FRIENDSHIP AND BONDING FEELINGS:
CONTINUING ARISTOTLE'S PERSPECTIVE ON VIRTUE AND EMOTION

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1. INTRODUCTION

Our society is profoundly complex, in part because of the sheer scale of interpersonal connectivity—the millions of individuals interacting via social networks continue to grow at an unstoppable rate (Millán-Ghisleri, 2025; Webster et al., 2021). Yet, paradoxically, we are inhabiting an era of profound isolation: many find themselves genuinely alone, while many more maintain increasingly fragile relationships (Bauman, 2003). Unwanted loneliness (*soledad no deseada*)—distinct from the solitude required for reflection and inner peace—has been empirically linked to a heightened risk of various psychopathologies, including depression, anxiety, and suicide (Cacioppo et al., 2010; Duan et al., 2025; Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015; Holt-Lunstad & Steptoe, 2022). In sum, postmodernity has been characterized as a society of tenuous bonds and a pervasive fear of stable commitment, a climate that accentuates individualism and its consequent isolation.

However, in adulthood, chronic unwanted loneliness is more likely to become clinically significant when early relational security has been compromised; however, multiple developmental pathways can lead to pathological loneliness. Thus:

> "To be capable of being alone, it is necessary that the dyadic relationship—between mother and child or newborn and caregiver—has flourished harmoniously and without disturbance [...]. If an individual is capable of being alone without unease or anguish [...] it is because they perceive an intangible, ever-present company at their side" (Rof Carballo, 1961, p. 490).

Here 'pathological' refers to persistent loneliness associated with clinically relevant distress/impairment and maladaptive coping, rather than transient solitude. In other words, when rooted in companionship, solitude is not harmful. For non-pathological growth toward the Good Life (eudaimonia) (Aristotle, 1985, 1095b), we require the experience of unconditionality. This manifests, first and foremost, in familial bonds (which lie beyond the scope of this presentation), but also in the bonds of deep friendship (*philia*). This thesis has been extensively corroborated by contemporary empirical research (Alsarrani et al., 2022).

2. AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

In this context, it is particularly timely to address the nature of deep friendship and its connection to human affectivity. Indeed, a flourishing life is inconceivable without the presence of feelings such as gladness (*laetitia*) and joy (*gaudium*) (Aquino et al., 2011; Martínez-Priego & Romero-Iribas, 2018).

Accordingly, this presentation pursues two primary objectives:

1. To explore the nexus between the "Good Life"—understood as the *telos* of human existence—and the highest human emotions (bonding feelings), specifically those emerging within deep friendship. To this end, the following points will be argued:

    o a. The relationship between the Component Process Model of emotion (as a synchronized psychological dynamic), virtue, and *eudaimonia*.

    o b. The nature of the psycho-emotional dynamics in friendship, specifically how the appraisal and monitoring components shape the feelings inherent to the bond of friendship.

    o c. Theoretical conclusions derived from this interdisciplinary integration.

2. To propose strategies for fostering character-based friendship within Higher Education, drawing upon the practical experience of university faculty engaged in teaching and intensive personal student mentoring.

Therefore, by synthesizing the Aristotelian framework of friendship with contemporary emotional dynamism and the psychological components of emotion, we seek to elucidate their interconnectedness and identify the specific feelings that are inseparable from authentic, person-to-person relationships. To achieve these goals, we will draw upon theoretical research—encompassing philosophy, psychology, and education—as well as recent empirical psychological studies.

3. PSYCHOLOGICAL DYNAMIC, EMOTIONS AND EUDAIMONIA

In truth, the literature on virtue as the end of the full life is excessively abundant, and in studies on Character Education it is treated as a presupposition (MacIntyre, 1984; Lapsley & Narvaez, 2006; Berg, 2020; B. Fowers, 2005; Fowers et al., 2021; Kristjánsson, 2016, 2018; Nucci et al., 2024; Wright et al., 2020)

We now propose an idea that will serve as the starting point for the argument that follows:

1. In Aristotle, the account of ethical virtue in the *Nicomachean Ethics* is preceded by the account of the psyche in *De Anima*. Ethics continues anthropology consistently (Aristotle's philosophical psychology), without being confused with it.

2. If this is so, virtue itself, as the stable disposition and the ease for getting it right in action—getting it right is what is good (Martínez-Priego & Romero-Iribas, 2024)—appeals to the operative principles of the human psyche, that is, to the faculties (Aristotle, 1984, pp. 414a30–415b1, 8b29), not only to the operation, which would be an insufficiently deep explanation (Polo, 2002, 2018).

