

Rethinking Friendship*

Mark Phelan

Associate Professor of Philosophy
Lawrence University, Wisconsin

Abstract: Philosophers have tended to construe friendship as an intimate relationship involving mutual love, and have focused their discussions on this ‘true’ form of friendship. However, everyone recognizes that we use the word ‘friend’ and its cognates to refer, non-ironically, to those with whom we share various relationships that are not terribly intimate or which do not involve mutual love. I argue that there exists no general reason to restrict our philosophical focus to ‘true’ friendships, and allege that we can gain important insights if we broaden our perspective to include lesser friends. I contend that friendships, in the broad sense (encompassing both ‘true’ and lesser forms), are necessarily relationships that are the product of significant collaborative norm manipulation. And I argue that understanding friendship in this way helps explain important features, including the difference between friendships and familiar relations, the non-fungibility of friends, and why friendships are often in flux.

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Philosophers have often construed friendship as an intimate relationship involving, if not mutual love, at least deep mutual caring. However, everyone recognizes that we use the word ‘friend’ and its cognates to refer, non-ironically, to those with whom we share various relationships that are not terribly intimate or which do not involve mutual love. For Aristotle, whose discussion of friendship has been definitive,¹ these uses of the concept involve a kind of analogical reference. Because lesser friendships (of pleasure and utility) share some important aspects with friendships of the intimate, mutual-loving variety, we refer to them using the same concept. According to Aristotle then, mutual-loving friendship is “friendship primarily and fully, but the other friendships are friendships by similarity” (1157a31-32).² For the most part, contemporary, analytic philosophers have followed Aristotle’s lead, and they have focused their discussions on what we might follow others in calling ‘true’ friendships, while giving, at most, cursory attention to lesser friendships. Thus, Fox (1993) confines her reflections to a “friendship of the close, intimate variety” (575). Whiting (1986) contends that “we generally take concern for our friends as a component of the friendship relation—that is, as part of what it is to be a friend” (560-1),

¹ Within the *Ethics*, Aristotle’s discussion of *philia* begins in Book viii with some reflections on common sense views of friendship. To gain traction on the questions which arise from common sense, and because it coheres with his overall teleological project, Aristotle adopts the approach of distinguishing friendships in virtue of their objects (1155b17-18). Thus, he delineates three broad classes of friendship by reflecting on the things that are “loved” or desired in these three kinds of relationships. In utile friendships, friends desire the mutual usefulness they get out of one another. Examples of merely utile friendships are mutually beneficial business relationships or the friendships spoken of between nations or their heads of state. In pleasure friendships, the friends are in it not (or not only) because the relationship is mutually useful to their individual ends, but rather because the relationship itself is mutually pleasurable. Prototypical instances in which friends desire the pleasure another provides include casual drinking buddies, friendly coworkers, and merely erotic sexual partnerships. In the third sort of friendship, which is central to Aristotle’s account, friends love one another not merely because of what the other provides but because of who the other is. What each gets out of these relationships, then, is the other person themselves, and what each desires from the relationship is the good of the other. Aristotle contends that relationships such as these can exist only between virtuous people. And he claims that these friendships (called character friendships in much of the contemporary literature) can be “complete” friendships, because such friendships between virtuous people may be both utile and pleasurable for each friend.

² Aristotle maintains that mutual-loving friendships can exist only between the virtuous. This point has been challenged (e.g., Telfar, 1970-71).

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and she characterizes the kind of special concern we have for our friends as analogous to that we have for our parents and children. Thomas (1997) writes that “the term friendship, itself, is generally reserved for individuals who are the best of friends.” (323). And Helm’s (2013) SEP entry on friendship begins by stating that, “Friendship, as understood here, is a distinctively personal relationship that is grounded in a concern on the part of each friend for the welfare of the other, for the other's sake, and that involves some degree of intimacy.”

