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# The Good of Friendship at the End of Life

*Christopher Mole*

## Abstract

This article attempts to explain the value that we assign to the presence of friends at the time when life is ending. It first shows that Aristotle's treatment of friendship does not provide a clear account of such value. It then uses J. L. Austin's notion of performativity to supplement one recent theory of friendship – given by Dean Cocking and Jeanette Kennett – in such a way that that theory can then account for friendship's special value at our time of death.

**Keywords:** friendship; death; old age; character; performativity; Phaedo

## 1. The Good Death

At the beginning of the *Phaedo*, Echecrates asks: 'Were you with Socrates yourself, Phaedo, on the day when he drank the poison in prison, or did someone else tell you about it?' (57a). The point of this is not just to establish Phaedo's authority, as a witness of the events that are to be recounted. Echecrates is more fundamentally concerned with the matter of whether Socrates died in company. He quickly moves to asking: 'What about his actual death, Phaedo? What did he say? What did he do? Who of his friends were with him? Or did the authorities not allow them to be present, and he died with no friends present?' (58c).

Here, and later, the *Phaedo* shows Plato's attraction to the idea that a good death happens expectedly and without fear, at a time when one is surrounded by friends. This is not our only conception of a good death, but it is a conception that continues to be appealing. Many of us take the presence of friends to be *especially* valuable at the very end of life. The attempt to explain that value faces difficulties.

The first half of this essay outlines those difficulties. The second half suggests a way in which we might address them. It starts from foundations provided by the 'drawing view' of friendship, proposed by Dean Cocking and Jeanette Kennett. It builds on these by applying J. L. Austin's notion of performativity to certain facts about the basis of character. This, together with

some contingent facts about the way life stories are narrated, enables us to explain why the end of life can be a time when friendship is especially valuable.

## 2 The Nicomachean Ethics

### 2.1 Usefulness and Help

If we value the presence of friends at our time of death – when nothing is any longer in prospect for us – then the values that we assign to friendship cannot be entirely prospective ones. Something must therefore be missing from any theory according to which the value of friendship is realized only in the future. This creates a difficulty for several theories, beginning with the work of Aristotle.

Aristotle's discussion of friendship does not explicitly consider the end of life, except to remark on the possibility that a good man might need to die for the sake of his friends (*Nicomachean Ethics* IX, 8, 1169a 27). It gives no account of any particular *value* that friendship might have at life's end. The closest that it comes to suggesting how such an account might be given is at the beginning of *Nicomachean Ethics* VIII, when the topic of friendship is first introduced. Aristotle does not mention death here, but he does mention old age, remarking that:

The young need it to keep them from error. The old need it to care for them and support the actions that fail because of weakness. And those in their prime need it to do fine actions; for 'when two go together...', they are more capable of understanding and acting. (1155a, 13–16)

Aristotle is referring here to *philia*. 'Friendship' is an imperfect name for the several social bonds that his discussion is intended to cover. His remark about old age would seem to apply to *philia*, construed generally, rather than to friendship in particular. The elderly might indeed need affiliates if they are to be helped through their 'failures because of weakness', but there is no reason to think that they would need these affiliates to be *friends*, in our current sense. There is even evidence suggesting that the very old prefer to separate their friendships from the activities of caregiving (Lang and Carstensen, 1994, p. 323).<sup>1</sup> The value that is placed on friendship by those whose lives are coming to an end therefore seems to be distinct from any value that they might place on helpfulness.

### 2.2 Pleasantness

Since friendship can be valued when the need for help is met by other means, and when there is no further help to be given, its value at the end of life cannot be wholly explained by reference to the fact that friends are helpful.

Nor did Aristotle suppose that it could. His remarks about ‘helping the old with their weakness’ are mere preliminaries to an extended discussion, in which he considers several different ways in which friendship contributes to the well-lived life. Once that discussion gets underway, the usefulness of friends plays only a minor role in it. More important than our friends’ usefulness is their pleasantness. And much more important than either of these is their role in the attainment and exercise of virtue. Having set helpfulness aside, we can now consider pleasantness. We’ll then consider virtue, at much greater length.

