Addison Moss

We often think about competition as a foil to friendship as it seems to fundamentally compromise, even preclude norms of love. Indeed friendships can persist between rivals, but traditionally *despite* competitive fora. Competition between friends is often unavoidable and divisive; if left unchecked and unreconciled, the friendship is undermined. Questions about of how we ought to resolve this fraught dynamic persist; should we aim to compartmentalize and separate competition out of friendship, do we accept the “primacy” of our social or professional ventures at the expense of our friendships, or are our competitive sensibilities better left unnamed, avoided, and unaddressed in friendships? My goal here is to argue for a model of friendship that proposes competition as a mechanism by which two friends might be unified, where the value of rivalry is not only useful as a means to enhance an end, but actually capable of engendering good in and of itself.

With a cursory look, friendship seems to require certain qualities, actions, and attitudes towards one another that competitive dynamics typically deter. Further, conventions of love come into conflict with norms of competition with regard to epistemology. On Kant’s account, friendship is a union through mutual and equal respect and love. (214) According to his definition, to love someone is not just to appreciate and respect their desires, but to shoulder, engage in, and have stake in them. (215) Love is realized and reflected by taking on another’s goals, projects, and ends as one’s own. As friendship requires that we ourselves champion our friend’s passions, competing with a friend would subvert constituent love. As Simon Keller asserts, what we believe about people has a bearing on their welfare. (1) As our beliefs set the state for our actions, what we think about someone affects their social and professional ventures, in as much as their popularity, reputation, and likability are vested in public perception. In this way, we are endowed with at least small-scale power over our friends’ success. As our beliefs have the capacity to benefit (or harm) our friends, we are compelled by the nature of Kantian love to frame them in a helpful way. For example, consider a scenario in which one goes to watch their friend’s dance performance in which they perform quite poorly. The friendship between the two, or more specifically the love the friend has for the performer, yields favorable misperceptions about their dancing. Positive bias in a friendship, and fond opinions (albeit undue) about a friend are a function of love. It is not that love requires that friends transgress reality nor fabricate evidence, but in watching the recital as a friend, it is likely that one’s views tend toward the encouraging end of the spectrum. There is a range of permissible takeaways licensed by a singular observation. Truth in other words has leeway, and favoritism in friendship is an epistemic tendency, even a requirement.

When two individuals compete with one another, they actively pursue the same, finite end. When a goal can only be realized or achieved by one person, a contest ensues as the competitors try to outperform and best one another. A proficient competitor is one who employs and makes use of all tactics necessary to be successful and prevail. To be the victor in any arena, self-esteem and personal morale are central; success requires belief in oneself. To inculcate self-confidence, we often evaluate competitors through a more critical lens, holding them to higher standards than we might otherwise. While intentions for steadfast and innate faith in oneself are noble, sense of self is often contingent on how we stack up to others. Where Kantian love yields (unmerited) fond beliefs, rivalry gives rise to more fault-finding, unfavorable attitudes. Consider a similar situation in which someone is dancing in a performance and her competitor is watching from the wings. While the competitor is not contriving nor denying facts, her observations likely tend toward the more captious and condemnatory end of the continuum. Negative bias seems probable and consequential in competitive relationships. As active competition provokes hypercritical outlooks, norms of love and of agon give rise to opposite epistemological leanings. The question remains, how might one watch their peer’s performance as both a competitor and friend?

When epistemological protocols derived from friendship conflict with those from competition, the resulting paradigm is characterized by a fundamental friction: prioritization of the self v. the other. To pursue the former would be to promote, as Dror Post suggests, a “Cyclopean state of mind,” (3) and to fail to integrate different perspectives or view things as relative. However, behaving in service of the latter would bear out false martyrdom, self-diminution, and undue selflessness. Neither is fruitful. But, perhaps the landscape can be more nuanced, the decision not so binary. There exists an alternate truth that allows us to both attend to our friends and to the self wholly. If we accept current notions of competition immutably and unequivocally, and ourselves as subjects within this construct, strife results and friendships are undermined. However, if we reshape our collectively held conception of competition, into the ultimate foxhole bonding experience wherein two people are united as they struggle together, it is quite conceivable that friendship flourishes. Enduring “battle” alongside one another, connection would grow, not just in spite of the emulous relationship but precisely because of it. In competition, albeit posited in contest, two rivals share in the same unique experience wherein mutual sympathy, understanding, and respect are cultivated.

The traditional value of competition is its ability to push competitors towards their finer versions. But in this process, their friendship is in danger of becoming frustrated as they are unable to wholly actualize the expectations of constituent love. Yet, if we endorse competition not merely as a means to an end but as a valuable forum for shared experience, worthy ipso facto, it inspires an extraordinary intimacy. This commonly embraced objective would be the basis and inspiration for the friendship from the outset. In other words, pursuing similar projects or sharing common goals would engender solidarity and the sense of being truly “seen” by another. Indeed, there are historical examples of such elevating kinship such as C.S. Lewis relationship with J.R.R. Tolkein. The friendship and competition between these celebrated authors arguably gave rise to two of the most imaginative tomes of the 20th century, *Narnia* and *The Fellowship of the Rings*. More importantly, it provided true existential meaning and deep connection in discovering “some insight or interest… each believed to be his own unique treasure (or burden)… and when two such persons discover one another… it is then that Friendship is born. And instantly they stand together in an immense solitude.” (96)