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The problem of loneliness and the place of teleological action in friendship

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ABSTRACT


A duty to address loneliness raises questions about the nature of friendship, particularly whether relationships formed to address loneliness can be considered genuine friendships. Philosophers including Michael Stocker, Kieren Setiya, and David Velleman suggest that true friendship arises primarily out of regard for the other in the absence of goals external to that. This paper, however, argues that friendships formed out of duty or self-interest, such as the need for connection, need not be deemed inferior. Drawing on Kant's notion of a duty of friendship, I challenge Stocker's critique that acting for ends undermines the authenticity of friendship. I argue that goals and duties can coexist with genuine concern in acts of friendship, offering a more inclusive understanding of human relationships. This supports the language of rights and duties related to loneliness while providing a normative-psychological framework for fostering meaningful connections. While friendship is not primarily goal-oriented, the presence of goals and duties does not negate its authenticity.

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1. Introduction

Friendship is arguably necessary for human life and very likely among the things that make it most worthwhile. As Aristotle held, it is part of our own happiness that we contribute to the happiness of others in friendship (1999, 1097b10). It follows from this that a lonely person is unlikely to be happy. Recently it has also been recognized that a lonely person is unlikely to be physically healthy. The 2023 U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory describes a contemporary epidemic of loneliness and isolation in which social connection is declining. The impact of this epidemic on public health is comparable

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to smoking and worse than obesity and physical inactivity (2023, 4). It is evident in shrinking social networks, demographic trends that include declining marriage rates and numbers of close friendships, declining community involvement, and decreased trust between members of society (Office of the Surgeon General 2023, 13 and 16). Addressing the problem of loneliness, philosophers have recently argued that there is a human right against loneliness, or a right to social connection. Zohar Lederman argues that we have a duty to create and optimize conditions to eliminate loneliness, based on the broader goods of solidarity and justice (2024, 31). Kimberley Brownlee argues for a right against social deprivation on Kantian grounds related to the dignity and equality of persons (2020, 3). It is further argued that we have a right to contribute in some way to the well-being of others based on the self-interest we have in their survival, our need to belong as members of a social group, and the sense of personal meaning that this provides (Brownlee 2020, 76). These rights correspond with duties, to meet others in their loneliness and create opportunities for one another to contribute to the social good. They also arguably correspond to duties we have to ourselves, for example, to seek friendship with others out of self-respect and care.

The duty to resolve loneliness raises a question about the nature of friendship, namely, whether friendship formed to resolve loneliness can be friendship at all. For it is argued that acting out of friendship cannot be understood as acting for the sake of a goal, so if one seeks friendship as a goal, for example, acting out of duty in response to one's own need or the need of others, then one cannot be acting out of friendship. This is because to act out of friendship is to act out of concern for the other and not for the sake of any ends at all.¹ This is the position advanced by Michael Stocker and similarly articulated by David Velleman and Kieren Setiya. It makes sense that in its best moments or forms, the action of friendship may arise purely out of concern for the other. However, the above accounts suggest that friendship may be present at one time or another as a goal in the mind of a friend, whether out of duty or self-interest, and that its presence there does not preclude that relationship from being one of friendship. With respect to the

¹See Stocker 1981, which I will engage below. The reasons for forming a friendship may be different from the reasons for maintaining it. This is implicit in book 9, chapter 9 of the *Ethics* where Aristotle acknowledges that human beings need friendship to be happy and yet the virtuous person will not maintain friendship with just anyone, choosing to maintain friendship primarily with those whose virtuous activity he can observe (1999, 1169b3-1170a15). So, the activity of seeking friendship may differ from the activity of maintaining it or acting out of an existing friendship (see Cooper 1999, 332); for example, one may initially form a friendship to resolve loneliness and later maintain that friendship out of love or concern for the friend. However, I argue that friendship may sometimes be maintained for similar reasons that it is entered, or it is at least difficult to separate the two sets of reasons such that many ordinary and decent friendships will be maintained partly for the same reasons that they began. This may include, among other things, a need for companionship. An ordinary person can be expected to move between psychological states aligned with each type of reasons and should not be faulted for doing so, nor should their actions be excluded from the category of friendship.

problem of loneliness, I want to suggest that if we form relationships with others out of a duty to reduce loneliness, whether it is the other person's or our own, those relationships may be described as friendships and need not be ranked as something lesser than that.² Similarly if we form friendships out of a need for connection with others. It is a feature of our human nature that we need our friends, and that we equally ought to respond to their needs where we may not have a direct or immediate concern in doing so. In this paper, I therefore want to explore the idea that friendship and duty, in addition to care toward oneself, may sometimes be present as ends toward which we act when we engage our friends.

