Friendship, Virtue, and Impartiality

DIANE JESKE
The University of Iowa

The two dominant contemporary moral theories, Kantianism and utilitarianism, have difficulty accommodating our commonsense understanding of friendship as a relationship with significant moral implications. The difficulty seems to arise from their underlying commitment to impartiality, to the claim that all persons are equally worthy of concern. Aristotelian accounts of friendship are partialist in so far as they defend certain types of friendship by appeal to the claim that some persons, the virtuous, are in fact more worthy of concern than are other persons. This article argues that we can preserve the underlying impartiality of Kantianism and utilitarianism, while also preserving a certain partiality with respect to our friends: the partiality of commonsense only seems objectionable if we fail to understand the true grounds, nature, and implications of such partiality. Neo-Aristotelian partiality should be rejected in favor of commonsense partiality.

I. Introduction: Morality and Friendship
Aristotle claimed that “it is finer to benefit friends than to benefit strangers” (1169b10). Similarly, it seems far worse to harm a friend than to harm a stranger or a mere acquaintance. Someone who lies to or betrays her friends, or fails to share her resources with her friends, is usually subject to harsher moral censure than someone who lies to, betrays, or fails to share her resources with a stranger. It is not only morally permissible for us to be specially concerned about our friends’ well-being, we are, in fact, often morally required to promote our friends’ well-being before, and to a greater extent than we promote the well-being of strangers.

These claims are part of our commonsense understanding of friendship as a relationship with significant moral implications. But they are claims that seem difficult to accommodate within the framework of the two dominant contemporary moral theories, utilitarianism and Kantianism. For Kantians, “the moral point of view is specially characterized by its impartiality and its

indifference to any particular relations to particular persons”. Friendship, like self-interest, is viewed as providing motivations that are apt to lead us to neglect our moral duties. Utilitarians also attempt to realize the moral ideal of impartiality. For utilitarians, no person’s happiness is more valuable than that of any other, so, in maximizing happiness, the agent is to weight each person’s happiness equally, regardless of that person’s relationship to the agent. Utilitarians have attempted to show that the best way for each individual to promote happiness is by concentrating her attention on herself and her intimates, including her friends, but such defenses of special concern for friends face the familiar difficulty of making the justification of such concern too dependent upon variable contingent circumstances.

Neither Kantianism nor utilitarianism, then, seems able to give friendship the moral significance which commonsense accords to it: whereas Kantianism regards it as in conflict with morality, for the utilitarian, duties of friendship are moral afterthoughts with only instrumental significance. But it is difficult to know how seriously the moral theorist should take this fact about Kantianism and utilitarianism, given that their inability to accommodate some common views about friendship seems to arise from their acceptance of the claim that all persons are equally worthy of concern, that mere contingent facts about a person’s relationship to me cannot make her more worthy of my concern than is a stranger to me. We seem, then, to be left with the initially unpalatable choice of either denying friendship the moral importance that we commonly attach to it or of denying that our friends are no more worthy of our concern than any other persons. How can the fact that someone is my friend morally justify me in being partial to her?

But perhaps partiality towards our friends appears objectionable only in so far as it appears to be an arbitrary partiality. Aristotle, as I suggested above, also justified partiality with respect to our friends, but only to the extent that our friends are virtuous and, therefore, intrinsically more deserving than those who are not virtuous. Jennifer Whiting has recently offered a new defense of this Aristotelian account. Whiting’s account is an attempt to vindicate partiality with respect to friends while avoiding any potentially parochial or ego-centric implications of such partiality. The success of such an account would

---

2 Bernard Williams, “Persons, Character, and Morality”, in _Moral Luck_ (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 2. Kantians can, of course, come in different varieties. In following sections, I will differentiate among Kantians with respect to the extent to which they allow what I will call “partialist” strains into their theories.

3 The utilitarian can claim that friendship has intrinsic value. But my duties to my friends still take a back seat to my general duty to promote friendship as such. For further discussion of this issue, see my “Relatives and Relativism, with Richard Fumerton, _Philosophical Studies_ (forthcoming). See also my discussion in section III below for a brief treatment of this issue.

4 In her “Impersonal Friends”, _The Monist_ 74 (1991). All future references to this article will appear in parentheses in the text.
pose a significant challenge to the underlying impartiality of utilitarianism and Kantianism.

I want to argue that abandoning the impartialist motivation of Kantianism and utilitarianism is too high of a price to pay, given the narrow range of friendships that the neo-Aristotelian account can accommodate. However, we can continue to accommodate the moral significance that we commonly attribute to friendship if we correctly understand the grounds and the nature of such partiality. Friendship and morality are both more complex than either a straightforward impartialist or neo-Aristotelian partialist account can allow.

II. Questions About Friendship

Before discussing the alternative accounts of special concern for friends, I want to distinguish various questions that could be asked about friendship, and make clear which of those questions I am going to be primarily concerned with. The answers to all these questions are intertwined in important ways, and how we answer one will influence how we answer the others. They are nonetheless distinct questions that should be kept apart.

First, what is the nature of the friendship relation? What are the necessary and sufficient conditions for someone’s standing in a friendship relation to me? What makes it the case that someone is my friend? I will assume that friendship is a complex relation between two persons that involves mutual attitudes of affection and behavioral dispositions to promote each other’s well-being. We can agree with Aristotle that each party to the friendship must care about the other for the other’s own sake (1155b30), and the parties must be, at least to a certain extent, aware of each others’ attitudes (1155b35). So friendship is not a mere feeling (1157b30), although certain feelings are components of the friendship relation—my liking Emma may be a necessary condition of Emma’s being my friend, but it is certainly not a sufficient condition of her being my friend. This admittedly incomplete but, I hope, uncontroversial characterization of friendship will be sufficient for our purposes.

Second, what justification does one have for undertaking or entering friendships with other persons? What reasons are there for entering such relationships in the first place? We have to be careful to distinguish two different issues here. I may have one sort of reason for having friendships rather than having some other type of personal relationship or no personal relationships at all, while I have different sorts of reasons for having some particular friendship rather than another. So, for example, I may be justified in having friendships because friendships are valuable relationships, while my being friends with Henry rather than Emma has some other justification or, perhaps, requires no justification. It will be important to keep in mind that our reasons for having friendships at all need not be the same as our reasons for having one particular friendship rather than another.