In this paper, I contend that there exists no general reason to restrict our philosophical focus to ‘true’ friendships (though specific philosophical projects may require such restriction).³ I also allege that we can gain important insights—into the nature of our social interactions in general and even into the nature of ‘true’ friendships themselves— if we broaden our perspective to include lesser friends. After arguing in the next section for the importance of a broader focus, I offer an account of what is common to *all* the relationships we non-ironically call friendships—all are the product of significant collaborative norm manipulation. I then explain how recognizing this common feature can lead us to several important insights about friendship, which we might miss if we focused only on friendships involving intimacy and mutual love.

Why Lesser Friends Matter:

Before considering whether lesser friends should be included in our analyses of the friendship-relation, let’s reflect more fully on lesser friendships. First, note the many relationships lacking intimacy or mutual love that we would nonetheless and in a variety of contexts describe as

³ Friedman (in ‘Friendship and moral growth’) focuses upon the exclusionary account because she is concerned with the deep commitments that we feel to our true friends—we do not seem to have the same phenomenology of commitment to lesser friends. Cocking and Kennett (in ‘Friendship and the self’) focus upon the exclusionary account because they think that true friendships have a distinct kind of value: they make a centrally important contribution to what sorts of persons we are or become. Lesser friendships do not seem identity-conferring/forming in the same way.

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friendships. Corporate employees and heads of state who work to one another's mutual benefit are often called friends.⁴ But the lesser friendships on which I will focus are Aristotle's pleasure friendships. For one example, consider three employees of a corporation who enjoy one another's company and lunch together once or twice a week, but are distant enough in age and residential address to practically ensure that they never interact outside of work. These three may be non-ironically referred to as friends by their coworkers, though they are not thought of as close, intimate friends or as experiencing mutual love. Each normally socialized individual experiences many of these lesser friendships—indeed, this has been a background assumption of the literature since Aristotle. Nonetheless, it is important to remind ourselves, since much contemporary work on friendship has directed our attention elsewhere.

Next, note that lesser, pleasure friendships encompass a large variety of relationships, and are often activity-centric. Drinking buddies are sometimes taken as prototypical instances of lesser friendships, but in truth there are as many sorts of lesser friendships as there are activities which people enjoy together (e.g., tennis, fishing, board-games, etc.). This includes sex, and erotic friendships are a notable subset of pleasure friendships.⁵ While lesser friendships may be focused on a particular activity, many involve a mix of pleasurable activities. Indeed, it is not uncommon for a friendship to blossom from a single, shared interest to include many others.

Finally, note that lesser friendships occupy a gradation. We have already seen how they can be single-track (focused on one common interest) or multi-dimensional (encompassing many activities). They also seem to almost imperceptibly develop from non-relationships and into 'true' friendships. A friendship is one of the most common things that one might be said to 'strike up';

⁴ E.g., "On trade, terrorism and Iran, US has a friend in UAE" (Sebright, 2017).

⁵ A quick search of Genius song lyrics reveals numerous uses of the word 'friend' to refer to relationships centered on sexual pleasure.

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yet, it will often go unremarked and even unnoticed, until further reflection, that two acquaintances have transitioned into the ‘lesser-friend zone’. On the other end of the spectrum, we can often not retrospectively recall when our besties became more than lesser friends.

Many of the relationships that we refer to as friendships do not involve deep, mutual caring or lack the sort of intimacy that has been attributed to ‘true’ friendships. No one disputes this. However, many philosophers ignore these lesser relationships and focus discussion on ‘true’ friendships. Is there some general reason for adopting this exclusionary approach? Several considerations may initially be thought to favor exclusion, though I will argue that none of these is ultimately compelling. While specific projects may require theorists to focus on specific varieties of friendship—and “true” friendship in particular—there is no general reason that the philosophy of friendship should be devoted exclusively to any one variety of what, I will argue, is a multifaceted human relationship.