This is a concern that has been raised with respect to Kant's account of friendship and morally worthy action more generally. Kant held that we have a duty of friendship (6:469).³ He is also understood to have held that for an act to have moral worth it should be performed from a motive of duty instead of, or in addition to, sympathy or feeling toward the recipient of one's act.⁴ The latter is the primary target of Stocker's schizophrenia criticism, that the requirement to act from duty separates 'reason and motive in vitally important and pervasive areas of value' such that to live consistently with Kantian duty is to live in a way that is 'deeply deficient in what is valuable'.⁵ In what follows, I will focus on Stocker's related but different idea that to act out of friendship is not to act for the sake of ends at all, including the end of friendship. I take this to apply as a critique to Kant's duty of friendship. I argue that this position overridealizes human relationships and therefore excludes forms of legitimate friendship, including those formed amidst the conditions of loneliness. I will therefore attempt to defend the broadly Kantian idea that it is consistent with friendship to act out of something more or other than concern for one's friend. My conclusion is moderate. I do not believe that friendship is exclusively or primarily goal-oriented, because I agree that this would be to make friendship inappropriately self-interested or a chore. Instead, I hope to show that goals and duties may sometimes be present in acts of friendship, and to discuss how this might be the case. I take this move to support the language of rights and duties pertaining to loneliness (Lederman 2023, 204) while elucidating a psychological framework that helps one to move forward out of loneliness, toward friendship.

²That is, I believe these relationships are not necessarily excluded from the category of friendship, though some of them may not be friendships.

³Kant's work will be cited by volume and page number of the 1902 Berlin Academy edition.

⁴See 4:398–400 for the standard passages on moral worth.

⁵Stocker 1976, 455. This is similar to Bernard Williams' one thought too many objection, that it is absurd to act both for the sake of a loved one and because morality requires it, because the presence of the second motivation undermines the first.

2. The problem of loneliness

There are several ways to describe the problem of loneliness. What is described by the Surgeon General's report as an epidemic of loneliness is a problem with social connection. Social connection can be defined along three lines: structure, function, and quality.⁶ The structure of social connection refers to the number, variety, and depth of relationships a person has. To have a partner with whom one lives, a family with whom one is in regular contact, and several close friends in addition to colleagues is to have a rich structure of social connection. The function of social connection refers to the various needs these relationships may fulfill and whether they in fact do fulfill them. Standard everyday emotional support, financial support in a crisis, or mentorship in one's career are examples of the different functions of social connection. One might rely, for example, on a spouse or close friend for encouragement when one has had a hard day, family when one has an unexpected and exceedingly costly emergency, or an older colleague for ongoing advice in the workplace. The quality of social connection is the degree to which these relationships and interactions with others are positive, or not. For example, to have a spouse who one enjoys as a best friend, confidant, and ongoing source of reciprocal emotional support is to enjoy a high quality of social connection in that relationship.

The problem is that relationships of the latter kind are declining. It is less likely now that people will have a rich structure of high-quality relationships that meet their various needs. The result is an increase in loneliness. For example, rates of close friendship have declined. 'Among people not reporting loneliness or social isolation, nearly 90% have three or more confidants. Yet, almost half of Americans (49%) in 2021 reported having three or fewer close friends – only about a quarter (27%) reported the same in 1990' (Office of the Surgeon General 2023, 13). Family size and marriage rates have been in decline for decades as the rate of those living alone has increased. 'In 1960, single-person households accounted for only 13% of all U.S. households. In 2022, that number more than doubled, to 29% of all households' (15). Community involvement has also declined, including reports of membership in faith-based groups that provide regular contact with others in an environment of shared meaning and support.⁷ 'In 2018, only 16% of Americans reported that they felt very attached to their local

⁶These are discussed in Office of the Surgeon General 2023, 10–11.

⁷Robert Putnam wrote in 1995 that the 'general pattern is clear: The 1960s witnessed a significant drop in reported weekly churchgoing—from roughly 48 percent in the late 1950s to roughly 41 percent in the early 1970s. Since then, it has stagnated or (according to some surveys) declined still further. Meanwhile, data from the General Social Survey show a modest decline in membership in all "church-related groups" over the last 20 years. It would seem, then, that net participation by Americans, both in religious services and in church-related groups, has declined modestly (by perhaps a sixth) since the 1960s' (69).

community' (Office of the Surgeon General 2023, 16). If one were to object that this describes a uniquely American problem, there is evidence to show that it does not. A 2022 Meta/Gallup survey found that 24% of the global population felt 'very lonely' or 'fairly lonely', with many African and Asian states reporting higher degrees of loneliness than North America and Europe (Gallup and Meta 2023, 15).

The widespread decline in social connection means that more people are not just alone but additionally *feel* disconnected from others. This has a variety of negative effects that can be understood in several ways. In one sense, the pain of loneliness is bad, intrinsically. This is obvious to anyone whose actual relationships fall short of what they desire them to be. Loneliness is a negative subjective experience, and feelings of loneliness are qualitatively painful, which may be one reason why loneliness is described as social pain (Cacioppo and Patrick 2008, 7). An upside is that this pain can be an incentive to social connection. One may care for one's body to avoid the pain of chronic illness, for example, by exercising and avoiding excessive consumption of sugar. Similarly, one may care for one's relationships in part to avoid the pain of loneliness.⁸ Still, where it is experienced, loneliness hurts.

In another sense, loneliness is bad instrumentally because it is bad for individual health. In aggregate, this means it is bad for public health. Chronic feelings of isolation can accelerate the aging process (Cacioppo and Patrick 2008, 5). Famously, the effects of loneliness on one's health have been compared to smoking up to fifteen cigarettes a day (Office of the Surgeon General 2023, 25). Loneliness increases the risk of morbidity from heart disease and stroke as well as complications from type 2 diabetes, and people who are socially disconnected have weaker immune systems and are more susceptible to infectious disease (26–8). Less surprisingly, lack of social connection increases likelihood of depression, anxiety, and self-harm. A meta-analysis conducted by Caroline Park et al. concludes that while loneliness has medium to large effects on all health outcomes, its largest effects are on mental health and overall well-being (2020, 4).