FRIENDSHIP, VIRTUE, AND IMPARTIALITY 53
Third, (and this is the question with which we will mainly be concerned), what, if anything, justifies me in continuing to be specially concerned about persons who are already my friends? Am I obligated to continue to be specially concerned about my friends? Here it is important to remember that the sort of concern relevant to friendship involves more than just a feeling, it involves having dispositions to promote the object of concern's well-being and, if appropriate circumstances arise, acting on such dispositions. So, to be specially concerned about someone involves promoting her well-being to a greater extent than and before one promotes the well-being of other persons. The question is why, given the fact that I find myself in a particular friendship with Henry, I am justified in maintaining that friendship. Why should my past special concern for Henry be relevant to determining, for example, how I should continue to distribute my resources?

I indicated above that it is this third question with which I will be primarily concerned. But it might be thought that by answering question two, the question as to the reasons we have for entering friendships in the first place, we will have thereby answered question three, the question as to why we should continue to be specially concerned about our friends. After all, it might be said, the friendship relation just is a relation of mutual special concern. So once we have justified the formation of friendships, we have thereby, it seems, justified our having relationships of mutual special concern.

In order to see that this is not the case, we need to emphasize the important distinction between coming to care and continuing to care. In justifying the formation of friendships, one justifies coming to have differential concern for a person. But, given that friendships are not necessarily permanent relationships, one has not thereby justified continuing to care in future circumstances that might be importantly different from those in which the friendship was formed. A friend is a person with whom one has a shared history of mutual special concern. At each moment, however, one can ask either of the following two questions: (i) ought I to continue to care about my friend as I have cared about him in the past?, and (ii) ought I to act on my dispositions to benefit my friend to a greater extent than I benefit persons whom I do not know? What is the relevance of the fact of an established friendship relation to how one should continue to behave?

In order to see how an answer to the second question is not thereby an answer to the third question, we need only consider the case of the utilitarian. With respect to the second question, the utilitarian can appeal to the value of friendship relations as offering reasons for persons to enter such relationships, and empirical facts about persons will determine which particular relationships each person should form. So, at a given time t, it may be the case that the most valuable relationship that I could form would be with Emma—she and I are such that a relationship of special concern between us would gener-
ate a valuable intimacy, more valuable than any to be had with other available persons. If that is the case, then it would seem that, once the relationship is in place, Emma and I should sustain our valuable intimacy by continuing to be specially concerned about one another. Moreover, that intimacy itself, once forged, provides instrumental reasons for continuing special concern, because Emma and I are better positioned, both epistemically and causally, to benefit one another than to benefit other persons. We know each other well, and can best promote overall well-being by promoting one another’s well-being.

The utilitarian, however, leaves the justification of continuing special concern at the mercy of contingent circumstances. I was justified in coming to be specially concerned about Emma at a certain time because, at that time, a relationship with her was my best opportunity to promote value. But such may not be the case at some later time. Henry may come into the picture, and it may be the case that a friendship with Henry, a friendship that precludes continuing to care about Emma, would be more valuable than one with Emma, even given my past history with Emma. Similarly, the utilitarian must hold that I also have the same reasons to help you maintain your friendships, so, if an occasion arises on which I can promote your friendship to a greater extent than my own, I should use my resources to do so rather than to benefit my friend. Thus, in answering our question two the utilitarian has not thereby answered question three: our reasons for entering friendships are dependent upon contingent circumstances that may change, leaving us without reasons for continuing concern. As I will show in the next section, the difficulty that utilitarians and Kantians face is in accommodating what we commonly understand to be the moral implications of the fact of an established friendship with respect to the justification of continuing concern.

III. Utilitarianism, Kantianism, and Continuing Concern

As I have said, both utilitarians and Kantians are committed to an underlying impartiality with respect to all persons. The challenge facing both theories is to show how such a commitment can allow at least an apparent partiality towards friends. Why should I benefit my friend Emma before and to a greater extent than I benefit Henry? Can we derive a justification of special concern for friends from an underlying, fundamental impartiality?

As I indicated in section II, the utilitarian can justify the formation of friendship relations by appeal to the value of such relations. And established friendship relations provide instrumental reasons for continuing concern, given that friends know one another and are well-positioned to benefit one another. But, as I also suggested above, if circumstances change in relevant ways, I may have no reasons to continue to care about my friend Emma. Perhaps I can now promote value better if I shift my affections and concern to
Henry, or if I use my resources to promote and foster your friendships rather than to promote and foster my own. But we usually take the fact of an established friendship relation to have greater justificatory force with respect to continuing concern than the utilitarian account allows it to have. We typically think that one has a special obligation to one’s friends—one must, it seems, regard one’s actual, established friendships in a different way than one regards either one’s own possible friendships or others’ friendships. The utilitarian, then, seems unable to provide a stable basis for maintaining friendships in the face of shifting empirical circumstances.5

The Kantian has several options open to her with respect to answering the third question. The first option is strikingly similar to the utilitarian answer. The Kantian can claim that I am obligated to be specially concerned about helping my friend to promote her ends only in so far as that is the best way for me to discharge my duty of treating persons as ends in themselves. Entering friendships would also be justified as a way of fulfilling more general duties of benevolence and love of humankind.6 The Kantian would then, like the utilitarian, be offering an instrumental account of continuing special concern for friends. Duties of friendship arise because an established friendship relation makes it the case that I am best able to discharge my general duties by being specially concerned about my friends. The Kantian will then face difficulties similar to those faced by the utilitarian, difficulties arising from variations in contingent circumstances. If she views friendship as a good strategy for fulfilling imperfect duties, then it remains only a strategy that depends upon empirical circumstances for its justification.

