

FRIENDSHIP AND EXPLOITATION

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What is the nature of friendship and its normative significance? What is the relation between the nature of friendship and the different and distinctive ways in which friendships can go normatively awry? Are there special wrongs or wrongings – distinct forms of mistreatment, abuse, and violation – that can occur in the context of friendship? Within these broad questions, I want to offer some reflections on friendship and a particular form of mistreatment: exploitation.

I shall begin by highlighting some features of friendships, including: (1) what they involve; (2) how they are formed, sustained, and terminated; and (3) how they matter and how the way in which they matter is manifested in thought, action, and feelings. These points then guide reflections on the phenomenon of exploitation in friendship. This part of the discussion begins with some general points about the concept and practice of exploitation and is followed by development of the claim that the possibility of exploitation in friendship is ineliminable, given that vulnerability is an essential aspect of friendship. The final part of my discussion explores the prospect of minimizing our exposure to the likelihood of exploitation in friendship.

Friendship

Friendship is not just any kind of relationship. When we say of two people that they are friends, we take it that they *have a relationship*, meaning that they stand in a relation that goes beyond the thin, logical sense of relation involved whenever two people satisfy some two-place predicate (Kolodny 2003). In other words, friendships are evaluatively laden relationships: friends do not merely *stand in some relation* to one another, but they *have a relationship* with one another, in a sense that has practical and normative implications.

T.M. Scanlon (2013: 86) suggests that a normatively significant relationship such as friendship can be thought of just as “a set of intentions and expectations about our actions and attitudes toward one another that are justified by certain facts about us.” While I think the constitutive conditions of a friendship include its members’ intentions, expectations, and dispositions, Scanlon’s account seems to me to leave out the important dynamic element of *interaction*: the mutual shaping and modification of attitudes, dispositions, and behavior between members in a relationship. These aspects are captured in Dean Cocking and Jeanette Kennett’s (1998) treatment of friendship, in which they argue that friendship is partially constituted by the mutual willingness to be directed and interpreted

by the other. A crucial dimension of friendship is the mutual shaping and modification of attitudes, dispositions, and behavior between the parties to the friendship.

For two people to count as friends, there typically has to be some shared history between the individuals in the friendship: some sufficient degree of engagement, interaction, and regard between them over time. David Owens brings out these interactive and reciprocal aspects of relationships of the sort that he calls “involvements,” which include friendships. “Involvements,” Owens (2012: 97) says, involve “a dynamic syndrome of attitudes, of behaviour that expresses (or purports to express) those attitudes and of norms that govern both attitudes and behaviour.”¹ As he observes, these essential elements of “attitude, behavioral disposition, and applicable norm all evolve in tandem: people who start to keep in touch, begin to want to keep in touch and come to feel they ought to keep in touch, all of a piece” (Owens 2012: 98).

It is important to note that (virtually all?) friendships – in particular, their emergence, their coming-into-existence – *could have been avoided*. To see this, let us consider more broadly the role of *choice* in friendship. Friendship is of course different from other valuable relationships, such as the parent–child relationship, in that it is typically chosen: one does not choose one’s parents – certainly not in the way in which one could be said to choose one’s friends. (Of course, there are aspects *within* the relationship between a parent and child that do involve elements of choice, including how the parties conduct their relationship, how they choose to interact, etc.)

But at the same time the element of choice involved in friendship is not exactly like the choice to raise one’s arm either. One typically does not choose one’s friends directly, in the way one might choose to raise one’s arm, or choose which cereal to buy (Apple Jacks or Wheaties) at the grocery store. Rather, one makes choices, not in the first instance about whether to be someone’s friend, but about *other* things that then have implications for one’s relationship to the person in question, including what one may come to owe to that person, what one may expect of that person, what they may owe or expect of us, and – in light of what’s owed and expected – whether one *is* friends with that person.

