or overlooked outstanding essays, I made the final decision.

I highly recommend this model as a template for building similar projects. The students and I found it greatly rewarding, and I am again gratified to see such excellent pieces of philosophy on showcase here for the public.

## 2 Directions for course assignment

### 2.1 Purpose

This paper is again [like the first paper] an opportunity to deepen your own understanding of some of the issues from class; to pursue an inquiry further than we have been able to do in class; and to practice the critical skills we have already been employing in class. These skills include: charitably interpreting the arguments put forward in different styles by different philosophers; considering possible objections to their arguments; and also considering how the author might respond—that is, whether there are reasons to think the author is basically right even if the argument she puts forward needs refinement.

This paper is expected to be a longer and more sustained argument than the prior paper. Here I will be looking for you to lay out a clear argument from the readings and lectures, to evaluate it critically and carefully, and to come to a reasoned conclusion that withstands objections as best as you can tell.

The presentation component of this paper is an opportunity to share your carefully thought-out ideas with others. Presenting your paper can help you think about objections and connections that might not have occurred to you on your own. It's also a chance to think about how your presentation of the issues is heard by others. It's one thing to be able to sit down and think through an issue on your own; quite another to be able to convey them to others. You won't be graded on whether you persuade your groupmates. But I want you to do your best to present your papers clearly and accessibly.

### 2.2 General directions

Bring the printed paper in duplicate to class on 4/22 with your email address at the top. It should be between 1200-2000 words (roughly 5-7 pages). It will serve as the basis for a peer-review exercise.

As always, be sure to cite your sources appropriately. If you consult materials not assigned for the course, cite carefully and include a full reference to the work (in any format you choose).

On 4/29 and 5/1 we will have group presentations of the revised draft of your papers. Similar to the discussion prompts, your groups will be those you're assigned to on blackboard. The first three names alphabetically in the group will present on 4/29; the last two on 5/1. On 5/1, after the last presentation, groups will discuss the papers they thought the best overall (in terms of argument, polish, and interest). The groups will then nominate those papers for publication on the special collection of [OpenBU](#) for this course, appended with material chosen by me. If the nominated authors accept, I will proof their papers with them and we will publish them for anyone to view on OpenBU.

The final draft of the paper will be due on blackboard by 5/4 (Sat) by midnight.

### 2.3 Topic and Structure

As with the short papers, you have a choice of topics; any substantive issue we've covered in class is suitable for a paper. I encourage you to write on a different (though it might well be closely related)

topic to last time. I encourage everyone to come to my office hours and discuss their topics, but I understand that not everyone will be able to do so. You may also email me or talk to me after class. Below are some topics you may want to consider (many of them are the same as last time).

Unlike last time, I want you explicitly consider arguments from at least two different authors. (Some of you did this last time, anyway, which was great). How you utilize the two authors' arguments is up to you. Simplest may be to use one in Step 2 below, and another in support of an objection (Step 3). Or perhaps two people argues similar conclusions and you want to figure out whose version (if either) is better.

Whatever your topic, please follow the following simple structure as last time. (This structure is meant to make your job easier. It is roughly the same structure I follow in my own writing. The bulleted notes are intended to address possible questions you may have about the numbered steps; ignore the notes if you don't find them helpful, or, better, ask me about them.)

- (1) What are you arguing? Briefly state what your final conclusion is (one sentence is fine), and say something quickly about why you chose to pursue this topic specifically.
  - You probably will have to write your conclusion after you write the paper, or at least you should return to it after you finish the paper.
- (2) What is the basis of your argument in the readings we've read? Present as clearly as you can (at least) one of the substantive arguments from one of the readings.
  - If you wish, you may rely on my presentation of the arguments in the lecture slides. Though you may find ways to improve on my presentation based on your own reading or light of the specific question you're pursuing.
- (3) Is the argument from the reading sound? Develop at least one reason to object to this argument that goes beyond the lecture in at least some small way.
  - Perhaps you think one or more of the premises are unfounded or even clearly false; perhaps you think the conclusion the author takes to follow from the premises does not (the argument is invalid).
  - If you think one of the objections we discussed is the most important, go ahead and present that objection. I'm not asking you to ignore the best reasons. I just want you to develop the argument yourself a bit rather than repeating word-for-word what I wrote in the slides. Step 4 will give you even more room to go beyond class if you struggle to do so in Step 3.
- (4) How might the original argument be defended against your objection? Develop at least one way in which the argument—in whole or in part—can be modified to address your objection.
  - If your objection is really strong, the response may require abandoning some part of the original argument. In deciding which to abandon, we have to think about what

the author is most committed to versus what the author just happens to espouse.

