

Friendship and Moral Danger

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## FRIENDSHIP AND MORAL DANGER\*

Close friendships, Gandhi says, are dangerous, because "friends react on one another" and through loyalty to a friend one can be led into wrongdoing. This is unquestionably true.... The essence of being human is that one does not seek perfection, that one is sometimes willing to commit sins for the sake of loyalty...and that one is prepared in the end to be defeated and broken up by life, which is the inevitable price of fastening one's love upon other human individuals.<sup>1</sup>

Friendship is widely recognized to be an important human good, and standard philosophical accounts have sought to locate this good within a moral framework. So, for example, Aristotelians claim that friendship is a virtuous relation between persons and argue that the trust and intimacy of close friendship must be based upon mutual recognition of one another's virtue. Indeed, on several recent views, friendship is most notably seen as a vehicle for moral self-examination and character improvement. As Nancy Sherman<sup>2</sup> describes the relation between close friends:

Each is inspired to develop himself more completely as he sees admirable qualities...manifest in another whom he esteems.... Character friends...are eminently suited as models to be emulated (*ibid.*, pp. 105-06).

In everyday experience, however, friendship surely plays a less exalted role. The inspiration toward moral improvement is not exactly at the heart of our interest in a regular card game or dinner date with friends. In fact, commonly enough it seems that our interest in our close friends can run directly counter to accepted moral requirements. As the joke has it, a friend will help you move house, a good friend will help you move a body. Comic observations are often funny because we recognize and are amused by the gap between some highly romanticized or moralized view we might like to have of ourselves and what rings true of our ordinary experience. In the case of friendship, the gap between common philosophical accounts of

\* We are grateful to audiences at numerous philosophy departments and conferences for helpful discussions of earlier versions of this paper. Special thanks are owed to John Campbell, Steve Matthews, Justin Oakley, and Michael Smith for their insightful comments and suggestions.

<sup>1</sup> George Orwell, "Reflections on Gandhi," *Collected Essays* (London: Mercury, 1961), pp. 455-56.

<sup>2</sup> "Aristotle on the Shared Life," in Neera K. Badhwar, ed., *Friendship: A Philosophical Reader* (Ithaca: Cornell, 1993), pp. 91-107.

the good of friendship and everyday experience seems especially striking.

#### I. INTRODUCTION

We focus here on some familiar kinds of cases of conflict between friendship and morality, and, on the basis of our account of the nature of friendship, argue for the following two claims: first, that in some cases where we are led morally astray by virtue of a relationship that makes its own demands on us, the relationship in question is properly called a friendship; second, that relationships of this kind are valuable in their own right.<sup>3</sup> In our view, then, efforts to locate the good of friendship wholly within the moral framework are misguided. Much of the good of friendship itself, and of what we have reason to do within it, has little, if anything, to do with morality. Indeed, the reasons that arise out of friendship may well conflict with moral considerations and may at times override such considerations. In order to argue our case that it is part of both the nature and value of friendship that it can lead us morally astray, let us begin by considering a contrast between an example from fiction of acting as a true and good friend, and a current, influential philosophical view of true and good friendship.

*Death In Brunswick*<sup>4</sup>: Carl, the main character of the film *Death in Brunswick*, is no saint. Weak, vain, and disorganized, he is a severe disappointment to his mother. He drinks too much, and he works as a cook at a seedy nightclub in Brunswick where he falls foul of the owners by falling in love with a young barmaid. One night, Mustapha, his drug-dealing kitchen hand is badly beaten up in the back alley by the nightclub heavies. Carl is warned to keep his mouth shut; Mustapha is told that Carl is responsible for the beating. So late that night, Mustapha staggers into the kitchen and lunges at Carl, who is holding a long-pronged fork. Mustapha impales himself on the fork and dies. In a panic, Carl calls his best friend Dave, an easy-going family man. Against the protests of his wife, June, Dave dresses and drives to the nightclub to see what is up. His initial response when shown the body is that the police must be called. Carl begs him not to, saying that he could not cope with going to jail. Faced with Carl's fear, Dave takes charge and helps Carl move the body. They take it to the cemetery where Dave works, he breaks into a coffin in an open grave, stamps on the putrefying corpse inside to make room for

<sup>3</sup> We thank Michael Smith for helping to clarify these claims.

<sup>4</sup> Written by John Ruane with Boyd Oxlade, directed by John Ruane (Meridian Films, 1990).

Mustapha, and re-closes the coffin. Later, they deny all knowledge of Mustapha's disappearance to his distressed widow and son. Now, in concealing Mustapha's death from his family, secretly disposing of a body, interfering with a grave, and desecrating a corpse, Dave has committed some serious moral wrongs by anyone's reckoning. But while Dave may have failed as a moral agent to do what he ought, it hardly seems plausible to think he has failed as a friend. Indeed, one might even think it a requirement of close friendship in these circumstances that Dave helps Carl move the body, and that he fails Carl in a serious way if he does not. Certainly, Carl invokes the friendship in asking for help and regards Dave's action as testimony to the strength of their friendship. Thus, on this kind of picture of friendship, true and good friends may well be led to act against competing moral considerations in the pursuit of one another's welfare.