The Kantian might instead attempt to reduce duties of friendship to duties arising from either implicit or explicit promises to continue to care.7 This strategy strikes me as unlikely to succeed, given that friends often do not exchange any such promises. The Kantian may try to argue that the friendship relation itself constitutes a type of implicit promise, but, if she makes that claim, then she is really just arguing that friendship is a relation that grounds obligations to continue to care. The fact that Emma is already my friend morally justifies my continuing partiality with respect to her. Once friendships are in place, we have perfect duties to our friends. But why does the fact that someone is already my friend justify or require my continuing partiality with respect to her? If the Kantian admits that the fact that Emma is my

5 I here ignore any attempts on the part of the utilitarian to appeal to rules or the value of permanent dispositions—the difficulties with such appeals are well-known.

6 Kant himself can be seen as taking such a route in The Metaphysics of Morals, trans. James W. Ellington (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., Inc., 1983), 112, and 135ff. Kant, in certain passages, esp.135ff., seems to be taking an Aristotelian approach to friendship. I here ignore such strains in Kant, given that I will deal with such an approach below.

7 I here ignore the many difficulties associated with implicit promises.
friend in and of itself justifies my continuing concern, then she is allowing a fundamental partiality that competes with her fundamental impartiality. I think that the most that the straightforwardly impartialist Kantian can say is that we are allowed to be partial to our friends as long as that partiality is not in conflict with the impartiality that morality demands.8

The reason why both utilitarians and strictly impartialist Kantians have difficulty answering our third question with respect to friendship is that both provide what we might think of as strategic answers to the second question: friendships are good strategies for achieving some more fundamental goal, be it promoting value or fulfilling imperfect duties. But viewing friendships as good strategies seems to imply that we must constantly assess whether the maintenance of that particular friendship continues to be the best available strategy, given our more fundamental moral goal in terms of which the formation of the friendship was originally justified.9 Both Kantians and utilitarians, then, seem unable to provide us with stable reasons for the maintenance of already existent friendships, and, as a result, neither Kantians (in their straightforward impartialist guises) nor utilitarians seem capable of placing friendship on the moral footing on which we place it in our lives. The Aristotelian solution is to place friendship on a special footing if and only if one’s friend can be regarded as special. Certain relationships deserve a privileged moral position if the parties to those relationships have a privileged moral position. So let us turn to Whiting’s neo-Aristotelian answer to questions two and three above.

IV. The Character-Based Account of Friendship

At 1155b10, Aristotle poses two questions about friendship: Can persons who are not virtuous be friends?, and, Is there more than one type of friendship? He, in fact, does allow that there is more than one type of friendship, but regards only the friendship between virtuous persons as complete friend-

---

8 It might be wondered if duties of friendship could possibly be compatible with Kant’s demand that an action be done from duty if it is to have moral worth. Duties of friendship seem to be duties to have certain feelings and attitudes towards one’s friend, and Kant, at least in the Groundwork, seemed wary of such duties, in so far as he seemed suspicious of our control over our emotions. However, I do not want to base any arguments on this potential worry about the limitations of Kant’s ethics, given the great complexities involved in understanding what it is to act from duty, and worries about how seriously to take some of his highly derogatory comments about concern as a moral motivation.

9 Notice that if one defines friendship as a permanent relationship of differential concern, then it is difficult to see how either the Kantian or the utilitarian could justify our entering friendships. If permanency is part of our concept of friendship, then neither Kantians nor utilitarians can justify our entering friendships, in the normal sense of “friendship”. I do not, however, think that our concept of friendship involves the notion of permanency. I prefer to allow that utilitarians and Kantians can provide an answer to question two, but to argue that their answer to that question puts them in an awkward position with respect to providing an adequate answer to question three.
ship, because only the virtuous can and do care about each other for the other’s own sake. We give the name “friendship” to different types of relationships that have certain features in common; thus, it would be a blatant disregard of common usage to deny that friendships for pleasure or utility are actually friendships, even if these relationships do not satisfy all of the conditions of complete friendship. But because the nature of friendship varies with the type of friendship under consideration, we should keep this in mind when answering questions about why we are justified in starting and maintaining friendships—such justification is likely to vary from one type of friendship to another.

With this in mind, Whiting offers a character-based account of friendship according to which “the substance or content of a person’s character ... is] the ground of concern” (11). Whiting is offering an account of reasons for entering and maintaining friendships between virtuous persons, and making no claims about what reasons, if any, persons have for entering and maintaining other types of friendships. So let us begin with her answer to our second question about friendship—why and when are we justified in forming friendships with other persons? Consider Aristotle’s claim that “only what is good is lovable. What is bad is not lovable, and must not be loved” (1165b15).10 Certain persons, the virtuous, have valuable characters. What is valuable or good is worthy or deserving of concern. Therefore, the virtuous are worthy or deserving of concern. We are justified in becoming friends with the virtuous because they are appropriate objects of the attitudes that are partly constitutive of friendship. Because those attitudes must be mutual in friendship, we must be virtuous to be friends with the virtuous—we must deserve or be worthy of having our concern reciprocated. So the nature of the characters of virtuous persons justifies one’s having greater concern for such persons than one has for the non-virtuous.

Being someone’s friend involves helping her to promote her ends. Only if the person I befriend is virtuous will I be guaranteed that her ends are valuable and worth promoting. Thus, only by entering a friendship with someone virtuous will I avoid committing myself to promoting unworthy ends. And, because I have reason to promote valuable ends, and can do so by myself only to a limited extent, I have reason to establish relationships with other persons so that I can assist them in promoting valuable ends that may be different from or important extensions of my own. Through friendships, then, we extend our ability to promote valuable ends, and increase our responsiveness to value in the form of other persons’ characters.

10 Aristotle here must be using “lovable” in the sense of “worthy of being loved”, rather than in the sense of “capable of being loved”. Persons can and do love what is bad, or even bad for them, even though it is possible to argue that they must regard it as good, or good for them, at least in a limited way (for example, as being good for them now, rather than in the long run).
So the character-based account offers us clear reasons for forming complete or true friendships rather than not, and also offers us reasons for establishing certain friendships rather than others. So Whiting has justified the virtuous person’s having greater concern for the other virtuous persons in the world than she has for the less than virtuous persons in the world. Why should I, however, choose to befriend Henry rather than Emma, if both are virtuous, and roughly equally so? What justifies me in coming to have greater concern for some virtuous persons than I have for other virtuous persons? Whiting claims that “[a]t this point, contingent and non-justifying factors may enter into determining (and hence explaining) which of the many deserving candidates I in fact befriend” (7). I may befriend Henry rather than Emma because I find him physically attractive or like his sense of humor, or perhaps I cannot help but find some of Emma’s mannerisms or her laugh annoying. Thus, once I have located the pool of virtuous candidates for my friendship, I may choose among them on the basis of morally arbitrary characteristics that strike me as endearing or likable. All virtuous persons are equally deserving of my concern, but pragmatic considerations force me to choose only a few as my friends. A person’s virtuous character is the justification, then, according to Whiting, of my entering a friendship with that person: as long as Emma is virtuous, I need no further justification for befriending her rather than Henry, who is also virtuous.