3. That is, we can approach virtue through the "matters" or particular contexts to which it refers (and we find a multitude of small virtues), or we can focus on the faculties (or subjects of virtue) (Aquinas, 2000, ST I–II, q.61, a.2) that we have and which are what grow: Temperance (concupiscible appetite), Fortitude (irascible appetite), Justice (interpersonal relationships), and Prudence (as rational guidance and command with respect to virtuous action) (Oderberg, 1999; Pieper, 2017).

Some examples:

1. Diligence, boldness, tenacity, etc., virtues with which we face difficulties, pertain to fortitude. Emotionally, they arise from coping capacity.

2. Sobriety, the governance of impulsivity, overcoming caprice, pertain to temperance. Which arises emotionally from the capacity to delay gratification.

3. Solidarity, respect, honesty, etc., which are interpersonal virtues, pertain to justice. Emotionally, they arise from empathic capacity. Friendship as a virtue would be situated here.

4. Finally, the right principle of actions, realism, reflection, humility, etc., pertain to prudence. Its emotional genesis is global and is preceded by the cognitive and action-oriented dimensions of emotions.

The virtues do not act separately, nor does our psychological dynamism, especially with regard to the cognitive and conative dimension. From this brief explanation (which would require completing each point with arguments and concrete data; here they are only sketched), we can conclude that:

In short, psychological dynamism makes it possible to understand where virtues arise from, or where they are psychically located, and these can be understood in terms of the faculties they perfect. And, as we noted at the beginning, eudaimonia is a well-lived life in which virtue is exercised in a stable way.

We must now explain the place—also psychological—of emotion.

4. PSYCHOLOGICAL DYNAMIC AND EMOTIONS

Emotion as a process (Scherer, 1982) is primarily described by its (a) trigger, (b) object or target, and (c) function. From this standpoint, I shall examine the relationships between psychological dynamics and friendship.

4.1. About Emotions

It is worth briefly clarifying the nature of emotion within the framework of both the Aristotelian tradition and contemporary emotional psychology.

By analyzing the "emotional process"—namely, the trigger, cognitive appraisal, coping potential, and the multidimensional response (Fernández-Abascal et al., 2010)—we can conclude that this perspective aligns with both neuroendocrine explanations and philosophical anthropology (Martínez-Priego & Romero-Iribas, 2024). In *De Anima*, Aristotelian philosophy approaches emotions through the formal structure of the human psyche and its faculties (Aristotle, 1984, 413b). Consequently, it becomes possible to more accurately pinpoint the ontological status and location of emotions and feelings.

From a philosophical standpoint, emotions are not primary acts of the subject (actions), but rather states that accompany those acts. Thus, emotions can be defined as states that are concomitant with, or consequent upon, acts of a cognitive-evaluative and appetitive (tendential) nature at the level of sensory knowledge; as such, they essentially involve corporeality (Aristotle, 1984, pp. 403a31–b1). Their clearest point of convergence with psychology lies in the inclusion of both a cognitive dimension and a tendency toward action (Martínez-Priego, 2010; Martínez-Priego & Romero-Iribas, 2021; A. Romero-Iribas & Martínez-Priego, 2022). Insofar as emotions accompany acts, they serve as a "report" (*noticia*)—a specific type of information[1] (Polo, 2023,

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[1] "Feelings are not to be confused with sensible objects; rather, they are a kind of concomitant information regarding the state of the faculty". They are "somewhat similar to habits but occurring within the realm of sensibility" (Polo, 2023, p. 427). "Feeling is not information about the adequacy of what I know with reality,

p. 427) regarding what is known, valued, and desired, as well as the state of the subject themselves (Polo, 2015b, 2016). Our interpretation of this "news" stems from the distinction between emotion and feeling; indeed, feeling is the subjective experience of an emotion (Palmero et al., 2006).

4.2. The Target of Emotions

If we return to the defining elements of each emotion[2], we can distinguish between the object and the function of the emotion (in the case of deep friendship, we shall see that object and function coincide, and we shall refer to this as the target, or beneficiary: the other person's good). In the Darwinian tradition, emotions are understood as responses with three functions: (1) an adaptive (and useful) function, (2) a communicative function, and (3) a motivational function (Fernández-Abascal et al., 2010; Berridge, 2018). Both motivation and communication are functions oriented towards adaptive survival, and all of this ultimately benefits the subject itself (the target).