Now consider a current and common philosophical picture of true and good friendship, which we shall call *the highly moralized account*. Many writers seem to have been tempted to overstate the moral features of friendship by cashing out the value of friendship in wholly moral terms and, indeed, claiming friendship to be an essential vehicle for moral development and improvement. In a similar vein to the moral role-model view of Sherman, Laurence Thomas<sup>5</sup> says that the love friends have for each other constitutes "the most fertile ground for acquiring the moral sensibilities":

...because of their love for each other they are deeply committed to each other's flourishing—moral and otherwise.... Accordingly through their interactions they seek to enhance rather than stifle each other's moral flourishing...the moral sensibilities that a flourishing companion friendship realizes enhance the quality of our moral interaction with others (*ibid.*, pp. 153-55).

On this view, the value of friendship lies in the selfless concern and respect for others which it models, in the specific moral learning that comes out of the comment on our lives and character which friends are especially entitled to offer, and in the moral example presented by the other which, as their close friend, we shall want to emulate. Although Thomas and Sherman do not think that friends are constantly engaged in moral criticism and encouragement or other activities designed to promote each other's moral flourishing, it is plain they think that companion friendship is, of its nature, morally demanding. On their kind of view, it is a conceptual truth that since we want those we love to flourish, this must include their moral

<sup>5</sup> *Living Morally: A Psychology of Moral Character* (Philadelphia: Temple, 1989).

flourishing.<sup>6</sup> To the extent, then, that we accept from the outset a person's character flaws without trying to improve them, to the extent that we are not concerned with their virtue, they claim that the relationship falls short of true friendship. It is a function of close friendship that friends contribute significantly to each other's self-understanding, and this we cannot do if we tolerate, or are indifferent to, each other's moral failings; for here a friend would be a mere sycophant and her loyalty be blind. It follows, then, that if we fail each other morally in these respects that we fail each other as friends.

If this kind of view were right, then there could be no fundamental conflict between the reasons for action which arise out of friendship and the requirements of morality. A true and good friendship cannot lead us astray, for its status as a true and good friendship depends upon its moral qualities. Clearly, on this highly moralized account, Carl and Dave are not true and good friends. As Dave's friend, Carl should have been especially sensitive to the moral quality of the acts he, in part, leads Dave to perform. He should think it against friendship that Dave would help him move the body, lie to the victim's relatives, and so forth. Now, surely, whatever one might think of the moral correctness of such things, it is hardly against true and good friendship that Dave would help Carl out in these ways. Indeed, if it were, and true and good friendship were as the highly moralized view claims it is, then it would be a good available to very few of us, bearing little resemblance to the basic human good we ordinarily and so widely recognize it to be. It certainly bears little resemblance to the relationship which is so widely thought to be marked by an agent-relative commitment to the particular interests and welfare of another, and which has, on this account, been thought by many philosophers to present a serious challenge to impartial moral theory.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> As Thomas says: "insofar as being morally virtuous constitutes a form of moral flourishing, we want those whom we love to realize themselves in this way as well" (*ibid.*, p. 147).

<sup>7</sup> That friendship does involve such a commitment is, of course, the point of Orwell's attack on Mahatma Ghandi. Philosophers who acknowledge the conflict between the good of friendship and the requirements of impartial morality divide between those who, like Orwell, accept the moral risk that friendship brings and those, like Kant, who wish to circumscribe friendship by subjecting it "to principles or rules preventing excessive familiarity and limiting mutual love by requirements of respect"—*The Metaphysics of Morals*, Mary Gregor, trans. (New York: Cambridge, 1996), p. 216.

## II. FRIENDSHIP AND PLURAL MORAL VALUES

Perhaps Carl and Dave's friendship can be acknowledged and the good of their friendship accommodated within a broader moral framework that adopts a plural view of the good and acknowledges that there are a variety of ways of acting well, not all of which are commensurable with each other. So, Dave's helping action may have realized one kind of moral good but failed to realize some other values that might also justifiably have guided his choice.

In recent times, there has been a move by philosophers to constitute friendship as a basic moral relation and as a model for our interactions with others. Feminists, such as Marilyn Friedman,<sup>8</sup> favorably contrast the equality, reciprocity, and voluntariness of friendship with the unequal power relations and fixed social roles of family, work, and community. As well, she and others, such as Laurence Blum,<sup>9</sup> see the interest friends have in each other's well-being as a specifically moral concern. So Blum says: "Friendship is an expression of moral activity on our part—of a type of regard for another person, a giving of oneself and a caring for another for his own sake.... It is genuine care for another person which constitutes a moral activity of the self" (*ibid.*, pp. 198-99).