For example, suppose you find yourself taking the bus home from school with a certain classmate, Beatrice. Perhaps Beatrice is not someone you would have singled out for a special relationship. Friendship with her is not something you were explicitly seeking out. Still, in the course of your conversations and exchanges of small favors (What was covered in class last week? Could I borrow your notes? Which professors do you recommend?), a friendship grows between you. You may not be kindred spirits, but you get along well enough and the mere fact of having spent time together changes things between the two of you. With more or less enthusiasm, you become Beatrice’s friend – you acquire the feelings, attitudes, and vulnerabilities of a friend.

But this could have all been avoided. You could have taken a less convenient bus or contrived not to meet her at the bus stop and so forth. In deciding not to do these things, you allowed a relationship to develop that involves certain expectations, and even obligations on you both. You may not be close (not BFFs yet), but you do now matter to one another, and you now owe Beatrice various forms of aid and concern that you do not owe mere strangers. My point here is that the kind of choice that you have in friendship is characterized by the fact that friendships are the sort of thing you can avoid getting into.

One can also choose whether to end a friendship (or end the process in which friendship is emerging). Termination, here, is not (typically) achieved simply by communicating the intention of thereby releasing oneself or the other party from the friendship. That is, one usually does not end a friendship by way of a *performative utterance*, or *speech act*. Ending a friendship is not usually like ending a marriage in a divorce. Indeed, it is not even clear that such an utterance would necessarily be sufficient to end a friendship, at least in some cases. (As Diane Jeske has pointed out to me: If I say out of the blue to a long-standing friend, “we are no longer friends,” the relationship is not erased. It seems that such an utterance may not be performative, but, rather, just false or infelicitous.) Rather, where a friendship is ended, typically this is because one does what one knows will

loosen the bonds of friendship. One takes a different bus home. Or, having moved, one simply fails to keep in touch.

None of this (the beginning or ending of a friendship) has to happen with your full explicit awareness or consciousness. You may be only dimly aware that in riding the bus home with your classmate, you are creating various bonds. And even when fully aware of this, the cost of avoiding this result, of getting another bus, or of ignoring the classmate's conversational overtures may be rather substantial. The same applies to ending a friendship. A friendship may lapse without either party having explicitly decided to end it, although people at least have some dim awareness that their actions and omissions can lead over time or repeated instances to this outcome.

Now I do not deny that, in certain circumstances, people can be obliged to become friends, and not infrequently, one finds oneself having to continue a friendship because one cannot break it off without wronging one's friend. Nevertheless, one *can* always decide not to be someone's friend or break off a friendship and thereby avoid or extinguish the obligations of a friend. Indeed, one can only be obligated to create or sustain a friendship because one has a choice about whether to do so. (In other words, being *obligated* to do something, entails that you have some measure of *choice* whether to do it. This, many think, is a conceptual matter.) All of this is consistent with the fact that in terminating a friendship, one may be wronging the other party, and wronging them by violating one of the norms surrounding the friendship. (It is worth noting that there seems to be an asymmetry between terms about terminating an already existent friendship or about not starting a potential friendship. It is perhaps more plausible to think that one can wrong the other in the former case, but perhaps not in the latter, because it is unclear whether anyone has a claim on me that I befriend her.)

I have been reflecting on the nature of choice in friendship – the way in which we can be said to choose it, or choose to end it. I turn now to the role and nature of *valuing* in friendship. What is it to *value* something? To *care* about it? To treat it as important, as mattering? Caring about things, or valuing them, involves a complex of normative judgments or beliefs, motivational tendencies, and emotional vulnerabilities. To value philosophy, or philosophical activity, for instance, is to take it to be a worthwhile form of disciplined inquiry; to find it interesting, in a way that leads one to care about pursuing it; to believe that people who have the requisite ability, interest, and opportunity have reason to study philosophy and engage in philosophical reflection; and to be emotionally vulnerable to how things fare with the practice of philosophy generally as well as with one's particular practice of philosophy. To give an example of one's emotional vulnerability in this case, one may feel disappointed, even depressed, for failing to live up to certain standards of clarity, originality, rigor, and insight in one's philosophical work.