Whiting contrasts the justification of entering friendships that she offers with what she calls the “brute” account of friendship, according to which “concern for our friends is (at least initially) something we simply come to have and not something that admits or demands justification” (7). According to this account, then, my coming to care is simply a matter of brute psychological fact that does not require justification. I may come to be friends with Henry because he is virtuous, or because he is funny, or can drink large quantities of beer, or knows more about Hitchcock films than anyone I know—from the moral point of view, any one of these reasons is as good as, or no better than, any of the others. According to the brute account of friendship, no persons or class of persons have any prior claim to my friendship—brute psychological facts about me can, therefore, legitimately dictate my choice of friends.

Of course, as Whiting herself points out, according to her character-based account, morally arbitrary factors will determine which particular virtuous persons I befriend. But her view allows such factors to come into play only after the pool of candidates has been narrowed down to the virtuous. It is important to see that someone who defends the brute view can consistently claim that persons should enter into friendships because friendships are valuable relationships—such a claim is quite compatible with the claim that we require no justification for entering one particular friendship rather than an-
other. Whiting, however, claims that friendships with persons with valuable characters are valuable relationships, so we require no justification for befriending one virtuous person rather than some other virtuous person. Her view differs from the brute view, then, in its identification of the class of persons with respect to whom morally arbitrary factors can permissibly determine whom we befriend.

Whiting claims that she offers the same answer to the third question about continuing concern as does the brute account of friendship: “[t]he two models seem to agree insofar as they take further concern to be justified—and generally required—once the initial concern generating friendship is in place...This is presumably because the friendship relation itself ... is taken to provide reasons for concern additional to those (if any) existing prior to its establishment” (7). But here there is an ambiguity in what it means for the friendship relation itself to provide additional reasons for concern. Recall that the utilitarian takes the friendship relation, once established, to provide reasons for concern that did not exist prior to the establishment of that relationship. Each of us is in a privileged epistemic and causal position with respect to our friends, so we can best promote human well-being in general by concentrating our energies on our friends (and other intimates). So, according to the utilitarian, the friendship relation provides instrumental reasons for special concern, instrumental reasons that did not exist prior to the existence of the relationship. Further, an already established relationship is valuable, and its value must be weighed when one considers whether one should abandon it to form a new relationship. (I suggested that the Kantian can offer a similar account of the moral significance of the friendship relation, although it would not be an account in terms of value.)

Whiting makes some suggestions later in her paper that suggest an instrumental defense of continuing concern. Consider the following passage in which Whiting claims that the virtuous person

generally knows herself and those with whom she has spent time more intimately, and is generally in a better position to cultivate and promote her generically valued ends in herself and her close associates than among those with whom she is less intimately acquainted, even if there are many others she suspects she would like to know and support...Who she can love and how is very much a matter of epistemological access and other practical considerations (21–22).

This passage could be read as offering an answer to the question as to how a virtuous person comes to choose which particular other virtuous persons she will befriend. As we have already seen, that choice can permissibly be determined by arbitrary factors. And, it might be said, those arbitrary factors also explain, without justifying, the virtuous person’s continuing to care about those whom she has already befriended. Given the same epistemic and other practical considerations that determined her choice in the first place, she will
continue to care about her friends. As long as her friends continue to be virtuous, her differential concern continues to be justified.

Whiting might also be attempting to offer an instrumental defense of continuing special concern. Just as "[m]y mere tastes may render the virtues of some of those I encounter more accessible to me than the similar virtues of others I encounter" (23), so my intimacy with a friend will certainly make her virtues "more accessible to me". The better I know someone’s ends and character, the more appropriate will be my concerned responses to her. Virtuous characters are worthy of concerned responses, but even virtuous characters differ from one another—the better I know some particular virtuous character, the better position I am in to care about that character. But this sort of instrumental account is in better shape than that of either the utilitarian or the Kantian, because, whereas the Kantian and the utilitarian must claim that continuing special concern is justified because of what our position with respect to our friends allows us to do (promote well-being or treat persons as ends), Whiting can claim that it is justified because of the enduring nature of the object of concern’s character. I do have reason to care about any and all virtuous persons, but I can be specially concerned about only a few. As long as my friends remain virtuous, then, my partiality with respect to them requires no justification beyond the fact that I care about them already: my love for such persons simply makes me psychologically better adept at responding to them in a concerned manner. So the reasons for special concern that Whiting offers are not at the mercy of contingencies in the way that those offered by the impartialist accounts are, because the characters and responses of virtuous persons are stable, and the instrumentality of concern for character friends depends only on the characters and attitudes of the virtuous person and her virtuous friend, rather than on shifting external circumstances beyond their control. So whether or not she intends the appeal to pragmatic considerations to merely explain or also to provide instrumental justification for continuing special concern, given that the ultimate justification of differential concern appeals to the virtuous character of the friend, Whiting, unlike the utilitarian or the Kantian, can offer stable reasons (whether explanatory or justificatory) for continuing to care.\footnote{Again, if one were simply to define friendship as a permanent relationship, then question three would not arise. (See footnote 9 above). But doing so not only makes the utilitarian and Kantian positions weaker, it also begs the question against the account that I develop below, which allows that friendships need not be permanent (see section VIII below). Also, if we allow with Aristotle that friendships for pleasure or utility are really friendships, then permanence cannot be part of our concept of friendship. Whiting may, and in fact will, follow Aristotle in regarding the permanence of character-friendships as a mark of their moral superiority, but it does not show that they are the only relationships that can be called "friendships". I will argue in section VIII that it is not even a mark of moral superiority.}