- (5) Is this final response enough to save the basic the argument? State your conclusion and your reason for it.

## 2.4 Sample Topics

These are really just starting points, since they don't always consider two authors each.

Aristotle argues that “true” or “perfect friendship” cannot be had between “bad men.” What does this mean, and is this argument sound?

Aristotle argues that even in perfect friendship, we only conditionally want what's best for our friend. What is his argument; is it sound; and is it consistent with his definition of friendship?

Torquatus gives several Epicurean arguments for Axiological Hedonism. Are any of them successful? Are they enough to shut down Cicero's worries?

Torquatus presents three ways to reconcile the tension between three claims Epicureans hold: that Axiological Hedonism is true, that friendship requires genuine concern and action for the sake of another's wellbeing, and that friendship is genuinely valuable. Are any of these (or some combination of them) successful in reconciling the tension?

Epictetus distinguishes being alone from solitude. He argues that the former is not bad in the way the latter is and that the former is actually good for us. Are these arguments sound?

Laelius, in Cicero's dialogue, offers two arguments that friendship is *not* selfish (or egoistic). Are these arguments any good? Are they (together) conclusive?

Aquinas gives several arguments for and against hedonism. Do these settle the issue? Do they change our estimation of Torquatus' arguments?

How different is Montaigne's understanding of friendship from the model we saw Aristotle and Cicero articulate? I emphasized the radical nature of loving friendship on Montaigne's description. Nehamas (Chapter 2) argues that this represents an important departure from the view that friendship is public good to a private good. Is the actual view of friendship and its value as different as Nehamas thinks? What are the differences exactly? Whose view is better? And why?

How does La Rochefoucauld's complex view that “virtues are but vices disguised” impact how we think about the basis and value of friendship? Is the resulting view more accurate than alternatives? How and why?

Wollstonecraft argues that genuine friendship is more valuable than the Romantic view of romantic love? What are her reasons, and does she make a compelling case? How does or should this impact the way we think about friends, romance, and other relationships today?

What is Schopenhauer's argument for pessimism? Why is it mistaken? What does the argument, or its mistakes, teach us about the good life?

Why does Schopenhauer think that most of the reasons given by the other authors in praise of friendship are naive and fail to recognize how bad most social interactions are for us? Is he (partly) right?

What is the basis and value of friendship for Emerson? Is his view defensible or is it just Romantic, poetic blather? (Given how celebrated it is, the blather reading owes us a very carefully and considered argument.)

Nehamas argues both that the traditional accounts of friendship we've read exaggerate friendship's value and exaggerate its dependence on moral virtue. Is he right about one or the other of these points? If you think so, think hard about how Aristotle or Cicero or someone else might respond to Nehamas.

Nehamas argues that a large part of the value of our friends is to make and show us who we are—friendships partly constitute our identity and allow us to explore possible identities, to try them on, as it were, and then to reveal to us who we are (becoming). Is this a plausible picture of the value of friendship? Why? What does it add to the prior account?

### 3 Condensed course syllabus

## Great Philosophers on Friendship and Solitude

CAS PH 110 A1, Boston University, Spring 2019

Ian D. Dunkle

### Description

The history of philosophy features as many great questions as it does great thinkers. One set of questions that affects everyone are those surrounding friendship. These include:

*Are friends valuable? Do they make us morally better? Do they inherently make us happier? Do they make us better off in some other way? Are there costs to friendship? And are they worth the cost?*

These and related questions were once considered to be among the most important for philosophy. While friendship has waned in philosophical prominence in recent decades, there is a reemerging interest in friendship and love. This course offers a survey of several of history's great philosophers, as well as recent work by a small number of influential current figures, all centered around the philosophy of friendship. We will use questions regarding friendship and its value as a portal by which to catch a glimpse of what these greats have to say regarding such ongoing value-theoretical questions as:

*What makes for a good life?*

*What is happiness?*

*What is the relationship between the good life and the morally upstanding life?*

*To what extent is human social behavior egoistic? altruistic? selfish? self-deceived?*