Here, I subscribe to a view of *valuing* that has been articulated by Samuel Scheffler (2012; Kolodny 2003; Wallace 2013). According to Scheffler (2012), valuing any X comprises at least the following elements:

- (1) Belief that X is good or valuable or worthy.
- (2) A susceptibility or vulnerability to experience a range of context-dependent emotions regarding X.
- (3) A disposition to experience these emotions as being merited or appropriate.
- (4) A disposition to treat certain kinds of X-related considerations as reasons for action in relevant deliberative contexts.

As concerns our topic of exploitation in friendship, I take special interest in the second element: the idea that valuing something implies emotional vulnerability to it. Indeed, I believe that with respect to most valued objects, if not all, Scheffler's characterization of the second element could be further broadened. In particular, valuing *persons* and *relationships* typically implies forms of vulnerability that

include but also go beyond those that are strictly emotional in nature. (I shall come back to this point.)

According to OED, something is “vulnerable” if it “may be wounded,” either literally or figuratively; it is “susceptible of injury, not proof against weapon, criticism, etc.” We might say that vulnerability, or the state of being vulnerable, is fundamentally a matter of exposure to potential harm. To say that valuing some X implies being vulnerable to X in some relevant way is, thus, to say that valuing X implies the real possibility of suffering X-related harm, loss, or damage.

Among the variety of objects we can and do value are persons and our relationships to persons. Persons and relationships are among the things that we attach the greatest value to in the world, that make the most significant contribution to a meaningful, fulfilling, and textured human life for us. Applying Scheffler’s general account of valuing to the specific case of valuing *relationships*, we have the idea that valuing a relationship implies (among other things) certain vulnerabilities on the part of the valuer – that is, the friend.

Consider the role in your emotional life of your friendships. For example, you may be cheered by the prospect of seeing and spending time with a friend, disappointed if the two of you rarely have occasion to see one another, keen to support her if she is in need or in a bad way, distraught if serious conflict develops between the two of you, or if the two of you become estranged, and hurt and betrayed if she betrays your trust. Put differently, it is natural to say that we are *attached* to our friends, and such attachments involve familiar patterns of emotional vulnerability and dependence; we care about the people who are our friends, in a way that renders us susceptible to distress when they are hurt, or when our relationship to them is threatened or damaged.

Indeed, friendships bring with them unique opportunities to be hurt by the other (as well as unique opportunities to be *benefited* by the other). The greater openness between friends, and the greater expectations of trust, imply greater vulnerability. We count on our friends in ways that we do not mere strangers. But this reliance can lead not simply to mere disappointment and unhappiness when our friends fail to come through as we expect, but also *a sense of betrayal*. There is greater exposure to vulnerability between friends, and we are more deeply hurt when we are let down by our friends.²

Exploitation

I shall argue that the vulnerability that is in the very nature of friendship is the source of the possibility of wrongful exploitation in friendships. To do so, I must first say something about exploitation.

Following others who have written on exploitation, I wish to understand exploitation as consisting (in part) in the taking advantage of another’s vulnerability (Goodin 1987; Liberto 2014; Sample 2003; Wood 1995). *Wrongful* exploitation, as I understand it, then, is the *wrongful* or *unfair* or *unjustified* or *disrespectful* taking advantage of another’s vulnerability, or garnering excessive benefits from them. More precisely, I take exploitation targeted at a person (or group) to involve at least the following three necessary conditions:

- (1) the use of the target’s capacity or resource to achieve some end or purpose of one’s own
- (2) through exercise of control or power over that capacity or resource
- (3) by taking advantage of the target’s being in a condition of vulnerability.