\section*{FRIENDSHIP, VIRTUE, AND IMPARTIALITY}

\footnote{Again, if one were simply to define friendship as a permanent relationship, then question three would not arise. (See footnote 9 above). But doing so not only makes the utilitarian and Kantian positions weaker, it also begs the question against the account that I develop below, which allows that friendships need not be permanent (see section VIII below). Also, if we allow with Aristotle that friendships for pleasure or utility are really friendships, then permanence cannot be part of our concept of friendship. Whiting may, and in fact will, follow Aristotle in regarding the permanence of character-friendships as a mark of their moral superiority, but it does not show that they are the only relationships that can be called "friendships". I will argue in section VIII that it is not even a mark of moral superiority.}
The brute account of friendship, on the other hand, does not take the friendship relation as providing instrumental reasons for continuing special concern; rather, it takes that relation as providing intrinsic reasons for such concern. In other words, it is the friendship relation in and of itself that provides the reasons for concern. The fact that Henry is my friend, in and of itself, provides me with reasons to be specially concerned about Henry. The brute account does not appeal to the privileged position that I am in with regard to Henry and my ability to promote his ends or to my ability to respond to his character appropriately; rather, it is the mere fact that he is my friend that justifies my continuing concern. So the brute account is committed to a partiality grounded solely in Henry’s relationship to me. The brute account, I will argue in following sections, is able to accommodate many claims that are part of our intuitive understanding of the moral nature of friendship; thus, from now on, I will refer to the brute account as the commonsense account.\textsuperscript{12} We find ourselves, sometimes for clearly statable reasons, sometimes not, in friendships, but once we find ourselves in those relations, we have reasons to care that we did not have before, reasons that have nothing to do with our ability to promote value, or how we can best fulfill positive duties to treat persons as ends, or how we can appropriately respond to virtue in other persons. Our duties of continuing special concern supervene on our relationships, and are not derived from any more general duties.\textsuperscript{13}

I indicated above that there are two possible readings of Whiting’s claim that the friendship relation in itself provides reasons for continuing concern. If we take Whiting to be offering instrumental reasons for continuing concern, then she is clearly disagreeing with the commonsense view. If we take her to be arguing that continuing concern, like the choice of which particular persons to befriend, requires only explanation, not justification, then she is still disagreeing with the commonsense view which regards an established friendship as providing justification not mere explanation of continuing concern. However we decide to interpret Whiting, the important contrast between her view and the commonsense view is in the ultimate justification of continuing concern. For Whiting that justification is the same as the

\textsuperscript{12} I am not claiming that commonsense has any developed account of friendship. As I say, I call the brute view the commonsense view simply because it accommodates claims such as those with which I opened my paper, claims that represent important intuitions about the moral significance of friendship. So I am not claiming that this commonsense view is the view of the person on the street or will account for all that that person is likely to say about friendship.

\textsuperscript{13} One possible strategy for the Kantian that I suggested earlier was precisely to adopt this attitude towards the friendship relation. I think, however, if the Kantian were to adopt such a strategy, she would be modifying her view considerably in allowing such a relationship intrinsic moral significance not derived from any more fundamental moral relationship or moral duty. So from now on, when I refer to the Kantian, I will mean the fully impartialist Kantian. Any other possible Kantians will be considered as advocates of what I call the commonsense view.
justification of coming to have differential concern: it is a justification in terms of the virtuous character of the object of concern. As long as Emma is virtuous, I am justified in coming to and continuing to care about her. On the commonsense account, however, arbitrary factors can legitimately dictate which particular persons I befriend (within certain limits, as I indicate in section VII below), while the formation of friendships in general may be justified by appeal to the value of such relationships. But the justification of continuing concern is independent of whatever justified my forming the friendship in the first place—the ultimate justification of continuing concern is the existence of the friendship relation itself. For the commonsense account, the answer to question three is independent of the answer to question two, whereas the two answers are not independent for Whiting (or for the utilitarian or the Kantian).

I have suggested that impartialist accounts of friendship seem unable to grant friendships the moral significance they seem to have, because they are unable to make moral reasons for special concern for friends stable and immune to shifts in contingent circumstances. Whiting’s character-based partialist account of friendship places such reasons on a firmer footing, because the moral ground of partiality, according to her account, is the character of the virtuous friend, and the characters of the virtuous are stable. The brute or commonsense partialist account, on the other hand, identifies as the intrinsic moral ground of partiality the object of concern’s relationship to the subject of concern. In the following sections, I will argue that the commonsense partialist account is not subject to the objections that Whiting raises to it. In section V I will defend the commonsense answer to question three. In sections VI and VII I will defend the commonsense view’s giving different ultimate justifications of initial and continuing concern. I will also argue that, although partialist, it is able to preserve the underlying motivation of the impartialist accounts, while justifying more actual friendships than does Whiting’s partialist account.

V. Concern for Friends as Concern for Them for Their Own Sakes

Aristotle claimed that “one person is most a friend to another if he wishes goods to the other for the other’s sake” (1168b), or, in other words, if he cares about his friend for the friend’s own sake. My caring about my friend for her own sake clearly precludes my caring about her solely as a means to my own pleasure or success in some endeavor that I have undertaken. I must care about my friend independently of whatever contribution she might make to my projects or goals. As I said in section II above, I think that we can agree with Aristotle that, at least in the best or most complete type of friendship, friends will care about each other for the others’ own sake, so any adequate account of the justification of initial or continuing special concern for
friends must accommodate this claim about the nature of concern between friends.