Although death has no particular role in Aristotle’s discussion of friendship’s pleasantness, his remarks about friendship in old age suggest that he would reject any suggestion that friends are especially valuable at the end of life because that is a time at which they are especially pleasant. Old people, he says, ‘pursue what is advantageous, not what is pleasant’ (1156a 26). ‘Sour and elderly people rarely make friends, as they are inclined to be surly, and do not take much pleasure in society’ (1158a 1).

Plato offers a more sympathetic view of friendship’s pleasures in old age. His concern with presenting Socrates as dying in the presence of his friends is nonetheless shown to come from his placing a value on friendship that is quite different from the value of any pleasure that friends might give. Towards the end of the *Phaedo*, when the philosophical discussion has concluded, and the business of Socrates’ death has begun, Crito suggests that Socrates delay drinking the poison in order to have a death that is accompanied by the enjoyment of a last few social and bodily pleasures. Socrates is dismissive:

But Socrates, said Crito, I think the sun still shines upon the hill and has not yet set. I know that others drink the poison quite a long time after they have received the order, eating and drinking quite a bit, and some of them enjoy intimacy with their loved ones. Do not hurry; there is still some time.

It is natural, Crito, for them to do so, said Socrates, for they think they derive some benefit from doing this, but it is not fitting for me. (116e.)

Socrates rejects the idea that there is any special value in the enjoyment of pleasure at the time of death. Plato shows us this having suggested that there *is* a special value in the presence of friends at that time. That value cannot be the value of pleasure.

This is not to say that pleasure has no value at the time of death. It is preferable to its opposite, then as elsewhere. It would nonetheless be strange to place any great value on a merely pleasant death. It would be strange to *aspire* to dying in the middle of a pleasant meal, or when tickled by a witty joke. Such a death might be a fine thing if one’s life had been devoted to the pursuit of these particular goods, but in that case their pleasantness would account for

only a part of what one valued in having a final enjoyment of them. The value that is placed on friendship at the time of death therefore seems to be of a different kind from the value of pleasure. We do not want friends to be present at our death merely in order that we can be pleased by them.

### 2.3 *The Observation of Virtuous Action*

Having set aside the value that friendship has because friends are useful, and the value that it has because friends are pleasant, we can now consider what Aristotle takes to be much the most important value of friendship, which is the value that it has on account of the ways in which friendship contributes to the life of virtue.

Interpreters disagree as to Aristotle's understanding of this contribution (Cooper, 1977, Hitz, 2011). Their disagreements are focussed on two arguments, set out in *Nicomachian Ethics* IX 9. We can begin by considering the second of these, which Aristotle announces as addressing the question of friendship's value 'more from the point of view of nature'.

Whatever the difficulties in the interpretation of this second argument, it is clear that the argument depends on at least one claim about the choiceworthiness of observing life. We are told, near the argument's beginning, that 'Life is good and pleasant in itself', and that 'life would seem to be pleasant for everyone'. From here Aristotle moves, via several steps, to the claim that

Perceiving that we are alive is pleasant in itself. For life is by nature a good, and it is pleasant to perceive that something good is present in us. And living is choiceworthy, for a good person most of all, since being is good and pleasant for him. (1170b)

These premises pertaining to the value of life, and of its observation, would seem to disqualify this argument from providing any satisfactory account of the value that is had by friendship at the point when life is ending. We are supposing that one might die well while knowing that one is dying. We are supposing, with the example of Socrates before us, that the presence of one's friends might contribute to the choiceworthiness of such a death. We are therefore looking for an account of friendship's value that can explain why one might value the presence of friends at life's end. Aristotle's argument 'from the point of view of nature' suggests that friendship is a good, in general, because it enables one to perceive that one is alive. The dying man is indeed alive, for now, and Aristotle may be right that the presence of his friends somehow enables him to perceive as much. That perception may indeed be good. But the perception of being alive does not seem apt, in itself, to make *ceasing* to be alive any better. The value of friendship that Aristotle is elaborating in this second argument therefore seems ill-suited to explain the particular value that

we are hoping to explain (although we will return, in §4, to an idea that it introduces).