One may favor the exclusionary approach on the grounds that ‘true’ friendships are the *best* friendships, or that they matter more to us than lesser friendships. Even if we grant this, the consideration does not clearly support the approach. Great works of art may matter more to us than lesser works, but philosophers of art do not take this as grounds for confining their considerations to the masterpieces. Indeed, it seems that some insights would be lost if they failed to consider lesser works or bad art. Without further argument, this consideration cannot support an exclusionary approach.

In a more Aristotelian vein, one may instead maintain that ‘true’ friendships are the *only real* friendships. Such a consideration provides better grounds for the exclusionary approach. After all, we don’t think that chemical analyses of gold need encompass fool’s gold, nor that an account of justice should make sense of all deviant uses of the word ‘just’. But the claim that ‘true’

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friendships are the only real friendships is less compelling in its own right than was the claim that they are the best friendships. What arguments might be offered in favor of this claim? Aristotle suggests that the lesser relationships we call friendships are valued because of what we get out of them—useful contacts in the case of utile friends, and pleasurable experiences in the case of pleasure friends. Whereas ‘true’ friends value one another intrinsically and also constitute useful contacts and supply pleasurable experiences to one another. Lesser friendships are friendships only derivatively then, because we get the same things out of those relationships that we get out of bonified friendships. But one will be inclined to adopt this position only if one roughly cleaves benefits into the utile and the pleasurable. If pleasures are not pleasures simpliciter but instead pleasures of importantly different sorts, then it is no longer compelling to think that ‘true’ friendships supply all the benefits that lesser friendships supply and more. Our dearest, old friends are not often our sexual partners. We do not invariably prefer playing tennis with our ‘true’ friends rather than our casual tennis buddies. Our lesser friendships often supply benefits we do not get from our ‘true’ friendships, so there is little reason to accept the present consideration on Aristotelian grounds, and other grounds have not been offered.

Finally, rather than maintaining that ‘true’ friendships are primary, a proponent of the exclusionary approach may contend that they are one amongst several importantly different kinds of relationships that are referred to using a shared word-form. Thus, while lesser friendships may be no less philosophically interesting, they are simply irrelevant to discussions of ‘true’ friendship and have not heretofore attracted theoretical attention. This proposal is underspecified, but one way to develop it would be to claim that the word ‘friend’ is lexically ambiguous, containing two or more senses, one referring to ‘true’ friendships and one or more referring to various lesser friendships. However, influential tests for lexical ambiguity fail to provide clear support for this

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claim. For example, conjunction reduction does not give rise to zeugma in the following sentence, as it might be expected to if there really were the relevant different senses of the word ‘friend’ (‘true’ and lesser):

- (1) Oliver went to the concert with Rena, his closest confidant since high school, and Panya, the woman with whom he currently happened to be having sex. Oliver and his two friends had a nice time at the concert.

Standard tests, such as conjunction reduction, do not clearly support the conclusion that ‘friend’ is lexically ambiguous.⁶ We are left without reason to treat ‘true’ and lesser friendships separately.

We have not found positive support for a general exclusionary approach to friendship. Of course, philosophers are at liberty to pursue an analysis of the narrow category of ‘true’ friendship, as many have. But I will contend that something interesting can be seen if we take a wider perspective.

Friendship and Collaborative Norm Manipulation:

What features, if any, are common to friendships in the wider sense, including both ‘true’ and lesser friendships? All the diverse relationships we call friendships share at least one feature: they are all the product of significant collaborative norm manipulation and they consist in collaboratively agreed upon norms. I first explain what collaborative norm manipulation is before arguing for its role as a necessary feature of friendship.

⁶ Compare to the related word ‘partner’, which has one sense, according to which a partner is a collaborator with whom one shares risks and profits, and another, according to which a partner is a person with whom one has sex (definitions drawn from the *OEDOnline*). We can see that these constitute distinct senses of the word because the conjunction of these two different senses in a single construction gives rise to zeugma.