Notice that the *target’s* being in a condition of vulnerability provides someone with an opportunity to make use of, to exercise power over, the target’s capacity or resource. The vulnerability helps explain why the exploiter is able to take advantage of the exploited. It is no accident, then, that there is a connection between *vulnerability* and the emotions that we are prone to experience as social creatures, such as *shame*: our susceptibility to feelings of shame is connected to the possibility of having our

vulnerabilities *exposed* – made an object of the gaze of others (real or imagined) in a way that leads us to want to hide, cover up, and self-protect.

The interpretation that I have offered of what exploitation involves preserves exploitation's connection to use, power, control, vulnerability, and taking advantage of another. These connections are maintained not simply as a matter of stipulation, but because they are needed, in my opinion, to best make sense of why exploitation matters to us in paradigmatic cases – why we find them specially objectionable. These paradigmatic cases include:

- (1) Desperately poor people who sell their organs.
- (2) Women who sell their sexual services or serve as surrogate mothers.
- (3) Workers in developing countries who work long hours in terrible conditions for next to nothing (e.g., sweatshop labor).

I believe that an interpretation of exploitation has to include at least the three conditions stated above in order to capture fully the morally distinctive features that give rise to our moral reactions in paradigmatic cases.

In characterizing exploitation in terms of the three conditions, I am deliberately rejecting an overly *broad* moral definition of “exploitation,” such as one that covers all transactions that are unfair, or all transactions that result in an unfair or unjust distribution of benefits and burdens (for such an account of exploitation, see Arneson 2013). My reasons for favoring a narrower definition that includes the three elements I've identified have not to do with the disputed issue of whether we ought to adopt a moralized or non-moralized conception of exploitation. Rather, my worry is that if we end up using the term *exploitation* merely to refer to an unfair or unjust transaction or distribution, then the term may end up becoming little more than a thin, pejorative term used to describe any economic system (or ways of dividing benefits and burdens in society) one rejects on moral grounds. It is important that the term *exploitation* maintain its analytic value as a thick ethical term – that the term not have its descriptive content thinned out in such a way that it reduces to little more than a pejorative used against one's political opponents on social justice issues. More specifically, it is important that we retain the connection between the term *exploitation* and notions like “vulnerability,” “power,” and “use,” for holding onto these connections guards against overlooking relevant moral distinctions and thereby giving an oversimplified description of the moral terrain.

Earlier I suggested that friendship involves vulnerabilities. More generally, valuing a thing – not just the special cases of valuing persons or relationships – involves vulnerability. It is worth noting that states or attitudes that fall short of valuing – such as states of need, desire, and even addiction and weakness of will – can generate vulnerabilities as well. Consider, for example, how the drug addict's desire or need for drugs may make her vulnerable to the drug dealer or pimp. Or how the very poor – who live check-to-check, in perpetual struggle to make ends meet – are vulnerable to entities like “payday” loan outfits, and credit cards with hidden fees. As Allen Wood (1995: 143) observes, “Many human needs and desires can be viewed as vulnerabilities, and accordingly many dealings between human beings can be put in an exploitative light.”

Of course, not all needs and desires count as vulnerabilities. If this is right, we might hope for a more precise characterization, a set of sufficient and necessary conditions for one person's being vulnerable to another person that distinguishes those needs and desires that count as vulnerabilities from those that do not. However, it is difficult to precisely state the conditions which make it the case that one person is vulnerable to another rather than one person simply desiring or needing something from the other that makes the first person do freely and willingly what the second person seeks or requests of the first. Whether a person's needs or desires count as vulnerabilities is a judgment that has to be sensitive to the details of the context. When focusing on particular cases, it may still be a difficult judgment to make. But even if we cannot provide a clear, discursive account of the borderline – for

the borderline may itself be vague – still we can acknowledge clear cases of need- and desire-based vulnerabilities and clear cases of needs and desires that are not vulnerabilities.

Being vulnerable means that one is *exploitable*. For if vulnerability involves being in a condition of relative powerlessness to others, being in such a condition makes one susceptible to being taken advantage of by others. To clarify this point, it helps to distinguish between the broader category of being in a general condition of vulnerability from the more specific category of being in a condition of what I call *friendship-based vulnerability*.

