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**The Moral Preconditions for Friendship:
A Middle Ground Between Aristotle,
Cicero, and Nehamas**

Esther Kang

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The Moral Preconditions for Friendship: A Middle Ground Between Aristotle, Cicero, and Nehamas

Traditional philosophical accounts of friendship, such as Aristotle's in *The Nicomachean Ethics* and Cicero's in *On Friendship*, have intertwined morality with friendship, claiming it essential to friendship. In a modern take more relatable to current friendships, *On Friendship*, Nehamas refutes this argument and asserts that "morality is often irrelevant to, or in conflict with our love for our friends" (Nehamas: 27).

In this paper, I will argue that morality is not essential but also not irrelevant to our friendships; those of poor moral character can be friends as long as they fulfill two important moral requirements of friendships. First, individuals must have relatively similar moral compasses to be friends. Our personal moral values create expectations of behavior from others and should one engage in activities the other abhors, it would be impossible to maintain the goodwill necessary for friendship. Second, the morals we practice in our friendships are different from the morals we practice toward other people. A friendship can only exist with mutually recognized goodwill, and this requirement holds friends to high moral standards of extending loyalty, honesty, integrity, compassion, and respect. Yet these virtues need not be extended to everyone. Those that behave in a morally reprehensible manner should limit their behavior to other people, and their friends should be able to trust them to do so. I chose this topic because these philosophers we have studied in the course have such different opinions on the role of morality in friendship, and I seek to offer my own insight on the matter.

The strongest argument for the importance of morality in friendship is that friendship itself requires moral virtues in practice. To Aristotle and Cicero, immoral people cannot have true friendships because they are incapable of moral behavior. Aristotle believes that morally

bad people cannot love the intrinsic value of others and that they solely seek personal gain, leading to friendships of either pleasure or utility. He views the perfect friendship as one between those that are good and of the same moral standing, those who love for the other's sake (Aristotle, book 8, §6). Likewise, Cicero maintains that bad people cannot be friends "for the simple reason that real friendship requires trust, wisdom and basic goodness." Therefore, "the real limit to be observed in friendship is this: the characters of two friends must be stainless. There must be complete harmony of interests, purpose, and aims, without exception" (Cicero: 20).

Nehamas argues, however, that the perception of our friends is subjective: "we take the features we admire in one another, whatever they are, to be virtues, whether or not they are such in the abstract" (Nehamas 189). This causes us even sometimes to love our friends not despite their shortcomings but because of them. We love friends because of the features we admire, and these features are not necessarily limited to morality. He discusses the movie *Thelma and Louise* to demonstrate how "bad" people can be friends. Two women commit terrible crimes together and grow their friendship through their immoral acts. Their friendship depends on their common immorality. So for Nehamas morality is not a trait essential to friendship.

I do not agree completely with Aristotle and Cicero's reasoning. Aristotle and Cicero thought bad people were unable to separate their behavior towards their friends and others, but it does not follow that because one has imperfect morals, he or she will behave immorally towards everyone. However, I do agree that friends must be of equal moral standing and must find harmony in their values. Friends who do not share similar moral values will find it difficult to engage one another without any issues arising from the clash in their beliefs. It is reasonable to have moral values that do not match perfectly; yet the more important the values are to them, the more important that the friends do not conflict on them. Bad people can be friends because as long as friends are compatible in their behavior, it does not matter if their behavior is moral or immoral.

Because the perceived value of character traits is more important than moral character, Nehamas' argument against independently acknowledged virtues makes sense. Nevertheless, it does not follow that morality has no role in a friendship. Everyone feels more strongly about certain moral qualities over others and has different standards for morality; these standards must be compatible for friendship to thrive.

Nehamas gives two examples of friendship between immoral individuals to demonstrate the irrelevance of morality to friendship, but these examples confirm that

individuals must share moral values. With Thelma and Louise, both individuals found robbing and kidnapping acceptable, which is why they grew closer through these shared crimes. Had one of them been staunchly against crime, their friendship would not have existed. The other example is of members of a gang who are friends because “they admire their willingness to take orders and ability to execute them unquestioningly” (Nehamas: 29). In the same sense, they can accept each other’s immoral behavior and be friends because they value such qualities over others and have a similar moral compass.

These examples also illustrate that “bad” people must act morally towards their friends even if they do not towards other people; only by both having shared morals and separating the moral behavior towards friends and others, can individuals sustain a friendship. The aforementioned virtues necessary for friendship existed between Thelma and Louise amid their shared depravity, and they were only able to be friends because they trusted that the other would behave towards them with these virtues. Members of a criminal gang treat each other differently than their victims, expecting loyalty from the members even though the gang engages in criminal behavior. This does not mean that genuine friendship is common between bad people—only in the rarest occasions would genuine trust and goodwill arise between gang members, who are prone to betrayal and greed. Yet friendships of those with slight moral flaws should not be invalidated. As long as they can trust each other, individuals with flawed morals can and will discriminate in their behavior in favor of their friends, and this is an inevitable requirement for friendship to exist between such people.

With these rules to friendship, it seems impossible for a good person and a bad person to become friends—but what of the issue of moral depravity? Knowing the considerable influence friends have over us, Cicero warns against this and repeatedly gives advice on being careful in selecting and making friends:

The true rule is to take such care in the selection of our friends as never to enter upon a friendship with a man whom we could under any circumstances come to hate... Wherefore, I must again and again repeat, you must satisfy your judgment before engaging your affections: not love first and judge afterwards. We suffer from carelessness in many of our undertakings: in none more than in selecting and cultivating our friends. (Cicero: 20)

This raises a potential problem from my account. Friends can often influence us to change our moral values drastically and engage in immoral behavior, such as taking drugs, cheating, or shoplifting. We shouldn’t need to take care in choosing our friends if individuals need identical morals to sustain a friendship. Even in the example of Thelma and Louise,

Louise induces Thelma to commit crimes on a greater scale. This seems to indicate that the friends originally did not have similar stances on moral issues. Yet I argue that it is only important for friends to have similar stances on moral issues that they think are especially important, or “deal breakers.”

Moral compasses only need be compatible, not identical. For example, one who does not smoke but does not care if his or her friend smokes can still form a friendship with a smoker. However, if the smoker also cheats, and the non-smoker cannot tolerate cheating, friendship cannot exist between the two. In this way, good people and bad people can be friends, as long as they do not conflict on the morals that they believe are important. For it is given that the morals that one thinks are important are morals they believe to be universal, morals that they believe everyone should abide by, while for morals that are not as important it does not matter if they are present in our friends.

Nehamas may also raise a possible issue with my account. Nehamas thinks that the features we admire in friends are not necessarily limited to morals. He may argue that because compatibility in all qualities, and not only morals, are necessary for friendship, morality is still irrelevant to friendship.

But although we can agree that friends love one another for features they admire, we need not think that these must be only the virtues of morality or even the broader range Aristotle had in mind. Your sense of humor may well be crucial to our friendship... the same is true of your taste in music, books, clothes, and who knows what else... I may think that you losing your sense of humor has turned you into a significantly different person and destroyed our friendship. (Nehamas: 28)

It is true that friends must be compatible in their qualities, not only in their morals, and friendships are started and maintained through common interests or a similar sense of humor. Yet it is only for certain friendships that such qualities are “deal breakers,” while compatibility in moral virtues is essential in all friendships. The question I seek to answer is not *Why do friends love?* but *What is required for friends to love?* Friendship can exist in the presence of common morals even without common qualities; whereas friendship cannot exist in the presence of common qualities without common morals. Arbitrary character traits, such as humor or beauty, are less important than the basic foundations of friendship such as loyalty and goodwill.

A related question is: *Is friendship that is contingent on a single character trait a true friendship?* Thinking upon our own close friends, even if one whom we may love for their sense of humor goes through a bout of depression and is not funny anymore, we would not stop loving them. However, it is understandable if you stop being friends with someone who starts behaving with malice or dishonesty.

It seems impossible to reconcile my argument to the writings of Aristotle, Cicero and Nehamas; we have fundamental differences in our opinions of what is required for a friendship to work. Yet to modify Aristotle's argument, perfect friendship is between those who are good, alike in virtue, and wish well for the sake of the other. However, goodness only needs to be extended within the friendship and bad people must limit their depravity to people they are not friends with. Unlike what Cicero believes, bad people are capable of extending "trust, wisdom and basic goodness," but would most likely only do so to their friends (Cicero: 20). As for Nehamas, perception of character is subjective, but we must be able to accept the morals we perceive in our friends, and in this way, morality remains relevant to friendship. In conclusion, only by fulfilling the two moral requirements of similar moral compasses and moral behavior towards friends can friendship be possible.

Works Cited

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