A rather different suggestion can be found in Aristotle's previous argument, given at 1169b 20 – 1170a 4. This argument depends on the idea that something of value can be attained by observing the actions (that is, the *energeia*) of one's virtuous friends:

We are able to observe our neighbours more than ourselves, and to observe their actions more than our own. Hence a good person finds pleasure in the actions of excellent people who are his friends [...] The blessed person decides to observe virtuous actions that are his own; and the actions of a virtuous friend are of this sort. (1169 35–1170a 4)

There is one interpretation of this passage according to which the value of observing one's friend's performance of virtuous actions depends on such observations providing a route to knowledge of one's *own* virtue. There is another interpretation according to which observing the virtue of one's friend's actions can be good for one because, the friend being 'another self', there is some derivative sense in which her actions are one's own, or are experienced as if they were one's own, thanks to the operation of sympathy. However the dispute between these interpretations should be settled, there is again a difficulty in taking the value that is explicated in this part of Aristotle's discussion as being the basis for the value that attaches to the presence of friends at the time of death.

In order to bring that difficulty to light, notice that, whatever value there is in having friends be present at the time of death, that value does not require the friends to be dividing their attention between one's dying and the performance of some other virtuous actions, in which they are concurrently engaged. It must therefore be that, if the friends who attend one's death are performing a virtuous action at that time, then the attendance of one's death is itself the virtuous action they are performing. But in that case the value that is derived from observing the virtuous actions of our friends cannot provide a basis from which to explain why the presence of friends at the end of life is a thing that deserves to be valued. In general, if the need to explain why it is valuable to have friends who  $\phi$  is to be met by reference to the fact that it is valuable to observe the *virtuous* actions of one's friends, then we will need to have some independent account of why  $\phi$ ing is a virtuous thing for those friends to do. In the present case there is no prospect of any such independent account being given. The thing that one's friends are doing is nothing other than attending one's death, and it is the value of *that* that we are trying to explain. The assumption that the friends who attend one's death are doing something virtuous is therefore required if the value of observing virtuous actions is to explain the value of their presence. This argument's explanation of friendship's value

therefore assumes the thing that, in the present context, needs to be established.

#### 2.4 *A Statement of the Problem*

The problems that we have been considering can be understood to have their source in the fact that there is only the thinnest of bases to which the value of friendship at the end of life is attached. It is a value that has to be achieved within only the narrowest of time slices – since death is at hand – and by only the slightest of activities – since its realization does not require our friends to be doing much more than being there. This value cannot be explained by the fact that those friends are doing anything that is helpful or pleasant, since pleasure is too slight a good, and the time for helping may have passed.

We cannot find a more substantive basis for this value by thinking of it as being a value that is realized in the future life of the friends, rather than in the life of the dying person. One's friends may indeed be glad, in the future, that they were there at one's death, but this is not the value we are hoping to explain. The value that we are hoping to explain might be instantiated on a ship that is going down with all hands, provided that the crew are not separated from one another as it does so. It can be realized even if the attended friends have no ongoing lives.

Nor should we resort to the idea that the presence of friends figures in our conception of the good death only as a symbol of some good that has been achieved elsewhere. The presence of friends can indeed serve a symbolic function: the presence of friends at Socrates' death serves as a reminder of his having instantiated the virtues of friendliness. It might be thought choiceworthy for that reason, without needing to have had substantive value for Socrates himself, at the time of his dying, but this merely symbolic source of choiceworthiness cannot give an adequate account of the value that we are here trying to explain. The fact of Socrates having been well-loved could be equally well represented, if only a symbol were needed, by an image of his many friends being sent away to grieve in private, as his wife and children are shown to be; of their needing to be barred from attendance at his death, because the court will not permit it; or of their post mortem concern with his burial and commemoration. To function merely as a symbol of his having been loved does not require these friends to be actually present at the time when he is dying. And yet the value that we are hoping to explain is value attaching to their actual presence.

### 3. Steps Toward a Solution

We can make some progress towards the solution of these difficulties by noticing that, although the basis to which we attach value is thin enough to



create an explanatory difficulty, that basis is not entirely without substance. We have said that one's friends need not be dividing their attention between one's death and some other activity. There is nonetheless a sense in which, in order for their presence to be valuable, the friends who are present at one's death do need to be *doing something* – something that is additional to the mere showing of their faces. They must, at least, be present attentively, and must be attentive in their capacity as friends. There is little value in the presence of one's friend the coffin-maker, if he is attentive only insofar as he is present on business.