As human beings are limited, dependent, social creatures, human life involves exposure to all sorts of vulnerability. Vulnerability (in general) includes individual vulnerability such as being physically frail, having some disability, having weakness of will or an addiction, or lacking certain competences or agential powers of certain kinds. One could also be vulnerable to aspects of the natural environment. *Friendship-based vulnerability*, as I want to understand it, is vulnerability *to someone else or some group in virtue of standing in a friendship relation to them*. Such vulnerability is fundamentally a matter of being susceptible to harm as a direct result of being a member in the friendship relationship, harm that one would not be susceptible to otherwise.

Consider some *sources* of this susceptibility to harm:

(1) *Care and Openness*: We are often, not unreasonably, more caring and generous with our friends. This care – like care more generally – involves “a consistent pattern of attending to the relevant object: in short, a kind of vigilance for what happens or might well happen to it” (Helm 2010: 57).³ We are also more willing to trust and to believe them, more open with them about our fears, secrets, and insecurities. This caring and openness is closely connected with the special goods that friendship makes available, goods such as: affection, understanding, connection, solidarity, and shared feelings and experiences. But this caring and openness also makes us more vulnerable, more *exploitable*. It is not surprising that exploitation in friendship often involves *emotional* manipulation. Our friends and loved ones may be better placed to exploit our affections, insecurities, fears, generosity, gullibility, vanity, loneliness, pride, and so on, in order to get us to do things that promote their own interests, aims, and goals, in ways that are objectionable and unfair.

(2) *Power*: When the things that one values are themselves things that can fare well or poorly – can be in a good or bad condition, can flourish or be damaged or destroyed – one’s vulnerability is apt to be greater. This is certainly true of friendships. One’s emotional vulnerability is apt to be greater when the relationship one values is itself vulnerable to changes in its condition or quality.

Of course, whether a friendship develops and flourishes or not is partly a matter of the attitudes and responses of the participants. What this means, then, is that if I value my friendship with you, there is a respect in which you have power over me – power that you have because your attitudes and responses toward me partly determine the condition of our friendship, which matters to me.

It can be illuminating, then, to view friendship through the lens of power: to see love in terms of putting oneself in the beloved’s power. To be a friend is to render oneself vulnerable to one’s friend, and so to place oneself under their power in this respect. As a friendship deepens, one’s life becomes more and more enmeshed emotionally and practically with the life of the other, which then generates opportunities for the friend to be exploited, to be unfairly taken advantage of, by the beloved. One could be asked to shoulder additional moral responsibilities and moral risks on behalf of one’s friend that one would not otherwise be willing to shoulder were one not in the relevant relationship.⁴

(3) *Unequal Vulnerability*: Participants in friendships are often not equally vulnerable. This asymmetry in vulnerability can be viewed in terms of the participants’ relation to the special goods friendships make available. These goods include those I mentioned earlier: care, affection, mutual understanding, sense of connection, shared feelings and experiences, shared purposes, and joint activities. They may also include benefits and resources that are more material in nature, such as food and shelter. There can be asymmetries in the power relation when:

- (a) One party values the goods, benefits, and resources provided by the relationship more than the other does.
- (b) One party is more dependent on the relationship to enjoy the goods, benefits, and resources than the other is. (In the extreme, the relationship may be the *only source* of such goods, benefits, and resources for one of the parties but not for the other.)
- (c) One party has more control (exclusive or discretionary control) over the goods, benefits, and resources than does the other. (For example: control over the financial resources.)

In short, when parties to potential *transactions* (broadly understood to cover both relational and commercial transactions) are *unequally* vulnerable to one another, the more vulnerable party (the weaker party) is at greater risk of being exploited. There is greater risk of exploitation when there is an asymmetry in the power relation between the two friends.