- (2) ?Oliver went to the concert with Rena, a business associate with whom he had just made a large investment, and Panya, the woman with whom he currently happened to be having sex. Oliver and his two partners had a nice time at the concert.

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My analysis begins with the idea of *norms*, which I will understand (following Bicchieri, 2006) as clusters of expectations that are self-reinforcing.⁷ Descriptive norms involve expectations about how most people in a population will behave in specific situations. It is a descriptive norm that people stand facing forward in an elevator full of strangers. Social norms involve expectations about how most people in a population prefer others to behave in a given situation and expectations about social sanctions for behaving in non-preferred ways. Amongst many cultures, it is a social norm that rewards should be split evenly amongst those who contributed equally to a cooperative task. Norms are self-reinforcing because violating accurate normative expectations incurs costs. The person standing backwards in an elevator may be socially ostracized. The person who keeps an unfair portion of a reward is no longer invited to contribute to collective endeavors, so misses out on some future rewards.

Note that the expectations that are constitutive of norms are population relative. Different expectations for how people will or should behave hold in different populations—e.g., across different cultures or subcultures. For example, two strangers who live in the same city will have a variety of normative expectations about the population that makes-up this community and about the larger populations of which it is a part. To the extent that these expectations overlap these strangers share a cultural normative framework, which will help to coordinate their interactions should they meet. It is against the backdrop of a cultural normative framework that strangers can become friends. And they will become friends through the collaborative manipulation of the shared norms which coordinated their interactions as strangers within a culture.⁸

⁷ Though my proposal should also be consistent with other accounts of norms.

⁸ Though, I emphasize that my understanding of a cultural normative framework here is quite broad, such that there may be a shared human cultural framework of norms, and perhaps even broader, interspecies normative frameworks.

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Friendship involves several different varieties of norm *manipulation*. Friendship involves *collaborative norm legislation*, in which friends form special expectations of one another that they do not have of others.⁹ For example, one friend may broach a discussion of the other's dating preferences. If the other responds favorably, the pair may form a normative expectation to discuss personal matters such as this, even if such expectations are not culturally normative and do not influence the interactions of either friend and other of her acquaintances. Friendships also typically involve *collaborative norm repeal*, in which friends exempt their relationship from certain normative expectations they have of other members of their culture. For example, two friends may mutually, if tacitly, agree to reject a social norm against casual cursing that coordinates interactions within their culture at large. Finally, we have *collaborative norm alteration*, in which two friends come to reinterpret the parameters of a cultural norm so that it dictates special behavioral responses within the context of their friendship. For example, two friends may recognize cultural norms of personal space when interacting with one another, but foreshorten the socio-typical zone of personal space to allow for closer contact.

Adversarial relationships often involve asymmetric norm manipulation, as when one businessperson lies by omission to a competitor after unilaterally reinterpreting norms of honesty to forbid saying anything false but not to require saying all that is relevant and true. But the norm manipulation which is constitutive of friendship is *collaborative* in the sense that it involves proposals which are subject to veto, in a sense to be explicated. These proposals are sometimes

⁹ To some extent, positive norm legislation has figured in contemporary discussions of 'true' friendships, as when Telfer (1970/71) notes that "friendship is seen as giving rise to duties and corresponding rights" (231). Telfer discusses our special duty to help our friends if they are under attack. However, positive expectations such as this one may be seen as culturally normative expectations for how friends behave, not as unique normative expectations negotiated in the context of a personal relationship, which are the subject of the present discussion. That is, it may be that friends expect mutual defense from one another without such expectations ever having been legislated within the specific context of their relationship.