This need for one's friends to be appropriately attentive does not impose a requirement for them to be doing anything, in any very demanding sense of 'doing', but perhaps it does require them to be instantiating some of the virtues on which one's friendship with them is based. This may be enough for there to be some *energeia* that it could be valuable for the dying friend to observe. And this, in turn, may be enough for us to apply some version of Aristotle's thought, that the value of friendship can be derived from the value of sympathetically observing the virtuous *energeia* of one's friends.

To bring this last thought into focus, it will be useful to consider a more recent account of friendship, which starts from a more or less Aristotelian basis.

### 3.1 *The 'Drawing View'*

Aristotle's idea that the observation of friends can provide a route to knowledge of one's own character has been taken up by several theorists, who have attempted to relate the value of friendship to the value of self-knowledge. In their 1998 discussion of 'Friendship and the Self', Dean Cocking and Jeanette Kennett reject any simple conception of this route to self-knowledge. They particularly reject any conception according to which the friend is analogous to a mirror. They argue that one can learn things about oneself from friends who do not share the traits one learns about, and that one's friends do not merely reflect back the traits one already has, but can also contribute to the development of entirely new traits. For these reasons, the 'mirror view' of friendship should be rejected.

Cocking and Kennett go on to develop their own view – which they call the 'drawing view' – according to which 'one is characteristically and distinctively receptive to being directed and interpreted and so in these ways drawn by the other' (1998, p. 503). This receptivity to being 'directed' and 'interpreted' has the result that, by having a friend, 'I develop in a way that is particular to the relationship; the self my friend sees is, at least in part, a product of the friendship' (Cocking and Kennett, 1998, p. 505).

Cocking and Kennett present this theory as an attempt to describe the *nature* of friendship, and not as an attempt to account for its value, but they also claim that their view of friendship 'provides direction for future characterization of

its value' (1998, p. 502). We can therefore ask how well their view fares, when we attempt to use it in accounting for friendship's value at the end of life.

The two components of the view are the notions of *direction* and *interpretation*. Cocking and Kennett illustrate the first of these with the example of one friend going to the ballet with another, despite the fact that this first friend has no particular interest in ballet as such. Over time, and thanks to his friend's influence, he nonetheless develops a love of ballet. This might come to be a trait that he values in himself, and that his friends value in him. That is Cocking and Kennett's paradigm case of one friend being open to the *direction* of another (Cocking and Kennett, 1998, p. 504).

Their notion of 'interpretation' is somewhat more complicated. The example that they use to illustrate it is this:

Judy teasingly points out to John how he always likes to be right. John has never noticed this about himself; however, now that Judy has pointed it out to him he recognizes and accepts that this is indeed a feature of his character [...] Within the friendship John's liking to be right may become a running joke which structures how the friends relate to each other. John continues to insist that he is right; however, his insinuations are now for the most part treated lightheartedly and take on a self-consciously ironic tone. And John may be led by Judy's recognition and interpretation of his foibles to more generally take himself less seriously. Thus, John's character and his self-conception are also, in part, drawn, or shaped, by his friend's interpretation of him. (Cocking and Kennett, 1998, p. 505)

Insofar as one's friends are virtuous, and insofar as the exercise of their virtues plays a role in one's interactions with them, these two character-forming influences are likely to be valuable. The 'drawing view' therefore suggests a mechanism by which friendship can bring about something of value.<sup>2</sup> But it is a mechanism that seems unlikely to deliver anything of value when life is ending. The cultivation of a taste for ballet takes time, which the dying person does not have. Even if friendship's influence on our taste and character were speedy, the end of life would still be an inapt moment at which to cultivate a taste for ballet, since no trip to the ballet can then be in prospect. The end of life cannot even be a moment at which there is much value in the cultivation of a newly light-hearted attitude to liking to be right. If death is near then the value of having such an attitude must remain unrealized.

There may be some cases in which a dying person does indeed value those friends who have character-improving effects. The flaws in a person's character may be such as to be particularly pronounced at the time of his death. If a person is prone to cowardice and self-pity, then those friends who can help to reform these aspects of his character may be especially valuable when death is making such emotions hard to resist. That is, however, a special case. It is

more generally possible, whether or not one's death is distressing – and whether or not one behaves badly in times of distress – to value the presence of one's friends, especially if they are friends who – rather than making a last ditch attempt to improve us – simply take us as we are. The act of taking other people as they are may sometimes be a complex business; as complex, perhaps, as the knowing of oneself. In cases where distress is a factor, the injunction to pull one's self together may need to be taken quite literally. The loving attention of the friends who take us as we are may play an essential role in enabling us to comply with it.<sup>3</sup>

I want to suggest, in what follows, that Cocking and Kennett's drawing view can enable us to unravel some of these complexities, and can thereby enable us to see why the presence of friends at the time of death is valued. In order for it to do so we need to supplement it with some points about the metaphysics of character formation.