Whiting argues that those views that she calls egocentric cannot accommodate the claim that we should care about our friends for their own sakes. Egocentric accounts of friendship are those that hold that "the nature of one's reasons for concern...depend essentially on the nature of the relationship in which a potential object of concern stands to oneself" (9). So the commonsense account of friendship is egocentric in Whiting's sense of that term—my reasons for caring about a friend supervene on the existing friendship relation. My partiality with respect to my friends is grounded in my friends' relationship to me, rather than in the intrinsic nature of the object of concern. But her argument against the egocentric account is directed against one version of it, what I will call the self-extending account, that goes one step beyond the commonsense account. According to the self-extending view, my friend's good is a part or a constituent of my own overall good, just as the good of my future self is a part or constituent of my own overall good. So my reasons for concern for some person depend upon whether she stands in a relationship to me such that her standing in that relationship to me makes it the case that her good is a part of my own overall good.14

Whiting objects that the self-extending view involves "an unnecessary and potentially objectionable sort of colonization" (10). Caring about someone for her own sake requires "grant[ing] independence to the value of [her] good" (10), rather than valuing it as part or constituent of my own good. I think that we can restate Whiting's objection so that it applies not only to the self-extending view, but also to the commonsense view, or to any view that attempts to justify partiality on the basis of the object of concern's relationship to the subject of concern. To care about someone for her own sake, it seems that I must care about her in virtue of or as a result of my recognition of the fact that the sort of person my friend is is the sort that is worthy of concern "independently of [her] relation to me and of whether or not I happen to care" (Whiting 10). According to the commonsense account (or any egocentric account), I am justified in caring about my friend because she stands in the friendship relation to me, because I happened, perhaps for no clearly defined reason, to start caring in the first place. But how can I be granting "independent value" to my friend's good if my concern for her depends for its justification upon her having come to stand in a certain relationship to me?

14 For a defense of the self-extending view, see David Brink, "Rational Egoism, Self, and Others" in Identity, Character, and Morality, ed. A. Rorty and O. Flanagan (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1990). Brink actually anticipates the type of objection that Whiting raises to his view, at p. 369. However, as I say below, I will re formulate Whiting's objection so that it applies to all the views that she calls "egocentric" and so that it is not met by Brink's reply, which I think is sufficient to meet the objection in the form that Whiting presents it.
The character-based view, on the other hand, holds that my friend's character provided me with reasons to befriend her in the first place—it is the nature of my friend’s character, not her relationship to me, that justifies my concern for her (if we assume that my friend has a virtuous character).

This objection to the commonsense (and other egocentric) accounts depends on a confusion between two types of reasons, justificatory reasons and explanatory reasons. The justification of my concern for my friend Henry depends upon his standing in a certain relationship to me, so my relationship to Henry provides justificatory reasons for my continuing to care about him. But if I regard Henry as a good person with valuable ends, the explanation of why I care about him may involve reference to his character, to the sort of person he is. I may love Henry qua good person, not qua person who stands in a certain relationship to me. The commonsense account does not hold that I ought to have a general desire that people related to me in certain ways be well-off, their good promoted. What I desire is that Henry be well-off, and the explanation of my desire can be in terms of Henry's having a valuable character; it is the justification of my acting on that desire that depends upon Henry’s relationship to me. The commonsense account is not committed to the claim that I ought to love my friends because they are my friends. The fact that Henry is my friend is what justifies my caring about him for whatever subjective reasons or motivating reasons explain my actually caring about him.15

Nonetheless, it is true that the commonsense account does not require that Henry be good or even that I regard him as good in order for my concern for him to be justified. But if Henry is not good, it seems that I cannot promote his ends as “independent goods”—his ends simply are not goods at all. This sort of objection, however, confuses concern for a person with concern for his subjective ends. I can care about Henry, be concerned to promote his well-being, and yet recognize that he has chosen to pursue harmful or trivial ends. My concern for him will lead me to try to help him to revise his ends—my concern for him is a concern that he pursue worthwhile ends, or, in other words, that his subjective ends correspond to his objective ends. Concern for a person need not involve valuing the ends she has chosen for herself;

---

15 A person’s subjective reasons are those reasons that she views herself as having. However, subjective reasons do not exhaust the class of explanatory reasons—explanatory reasons also encompass what I have called “motivating reasons”. Such reasons are ones that an observer may appeal to in explaining an agent’s behavior, although they need not be reasons that an agent views herself as having. So, for example, I may unconsciously respond with affection to persons with certain character traits, although I never justify or explain my befriending those persons by appeal to such character traits. Distinctions among various types of explanatory reasons are not central to my argument, whereas the distinction between explanatory and justificatory reasons is. For a nice discussion of these distinctions see Stephen L. Darwall, Impartial Reason (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), 28ff.

FRIENDSHIP, VIRTUE, AND IMPARTIALITY 65
parental concern for children and especially for teen-agers is a good example of concern for a person coming apart from concern for her chosen ends. Whiting is wrong to claim that concern for Henry for his own sake requires aiming at Henry’s ends as independent goods, unless she means aiming at Henry’s objective ends, the ends that he ought to be pursuing. Concern certainly requires that I help Henry to pursue ends that he ought to pursue, and to cease to pursue his chosen ends if doing so will prevent him from attaining his own well-being. These claims are not inconsistent with the commonsense account, so that account can accommodate the claim that we ought to care about our friends for their own sakes.

VI. The Charge of Parochialism

But, I think, we need to pause and consider the possibility that our friends come to have harmful or immoral ends. I think that this possibility, a very real one for most of us whose friends are not entirely virtuous, is one that is very liable to lead many of us, upon reflection, to question whether friendship should have the moral place that we often assign it. The commonsense account of friendship holds that my special concern for my friends is justified even when those friends are less than virtuous and so may have disvaluable ends. But special concern involves a disposition to promote the object of concern’s well-being to a greater extent than one promotes others’ well-being. Is it the case, then, that the commonsense view commits us to being “loyal to our friends however they misbehave” (Whiting 15; cf. Aristotle at, e.g., 1159b5)? Does it commit us to standing by our friends no matter what they do or what sorts of people they become? These sorts of questions are, I believe, what lead many impartialists and Aristotelian partialists to worry about partiality grounded in the object of concern’s relationship to the subject of concern.