While depression and loneliness are not the same thing, if loneliness causes depression this reinforces the idea that being alone is painful. It has been shown that social disconnection causes people to view life as less

⁸This is consistent with goods like loyalty provided it is not one's dominant (or exclusive) motivation. For now, I just want to suggest that it is ordinary for us to have these motivations alongside more altruistic forms of love or compassion, and that this is no indictment against friendships that are otherwise good. Were this motivation to become too prominent it would strain the notion of friendship (relationships formed purely out of personal need are often easy to spot and rule out as cases of genuine friendship). What I have in mind is the more ordinary case of friends who both need *and* genuinely care for one another. For need and love are not so easy to prize apart. Further, our need for others can be a window to their value and enable altruistic love, as when I reflect on the many ways my parents have cared for me, I realize how much they mean to me, and that realization is followed by a desire to care for them without considering the cost to myself.

meaningful (Stillman et al. 2009, 692). Loneliness has existential implications as it diminishes an individual's opportunity to realize value. As Tom Roberts and Joel Krueger argue, to be alone is to lack access to social situations and relationships that enable one to explore, understand, and articulate one's identity. It therefore diminishes one's capacity to navigate life with purpose and meaning.⁹ In this way, loneliness indicates a negative state of being. This is evident in the distinction between loneliness and solitude, where the latter is a state of being alone which is not experienced as painful. Loneliness also implies a lack of access to rich social goods like moral support, companionship, affection, and physical touch (Roberts and Krueger 2021, 191). In an additional, dramatic sense loneliness is argued to be bad because it causes an individual's world to decay along with their sense of self. Ian Corbin and Amar Dhand argue that the disintegration of attention-regulation experienced by prisoners in solitary confinement demonstrates 'the centrality of intersubjectivity to world-tending', that is, the need for others to maintain a meaningful sense of self and world (2024, 361). This is based on a phenomenological analysis of prisoner experience showing that the presence of others is necessary to maintain boundaries between real and imagined objects of perception (Guenther 2013, 35).

In summary, loneliness is bad for many reasons: it has negative effects on individual and public health, constitutes a lack of access to rich social goods, diminishes the possibility for a meaningful life, threatens one's sense of personal identity, and is itself a painful experience. These are the negative features of social disconnection. The flipside of social disconnection is social connection. While being connected with others is not a guarantee that one will not feel lonely, it is the solution toward which the pain of loneliness pushes us. From an evolutionary standpoint, loneliness is a stimulus that motivates us to change our behavior. It prompts us to attend to our social connections and seek and preserve bonds with others because these bonds are conducive to survival (Cacioppo and Patrick 2008, 7).

One question to then ask is what contributes to social connection and counteracts the negative effects of loneliness. Philosophy can point us in the direction of an answer. It can articulate normative and psychological frameworks to clarify why some individuals might be more socially connected than others. In that sense, this paper is partly an exercise in the philosophy of

⁹For example, in the company of others, 'you can be honest, vulnerable, witty, and kind in ways that are impossible on your own. With friends and family, you can be mischievous, irreverent, indiscreet, and spontaneous. With an intimate partner, you can be romantic, affectionate, passionate, and loyal. You can be a sympathetic listener, a storyteller, a giver of thoughtful gifts and wise counsel, or the life and soul of the party. Traits like these can be central to a person's idea of themselves; they are elements of one's character in which one may have a deep investment and of which one may be justly proud. Moreover, they can give the bearer a sense of purpose—taking on a nurturing role or the position of confidante or advisor, for example, brings responsibilities that make one feel valued and trusted' (Roberts and Krueger 2021, 193).

public health: I want to look at the deeper philosophical context of this problem and contribute toward a solution. This is to add a further strand to the three already identified strands of contribution that philosophers can make to addressing the global problem of loneliness.¹⁰ Beyond deliberating about human rights against loneliness, identifying the different kinds of loneliness, and considering interventions to address loneliness, philosophers can deliberate about the normative and psychological conditions that are likely to lead an individual out of loneliness and toward social connection. If our norms and our understanding of them can guide our action, and our action as individuals has a role to play in enhancing social connection, then moral norms and psychology are relevant to addressing the problem of loneliness. They can help to elucidate the norms and psychology of a socially connected individual, as well as support the language of rights and duties pertaining to the resolution of loneliness.

3. On the nature of friendly acts

If there is a duty to eliminate or decrease one's own or another's loneliness, then a person who acts on this duty will have friendship with others as an end.¹¹ Standing in the way of this is the argument that acts of friendship cannot be guided by concern for friendship as such. Stocker distinguishes between the source, or *arche*, of acts and their end, or *telos*, arguing that teleological considerations are foreign to acts of friendship.