### 3.2 *Causal and Non-Causal Consequences of Interpretation*

At the core of the drawing view is the idea that one's character can be changed by the 'interpretations' that are constitutive of friendship. Although Cocking and Kennett do not provide an account of *how* interpretations can bring about changes of character, their examples suggest that two quite different mechanisms might be involved: changes to one's character might result from being *causally* influenced by the things that one's friends say and do; they might also be effected by the metaphysically very different mechanism of *performative stipulation*. The causal cases are relatively straightforward: causal influences of friendship might be mediated by the deliberate formation of beliefs and intentions, by less-than-deliberate emotional changes, or by an unconscious force of habit. The performative cases are somewhat more complicated. For our present purposes they are crucial.

A performative speech act is one that makes itself true, not by its *causal* influence (as with a self-fulfilling prophecy), but in the act of its own performance (Austin, 1962). Austin's paradigmatic performatives are ceremonial utterances, in which an authorized person says 'I hereby banish you', or 'I name this ship the HMS Albion'. These utterances can make it the case that one is thereby banished, or that the ship is indeed named 'HMS Albion'. Similar acts can make it the case that one is now the chief executive, now a husband, or now a wife.

Performative acts typically require authority for their successful execution. It is only authoritative persons who can perform banishings, marriages, and baptisms. The authority with which these stipulations are made is sometimes regulated by a higher authority, but in many cases (and perhaps in all ultimate cases) it is simply a matter of the stipulations being taken seriously by their audience. If a speaker says 'I bet' in full seriousness, but her bet is not taken

seriously, her performative will be, in Austin's terms, 'purported but void' (Austin, 1962, p. 18). If her bet *is* taken seriously, then her utterance of 'I bet' succeeds in making itself true. One comes to have the authority to make a performative stipulation, partly in virtue of the fact that one is seriously regarded as having that very authority.

Performatively stipulated changes can have character-influencing consequences. Suppose that a performative stipulation makes it the case that Clara is now a chief executive. This might have the consequence that her habitually imperious manner becomes part of a commanding managerial style, whereas previously it could be seen only as a case of high-handed arrogance. That ceasing to be arrogant can itself be a partly causal and partly stipulative matter. It may be that, thanks to her newly-stipulated status, Clara's conduct ceases to *qualify* as high-handed arrogance, although the tenor of that behaviour remains substantially the same. It might also be that Clara's behaviour is caused to change substantially, as a consequence of some change in attitude that is brought about (causally) by her newly stipulated status.

I want to suggest that the changes of character that can be brought about by performative stipulation should be taken as a model for one of the ways in which character can be influenced by friendship. I then want to suggest that this can help with our attempt to explain friendship's value at the end of life.

### 3.3 *The Ratification of Character Traits*

Austin did not take performativity to be an exclusively verbal phenomenon. He claimed 'that it applied to *all* ceremonial acts, not merely verbal ones, and that these are more common than is appreciated' (1962, p. 25). The idea that facts about our non-verbal lives can be thought of as having a performative status now enjoys currency in some areas of philosophy (thanks, largely, to its role in the post-structuralist literature on gender).<sup>4</sup> In applying this notion of performativity to Cocking and Kennett's examples, we should not cast it in too central a role. The influence of friendship should still be understood as being, for the most part, a straightforwardly causal matter. The crucial point is that *causing* one to enjoy ballet should not be the whole of Cocking and Kennett's story about the way in which friends can 'direct and interpret' one's character.

A merely causal influence of friendship might make it the case that one is now disposed to enjoy the experience of ballet, but possessing such a disposition is not enough, by itself, to make ballet-loving into a feature of one's *character*. For that it is necessary that this disposition play some role in making one's several choices and actions intelligible. One way in which the disposition could come to have such a role is if our friends speak with performative authority when assigning that role to it. Coming to have 'being a ballet-lover' as a valuable feature of one's character can then involve the operation of both causal and performative mechanisms.