Minimizing Exploitation

I turn my attention now to the issue of remedying, eliminating, or minimizing exploitation: what, if anything, can prevent exploitation or limit its occurrence, in the friendship context? I shall approach this question indirectly by first considering exploitation in the commercial or economic context, drawing on Allen Wood's insightful analysis in this area.

Wood distinguishes between two main ways of remedying exploitation in the economic context: *interference* and *redistribution*. Interference consists in "prevent[ing] (or interfer[ing] with) the ability of those in a stronger position to take advantage of the vulnerability of others" (Wood 2004: 261). This strategy is typically pursued through the instruments of law and social policy. Consider two examples. In the case of protecting workers from capitalist exploitation, we might put into place: "minimum wage laws, legal limitations of the length of the working day and the creation and enforcement of regulations insuring healthy work conditions and safety on the job" (ibid.). In the case of protecting surrogate birth mothers from adopting couples, we might make surrogacy contracts legally unenforceable. Doing this would help limit the harms that might come to birth mothers who are "poor" and/or "young," and who enter into the contract without full understanding and appreciation of the personal ramifications of giving up a child they have carried. Notice that the strategy of *interference* does not so much aim at removing vulnerability, but rather attempts to prevent those in the relevant positions of power from taking advantage of those in the corresponding positions of vulnerability.

The second strategy – *redistribution* – consists in a transfer of power from the powerful to the powerless, in such a way that those who were previously in a position of vulnerability to others are no longer vulnerable, or are made less vulnerable (ibid.). (The transfer of power can be achieved by transferring wealth or property.) The vulnerable are made less vulnerable, and so less exploitable. In contrast to the strategy of interference, the strategy of redistribution is very much aimed at removing the vulnerability of the exploitable.

Wood (2004: 262) argues that Karl Marx's conception of "the socialist or communist revolution" is best understood as involving (a radical form of) this second strategy:

[Marx] thinks of revolution, in other words, not as a social act protecting the vulnerable from their exploiters but rather as the establishing of new social conditions that obviate the need to protect them (by abolishing the very relationships of power within which those roles of exploiter and exploited can exist).

In other words, revolution is aimed at establishing new social conditions and relations of equality between members of society that imply the elimination of certain kinds of vulnerability.

Of course, the aim of removing the vulnerabilities of the exploited could be pursued without necessarily seeking to bring about social conditions and relations so radical that they require revolution. For example, the transfer of income and wealth in a non-revolutionary context is one possible remedy. Another is the more equal distribution of quality primary and secondary school education. Indeed, minimum wage and maximum hours laws that help preserve a threshold of economic welfare and enhance the bargaining power of the poorest people might also be viewed through the lens of serving to make potential targets of exploitative practices less vulnerable.

Safeguards for Relationship Exploitation?

In the previous section, I suggested that in the case of commercial exploitation (e.g., exploitation of sweatshop workers), there are two main ways to prevent or mitigate exploitation – two ways to protect the vulnerable from being exploited. The first, *interference*, seeks to make it harder for those in the relevant positions of power to exercise their power to take advantage of the vulnerable. The second, *redistribution*, seeks to help the vulnerable more directly, by removing or minimizing the vulnerabilities of the exploited. Whereas the strategy of interference aims to protect the vulnerable from being taken advantage of, the strategy of redistribution aims to free the vulnerable from their condition of vulnerability and, thus, from any need for special protection.

My question now is: How, if at all, might the two stratagems of elimination apply to the context of friendships? How might they serve to reduce the possibility of one participant exploiting, taking unfair advantage of, the other participant's vulnerability (particularly, *interpersonal vulnerability*, the sort deeply tied to valuing the friendship)?

Consider the application of the first strategy: preventing the less vulnerable party from taking advantage of the less vulnerable party. It is far from clear how this strategy can be operationalized in the context of friendships, especially if we are committed to the notion that the state should not be too intrusive in regulating our friendships (and other private associations). As Jerome Neu (2002: 55) reminds us about romantic love:

Love [...] cannot be given on demand. We cannot decide to love someone because we think they have a right to be loved by us; we cannot make ourselves love someone because we owe it to them. Moreover (and this is one of the many ironies of the human condition), even if love could be given on demand, that would not satisfy [...] for the love that is desired is usually a freely given love – a response to a desire (backed by a need) rather than a demand (backed by a threat). A love that was coerced (presuming something that was coerced could still be regarded as love at all) would be the wrong sort of love.