However, adaptation does not suffice to explain all aspects of human life, especially those concerning interpersonal relationships, in which adaptive/competitive logic (the 'law of the strongest') is not sufficient. Thus, we build hospitals; we save the sick and the elderly when life is at risk. On the other hand, human beings do not adapt to the environment; rather, through culture they adapt the environment to themselves. Or, put in terms of ethology and biological anthropology, humans are comparatively under-specialised and rely on culture to transform the environment; this reduces the explanatory reach of purely adaptive/competitive accounts for interpersonal life. (Portmann, 1970; Rof Carballo, 1964)[3].

We will now attempt a classification of emotions that occur within interpersonal relationships, attending to triggering stimuli (trigger) and to whom the emotion is directed or whom it benefits (target).

4.3. The Emotional Trigger

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but rather of what I know with the faculty itself. Therefore, the function of feeling is to provide information about capacity" (Polo, 2015a, p. 220).

[2] Following the componential approach, an emotion can be described by: (i) its trigger (the evaluated event/stimulus), (ii) its object (the intentional target: what the emotion is about), and (iii) its function or motivational component (the state of action readiness that guides behaviour) (Scherer, 2011; Scherer & Moors, 2019).

Taking fear as an example:

- Trigger: The perception (real or imagined) of an imminent threat or danger: signs of potential harm, uncertainty regarding safety, or loss of control (e.g., a sudden loud noise, a car approaching too closely, alarming news).
- Object: That which is feared (the content of the emotion itself); namely, the anticipated harm (and its source) toward oneself: an aggressor, an accident, an illness, or the thought "that X might happen to me." The object can be external (something in the environment) or internal (bodily sensations interpreted as dangerous).
- Function: To protect. It prioritizes attention toward the threat, increases vigilance, and mobilizes safety behaviours (flight, avoidance, seeking help, freezing; sometimes fighting), as well as preventive learning for the future. It also serves a social function: signalling danger to others through facial expressions, tone of voice, etc.

Here, we use "target" to refer to the emotion insofar as it "benefits"; that is, it answers the question of whom the emotion benefits: oneself or the other.

[3] We must remember that the superior does not negate the inferior; rather, it provides it with a higher teleology (*fin*). Thus, while having friends is indeed useful, we do not love deep friends BECAUSE they are useful to us, but for their own sake—even if this relationship happens to yield many inferior goods

Based on the points previously discussed, it can be affirmed that whenever there is evaluative knowledge—a cognitive appraisal—coupled with an appetitive inclination toward the appraised object, an emotion occurs.

However, when addressing the triggering stimulus of an emotion, current literature often fails to categorize stimuli into distinct types, focusing instead on the variables through which they are evaluated. It is, therefore, relevant to distinguish between a general stimulus (Frijda, 1988) and the stimulus of "the other." According to an extensive psychological tradition, the stimulus to which human beings are most sensitive is the psychosocial stimulus (Rof Carballo, 1952). Consequently, it is advisable to differentiate between emotions that correspond to the world in general and those specifically triggered by another person—by the *Other*.

Thus, we can now focus on the emotions that accompany interpersonal relationships. By classifying emotions according to their trigger and their target, we are able to identify the specific emotions inherent to the interpersonal relationship of "friendship." For example, in admiration the object is the other person while the functional beneficiary is oneself.

5. ON FRIENDSHIP

5.1. An approach to the reality of deep friendship

To identify these specific emotions, we must first establish a working definition or a set of essential characteristics. We shall follow a selection of contributions drawn from four major studies on friendship (A. Romero-Iribas, 2011, 2021; A. M. Romero-Iribas & Martínez-Priego, 2017):

- Leonardo Polo (2006): He writes:

  o "The essence of friendship resides in sharing, in conversation, and in mutual understanding (*compenetración*)."
  o "Adulation, fawning, and servility are incompatible with friendship."

- Laín Entralgo (1986): He notes that friendship is:

  o "A righteous and mutual integration of benevolence, beneficence, and intimate self-disclosure (*confidencia*)."
  o "Only by way of deep personal sharing..." (deep conversation)

- C.S. Lewis (*The Four Loves*, ch. IV "Friendship") (Lewis, 2017):

  o "Friends, side by side, absorbed in some common interest."
  o "Complete forgetfulness of ourselves."

- Aristotle:

  o "For without friends no one would choose to live..." (Aristotle, 1985, 1155a).
  o "Perfect friendship is the friendship of men who are good..." (Aristotle, 1985, 1156b).
  o "The friend is another self" / "ὁ φίλος ἄλλος αὐτός" (Aristotle, 1985, 1166a).

In synthesis, the elements upon which all these authors converge are:

- Common objective or interest; sharing.
- Rectitude (loyalty, mutuality), and virtue.
- Selflessness (*gratuidad*).
- Conversation.
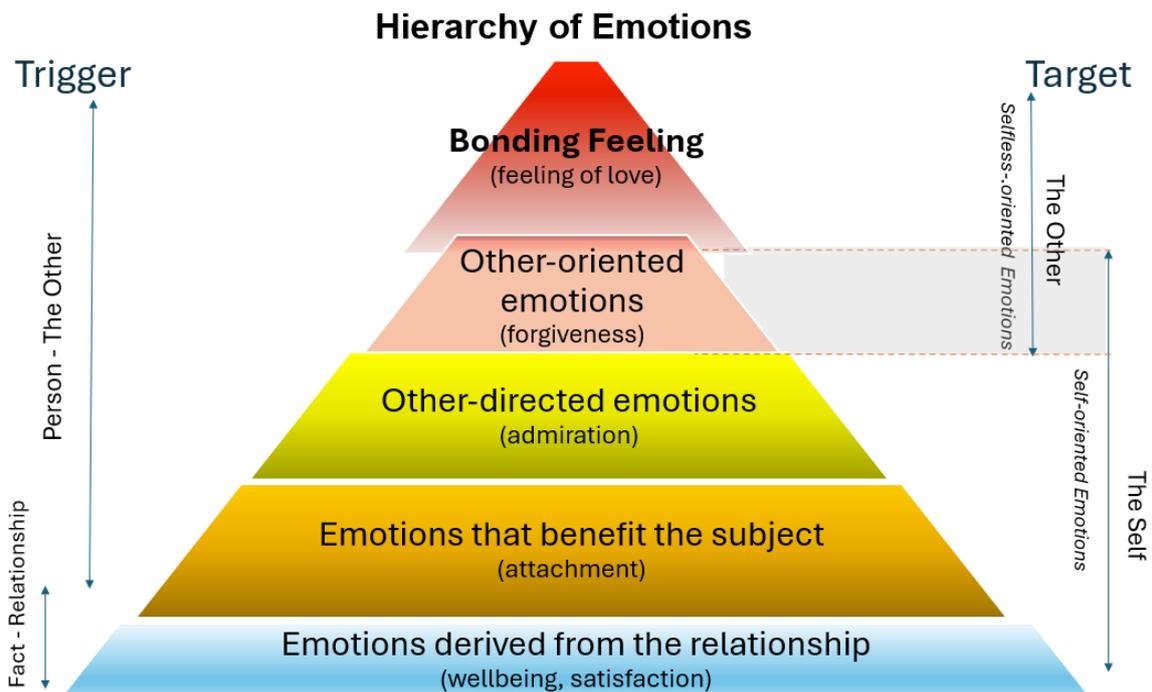
5.2. Hierarchy of Interpersonal Emotions

Figure 1. Martínez-Priego & Romero-Iribas, 2021

The analysis of emotions associated with friendship can be classified hierarchically according to the trigger and the target (beneficiary) of the emotion. The resulting classification—modelled after the transition from reactive emotions to stable affective states—is as follows (figure 1):

- Relationship-Derived Emotions (Base): These proceed from the interaction itself rather than the singular identity of the Other. The subject is the primary beneficiary of the hedonic well-being generated. Examples: "I feel at ease conversing; I enjoy the company."

- Self-Oriented Emotions: Triggered by the Other, but the beneficiary is the Self. A prime example is attachment, which provides the subject with a sense of security and emotional regulation.

- Other-Directed Emotions: Triggered by the Other, but the benefit remains within the subject's internal experience (e.g., felt admiration). The Other is the object of the emotion, but the Self is the functional beneficiary.

- Other-Oriented Emotions (OOE): These are triggered by the Other, and the primary beneficiary is the Other's well-being (e.g., empathy, compassion, or forgiveness). While these are directed toward the Other's good, they can still be lived under a logic of reciprocity or "indebtedness," which may introduce emotional ambivalence.

- The Bonding Feeling (BF)[4]

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[4] Considering these characteristics, we can conclude that the Bonding Feeling (BF) serves as a certain kind of "existential news" (*noticia*) about the person-to-person relationship. Following the Polian perspective, the BF is not a mere psychological discharge, but a refined form of information:
- Information about the Other: It is the affective confirmation of the Other's growth and flourishing.

As argued in Martínez-Priego & Romero-Iribas (2021), the BF represents the highest affective level, surpassing the reactive nature of OOEs. We define the Bonding Feeling as a stable affective state (persists across repeated interactions, resists short-term frustration, and is not reducible to episodic emotional peaks) that accompanies sustained, gratuitous (selflessness) acts oriented toward the good of the Other *as a person*. That is, gratuitousness is a necessary condition, but the bonding feeling is characterised—phenomenologically and relationally—by stability over time, a sustained eudaimonic tone, and the absence of calculation or ambivalence in one's orientation towards the other; this is expressed as an affirmation of the bond.

Key Characteristics of the BF in Character Friendship:

1. Gratuitousness and Selflessness: It is disinterested, operating outside the logic of exchange. It is not about "giving and receiving," but rather about "giving" and the Other "accepting." In this framework, to accept is to give acceptance, completing the gift without requiring a return.

2. Affirmation of the Singular Person: The BF seeks the good of the Other understood as a unique and unrepeatable person. It is a positive, growth-oriented feeling (*eudaimonic* in nature).

3. Intellective and Volitional Root: Unlike the reactive nature of other-oriented emotions, the BF arises from a free decision grounded in the recognition of the Other as a person of intrinsic worth. As such, it is, par excellence, a free bond.

Other-oriented emotions (OOEs) can be genuinely prosocial; however, they often continue to operate within a logic of reciprocity, compensation, or indebtedness, in which the other's good is intertwined with an expected return or with the need to restore balance in the relationship. The bonding feeling (BF), by contrast, requires a structural break with that logic. Hence, in the BF the primary beneficiary of the emotion changes—no longer the self, but the other—and the nature of the bond also changes, being configured by gratuitousness and by the affirmation of the other as a person[5] .

5.3. Final Conclusions

The Good Life (*eudaimonia*) requires, in order to reach its highest degree, the presence of friendship or, in other words, of gratuitous person-to-person relationships. It is important to note that gratuitousness (selflessness) is a quality of a relationship, not merely an isolated act, and it is distinct from virtues such as generosity or justice. These relationships break the logic of simply "doing good things" to focus instead on the goodness of the Other's existence. In this sense, friendship is the relational space for the *amor benevolentiae* defined by Aquinas: "amare est velle alicui bonum" (*S.Th.*, I-II, q. 26, a. 4, co.)—to love is to will the good of the other. The Other

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- Information about the Self: It reveals the subject's own capacity for unconditionality and free self-giving.
- Information about the Bond: It signals that the relationship has transcended the reactive level of emotions.

[5] A fundamental conceptual basis for understanding the radical nature of this person-to-person bond is the concept of the affective warp (*urdimbre afectiva*) proposed by Juan Rof Carballo. The affective warp describes the essential nexus between human primordial helplessness and diatrophic love (nurturing and other-centred). This radical, dialogical structure is configured within transactional interpersonal relationships, primarily within the family, and serves as the ontological foundation for later character friendships (Martínez-Priego, 2012).

is the motor and the *telos* of actions; yet friendship itself is not an action, but the relationship that moves one to act.

Since no human activity—least of all personal relationships—is ever devoid of affectivity, the Bonding Feelings (*sentimientos vinculativos*), being the highest of their kind, correspond to personal love (the fulfilment of life).

In short, Aristotelian reflection on virtue and emotion (extended by authors such as Aquinas and Polo) allows us to affirm that a full and flourishing life is rooted in the establishment of the highest personal bonds and is manifested in the highest feelings. Indeed, "it is not the same to 'feel inspired by your greatness' (admiration) as it is to 'will your good' (sustained unconditionality)." Therefore, we can affirm that certain feelings (BF) are inseparable from deep friendship and that these feelings are specific to person-to-person relationships (personal loves).

This confirms that friendship is more than a virtue, although it requires virtue as a necessary antecedent. Virtues are not personal relationships; rather, one of them—justice—regulates them. However, justice itself is not a personal relationship, but a moral criterion for interpersonal conduct. In any case, justice provides a necessary moral criterion for interpersonal relationships; gratuitousness describes the constitutive logic of personal love/friendship when it reaches its highest form.

6. EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS: THE UNIVERSITY EXPERIENCE

Undoubtedly, understanding these theoretical constructs is of intrinsic interest; however, the impact of a university professor extends far beyond pure research.

6.1. Educating for Friendship in the University: The Environment

As noted in the section on friendship—specifically regarding character-based friendship—this bond requires shared goals, rectitude, unconditionality, and conversation. These elements can be cultivated both within the classroom and through personal dialogue.

In my university, this is integrated into the academic and personal mentoring plan (*plan de acompañamiento*): students may request to speak with a professor whenever they choose. This provides a space for sharing, questioning, problem-solving, and reflection—offering both support and encouragement during this period of intense formation (Nocito et al., 2021).

This institutional culture encourages students to engage in personal dialogue, not only with their assigned tutor but with the professor they find most suitable. Thus, the university is transformed into a locus for both academic and personal dialogue—a place for genuine maturation.

6.2. Resources

A professor educates by their very presence and through their professional conduct. Therefore:

1. Education takes place within academic "work." This is where virtues can be cultivated.

   o The key issue lies in the virtues the professor embodies in their professional practice: fortitude, temperance, justice, prudence, and the many virtues derived from them.

   o Victor García Hoz referred to this as "well-executed work" (*la obra bien hecha*) (García Hoz, 1993).

2. Education as professor-student dialogue. This context is built upon mutual respect, trust, loyalty, and a shared interest (both academic and in the student's overall well-being).

This dialogue becomes possible when classroom topics or methodologies impel students to improve, inspired by the style of work proposed. It occurs when the professor uses literature to exemplify human experience; when students discover that the professor is also a person with aspirations; and when they recognize the professor's own commitment to "well-executed work."

In such circumstances, it is common—in my experience—for students to spontaneously approach the professor for advice on books, to revisit classroom questions from a more personal perspective, or to share their interests. This fosters a climate of trust and leads to recurring conversations. The student feels heard, valued, and connected to a trustworthy interlocutor. Crucially, all of this must be rooted in sincerity.

6.3. Areas for Personal Growth

Education must aim beyond mere homeostasis or subjective satisfaction (hedonic goals), moving toward eudaimonic goals: the integration of emotion into the psychological dynamic, virtue, and human flourishing. In this sense, education as a support for human growth—within a context of dialogue—is oriented toward the development of virtues and a mature personality, both of which are necessary conditions for the formation of character. To nurture Character Friendship (CF) in an educational setting, it is essential to cultivate those dispositions that favour Other-Oriented Emotions (OOE) and the Bonding Feeling (BF).

The following points are central to this endeavour:

1. Relative Equality and Recognition: CF requires friends who mutually recognize each other's personal dignity. The dialogical nature of the human being implies that the Self is constituted in relation to the neighbour; thus, growth is never autonomous but relational. It is essential to cultivate mutual respect, mutuality, and trust. Trust, an other-oriented emotion, is promoted through truthfulness and coherence.

2. Shared Goals and the Development of Rationality: Education must foster shared goods that transcend self-interest. The pursuit of these goals requires rationality (enabling reasonable disagreement) and will (stabilizing desires through fortitude). Mentoring and Reflective Dialogue are essential for CF: dialogue promotes perspectivist metacognition (balance of viewpoints, epistemic humility, and open-mindedness), which are crucial civic virtues for a non-polarized society.

   o *2.1.* There must be a certain equality between friends. While this is primarily found among siblings in the home, it can also occur in the University with professors, provided they share common aspirations (the student's well-being, a passion for research, and the pursuit of truth).

3. Generous and Disinterested Action: Since CF is based on selfless acts seeking the other's good, education must promote generosity and gratuitousness.

   o It is generous to go beyond the mere fulfilment of tasks.

   o This mindset is transferable to personal relationships, facilitating the transcendence of the self (maturing into the realization that "I am not the centre of the world").

   o The person must possess the capacity for gratuitous acts toward another, which is made manifest (as "news" or *noticia*) in the higher emotions. The primary environment for learning this is the family, followed by the attitude of professors.

> - Education in gratuitousness (selflessness) is linked to overcoming egoism—the antithesis of CF. As a relationship of personal love, CF implies, as previously stated, benevolence, beneficence, and intimate self-disclosure (*confidencia*).

As a professor aspiring to form the character of university students, I engage with them upon these three pillars, helping them identify the resources for growth oriented toward the good of others. Ultimately, this journey is not about teaching students to follow a set of rules, but about enabling them to discover the profound joy of the BF. When we move from the logic of justice to the logic of gratuitousness and selflessness, we open the door to a flourishing life where the Other is truly an 'Another self.' In the classroom and in mentoring, our highest goal is to be the diatrophic presence that makes such a life possible.

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