Why are such [teleological] acts not, as such, friendly acts? Why do they not, as such, achieve the good of friendly acts? The answer seems obvious: if I act for the sake of the friendship—to take one case for all—then my aim in acting is to get, sustain, strengthen, the friendship, rather than to act for the sake of the friend. So, for example, I may court someone in order that we become friends. Or, valuing our friendship and believing that it will suffer if I do not do such-and-such, I do it to preserve our friendship. Or, not 'really wanting' to do something you want me to, and not being moved by my liking you, by my feelings of friendship for you, and the like, I do the act because I realize that friendship requires me to do it. In these and other cases where friendship is a goal, there is no suggestion that in acting the agent acts out of, or even with, liking of or concern for the other person (1981, 755).¹²

The underlying idea is that acts of friendship are performed out of concern for one's friend and for nothing other than that. To act out of friendship is not to

¹⁰Bioethicists can thus contribute to the urgent, global problem of loneliness along at least three strands: deliberate the right of humans against loneliness from a variety of philosophical approaches, identify and articulate the different kinds of loneliness and consider the appropriate nature of interventions and resources allocated to address these different kinds' (Lederman 2023, 205).

¹¹For the idea that duties entail ends, see Kant, 6:385.

¹²It has been pointed out that to act for the sake of the friend is to act for the sake of an end and hence to incorporate teleological considerations. I would agree with this. If this point raises trouble for anyone's position it will be Stocker's and not my own.

act out of ends at all, for ‘there are no ends, properly so-called, the seeking of which is, as such, to act out of friendship’ (Stocker 1981, 756). Concern for one’s friend is the source, or *arche*, and appropriate description of friendly acts. As such, it says something about the character of the people who are friends, namely that they have certain concerns, likes, and feelings, and are moved by some things and not others. The main point is that they are concerned for their friends and not some other good external to the friend that friendship brings about.

This resonates with a concern that Setiya expresses about the meritocratic nature of Aristotelian friendship. For to value a friend because of their virtue, or likewise the pleasure or utility they bring you, is to value them for the sake of something other than who they are. It is to value them for the sake of a purpose or goal such that acts toward them are not truly acts of friendship because they are inappropriately purpose driven.¹³ One can see how the introduction of a third element – in addition to the self and the other – sets the stage for meritocratic relationships by introducing a value or goal external to the value of the other in themselves according to which they may be evaluated. This is much like the idea of having one thought too many in Bernard Williams’ sense (2012, 18). I agree that to value a friend for the sake of what they bring you and to dissolve friendships when a friend no longer provides that thing is to act with a diminished sense of friendship and possibly no friendship at all. Relationships like these are like Aristotle’s friendships of utility which are easily dissolved and described as incomplete (1999, 1156a15-b10).¹⁴ Both Setiya and Stocker are keen to say that true friends act for the sake of the other, namely their friend, and do not act with interests or goals external to that.

Setiya incorporates this point in his advice on how to make friends and in doing so address one’s own loneliness. He argues that it is a mistake to think of friendship in the above way as meritocratic and conditional on virtue. According to this way of thinking, we should seek out friends who are virtuous and we should likewise dissolve friendships with people who do not remain virtuous – and this is flaky. This is connected to the idea

¹³The nature of Aristotle’s position is a point of scholarly debate. To love a friend because of their virtue, for example, may mean to love them in recognition of their good character, that is, ‘as a consequence or result of the friend’s being morally good rather than some purpose that the well-wisher has in wanting him to prosper’ as John Cooper argues (1999, 323). Jennifer Whiting occupies a similar stance in taking Aristotelian virtue friendship to be based on impersonal rather than egocentric reasons (1991, 11). Bradford Kim argues contrary to this that when Aristotle speaks of loving a friend for himself, this means loving him for the sake of his virtue which is ultimately valued for the sake of one’s own virtuous activity and happiness (2022, 39). Terence Irwin similarly holds that Aristotelian friendship is grounded in egoistic reasons (see Irwin 1990, 395–7 or, for a sharper expression of this stance, Irwin 2016, 39).

¹⁴If Setiya is right that Aristotle’s virtuous friendship is undesirably meritocratic, then this is increasingly the case with friendships of utility, with the difference that with the latter merit is assigned to those who are merely useful.

that we are fundamentally our character, the set of traits that can be attributed to us, so that to love a person is to love their character and ‘only those whose character is virtuous can truly be loved for themselves’ (Setiya 2022, 53). He contrasts this with the idea of loving someone for who they are independent of any traits they may have, and independent of their character. That is, to love them as a bare particular or concrete thing (person) that may outlive any one attribute. On this latter conception, the value of friendship ‘flows’ from the unconditional value of the friend (55).

This more favorable way of thinking about friendship was made possible by the Kantian idea that persons have dignity, an unconditional value that cannot be exchanged for something else, for example, or metaphorically bought at a price on an open market.¹⁵ Setiya follows Velleman’s reading of Kant which holds that reverence for morality is demonstrated in taking up an attitude of reverent attention toward a particular other, and additional thoughts or motives need not be involved (Velleman 1999, 348). Several observations concerning loneliness and friendship follow from this. One is that the way out of loneliness involves attending to the needs of others or concern for a potential friend, not a potential friendship (Setiya 2022, 61). A second is that what begins in respect, the affirmation that someone matters, may end in the love of friendship. This is because the difference between respect, compassion, and love are differences in degree not kind; each attitude asserts that the other matters (61). So, affection and love can flow naturally through one attitude to the other. A third observation is that friendship can begin in the simple act of paying attention, and mutual admiration or common interest are not necessary for this.