I submit that the same points apply to friendship – it too cannot be given on demand, and cannot be a matter that another person has an institutional right to claim or obligation to provide. Moreover, even if such a thing were possible, it would not necessarily be the sort that we would really want for ourselves.

There are good reasons not to institutionalize or legalize certain norms of friendship, norms such as considering the other's feelings, living up to the trust that the other has placed in one, not betraying secrets, keeping promises, not being selfish, not letting the other down. This is because it is important that acts of friendship (acts toward one's friend that manifest consideration of the other's feelings, their trust in one, etc.) be performed *for the right reasons*. Were we to make acts of friendship legally obligatory, that would only obscure motivations and intentions further. We would be in a worse position to decide whether acts of benefiting another are performed out of the sentiments and motivations of friendship – or out of a desire to avoid legal penalties. (Indeed, such a strategy would also involve invasions of privacy, where such privacy may very well be necessary for intimacy.)

Consider, next, the application of the second strategy of vulnerability removal. I argue that removing the distinctive vulnerability of friendship is not a viable option either. Earlier, I made

the case that friendships are partly constituted by the emotional vulnerability of their participants. Removing the distinctive vulnerability of friendship is not a real option, short of impairing the friendship – or at least significantly altering its relationship nature and value.

It seems to me that the special goods of friendship – such as care, affection, support, mutual respect and understanding, feelings of solidarity, shared experiences, and joint activities – would not be possible (certainly not in their rich and robust form), if we immunized ourselves completely from the distinctive vulnerabilities of friendship. And anyway, the vulnerabilities of friendship should not be seen as morally problematic in themselves; we may even see them as morally desirable (on the moral value of love, see Velleman 1999). Nevertheless, the vulnerabilities of friendship bring with them risks associated with the abuse of power by one friend to another.

It is worth clarifying that the sort of vulnerability bound up with friendship that I have been discussing is distinct from other kinds of vulnerability that may also be contingently present in friendships, due to such factors as one participant coming to the relationship in a state of poverty. In such cases, the likelihood of exploitation can be reduced if the participants strive over time for material or economic equality between the two parties, enabling both to have equal control over the economic resources in the relationship. Of course, there are limits to the effectiveness of this strategy, particularly in cases where one party is in a state of permanent dependency, such as when one party is severely disabled.

Let me end by sketching one more strategy for safeguarding against the possibility of exploitation in friendships. Like *interference*, the strategy I propose seeks not to remove vulnerability but rather to constrain the power of the less vulnerable party to take advantage of the more vulnerable party. Like *redistribution* (at least in its radical form that Wood associates with revolution), this strategy seeks the new creation of forms of relating. But whereas both of these remedies in the commercial context are meant to be *imposed externally* – from outside of the relationship between the economically powerful and powerless, say, through legal regulation, social policy, or proletariat revolution – the remedy for the friendship case that I propose comes from within the friendship relationship: it is generated by, or out of, the motivations and concerns of the parties to the friendship relationship themselves.

The strategy I have in mind involves the promotion and cultivation of *egalitarian dispositions*, or dispositions that enable friends to relate as equals. Without necessarily removing the vulnerability that is connected with friendship, friends may nonetheless strive to conduct their relationship on a footing of equality. An egalitarian friendship is one where the participants have a reciprocal commitment to regarding the other with consideration and respect, divide up or assign the responsibilities in a fair way, and have equal voice and authority in important decisions regarding the course of the relationship. In such a friendship, each party accepts that the other's equally significant interests, which depend on that person's needs, values, and preferences, ought to have equal weight in shaping decisions that are relevant to the friendship.⁵