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explicit, as when two friends discuss and revise the status of their relationship by openly revising various of the norms in which it consists.¹⁰ But they are more often tacit, as when one friend tells a dirty joke to another, even though such bawdy humor violates a cultural norm that has not yet been subject to manipulation within the context of their friendship. Such open and intentional violations convey tacit proposals to manipulate the shared normative framework that governs the interactions of others within the friends' culture.¹¹ These proposals are subject to veto in the following sense. If the other behaves in a way that signifies rejection of the proposed manipulation (e.g., she frowns rather than laughs), then the friend who made the proposal will not soon act in accordance with the proposed but rejected norm on penalty of jeopardizing their relationship.¹² However, if the other behaves in a way that signifies acceptance of the proposal (e.g., she laughs and follows up with an elaboration), then the friends have collaboratively manipulated a norm, and the manipulated norm becomes part of their unique, shared normative framework.

Importantly, collaboration is not mere reciprocation, because enemies may reciprocally manipulate the norms that govern their interactions without thereby becoming friends. Brent may slur Brian, and that may lead Brian to slur Brent. Over time, denigration may come to be a mutually recognized descriptive norm for these two enemies' interactions. The enemies are not thereby

¹⁰ One interesting example of explicit norm manipulation, relevant in some socio-linguistic frameworks, involves explicitly deciding to move from a formal to an informal pronoun tense.

¹¹ This begs for elaboration, which I am not able to supply in detail in this paper. However, as an initial proposal, I suggest that we model the conveyance of tacit proposals to modify cultural norms on accommodation of novel pragmatic presuppositions in a Stalnakerian framework (c.f., Stalnaker, 2002). In broad strokes, the initial act (e.g., telling a dirty joke) constitutes a manifest event, which presupposes, and thereby proposes, a departure from the shared normative framework. An objection on the part of the friend or a positive response constitutes another manifest event, which presupposes rejection or acceptance of the proposed norm manipulation.

¹² Of course, people are dynamic. A friend who proposed an adjustment of norms to permit bawdy humor may make the proposal again after sufficient time has passed and the relationship has changed in other respects, and the friend who first vetoed the proposal may subsequently come to accept it. But such proposals will not occur again soon on penalty of damaging the budding relationship, where 'soon' is relative to the proposed manipulation, its importance within the shared normative framework, the cost of effecting the manipulation, and so on.

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friends, because the process that led to this manipulation was not collaborative. Brian's reaction to Brent's initial slur did not have the potential to influence Brent's future behavior in deference to their relationship. Compare this to the related but quite distinct case in which Brent and Brian are friends engaged in a collaborative process to potentially make mutual slurring a norm that governs their interactions. In that case, Brent's initial slur of Brian was subject to a veto in the form of Brian's angry or hurt response to a perceived slight. If such a veto had been issued, Brent would not soon have slurred Brian again, not only because it is now clear that such an action would anger or hurt Brian (a reason any moral individual might refrain from slurring a mere acquaintance), but also because it is clear that to have done so might have damaged their budding relationship or even caused it to cease. Brian's reaction here constitutes a veto because its effectiveness in altering Brent's future behavior is due in part to the value Brent places on their current or potential future relationship.

Any relationship we would be tempted to call a friendship is the product of collaborative norm manipulation. Activity-centric friendships consist in their negotiated departures from the normative frameworks that govern non-friends engaging in the relevant shared activity. My tennis friend may make fun of my serve, a mere competitor should not. My drinking buddy may stand me a round, I will be inclined to buy another to repay a mere acquaintance. Erotic friendships involve the negotiated manipulation of norms of physical interaction and other-regarding that govern our non-erotic-friendships. Utile political or corporate friendships consist in their—sometimes explicitly—negotiated departures from standard normative frameworks for political or business interactions. Casual pleasure friendships, such as the one between the corporate employees of the last section, do not consist in departures from the norms of a single activity but are rather the product of many small negotiations involving norms of conversation, gift-giving,

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assistance, and so on. Our deepest friendships are the products of countless collaborative departures from a shared cultural framework—sometimes so many that deep friendships resemble isolated cultures in their own rights.