We first acknowledge one another, only later finding things to do. Listening by itself may be enough to forge connection. Doing it well takes courage and resilience. It can be a long, hard path from friendly greetings to close friendship. That path is paved by volunteer work, evening classes, amateur sports. It is paved by invitations offered, silences endured—an exposure of need that may be frightening and touched with shame (63).

To think that admiration and shared interest are necessary to friendship is to echo Aristotle in conceiving of friendship meritocratically, and this is a mistake (63). A meritocratic mindset is less conducive to forming and maintaining friendship with others. Instead, what helps one to make and keep friends is to recognize the other’s dignity and take actions appropriately guided by that.

¹⁵Or this is what Setiya argues (2022, 54–56). More plausible is the claim that it was Christianity which paved the way to this way of understanding the value of another, as suggested by Gregory Vlastos (1981, 33). David Konstan provides more detail here, arguing that it was precisely because of its meritocratic grounds which contradict Christian humility that early Christians preferred the language of familial love to friendship (1997, 156–60).

An alternative that is not entertained is the thought that there may be a duty to build friendship. An account of friendship closer to Kant's own recognizes this. Kant held that we have a duty to strive for friendship in which two people participate and share sympathetically in each other's well-being 'through the morally good will that unites them' (6:469). The idea behind this is that because we have a general duty to promote the well-being of others (a duty of beneficence) and friendship contributes to the well-being of others, we have a duty to build friendships (6:452–3). This duty might be understood as an invitation to respond to the interests and needs of another based on their unconditional and non-interchangeable value.¹⁶ An agent who is responsive to duty in general will be responsive to this invitation. In responding to it, they may be acting for the sake of an end as well as acting out of concern for the other.

In addition to being a duty, Kant held that the need for friendship arises in part out of self-love. For we need the help of others – as well as their love and sympathy – to survive and be happy. This is clear in the examples of the *Groundwork*.¹⁷ Kant understood that every person naturally seeks their own happiness and ought to do so where that is consistent with the moral law. He describes this kind of self-love as rational (5:73). He further includes happiness as a feature of the highest good provided it is distributed in proportion to personal virtue (5:110). We can infer from this that an agent's pursuit of happiness (i.e. self-love) is reasonable where it is consistent with the moral law (Engstrom 1992, 752–55). This love is not perniciously self-centered because fulfillment of the moral law requires one to also act for the sake of others. It might be more fittingly described as self-care or even self-respect. After all, one must honor the dignity of one's own rational nature, as the second formulation of the categorical imperative instructs (4:429). This further resonates with the idea from the *Doctrine of Virtue* that we have duties to ourselves based on our animal nature. They amount to duties of self-preservation, to not harm or deprive oneself of the capacity to exercise one's powers, and they could easily be described as duties of self-care (6:421). In this sense, self-respect and rational self-love are nearly indistinguishable. The upshot of this is that the virtuous Kantian agent both may and must exercise care toward themselves. Given the evidence now available to show that loneliness is harmful to one's health and agency (as outlined above), it is natural to think that action to form and maintain relationships

¹⁶The contrary of this view, that persons are to be valued based on external merit, is more sharply pronounced in Plato than Aristotle. See Vlastos on Plato's 'cardinal flaw' (*Platonic Studies*, 31).

¹⁷For a will that decided this [not to contribute to the good of others] would conflict with itself, since many cases could occur in which one would need the love and sympathy of others and in which, by such a law of nature arisen from his own will, he would rob himself of all hope of the assistance he wishes for himself' (4:423). See also 4:430.

will be constitutive of this care. This action could be motivated by self-love or duty, or perhaps both.

This does not mean that motives of self-love and morality never compete, a point which Kant was keen to acknowledge, nor is it always clear how these motives should interact.¹⁸ The *Collins Lectures* express how friendship evolves out of a dynamic between self-love and morality. It is difficult to say which motive comes first.

It is, however, a great merit, if a man is moved by a general love of mankind to promote the happiness of others. But now a man clings especially to what gives worth to his person. Friendship evolves from this idea. Yet how do I now begin? Should I first care for my own happiness, from self-love, and later, when that is attended to, try to promote the happiness of others? [...] It looks as if a man loses, when he cares for other people's happiness; but if they, in turn, are caring for his, then he loses nothing. In that case the happiness of each would be promoted by the generosity of others, and this is the Idea of friendship, where self-love is swallowed up in the idea of generous mutual love (27:422).

Kant is saying that contributing to the good of others will lead to one's own good. Good advice based on this observation is that one should simply jump in and pursue friendship with others whether motivated by self-love or concern for the other as such. The two will often be difficult to distinguish in practice. This is putting to one side the matter of whether one's true motivations can ever be known, something Kant doubted based on his commitment to the metaphysics of transcendental idealism (see also his 'dear self' comment in the *Groundwork*, 4:407). It may be the case that this feature of Kantian agency is endemic to all action in friendship, as human motivations are often mixed and overlapping. Whereas Stocker seems to think that motives like these (understood as teleological considerations) enter only where friendship has broken down, I want to argue that they are present throughout many ordinary, healthy forms of friendship and may further serve to embody a person's love for their friend. This motivational combination is a normal state of affairs and I suspect it will help us to be less lonely if we accept that sometimes we must do things for the sake of friendship, instead of expecting ourselves to be wells of undying concern for the other (or expecting others to be so concerned about us, if that is even a good thing; see note 24 below).