These equally important interests would presumably include the interest in not having one's vulnerabilities lead to one's being taken advantage of by one's friend. Both participants in an egalitarian relationship, then, are disposed to treat the other's interests in not being used (merely as a means). Both are disposed to take into account the other's interest in not being exploited as playing a role equal in significance to their own such interest in settling choices and decisions within the relationship. As a matter of practice, the attempt to conduct one's friendship on a footing of equality will mean that, when needed, there will be periodic discussions that take place between the friends to work out the division and assignment of responsibilities in a fair way, and to have preferences and interests voiced when there are important decisions to be made. In the best instances, the participants engage in respectful dialogue, imaginative co-deliberation, and reasonable compromise and concession with respect to their interests.⁶

Notice that effective communication and fair-minded negotiation need not imply that every single decision taken individually must give equal weight to the comparably important interests

(including needs and vulnerabilities) of each party. Sometimes this will be undesirable; other times it will be infeasible. But *over the course of the friendship*, each participant's significant interests should play a comparably weighty role in determining the content of the joint decisions in the relationship, given that both parties possess a willingness to treat the other's interests with equal deliberative significance.

Of course, there may be *external* forms of reducing the likelihood of relationship exploitation as well. If the lack of "exit options" makes exploitation in friendships more likely, then one possible external remedy would be the use of social policy to increase the "exit options" for participants in such relationships. A related remedy is to increase participant's *subjective awareness* of their "exit options." Such awareness of one's exit options (when one is in a relationship that is exploitative or unhealthy or dysfunctional) could go beyond an awareness of the fact that there are other potential people out there in the world with whom one could be friends. It also includes an awareness of other options more broadly conceived: other valuable projects and activities that one could devote one's life to, invest oneself in. We could strive to increase such awareness through social instruments such as public education and public service campaigns.

Related Chapters

Friendship and Self-Interest; Are You a Good Friend?; The Value of Friendship

Notes

- 1 For Owens (2012: 96), "involvements" are "valuable forms of human relationship" that are marked by two features: they are "in some sense chosen" and "entail obligation." *Involvements* include relationships between neighbors, acquaintances, guest and host, conversational participants, and friends. But they do not include such relationships as between parent and child, family members, and fellow citizens, insofar as *these* relationships are (typically) not chosen.
- 2 Valuing relationships that are *thinner* than friendship also involves vulnerability. Consider, for example, what Scanlon (1993: 162) calls "a relation of mutual recognition." People who stand in such relations take themselves to have reasons to act in ways that are justifiable to others on grounds the others could not reasonably reject. They "will refrain from lying to others, cheating, harming, or exploiting them 'because these things are wrong'" (ibid.). Even individuals who stand in relations of mutual recognition are vulnerable to each other, insofar as they are or would be responsive to each other's normative expectations, complaints, and resentments.
- 3 For similar accounts that emphasize the orientation of attending to the object of care and the disposition to see the object of care as a source of reasons for action and emotion, see Jaworska 2007 and Seidman 2016.
- 4 Michael Robillard and Bradley J. Strawser (2016) identify a form of exploitation – moral exploitation – that some soldiers face, insofar as they are pressured to shoulder additional moral responsibilities, moral deliberative roles, and moral risks that they would not otherwise agree to shoulder were they not vulnerable. I am suggesting that this sort of unfair outsourcing of moral burdens could also show up in the close relationship context.
- 5 In proposing the strategy of cultivating egalitarian dispositions in friendship, I have been influenced by Scheffler's (2015) notion of the "egalitarian deliberative constraint" in social relations.
- 6 There are other practices that further equality in friendships, particularly when there is disproportionate vulnerability and the possibility of exploitative arrangements. Seana Shiffrin (2008: 502–10) argues that in intimate relationships, *promises* "provide a unique and indispensable tool to manage and assuage vulnerabilities," though she also acknowledges that promises may also generate new vulnerabilities on the part of the promisee.

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