This last claim should not be taken to suggest that an operation of performative stipulation is essential to character formation. There can be several routes by which the mere disposition to enjoy ballet might come to have a role in explaining the intelligibility of a person's choices and actions, and so might come to be a part of that person's character. My argument requires only that the interpretations that are authoritatively proffered by one's friends play a role in one of these routes.

The route can be thought of as having two stages (although there is no reason to think that the first stage must always precede the second). In the first stage our interactions with friends cause us to have a disposition to have enjoyable experiences when attending the ballet. In the second those interactions make it the case that this disposition qualifies as a component in the character trait of ballet loving. The influence that operates in the first of these is causal. In the second it can involve a non-causal mechanism of performativity. This will happen when interpretations of a life in which ballet-loving plays a significant explanatory role are taken seriously, and are thereby endowed with a performatively authoritative status.

When, in Cocking and Kennett's (1995, p. 503) words, one is 'characteristically and distinctively receptive to being directed and interpreted and so in these ways drawn by the other', one thereby treats one's friends' interpretations with a seriousness that, I contend, endows them with a performative authority. In the next section I argue that the existence of this performative-involving route to the possession of character traits enables third-party interpreters to be contributors of value to one's life. If that is accepted then the possibility is open that it is in this way that one's friends can be of value at the time of death.

#### 4. Performative Stipulations of Value

My suggestion that character traits can be acquired by fiat might seem to imply that matters of character are somewhat arbitrary. It might therefore seem to place a limit on their value.

There is indeed a limit here, but the arbitrariness of stipulation should not be thought to rob character traits of their significance entirely. We are not under any moral obligation to love the ballet. There is nonetheless a sense in which, in a life that is animated and structured by a love of the ballet (together with a love of other things), the trait of ballet-loving might contribute to the fact of that life's being well-lived. The ballet lover himself might value his love of ballet. So might his friends. Ballet-loving can make this contribution to a well-lived life, even if the bearer of this trait comes to have it, not wholly on account of facts that are intrinsic to his psychology, but also, in part, on account of the fact that his friends make mention of that trait when they speak with the authority of friendship in making sense of his choices and actions.

There is nothing to prevent more morally important sorts of love from having the partially-stipulative structure that the ballet case exhibits. Having a love of one's neighbours is not simply a matter of being disposed to have positive feelings when one sees them doing well, any more than having a love of the ballet is simply a matter of possessing the disposition to enjoy the experience that one has at the ballet. In order to qualify as constituents of one's character, such dispositions must have some role in making one's several choices intelligible. One way in which they can come to have such a role is, again, by being given it in the narrations that are taken seriously when a person's friends are making sense of that person's life. (I do not claim that this is the only way, the most important way, or even the usual way.)

#### 4.1 *Performative Stipulation at the Time of Death*

We are under no *obligation* to have a good death, but a life might be thought of as having gone better on account of having had a good ending. The value that we are trying to account for here is, to that extent, on a par with the value that I have suggested can be found in performatively stipulated character traits. A good death is intelligibly choiceworthy, rather than being morally obligatory.

We said, in §3, that the friends who attend a death need not be doing very much in order to be doing something valuable, but that they must at least be attentively present. This attentiveness must, we said, be *friendly* attentiveness, and so it will involve some reflection on the life of the person dying. Such reflection is, in part, a matter of coming to have a cogent and knowledgeable narration of the things that this person has done and been.<sup>5</sup> It is perhaps for cultural reasons, and perhaps as a contingent feature of our psychology, that the narrations we treat with seriousness are those in which a whole life is shown as having an overall pattern, which lends some shape and style to the actions that make it up.<sup>6</sup> These whole-life stories need not take the form of a single narrative arc from birth to death, but we do like to be able to give an account of a life as having some sort of narrative coherence.

We saw above that Aristotle's first argument concerning friendship and virtue turned on the idea that 'The blessed person decides to observe virtuous actions that are his own; and the actions of a virtuous friend are of this sort'. The sense in which our friends' actions are our own is, we said, a point of contention. One way in which the actions of a friend can be one's own is if they are actions that pertain to oneself, as they do when the friend is making sense of one's life by attentively participating in the project of narrating it. In that case Aristotle's suggestion that it is good to observe virtuous activities that pertain to oneself seems exactly right. If an account of one's life is being given honestly, bravely, and with compassion, then it is good for one to hear it.