This picture is reinforced by Kant's description of friendship as an 'Idea' whose seat is in the understanding while 'in experience it is very defective' which I take him to mean morally imperfect (27:423). However, the admission of self-interest does not undermine friendship as such or reduce it to motives

¹⁸There is a further question here about whether moral motives can compete with one another. As far as Kant is concerned, his view was that a conflict of duties is impossible while non-conclusive 'grounds of obligation' can come into conflict (6:224). For discussion of moral conflict in Kant, see McCarty 1991 and Timmermann 2013.

of self-love. As already mentioned, Kant understood rational self-love to be consistent with morality if constrained by the moral law. This allows that ordinary friendship for the empirical beings we are is bound to be imperfect such that our concern for others may at times be difficult to disentangle from concerns we have to meet needs of our own. I suspect that many decent friendships move in and out of these psychological states.¹⁹ This is perhaps why Kant held, pragmatically, that friendship is both consistent with self-interest and at times requires the motive of duty if it is to be maintained. For sometimes friendship will require us to do things that are costly and uncomfortable, but right for the sake of our friend, the friendship, and the growing good of the world. Among these may be a duty to alleviate loneliness on which rights against loneliness and to social connection may be grounded. These duties may be present to such an agent as ends for which they act.

4. A place for teleology in friendship

It is therefore instructive to explore further the possible role of teleology in acts of friendship. I have suggested that to rule it out risks overridealizing human relationships and overlooking important points about the development and maintenance of decent, ordinary sorts of friendship. It also gives insufficient credit to the moral dimension of friendship and arguments that support it. If our account of friendship is too ideal, it risks producing false negatives by ruling out cases of real friendship on the grounds that they do not match this ideal. What is more desirable is a realistic account that affirms friendships forged amidst loneliness as cases of genuine friendship. In what follows, I explore this idea and argue that it is consistent with friendly acts – acts performed out of genuine friendship – that one may act with certain goals, including, *pace* Stocker, the goal of friendship.

To exclude the goal of friendship from friendly acts places these acts too far along on the continuum from first encounter to intimacy. For example, when moving to a new city it would be reasonable and expected that one engages social events with the goal of friendship or making new friends. Even after forming bonds of affection alongside, say, mutual appreciation of the other's projects, interests, and personality, that goal may not altogether drop out of the picture. In his advice, Setiya is telling us how to meet that goal – the goal of building friendship – by suggesting that one take interest in another person for their own sake and not with that goal in mind (2022, 61). But the goal is not absent. It is more accurate to say

¹⁹Though perhaps the more often one is motivated by concern for the other, the better, and too much self-interest will strain friendship, being inconsistent with its better forms.

instead that it ought to move to the back of one's mind and progressively so as one begins to form bonds of attachment with another.

Effectively what is being recommended is that if you have the goal of forming a new friendship, it is best to (a) be more concerned about others, opening your world to their likes and interests while not being too preoccupied with your own, and (b) not be too obvious about the fact that you are looking for friendship. Additionally, acting to fulfill a duty of friendship may psychologically support this process and one may continue to act to fulfill this goal after the thought of it fades. For this reason it is unrealistic to hold that acts of genuine friendship exclude friendship as a goal, because friendship of a more ordinary, less intimate kind can still be had in these psychological circumstances.²⁰ Stocker tends to describe as friends only those who are exclusively motivated by concern for the other when it may be the case that most people have very few friendships of this kind, yet have many healthy and fulfilling friendships nonetheless. A broader definition of friendship and the nature of friendly action accounts for this.

Yet, even in the most intimate of friendships there is a sense in which the relationship itself may continue to be a goal for the parties involved. One reason for this is that concern for the friendship embeds concern for the friend. To say that 'where friendship is a goal, there is no suggestion that in acting the agent acts of, or even with, liking of or concern for the other person' overlooks this. It places an artificial distinction on something that is often in practice indistinguishable. If I am concerned because I am fading out of touch with a close friend, I may take action to preserve the friendship. It is common that people speak in these terms. One might argue that this is an inaccurate way of describing what really amounts to concern for one's friend. But my concern or my feelings of friendship toward him at that point might have diminished to less than those, for example, that I now have towards a more recent friend. Something I share with my old friend is history and what might be called the project of our friendship, and I desire to see that project and shared history continue along with his presence in my life.²¹ At times that may present psychologically as a goal and less or perhaps at moments not at all as a concern in the manner that Stocker describes.

Nevertheless, acting with the goal of strengthening our friendship is necessary for being concerned for the friend *qua* friend. This is precisely what distinguishes the friend's case from any other case of acting for the

²⁰E.g., Stocker says that 'when one acts out of friendship, friendship is not, as such, a goal' (1981, 755).