*Does solitude, independence, and/or solitary reflection (on oneself, others, the world) have any value over and above what can be had in the company of others?*

*What is an identity, and how do we acquire one?*

*What is love? Does love teach us anything about ourselves, others, or the world that we can't get any other way?*

### Texts

The only book required for this course is:

Nehamas, Alexander. (2016) *On Friendship*. New York: Basic Books. (ISBN 9780465082926)

Most of the readings for this course are posted to the course blackboard site. Some of these posts are links to pages on the Mugar Library website where the material can be accessed by entering your kerberos login. In particular, multiple chapters are assigned from the following:

Wolf, Susan. (2015) *The Variety of Values: Essays on Morality, Meaning, and Love*. Oxford University Press.

## Grading

### Discussion Prompts (6% of overall grade x 2)

Students are randomly assigned to small groups on Blackboard and to three days during the semester for which they are the leader. On each day indicated on the course schedule-calendar, the assigned member of each group will present a discussion prompt (five-seven minutes) to their group at the beginning of class.

The purpose of the prompt is to raise a point of discussion based on the material assigned for that day. Discussion prompts should raise at least one question about the reading to other students; they should explain why the question is important; and they should propose at least a partial answer to that question. The student will submit a one (or two) page written prompt on Blackboard before the class period during which they present.

### Paper 1 (20% of overall grade)

The first paper is due printed and brought to class on 3/1. The paper should be 900-1500 words, be based on the material from the course, and follow the forthcoming guide which we will discuss.

### Paper 2 and Presentation (33% of overall grade)

The second paper, like the first, is due printed and brought to class on 4/22. Unlike the first paper, this paper should be 1200-2000 words and will be presented either on 4/29 or 5/1 to the same small group to which one is assigned for discussion prompts.

### Final Exam (25% of overall grade)

The final exam will take place on the official University final date. The final will be based on the final third of the course.

### Attendance/Participation (10% of overall grade)

Students are allowed two unexcused absences from the main class. More will bring down this component. Students are also expected to participate in their small groups and in the class as a whole. Those who do not participate or who are observed engaging in distracted or distracting behavior (surfing Internet, etc.) will not earn full credit for this component either.

## Schedule

NB Below is a tentative overview. The official course schedule is visible on blackboard in an embedded Google calendar. You can view any changes to the course schedule of reading and assignments in real time there. You can also add the course Google calendar to your personal calendar (e.g. on your phone).

[1/25-2/4]

Aristotle (384-322 BCE)

(unknown) *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book I (entire); II (entire); VI: Sections 1-5, 12-3; VIII (entire); IX (entire); X: Sec 7-8.

[2/6-2/11]

Epicurus (341-270 BCE)

Cicero. (45 BCE) *De Finibus*, Book I: Sec IV-XXI.

[2/13]

Epictetus (55-135)

(108) excerpt from *Discourses*

[2/15-20]

Marcus Tullius Cicero (106-43 BCE)

(44 BCE) *On Friendship*.

[2/22-27]

Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274)

(1269-74) selections from *Summa Theologica* I-II: Questions 1-4.

### 3/1 – Paper 1 Due

[3/1-4]

Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592)

(1595) *Essays*, Book I: Chapter 28 “Friendship”; Ch 39 “Solitude.”

[3/6-8]

François de La Rochefoucauld (1613-1680)

(1678) *Reflections; Sentences or Moral Maxims*. (abridged)

[3/18]

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804)

(1785) excerpt from *The Metaphysics of Morals*

[3/20]

Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797)

(1792) excerpt from *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*.

[3/22-25]

Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860)

(1851) *Parerga and Paralipomena*, selections from “On the Suffering of the World” and “[Aphorisms on] the Wisdom of Life.”

[3/27]

Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882)

(1841) “Friendship”

[3/29]

Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900)

Excerpts from (1886[1878]) *Human, All-Too-Human* and (1886[1882]) *The Gay Science*.

[4/1-12]

Alexander Nehamas (1946-)

(2016) *On Friendship* (entire)

[4/17-24]

Susan Wolf (1952-)

(2015) *The Variety of Values*, Ch 9, 10, 11.

**4/22 Paper 2 Due**

[4/26]

Bülow, William & Cathrine Felix. (2016) “On Friendship between Online Equals” *Philosophy & Technology* 29(1).

**4/29-5/1 Paper Presentations**

**Final** – See University Final Schedule