This goodness is not derived from the fact that the narrative will be pleasing or useful – it may not be – but one part of the reason why it is good is

because the account, having been heard and taken seriously, can contribute to the facts about one's character. I have been suggesting that this contribution should sometimes be thought of on the model of a performative stipulation. When it is understood in that way it provides an explanation of how it is that the presence of friends can be of special value at the time of death. The dying man who has liked always to be right can then be understood as finding value in the attentive presence of friends who take seriously a narrative in which this trait features as an ironically regarded foible, rather than as a well-entrenched vice. Their attention is valuable to him because it makes this account of his character true. Similarly, a dying woman might value the fact that her life story has been that of a dignified struggle, against insurmountable adversities, and so might value the attention of those friends who make it true that this is her story, by taking it seriously in their final narrations of her life.

The value of friendship at the time of death is a special one because the time of death is an exceptional moment in the project of narrating a life story. It is exceptional in the seriousness with which it is taken, and exceptional because it is itself a moment that plays a unique role in the story of the life that is being narrated. It is unique in that the life is now complete, so that its total narrative arc can now be seen, and unique in the importance that endings have, in determining the quality of the stories that they conclude. The performative authority that is invested in friendship thereby makes room for an account of the special value that attaches to the presence of virtuously attentive friends, at the time when life is ending.

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### Notes

- 1 Although differences of loneliness, neuroticism, and illness have the consequence that different old people derive different benefits from their contact with friends, the oldest of old people typically do report more positive and less negative affect during time that is spent in the company of friends (Chui, Hoppmann, Gerstorf, Walker, and Luszcz, 2014). Time spent with spouses, or with 'peripheral ties' (a category comprised of 'service providers', 'formal care givers', and 'other social partners'), is much less consistently experienced as positive (Chui et al., 2014, p. 9). This indicates that the oldest of old people do value the presence of their friends, and that they do so for reasons that are not derived from the help that those friends provide.
- 2 Cocking and Kennett (2000) themselves emphasize that their view also allows that friendship may sometimes have negative value, in cases where the interactions on which the friendship is based are not virtue-involving.

- 3 An anonymous referee for this journal raises the death of Ivan Ilyich, as being an illustration of the ways in which the demands of sympathy can be complicated by the presence of overwhelming regret. The referee writes that ‘The reader is invited to share Illyich’s judgement that his life had indeed been wasted on frivolities such as career advancement – if a friend also agrees with Illyich, should he nevertheless lie to him and reassure him that his life was meaningful?’ I don’t at all know the answer to that question. The hope here is only to be giving a theory that allows for such complications. In the case of Ilyich, I think that we see the possibility of a life being so lived that the value of a good death is unattainable from within it.
- 4 Judith Butler, for example, attempts to apply Austin’s notion of performativity to a broad range of the facts about the norms of gender in her 1997 (a book which has influenced my thinking about this topic in several ways).
- 5 I have said here that a narration can derive performative authority from the fact that it is knowledgeably given. Some sorts of knowledge carry more authority than others. First-person knowledge of episodes that have been shared with the dying person may have most authority of all, with the result that old friends may be in strongest position to contribute value at the time of death. As with all matters of performative authority, however, this seems to be owing, in part, to contingent facts about the way in which authority happens to be allocated in a culture like ours. No sort of mistake would be being made by the dying person who placed the highest value on the presence of her newest friends.
- 6 Social psychologists have, famously, found that situational factors make a central contribution to determining our actions, whereas stable traits of character play a relatively minor role (Doris, 2005; Harman, 1999). This is no threat to my present explanatory use of character traits. There do not need to be intrinsic, stable, and independently-existing traits, in order for it to be intelligible that we privilege coherent, well-integrated narrations, when deciding which accounts of a life to take seriously. The claim that the intrinsic basis of character traits is thin is compatible with the idea that facts about those traits can be derived, in part, from the performative stipulations that are made in the course of an authorized narration. Equally, the ontologically thin view of character traits is not required by the claims that I have been making. Battleships are as ontologically substantive as one could ever want character traits to be. This substantiveness is quite compatible with there being several facts about those ships – concerning their names, their captaincy, and the missions on which they are embarked – that owe their existence to performative stipulations.

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