I have enumerated some norms that are plausibly thought to be the target of manipulation for several sorts of friendships, but my argument for the necessity of collaborative norm manipulation is ultimately one of conceivability. We cannot conceive of a friendship that does not consist in some unique norms, which are themselves the product of the kind of process described above. Thus, collaborative norm manipulation seems to be a necessary condition for friendship. But perhaps this reasoning shows something different and damaging for my analysis. Perhaps we cannot conceive of a friendship that is not the product of collaborative norm manipulation simply because collaborative norm manipulation is ubiquitous, occurring in every relationship whatsoever. This seems unlikely, since we have relationships of a sort with our perfect enemies. But it is true that our interactions with mere acquaintances are sometimes influenced by special norms, collaboratively reached. However, my analysis includes the proviso that friendships are the product of *significant* collaborative norm manipulation. Thus, I do not typically call my mailman a friend because I do not typically consider the sparse collaborative norm manipulation that we have engaged in significant enough for friendship.

What amount of collaborative norm manipulation is significant enough for friendship? There is no single answer to this question. Significance is context dependent. In some contexts, small departures from a standard normative framework are sufficient—and then we may be said to strike up a little friendship. In others, only relationships that are the product of a relatively high amount of normative collaboration count. This is why ‘friend’ is sensitive to similar context shifting phenomena as ‘know’. “But do you *really* know you have hands?” “But is she *really* a

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friend?” This sensitivity does not entail that there isn’t really any such thing as friendship, any more than it entails that there isn’t really any such thing as knowledge.

Although there is no univocal value for ‘significant’, it may nonetheless be helpful to identify some metrics to which our significance assessments appear responsive. I have already alluded to one of these in suggesting that our closest friendships often involve *numerous* departures from a culturally normative framework. This is, in a sense, a backward-looking metric, since numerous normative adjustments will, in most instances, have been achieved over the course of a long relationship.¹³ But sometimes a relationship may be deemed significant not because past interactions have yielded numerous normative adjustments, but because the *frequency* with which normative adjustments have been achieved over a short period promises successful collaborative relationship building for the future. Many of us have the experience of having met someone with whom we “just clicked”. The current view would analyze such instances as involving two individuals who (for whatever reason) are well matched to quickly adjust culturally typical norms into more unique, shared norms. In instances such as these, the burgeoning friends will often want to spend more time together soon—a mark of the significance with which we regard relationships that afford for frequent norm manipulation. Perhaps another metric of significance is to be found if we consider the relative importance of norms. A social norm may be said to be more important if violations of it are expected to carry greater social sanctions. From this perspective, there is

¹³ This simple observation may ground some empirical research on friendship, such as that by Hall (2019), who found in one study that, for participants who had recently relocated to a new region, “at low amounts of time (<10 hr), relationships are best described as acquaintances (51%) or friends of friends (16%). Casual friendships emerge around 30 hr, followed by friendships around 50 hr. Good friendships begin to emerge after 140 hr. Best friendships do not emerge until after 300 hr of time spent [together]” (1286-1287). Nonetheless, some situations may push friendships that are significant in this way to form over a short period of time. For example, a relationship that involves many departures from a shared normative framework may emerge over a relatively short period for two Americans culturally isolated on the same foreign exchange program in Japan.

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perhaps no greater social norm than the one prohibiting killing other people. Still, this is a social norm that soldiers are called upon to violate. Indeed, soldiers must collaborate to kill. And it is also well known that other social norms related to death and killing are also often manipulated by soldiers—soldiers may, for example, joke about killing or the dead. Yet, friendships between soldiers who fought together for even a relatively brief time are often accorded a special significance. Perhaps these relationships are considered significant, in part, because of the *importance* of the norms such fellow combatants were pressed to collaboratively manipulate. Though it is unlikely to be an exhaustive list, number, frequency, and importance of norm manipulations all seem to factor into our overall assessment of the significance of a friendship.

Friendships—lesser and ‘true’—are the product of significant collaborative norm manipulation, and our interactions with our friends are influenced by the distinctive frameworks of norms which result.¹⁴ In the next section, I will argue that this explains some key features of the friendship relation.