My concern for my friend, in many cases, however, ought to guide me to do certain things that my friend may not want me to do. If my friend has chosen certain disvaluable ends, then my concern for her ought to guide me to try to persuade her to change her subjective goals, to develop new projects. And

---

16 I do not intend to be denying that certain ends are subjectively valuable in the sense that their value derives from the fact that the agent values them or has chosen them. My friend’s running an ultra-marathon may not be objectively valuable, but it has subjective value given my friend’s desire to run an ultra-marathon, so I have reason to help her to run an ultra-marathon. However, if my friend desires to continue smoking, such an end has no subjective value, because it is in conflict with her objective ends, it is detrimental to her well-being. So some desires can confer subjective values on particular ends, while others do not. This is a complicated issue. For a fuller treatment, see Thomas Nagel, The View From Nowhere (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), Chapters VIII and IX. My claim in the text is simply that promoting someone’s well-being does not involve promoting any end she happens to have chosen—I am rejecting a straightforward desire-satisfaction conception of human well-being.
because she is my friend, I ought to spend more time helping her to revise her plans than I would spend helping a stranger to do the same. Concern for a friend involves an interest in her well-being. Only if we think a person is well-off if and only if she has all or most of her actual desires satisfied are we committed to the view that caring for a friend entails helping her to pursue whatever projects she has chosen. So the worry about egocentrism or parochialism is really a worry about a certain conception of well-being, not a worry about the commonsense account of friendship as such. If we couple the commonsense account of friendship with, for example, an informed desire-satisfaction theory of value, we are not committed to saying that loyalty to a friend involves helping her in whatever way she actually desires to be helped.

More importantly, however, we need to see that we can accommodate the claims about friendship with which I began this paper, without being committed to any objectionably parochial conclusions. We can accept that friendship always provides us with reasons to promote our friends’ well-being without claiming that those reasons are always our strongest reasons for action. The commonsense account regards our reasons for action that arise as a result of our standing in friendship relations to be reasons that compete with our reasons for promoting any person’s good, reasons that may derive from Kantian moral constraints or from utilitarian requirements to promote good as such. It differs from Kantianism and from utilitarianism as regarding our reasons for being specially concerned about our friends as having their ultimate source in those relationships, not in more general principles. (Again, as I have said above, if a Kantian makes a similar claim, she is simply adopting a partialist account of friendship, which involves a modification of her conception of moral reasons for action.)

So suppose that my friend has committed a terrible crime. I have reason to turn her in to the police, arising from considerations of justice. But I also have reason to promote her well-being, because she is my friend. In this case, if I turn her in I will not be promoting her well-being. However, my reasons for turning her in outweigh the reasons stemming from my friendship with her. And it is no objection to the commonsense view that people will often get this weighting wrong. The truth behind Kantianism and utilitarianism is that we must struggle not to let our affections blind us to the fact that we do have reason to act on behalf of persons with respect to whom we stand in no particular relationship, reasons that can outweigh our reasons deriving from our friendships. And being true to our moral experience demands that our moral theory explain why, in cases such as the one I have just described, we feel torn between different competing moral reasons for action, not just

---

17 I am leaving aside the Platonic view, expressed in the Gorgias, that receiving one’s due punishment is in one’s own best interest. The claim is, I think, implausible, particularly if we are considering severe punishment such as a very long prison term.
disinclined to act on the only genuine moral reasons we have—this is where the commonsense view proves itself superior to either (straightforward impartial) Kantianism or utilitarianism.18

VII. Brute Friendship

So far I have tried to show that the commonsense account of friendship offers an answer to our question about the justification of continuing special concern that is not subject to objections that have been leveled against it, objections which provide the motivation for Whiting’s character-based account. But I still need to defend its answer, or lack thereof, to our second question about what reasons we have to enter friendships.

As I said in section II, there are really two questions here, one question about our reasons for entering friendships at all, and another about our reasons for entering one particular friendship rather than another. Let us begin with the first question. Whiting claims that the brute friendship model holds that there is “nothing to be said for or against caring in the first place” (8). At least with respect to the reasons offered for entering friendships at all, this is not the case. For the brute model need not deny that friendships enrich our lives, and that, therefore, each of us has reason to enter at least some friendship relations. Or, if friendships are valuable, we may have a general duty to create some in our own lives.

But is there anything “to be said for or against caring” about one particular person rather than another, beyond pointing to brute psychological facts about what sort of persons one happens to be disposed to like? The commonsense account denies that virtuous persons are more deserving of the concern that is a constituent part of the friendship relation than are less than virtuous persons. After all, concern involves a disposition to promote the friend’s well-being, and, as Sidgwick said, “the good of any one individual is of no more importance...than the good of any other”,19 so I have no reason to enter a friendship with Emma rather than with Henry just because Emma is more virtuous than Henry. The commonsense account of friendship, then, takes as one of its starting points the claim that motivated the impartiality of Kantianism and utilitarianism, the claim that all persons are equally deserving of concern.

The Sidgwickian claim is, of course, plausible only when we keep in mind the point that I have been making, that a person’s good or well-being need not be a function of her actual desires or ends. And, when we keep that point in mind, it becomes very implausible to think that the virtuous are

18 Of course, the utilitarian may say that considerations of friendship are always relevant in determining what we ought to do. But because all duties arise from the same source, duties of friendship do not compete with duties to promote well-being in general, as I am suggesting that they do according to the commonsense account.
somehow specially deserving of the type of concern that we have towards friends. At least most persons have the capacity to become virtuous, and Sidgwick’s point, if we assume that a person is well-off only if she has a virtuous or valuable character, is that there is no more value in any one person’s becoming virtuous than there is in any other person’s becoming virtuous. So I have reason to promote everyone’s virtue, and such reasons are particularly pressing with respect to those who are less than virtuous. Thus, any person with the capacity to develop a virtuous character is a suitable candidate for my friendship. Perhaps that rules out the Ted Bundys or the Adolf Hitlers in the world, but any reasons that we might have for befriending such persons are definitely outweighed, in any case, by other reasons of, for example, justice or benevolence.

It is important to notice that according to this commonsense view that I am defending, we can still ask, with respect to some friendship that we are considering forming, whether we would be justified in doing so. At any given moment in my life, I have many reasons, both moral and prudential, and the rational, reflective individual is the one who considers all such reasons before acting in such a way that might lead to the formation of a relationship that would generate further moral reasons, moral reasons that may in fact conflict with other reasons that she has. So once I have ruled out Ted Bundy and Adolf Hitler as potential friends, I still need to consider whether a friendship with Henry would, for example, unduly hinder my pursuit of other goals, such as success in my career, continuing concern for Emma, or a certain amount of time for charity work or solitary leisure. But, all else being equal, given the equal worth of all persons, I have no need to justify my choosing to befriend Henry rather than Emma if I happen to find Henry attractive and witty but find Emma annoying or dull. So friendships can be formed rashly or without reflection and thus be unjustified, but that lack of justification does not stem from facts about the potential object of concern’s character, in and of itself.