²¹My position here is perhaps most like Niko Kolodny's account of love as valuing a relationship, on which one's relationship to another is viewed as a reason for loving them. Here, I agree that the relationship itself explains constancy in love despite alteration in qualities; it also explains the fact that I do not have reason to love someone else who has identical qualities to my friend but with whom I do not have a shared history or relationship (Kolodny 2003; 147).

sake of another. This will increasingly be so where I see our friendship as (and it indeed is) something that nourishes our mutual well-being. This line of thought is supported by a common recommendation that in a marriage, spouses act for the sake of the marriage as a shared project or view their relationship metaphorically as a house that each party is responsible for maintaining, as a place in which they together make their home.²² *Prima facie* it is therefore difficult to exclude acting for the sake of friendship from acting with concern, care, or feeling for a friend. It is often the case that in practice people act for the sake of both at once.

One might respond to this by arguing that while they may involve both considerations, acts of friendship cannot be exclusively teleological and are necessarily performed out of concern, care, or feeling for a friend, such that where these ingredients are absent there is no act of friendship.²³ However, this asks more of these motivational states than they can perform without further clarification. For it may be the case that concern, care, or feelings of friendship temporarily fade and disappear from one's motivational set. And it is ambiguous as to what concern for one's friend entails.²⁴ In these circumstances, one may act for the sake of a friendship as a bridge toward an anticipated or hoped for state when these things return. For example, there may be a moment where one does not feel so moved to visit a friend who is sick and yet chooses to do so for the sake of the friendship, anticipating that the desired concern will soon come back. One may do this because of a vow they have made to themselves to be the kind of person who is committed, not flaky, and sticks by their friends in times of need, even where affection for a particular friend is strained. It may be the case that many friendships require this kind of occasional motivational bootstrapping. This is a reason why teleological action is a natural feature of ordinary friendship. In these circumstances, it still makes sense to think of these as acts of friendship, even if their orientation may be teleological.

However, they are teleological only insofar as they are evaluated at one moment in time. To get a better sense of the quality of a friendship what is needed is a picture of a person's feelings, goals, and dispositions toward their friend over an extended period. Extending the analysis in this way helps to clarify the character structure out of which friendly acts issue and it may be the case that certain ends are a part of this structure. Returning to the problem of loneliness, the person who is new to a city may have an

²²Gottman 2015, 24.

²³This appears to be what Stocker is saying in 1981, 757.

²⁴I am inclined to agree with Velleman that there is little realism in the suggestion that loving someone entails being moved to do them good, and Stocker's concern seems to be a desire of this kind. Further, 'a love that is inseparable from the urge to benefit is an unhealthy love' as 'someone whose love was a bundle of these urges, to care and share and please and impress—such a lover would be an interfering, ingratiating nightmare' (Velleman 1999, 353).

interest in forming friendship with others. They may grasp that this is constitutive of human flourishing and seek the company of others with, among other things, this goal in mind. This interest is likely to fade to the back of their mind as they form bonds and grow closer with others. Yet the goals of friendship and human flourishing are likely to be necessary to scaffold friendship, even those of the most intimate kind. The best of friendships may begin in a place of need and from there grow into something that sustains the well-being of both parties, as each becomes increasingly concerned for the well-being of the other. In cases like these, at what point can the friendship be said to have begun, only when the goal of friendship has entirely been put aside? It is unreasonable to set so high a standard. And in practice this line will be hard to draw, as in the above example of taking action to revitalize a fading friendship, this goal may continue to function as a resource when other elements run dry.

One way to understand actions of this kind is through the character structure of loyalty. To exclude teleological action from friendship is to overlook the connection between loyalty and teleological considerations often associated with it. Loyalty may be defined as ‘perseverance in an association to which a person has become intrinsically committed as a matter of his or her identity’ (Kleinig 2022). While a friend may be the object of one’s loyalty, one’s loyalty is likely to include certain values and principles that motivate action alongside concern for the friend. This may be because the friend is committed to certain values such that loyalty to the friend requires loyalty to the pursuit of these values as ends (Whiting 1991, 23). Loyalty may also include the pursuit of moral duties in the Kantian sense outlined above, the project of the friendship, or a desire to form a stable and cohesive community in a broader sense. Sometimes these considerations will be more prominent than one’s concern for a particular friend. Likewise, feelings of concern may be temporarily absent, and it is a distinctive feature of the loyal person that they are moved to act in their absence. The above example of the friend who visits despite a momentary absence of concern is consistent with the plausible observation that ‘the test of loyalty is conduct rather than intensity of feeling, primarily a certain ‘stickingness’ or perseverance – the loyal person acts for or stays with or remains committed to the object of loyalty even when it is likely to be disadvantageous or costly to the loyal person to remain so’ (Kleinig 2022).

It is not necessary that one lack, for example, affectionate feeling toward a friend for one’s commitment to principle to form a conscious reason for one’s loyalty. The character of Samwise Gamgee in Tolkein’s *Lord of the Rings* trilogy provides an uncomplicated example of loyalty in his friendship with Frodo Baggins. After nearly drowning in an attempt to swim after Frodo’s boat, refusing to let Frodo proceed with his dangerous journey alone, Sam expresses his loyalty to Frodo saying, ‘I made a promise, Mr. Frodo. A

promise. Don't you leave him, Samwise Gamgee. And I don't mean to. I don't mean to' (Jackson 2001). Sam's explanation demonstrates that loyalty may be intertwined with a concern to keep one's promises. He views his promise as binding, providing a reason to stick by Frodo's side. It occurs to him as a thought in addition to the felt concern he has for Frodo. It is not that his promise excludes concern or affection for Frodo; quite the opposite, he is deeply affectionate and concerned for Frodo the particular. He understands his promise as supporting this concern. In this way, these elements are difficult to distinguish in practice.

With respect to social connection more broadly, one may have an additional interest in being the sort of person who can be relied upon by others as a meaningful contributor to their community.²⁵ That is, one may have the goal of being a good neighbor or friend, corresponding with a Kantian duty in the manner outlined above. That may mean that, beyond the goal of friendship, one might have the goal of helping others and creating a community where others can flourish in addition to oneself. A goal like this may be consistent with friendship because a person may act with concern and affection for their friend while at the same time understanding the friendship as in part constitutive of a broader social good. I may, for example, forge friendships with those with whom I disagree on political and religious issues, understanding that our community will be better with more friendships of this kind.²⁶ Our friendly acts would not be strictly reducible to this common goal, but this goal may form an additional reason for which they are sought and maintained.

Similar acts may be seen within family relationships, which are like friendship if they do not count as friendship in the standard sense. One adult sibling may act toward another in part for the purpose of maintaining good family relationships, that is, a warm and supportive community where each family member can flourish. This arguably describes the way that Confucian practices of filial piety unite familial love with duty, as children are advised to obey rituals that embed concern for their parents. To act for the sake of filial piety and the fulfillment of rites is to act for the sake of ends, forming a community of collective flourishing, while caring for one's particular parents.²⁷

²⁵See, for example, Brownlee's argument in favor of social contribution justice in *Being Sure of Each Other*. It is a crucial feature of our social nature that we not only need support from others but need to sustain others as well, contributing meaningfully to society (Brownlee 2020, 3).

²⁶These might be described as friendships not of utility or pleasure, but civic virtue.

²⁷This can be observed in the pattern of conversation between Confucius and his disciples: 'Meng Yizi asked about filial piety. The Master replied, 'Do not disobey.' Later, Fan Chi was driving the Master's chariot. The Master said to him, 'Just now Meng Yizi asked me about filial piety, and I answered, 'Do not disobey.'" Fan Chi said, 'What did you mean by that?' The Master replied, 'When your parents are alive, serve them in accordance with the rites; when they pass away, bury them in accordance with the rites and sacrifice to them in accordance with the rites. Meng Wubo asked about filial piety. The Master replied, 'Give your parents no cause for anxiety other than the possibility that they

It also makes sense to include moral purposes in friendly action more generally, beyond cases like these. Insofar as we are interested in forming relationships and contributing to a common life that honors, for example, values like kindness, respect, service, and commitment, it is reasonable to hold that these values will at times feature in our psychology as ends to be fulfilled by the actions we perform. This will include acts of friendship, whether we are seeking to form new friendships or maintain existing ones. For this reason, it is implausible to hold that friendly acts may not have a moral or teleological quality. We typically desire not just friends for whom we are concerned, but friends with whom we share certain values. To be more specific, we may desire to know whether someone is trustworthy to determine whether we are willing to be vulnerable and share with them aspects of our personal life, as Kant was keenly aware (6:472). We may want to know this before becoming more than acquaintances, such that our friendship is conditional on facts about their moral character (namely that they are trustworthy and not, say, deceptive). In this way, too, moral ends may guide the formation of friendship.

5. Conclusion

I have argued broadly in defense of a place for teleology in acts of friendship. Moral ends are a natural part of this. One may want their friends to be minimally morally decent – kind, committed, and trustworthy – and one may dissolve friendships with people who consistently fall short of these standards. But this does not imply that friendship is meritocratic in the way that we might be concerned Aristotle's account is. Because Kant saw that open-heartedness generates moral as well as prudential risks, this moral concern is more about protecting oneself than maximizing the goods that one has, including the good of one's own character (Stohr 2023, 64). Kant's duty of friendship directs us to act at least as much for the sake of the other (one's friend) as oneself in contributing to their well-being. At the same time, our acts may begin from a desire to address our loneliness which may later in time become altruistic concern for another. As expressed in Kant, friendship for ordinary, empirical beings like us often evolves out of the dynamic between moral duty and self-love. These are both ends and action performed for their sake is teleological in nature while not inconsistent with friendship. Grasping that one has a duty of friendship may motivate one to seek connection with others to relieve another's loneliness or one's own. It may also

might fall ill' (Confucius 2013, 2.5-6). For an illuminating account of (neo-) Confucian friendship with a different emphasis, see Tiwald 2020. I take Tiwald's interpretation of Dai Zhen to be broadly consistent with the argument provided here, including his take on the place of self-concern in friendship (Tiwald 2020, 108–109, note 1 in particular). Though I suspect we may disagree on the matter of moral worth, discussion of which I reserve for another occasion.

motivate one to maintain friendships when it becomes costly or difficult to do so. Having the friendship as an end may embed concern for one's friend. It is natural to think that, at its finest, friendship emerges solely out of concern for the other. Yet friendship can also become a conscious end for one or both friends, whether that end arises from a sense of duty or care for oneself. The presence of these considerations does not have to disqualify a relationship from being one of true friendship. Making room for ends in friendship supports the language of rights and duties pertaining to social connection, illuminating how to remove the pain of loneliness and receive the good of friendship.

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