Why Collaborative Norm Manipulation Matters:

Thinking of friendship as involving collaborative norm manipulation is of explanatory value. Here are four features of friendships that are explicable on the present account.

i. Friendships and Familial Relations

Relationships between family members are typically intimate and often involve significant mutual love. Yet intimate, loving familial relationships are not always, or even typically, thought

¹⁴ Again, the present account holds that this is a necessary but not a sufficient feature of friendship. Former friends who have experienced a falling out have engaged in collaborative norm manipulation, and, should they meet again, their interactions would likely be influenced by distinctive norms previously negotiated, but they are not now friends. Perhaps what is missing in such cases is a mutual positive disposition towards the other. If so, this is another necessary component of friendship in the broader sense, and perhaps these two features are jointly sufficient.

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of as friendships.¹⁵ The present account provides a clear distinction between the two, since it does not characterize friendship as a variety of love or intimacy. My love for my sister may be introspectively indistinguishable from my love for a dear friend, I may know intimate details of her life or we may share a common perspective. Yet, I may not consider her a friend, because we have always been too far apart in age and interests to negotiate a significant normative framework. Of course, family relations may involve significant collaborative norm manipulation, and to the extent that they do we tend to think of them as friendships. The present account also recognizes that there may be important bars to friendship in the context of some familial relations. Thus, it is rare for parents and their non-adult children to be friends, since parents rarely negotiate norms with their children. As this changes with age, parents and their adult children are more likely to be friends.¹⁶

ii. The Cultural Relativism of Friendship

Those who have spent significant time abroad often remark on differences in interpersonal relationships between cultures. And some social psychological research suggests cultural differences in our conceptions of friendship.¹⁷ It is unsurprising on the present view that friendship is in some sense culturally relative, since friendship consists in departures from a common cultural normative framework. There will be differences in the kinds of relationships that are shaped via alteration of distinct kinds of normative fabric.

iii. The Non-fungibility of Friends

¹⁵ Of course, Aristotle's *philia* is intended to apply to family members in addition to friends. Whatever difficulty contemporary accounts of friendship face in distinguishing friendships from familial relations may thus be due to their emphasis on his account.

¹⁶ See Kupfer (1990) and Kristjánsson (2006) for discussion of issues related to these points.

¹⁷ See, for example, Verkuyten and Masson (1996) and Adams and Plaut (2003).

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On the present proposal, each friendship is the product of numerous individual negotiations. Because the same pattern of collaboration is unlikely to be repeated, no two friendships are likely to consist in identical normative frameworks. Thus, each friendship is *sui generis*. This *sui generis* helps explain the unique value of each friendship. Just as many of our thoughts and actions are possible only against a cultural normative framework (e.g., I may shake hands or think of shaking hands only if I am familiar with certain cultural norms), so some thoughts and actions may be possible only within the context of each friendship's unique shared normative framework. If we maintain that our friendships are valuable (in part) because of what they allow us to do and think, then each friendship will have a unique value on the present view. This does not mean that each of our friendships will be valuable *to* us. I may not care about the thoughts and actions a particular friendship affords. Nor does it mean that every relationship we ever call a friendship is non-fungible, that it cannot be replaced by something functionally similar without a significant change in value. Nonetheless, it may be that a significant source of value for our best and non-fungible friends derives from the unique and irreplaceable normative frameworks they comprise and our knowledge that we negotiated that framework together.

iv. Friendship and Flux

We do not tend to experience our friendships as static or unchanging. Our friendships grow and fade. They change in kind. Activity-centric friendships diversify. Erotic friends become 'true' friends, and vice versa. Even our 'true' friendships are not static. We do not invariably pick up with our old, but long absent, friends right where we left off. Sometimes, for a little while, it is not quite the same old friendship, even though we love one another as deeply and are prepared to share intimate details of our lives. Sometimes we share experiences with our 'true' friends that fundamentally change the nature of our relationship without clearly changing our love for or