The commonsense account, then, in answering our second question, agrees with utilitarianism and Kantianism, that no person is more or less worthy of our concern (although with respect to some we must recognize that our concern would be in direct conflict with other moral duties). And we should not deny this, even after some persons come to stand in friendship relations to us. Of course, my friends are more valuable to me than are other persons, but that does not mean that I view them as objectively more valuable. Thus, I understand that others are committed to their own friends, not to mine, and I also understand that I cannot ignore whatever reasons I have for promoting the good of those who do not happen to be my friends. Again, the fact that people do often ignore these latter reasons is no reason to denigrate the significant role of reasons arising from friendships.
Of course, some persons seem to attract many more friends than do others, while some persons seem to attract no friends. Given persons' equal worth, how can we justify such a situation? What we must recognize is that friendship comes in limited quantities. Each of us can only be friends with a certain very limited number of persons, and certain empirical psychological factors partially determine who the candidates for our friendship are. Intimacy simply is not possible between any and every two persons. So we cannot distribute friendship in the way that we can distribute food or health care. Those without friends are in an unfortunate position, but they have no special claim that someone be their friend. To deny this is not to deny that everyone is equally deserving of concern.

VIII. Friendship and Justice

Friendship has often been seen as a relationship of harmony, free from divisive conflict. Friends share common goals and values and work together to attain those goals and realize those values. Some recent political philosophers, most notably Michael Sandel, have held friendship up as a community between two persons that is beyond justice, exemplifying higher and nobler virtues. Aristotle agreed, claiming that friends will have little or "no need of justice" (1155a25). Friendships are enduring relationships, characterized by concord and goodwill.

If this picture of friendship is the correct one, then we can see why the ideal of character friendship is attractive. Character friends have valuable characters, and so share or can at least appreciate each others' valuable ends. Conflict is not likely to arise, because virtuous parties will agree on means, perhaps only differing on means. There will be no conflict between duties to friends and other moral duties because our character friends will not tempt or expect us to do what is immoral. So character friendship looks to be the ideal relationship, providing a model for all human relationships, including that of the political community.

The picture of friendship offered by the commonsense view that I have defended, however, does not guarantee that friends will have no need to appeal to justice. Friends may not agree on final ends, or regard each others' subjective ends as valuable. Therefore, conflict and disagreement are real possibilities. Also, what we owe to friends in the way of concern will sometimes conflict with what we owe to other persons, so that we have no guarantee that we will not face difficult moral choices, if not actual dilemmas. Friendships between non-virtuous persons are more fragile, more subject to


21 I do not want to take any stand on the possibility of moral dilemmas.
dissolution than are character friendships—at the least, they will require greater moral struggle in their maintenance.

Character friendship is a tempting ideal, but, I think, it is clear that it betrays our actual moral experience, and overestimates the role of choice in the determination of friends. We often begin interacting with persons with whom we think we have much in common, only to learn later that they differ from us significantly. But through our interactions, we develop affection and concern for that other person—we find that we are friends, before we really understand the other's character. So friendship is more like familial relationships than the Aristotelian model allows. This is not to say that there is no element of choice in friendship; as I indicated in section VII above, when deciding whether to form any given friendship, we must weigh our reasons, moral and prudential, before acting. Coming to know other people, however, is a complex and difficult process, because persons are not transparent. We are not, at the time of first meeting an individual, in any position to fully judge her character or what the character of a friendship with her would be. Sometimes we must become friends with someone, i.e. begin responding to her with care and openness, before we can come to know that person. Also, as with many other decisions, we often will lose opportunities for friendships if we deliberate too long or too often before making the first steps. Even the most rational individual must sometimes just act, given the opaqueness of persons, and the fact that opportunities for friendship do not come along every day.

Given these facts about the formation of friendships, then, it is likely that we may form friendships before we know all of the faults of our potential friends. Discovery of faults, even serious moral flaws, in persons we have come to care about should lead us to help them to overcome those flaws, not abandon them to their own devices. Unwillingness to do so seems to indicate an overscrupulous desire to avoid moral conflict. Of course, discovering that we are incompatible with our friend or that our friend is just evil will lead to the dissolution of the friendship. A certain affection is a necessary condition of friendship, and such affection can become strained. When such strain justifies us in ceasing to care is a difficult question, but it is a genuine question. Conflict or difference should not immediately lead us to abandon a friendship. Sandel mistakenly fails to recognize that persons just find themselves in political communities with others with whom they disagree, just as often we find ourselves in friendships with persons who are less than virtuous. We may wish things were different, but that does not change the reasons we have, given how things are. On the other hand, if persons were easier to know, genuine intimacy would not be the valuable accomplishment that it is in our world. Coming to know somebody can be trying—friends are persons
who make the effort and, at least sometimes, accept what they may unexpectedly discover.

We can also see that adopting the commonsense account of partiality with respect to friends does not commit us to rejecting the claim that underlies Kantian and utilitarian impartiality. In the introduction I quoted Bernard Williams' characterization of Kantianism. Williams, of course, is noted for his objections to the impartiality of Kantianism and utilitarianism on the grounds that they do not grant appropriate moral significance to personal relationships such as friendships. But, as I suggested in section VII above, what impartiality requires depends on the nature of the resource we are considering. I have argued that a commitment both to the value of friendship and to the moral ideal of impartiality requires the partiality towards our friends demanded by the commonsense view. Such a conclusion seems paradoxical only if we fail to consider why we are committed to impartiality in the first place. Friendship is a unique resource that demands a partiality grounded in the nature of the relationship itself, but does not require us to deny that persons are equally worthy of concern.22

22 I would like to thank David Brink, Richard Fumerton, Scott MacDonald, and an anonymous referee for Philosophy and Phenomenological Research for extremely helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper.