



## **“Universities as Schools of Friendship”**

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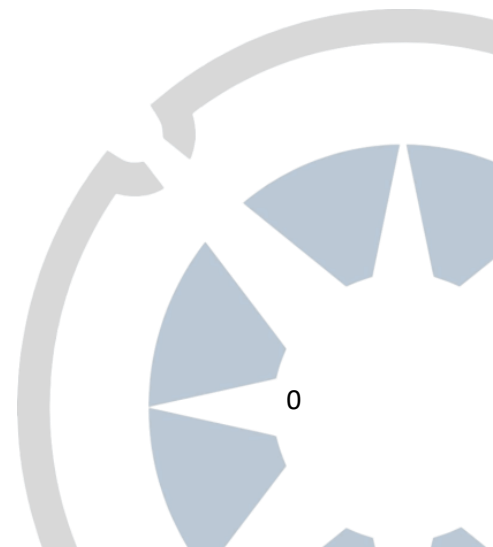
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“Universities as Schools of Friendship”

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Introduction

As we consider the importance of character in professional practice, our conversation during this conference will hopefully contribute to the professional programs offered at our universities. Ethics courses have long been a requirement of the curriculum in these programs. More recently, several universities in the United States, including my own, have enhanced their professional programs with an even more integrated focus on personal and professional character.

It is somewhat surprising, therefore, to discover how little universities consider character in professional practice in the context of university life itself. As James Keenan observes, “The university is where faculty teach and students learn ethics. The one place that those teaching ethics normally do not engage is precisely the place where they work” (2015, p. 201). University faculty regularly teach ethics courses in the fields of law, business, and medicine in addition to the burgeoning fields of artificial intelligence and digital currency. But where do these same faculty learn the ethics that will guide their own professional practice? According to Keenan, universities seem to operate with the assumption that if they can teach ethics, they do not need to learn it.

At the same time, the need for ethics in university life could not be more clear. Reports of scandals at American universities involving athletics, cheating, binge drinking, and sexual assault—to cite only some of the most common issues—are altogether too frequent. The “Varsity

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Blues” scandal in 2019 resulted in federal criminal charges. In addition to these high profile scandals, university life requires countless decisions each day that are no less ethically charged.

Positively, there have been recent attempts to apply a virtue-based approach to professional ethics to the particular context of university life (Curren, 2008). And yet, Keenan notes the irony that the recent books on university ethics in university libraries pales in comparison to the hundreds of books on ethics in other professions (2015, p. 18).

To explain the absence of ethics at American universities, Keenan points to their structure and the challenge it presents for forming a culture of ethics. Referring to university faculty, Keenan observes, “Our accountability is fundamentally vertical, to our chairs and deans, but not to one another, certainly not to our students, not to the university community, not to stipulated community standards” (2015, p. 18). In addition to the hierarchical structure of American universities, Keenan also cites the highly individualistic work of academics. He asks: “What other field of work requires its professional formation to be at least five years of working alone on one’s own project with the last two years spent effectively in solitary confinement? Why is this, the highest expression of academic wisdom, so individualistic and so isolationist?” (2015, p. 59). The system of academic tenure—and the autonomy that comes with it—allows for further and ongoing isolation.

In response to ethical lapses, particularly after a scandal has become public, many American universities have responded with new policies, updated codes of conduct, and impassioned discourse about the need for ethics. All these approaches aim at “doing the right thing.” However necessary, this alone is insufficient to form a culture of ethics at universities. Moreover, professional codes of conduct are ineffective and ultimately become meaningless if they are not also grounded in a culture of ethics that reinforces the stated expectations. A

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virtue-based approach to professional ethics, on the other hand, gives attention to the type of character traits that are necessary for personal and collective flourishing. Central to this approach is *phronesis* or practical moral wisdom as an integrative, guiding virtue.

#### Universities as Schools of Friendship

In this paper, I consider the extent to which friendship can serve as a valuable approach for cultivating and sustaining a virtue-based approach to professional ethics at universities. To form a culture of ethics at universities, we must discover how to overcome the challenges stemming from the hierarchical structure of American universities and the individualistic work of academics. Since both these are primarily relational challenges, might friendship be not only a possible but also particularly appropriate way forward? To explore this question, I draw from two traditions that are important, but not exclusive, to my university. I begin with Aristotle’s account of character friendship found in the *Nicomachean Ethics* as an integral part of his overall account of moral goodness. I then move to a Christian account of friendship found in the Gospel of John. As an educator at a Lasallian Catholic university, I also cite the example of Saint John

Baptist de La Salle who believed that friendship was essential to the educational mission that he founded. My overall argument is that the practice of character friendship has the potential to serve as a fruitful foundation to form a culture of ethics at universities because of the focus on character traits, phronesis development, and personal and collective flourishing. After considering possible objections to and limitations of this approach, I conclude by providing an initial sketch of what it might look like in practice.

### Aristotelian Character Friendship

Most people are familiar with the three types of friendship that Aristotle describes in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. For Aristotle, friendship is “a kind of virtue or implies virtue” and is

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“indispensable to life” (1987, p. 253). The three primary kinds or types of friendship that Aristotle describes are distinguished by the motivation for the friendship be it utility, pleasure, or virtue. It is not my intention in this paper to fully explore the three types of friendship or identify all of the nuances among them. It will suffice to point out that Aristotle believes that friendships motivated by utility and pleasure are incomplete because their motivation is extrinsic. In contrast, character friendships have intrinsic value—and are motivated by the good of the other. According to Aristotle, “it is people who wish the good of their friends for their friend’s sake that are in the truest sense friends, as their friendship is the consequence of their own character, and is not an accident” (1987, p. 260).

While the study of Aristotelian character friendship has historically received less attention, Kristján Kristjánsson’s recent work in this area has highlighted the importance of

character friendship as an integral part of Aristotle's overall account of moral goodness.

Kristjánsson refers to character friendship as "method" of moral education, arguing that Aristotle hides his method for cultivating virtue and phronesis in plain sight in two of the longer books of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Kristjánsson argues that "the Aristotelian *raison d'être* of character friendships is, arguably, both moral and education. The aim of such friendships is not only the love of character *per se*, but loving it in the service of mutual character development" (2020, p. 352). Alongside other well-known and accepted methods of moral education including habituation and moral exemplars, Kristjánsson rightfully invites renewed interest in Aristotelian character friendship and the significant potential of such relationships for supporting character development.

Before moving any further ahead, recall that character friendships are distinct according to Aristotle because of their intrinsic value. If we use character friendships as a "method" for moral development or, even more, an approach for fostering a culture of ethics at universities, does this not smack of instrumentality? Kristjánsson helpfully clarifies that the intrinsic value of the friendship must remain primary, even if a character friendship is beneficial in one's own moral development (2020, p. 350 and 357). Indeed, that we value friendship in and of itself rather than for its instrumental benefit does not preclude that we can also learn and grow from the experience of friendship (Kronman, 2007).

The basis of all friendship, for Aristotle, begins with "reciprocal well-wishing" (1987, p. 257). Kristjánsson draws attention to the distinct features of character friendships, which include

admiring the good character of the other and expressing concern for their continued good (2020, p. 351). Aristotle is rightfully skeptical that this type of friendship develops quickly (1987, p. 261), yet I tend to agree with John M. Cooper that well-wishing and good-will can be converted into actual friendship in time (1977, p. 642). Nevertheless, for a genuine character friendship to develop, it requires time, trust, and ultimately love (Cooper, 1977, p. 629). Aristotle believes that we need friends, for friendship is constitutive of human flourishing (1987, p. 312). As Cooper emphasizes, “Aristotle thinks that no human life is really satisfactory that is not partly structured around close personal relationships founded on mutual knowledge and love” (1977, p. 648). The reason that Aristotle gives for this conviction is that character friends become a “second self,” providing for us what we need but cannot supply by ourselves (1987, p. 311). Modern notions of friendship often tend toward sentimentality, which can limit their potential to support moral development. In contrast, Kristjánsson points out the critical function in Aristotle’s understanding of character friendships. Character friends hold each other mutually accountable, which is essential for continued growth in character, as other-examination and self-examination are connected (Kristjánsson, 2020, p. 359-360).

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Even with this brief overview, the potential of character friendships to advance a culture of ethics at universities should be clear. I argue that the practice of character friendships have the potential to serve as a fruitful foundation to form a culture of ethics at universities for several reasons. In a culture of trust, moral development is supported when virtues are reinforced and vices are challenged. Most universities claim to foster the flourishing of their students and

communities, and character friendships are essential for personal and collective flourishing. It is the third point that is most tricky, for the challenges of considering friendship as a “method” of moral education run parallel to the challenges of advanced phronesis development (Kristjánsson, 2020, p. 350). On the other hand, insofar as Aristotelian character friendships assist in moral development, one should be able to say the same about phronesis development. Indeed, is it not the case that those who have the assistance of a “second self” are more able to cultivate practical moral wisdom through the process of mutual molding?

### Christian Friendship

Christian theology has a long history—reaching a highpoint with Aquinas—of employing Greek concepts and philosophy in service of the Christian message. Thus, even though we have taken Aristotle as our starting point, it should not be surprising to find substantial similarities in the Christian understanding of friendship. Indeed, friendship was not only an important topic in ancient Greece, but it also serves as the underlying motif in the Gospel of John. As Gail O’Day explains, “Jesus’ words articulated a well-known ideal of friendship, not a brand new idea” (2008, p. 21). Nevertheless, Jesus Christ did not merely invite his disciples to accept the idea of friendship. Christian friendship depends completely and results only through a relationship with Jesus Christ. As Pope Benedict XVI succinctly wrote, “Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction” (2005, Introduction). Jesus Christ is the model and source of God’s love for his disciples and, consequently, friendship with Jesus Christ serves as the basis for



Christian friendship. A brief review of a key passage in the Gospel of John will bring the features of Christian friendship into sharper focus.

This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you (John 15:12).

Here we find a clear instance of Jesus setting himself as the example of love for his disciples to follow. This passage is part of the Farewell Discourse, which is a series of Jesus' most significant teachings given at the Last Supper on the night before his death. The chief commandment that Jesus gives his disciples is to love, that is, to practice his example of friendship with each other. Indeed, "In the New Testament a 'friend' is immediately understood as 'one who loves.' This fundamental connection between love and friendship is an essential starting point for reclaiming friendship as a resource for faith and ethics for contemporary Christians" (O'Day, 2008, p. 20).

No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends (John 15:13).

As with Aristotelian character friends, the Christian understanding of friendship also resists sentimentalization. If there is any doubt about the cost of friendship, Jesus teaches that the ultimate witness of friendship is the complete gift of self, an example that he fulfills by his passion and death. While Christian martyrs are a literal example of this teaching, most Christians will follow this teaching in less dramatic ways. The point is that friendship takes on its moral worth in practice (O'Day, 2004, p. 149). Moreover, in the Christian account, it is through the gift of one's self that the fullness of human joy is realized.

You are my friends if you do what I command you (John 15:14).

Jesus is not only the model of friendship par excellence but also the source of Christian friendship. Through friendship with Jesus, that is, by following his teaching, Christian disciples acquire the capacity for Christian friendship. As O'Day clarifies, "If we take Jesus' commandment to love seriously, and if we long to be called 'friend' by Jesus, then the Christian vocation is to give love freely and generously without counting the cost and without wondering and worrying about who is on the receiving end of our limitless love" (2008, p. 24).

I no longer call you slaves, because a slave does not know what his master is doing. I have called you friends, because I have told you everything I have heard from my Father (John 15:15).

An important mark of friendship in the ancient world was "plain speaking" (O'Day, 2008, p. 25). With a friend, it is possible to be open and honest, for there is no need to conceal anything. Remarkably, Jesus speaks this way with his disciples, acknowledging them as genuine friends. Christian friendship has the potential to bridge gaps and differences, for "Both speaker and listener are transformed by the plain speaking of friendship because in holding nothing back, the speaker acts in the intimacy and trust of transformative love. The speaker risks herself in the speaking; the listener risks himself in the hearing" (O'Day, 2008, p. 27). Indeed, it is not only that friendship with Jesus is transformative, but the practice of Christian friendship continues to be transformative insofar as his disciples follow his example.

This passage in the Gospel of John has been the source for many saints including Aquinas and John Henry Newman to contribute to the Christian understanding of friendship.

Saint John Baptist de La Salle, born in 1651 to a wealthy family in Reims, established an

educational mission that continues today with more than 1,000 schools at various levels

worldwide. De La Salle connects education and friendship, believing that friendship with Jesus

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was essential for the teachers in his schools. In a typical example, De La Salle writes, “As

teachers, you need to be honoured with the friendship of Jesus” (Med 88.1: feast of St. John the

Evangelist). For De La Salle, friendship with Jesus naturally calls us to Christian to friendship

with each other. In a letter to one of his teachers, De La Salle writes, “It is impossible to please

God if you do not live on friendly terms with others” (Letter 47 to Brother Robert in Darnetal,

1709). According to De La Salle, Christian teachers must first be friends with one other before

they can be effective teachers to students. Indeed, beyond technical knowledge or pedagogical

skill, friendship with Jesus and Christian friendship equips teachers with a necessary sense of

purpose. De La Salle established his schools with a clear telos: education is not only for human

flourishing in this world but ought to be oriented toward eternal life.

### Answering Objections

As we consider the use of character friendship (and Christian friendship for Christian

schools) as an approach for cultivating and sustaining a virtue-based approach to professional

ethics, it is helpful to consider possible objections. An obvious first question is whether

professional colleagues at a university can be friends since friendship is a personal relationship

that should occur naturally. Cooper’s reading of Aristotle’s account of friendship allows for

relationships beyond the personal such as business and civic friendships (1977, p. 620-1). This

broader interpretation of Aristotelian character friendships seems to suggest that university

colleagues can develop friendships that, while distinct from their personal relationships, still desire the good of the other. Mutual trust remains an essential ingredient for character friendships, especially to allow for the critical engagement that is necessary for moral growth (Kristjánsson, 2020, p. 358).

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A second important consideration is whether character friendships are possible if the friends are not perfectly virtuous. Perhaps one reason for the comparative popularity of moral exemplars as a method for moral education is that we fear that genuine character friendships are unattainable. Cooper argues that we need not be a “moral hero” to have a genuine character friendship in the Aristotelian sense (Cooper, 1977, pp. 626 and 629). Kristjánsson likewise argues that it is possible for complete, even if not perfect, character friendships to assist in our moral development. He offers the helpful concept of the “zone of proximal development of character friendships,” by which he means that friends must be similar enough in virtue to support each other (Kristjánsson, 2020, p. 353).

Even if these more philosophical objections can be answered, it is still necessary to admit the possible limitations and risks of this approach. To begin, there might be individuals who are simply uninterested in developing friendships with their professional colleagues. An important caveat is that one need not be friends with all of their colleagues to contribute to and benefit from a culture of ethics. Nevertheless, true power differences do exist in American universities and we must be attentive to the interpersonal dynamics that might result in an unequal friendship between a supervisor and subordinate. Proceeding with necessary caution, I still agree with

Kristjánsson that a community of character friendships is possible (Kristjánsson, 2020, p. 362).

## Conclusion

I believe that friendship has significant potential to introduce and reinforce a virtue-based approach to professional ethics in universities. Both the Aristotelian account of character friendship and the Christian understanding of friendship provide fertile soil to develop a vibrant moral culture and promote human flourishing. Thus far, our focus has been how friendship is defined in these traditions. The more challenging question is how these friendships are formed.

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Even though Aristotle does not provide an explicit answer to this question, Cooper argues that, “Given his account of what friendship is, it is not difficult to see how, in decently arranged cities, people should naturally come to have friendly feelings toward one another” (1977, p. 647).

Should we not be able to say the same about “decently arranged” universities? Indeed, a first step is a careful appraisal of the structures and practices at our universities. Do they encourage or discourage relationality? Do they enable or limit the members of the university community to desire the good for each? Do they hinder or foster a community where character friendships are possible? Do they reflect a shared telos that provides purpose and direction to the university?

Perhaps the greatest barrier to overcome is the idea that fostering a vibrant moral culture is desirable but not essential for what it means to be a university. We have seen in both Aristotle and the Christian tradition that friendship is a necessary part of a fully human life precisely because of the capacity of friendship to support our development toward the good. As Keenan rightly argues, “Promoting the issue of professional ethics does not and will not inhibit or

compromise the work of the university. Rather, ethics is constitutive of human flourishing, an insight that Aristotle and Paul tried to teach time and again” (2015, p. 14). Indeed, a virtue-based approach to professional ethics with its focus on the cultivation of phronesis is most aligned with university culture that prioritizes moral and intellectual virtues such as honesty, fairness, and critical thinking.

Character friendships have the potential to shape the overall fabric of the university community. As Wayne Meeks notes, “Making morals means making community” (1993, p. 5). If there are no obvious structural barriers, some level of friendship will likely occur naturally. It is also possible to encourage the formation of friendships while still respecting its natural process and individual freedom. Even if not all friendships are character friendships at first, they can

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develop into genuine character friendships, for “We become friends by practising friendships, just as we become musicians by playing music” (Kristjánsson, 2020, p. 362). Indeed, in both the Aristotlian and Christian accounts, the growth in virtue occurs through the act of friendship itself.

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