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intimacy with one another. All of this is readily explained by the current view. Growth in friendship is the collaborative manipulation of additional cultural norms. As a friendship fades it falls back into the cultural normative framework. Initial meetings of old dear friends are sometimes strained because we are out of practice with the unique norms that constitute those friendships. Friendship changing experiences are norm changing experiences. They need not change the depth of our love or our level of intimacy

I conclude that that friendships, in the broad sense, are relationships that are the product of significant collaborative norm manipulation, and consist in normative frameworks collaboratively agreed to thereby. Furthermore, understanding friendships in this way is of explanatory value.

Coda: Unique Normative Framework or Minimally Structured Relationship?

The account of friendship offered above is similar to one suggested by Thomas (1987). Thomas and I agree that friendship consists (in part) in departure from widespread social expectations of appropriate behavior. However, there are at least two important ways in which our views differ.

First, we differ in our conception of what is being departed from when we form a friendship.

Whereas I emphasize cultural normative frameworks, Thomas emphasizes norms associated with social roles, which he characterizes as, “well-delineated modes of behavior which are generally expected of a person, given the position which he occupies in an institutional structure (for example, professor or student) or the significant social category in which he falls (for example, member of a gang or affluent class)” (227). Thomas calls interactions that revolve around our social roles ‘structured’ interactions, and he claims that “[i]n general, our social interaction revolves primarily around the social roles which we occupy” (229). This brings us to the second important difference between our views. Whereas I characterize the formation of a friendship as

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the manipulation of a shared normative framework, Thomas characterizes it as a departure from structured social interaction. Interactions amongst friends, Thomas suggests, are minimally structured. That is, in friendship “how the parties interact with one another is not primarily a function of social roles” (218).

While I find much to agree with in Thomas’s discussion, I think several reasons favor my characterization of friendship, as a unique normative framework, over his, as a minimally structured relationship. First, a normative framework is a more explanatorily useful posit than a social role. To see that normative frameworks are more explanatorily useful, consider asking a stranger for directions or striking up a conversation with your seatmate on a transcontinental flight. Do interactions such as these primarily revolve around our social roles? It is far from clear that they do. Of course, social roles factor into such interactions. Someone may bring up the topic of sports if their seatmate is wearing blue jeans or the stock market if he’s wearing slacks, because clothes are a marker of social category. But, presumably, not every aspect of such a casual social interaction will be structured by the institutional and social categories the seatmates fall into. However, most every aspect of every social interaction *is* norm-governed. Indeed, institutional and social categories are themselves normative categories, so they are encompassed within a normative framework, which can therefore explain everything a social role can explain about our social interactions and more.

A second reason to favor characterizing friendships as unique normative frameworks rather than minimally structured relationships is simply that friendships are themselves highly structured relationships. The behavior of friends is often structured by the different social roles that they occupy within a friend-group (‘the clown’, ‘the straight-man’, ‘the parent’). As discussed above, friendship is also seen as giving rise to special duties, so that far from escaping

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the dictates of our social roles in friendship, the significant social role of being someone's friend brings new prescriptive requirements all its own, such as the requirement to set aside other obligations to comfort a friend in their time of need. Finally, communication is an essential activity within any friendship and, as Grice (1989) showed us, communication is itself normatively structured. Part of the framework against which these communicative norms operate involves knowledge of the social roles our interlocutors occupy. For example, my conversations with my unmarried, childless friends revolve around different issues and rest on different assumptions than do my conversations with my friends who are married parents. Given the important role of conversation within any friendship, and the clear ways in which conversation (even within friendship) is itself structured by our social roles, it seems difficult to maintain Thomas's view of friendship as a minimally structured relationship. Nonetheless, friendships are uniquely structured relationships, even when the interactions they comprise are colored by our social roles.

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