Insofar, then, as the reasons for action which arise from friendship do so from an altruistic concern for and commitment to the other's good, these reasons might well be plausibly thought of as *moral* reasons, and to this extent friendship might be seen as a morally valuable and virtuous relationship.

Now, Dave's action uncontroversially displays such a commitment to his friend Carl. Thus, the *Death in Brunswick* case may demonstrate a conflict within morality between different kinds of moral values—the well-being of a friend against the lying and law-breaking involved in the case. My commitment to my friend is, as Friedman points out, quite unlike a commitment to abstract or impartial moral principles from which the agent derives specific practical judgments that apply to all relevantly similar circumstances. Rather, as she puts it: "the interests and *best* interests of the friend become central...to determining which of one's own actions are right or wrong and which goals and aspirations are worthwhile" (*op. cit.*, p. 191). As my friend's life unfolds in new and unexpected ways, so, too, do the moral determinants of my actions. This is, in part, due to the opportunities for moral discovery which my privileged access to my friend's perspective affords, but Friedman's main focus here is on the attitude I must

<sup>8</sup> *What Are Friends For?* (Ithaca: Cornell, 1993).

<sup>9</sup> "Friendship as a Moral Phenomenon," in Badhwar, ed., pp. 192-210.

adopt *toward* the friend's perspective. For my friend's own conception of her good must be taken seriously by me if I am committed to *her* rather than to abstract morality. If I take my friend seriously, I shall at least sometimes be prepared to act on her behalf, even where such action lacks support from my more general moral principles. So, for example, I might lie to conceal a friend's moral lapse (say, an act of adultery), even though I disapprove of both lying and adultery, because I see that my friend needs time to resolve the situation in her own way, and I trust her to do so.

This view of what is entailed by a commitment to one's friend clearly goes beyond an active concern for the friend's good character and the *ceteris paribus* moral permission to favor the friend's interests which Thomas and Sherman would be happy to allow. And, again, if it is right, then many apparent conflicts between friendship and morality should better be seen as conflicts *within* morality. Insofar as Dave acts altruistically out of a concern for Carl, which takes seriously Carl's view of his own good, he acts for a *moral* reason.

It is uncontroversial that good and true friends have this kind of deeply felt concern for each other, and that this interest in the well-being of the particular other who is their friend goes beyond a willingness to help out in times of crisis. Within the friendship, it will more generally inhibit their performing certain kinds of immoral actions and tend to promote their performance of certain morally good actions. Good friends will not exploit each other, they will try to avoid actions that would cause the other pain, they will routinely promote each other's interests, and they will delight in each other's successes. So individuals must reach a minimum moral standard in these kinds of ways if they are to be fit for friendship at all. But apart from this moral concern and activity that is internal to friendship and focuses on promoting the welfare and well-being of the friend, how compatible is friendship with morality more broadly conceived, even given a plural moral-values view?

### III. DIRECTION AND INTERPRETATION IN FRIENDSHIP

The plural moral-values view focuses on the altruistic concern we have for the friend's well-being as the core moral value in friendship.<sup>10</sup> A relationship that may feature such moral concern, however, even when it is a deeply felt, particularized concern for the other's well-being, is not distinctively a relation of friendship on this account. Other kinds of relations between persons, such as the parent-child

<sup>10</sup> Friedman thinks, however, that the commitment we have to our friend's interests as such provides scope more generally for moral learning and growth.

relation, pastoral relations, or the relation of being a good doctor or teacher to another, may similarly be governed, in part, by a particularized and informed concern for the well-being of another. So, for instance, the good teacher may act for the sake of a particular student and do so from a deeply felt concern for their welfare. Clearly, though, the teacher does not thereby act as a friend.<sup>11</sup> Thus, in order to distinguish and more fully understand the nature and good of friendship, we need to look at a broader set of governing conditions that might plausibly be thought to characterize what is distinctive about relations of friendship.

Let us now set out some features which we think are partly constitutive of close friendship and which serve to identify and broaden our appreciation of the interest we have in each other as friends.<sup>12</sup> Our account of the ways in which friendship is governed by a distinctive kind of engagement with the other, and of how this gives rise to reasons for action where the other is concerned, should help to show the narrowness of the focus on the moral concern for the well-being of the friend as an account of the good of friendship. For it demonstrates that a large part of the good of friendship need not be expressive of any particular *moral* interest at all.

All accounts of the nature of close friendships agree that such things as mutual affection, the disposition to promote the other's serious interests and well-being, and the desire for shared experiences are necessary constituents of the relationship. In addition, we claim that it is a constitutive feature of companion friendships that friends are characteristically receptive to being directed and interpreted and so in these ways drawn by each other. As a close friend of another, I shall be especially disposed to be directed by her in our shared activities—to play in a card game, go bushwalking, or go to the movies. Even if our interests are, as it happens, remarkably similar, my reasons for action where she is concerned do not depend upon this contingent similarity in the way that they might, say, if we were merely members of the same common-interest club. In the case where my close friend's interests diverge from mine, her interests continue to have action-guiding force for me, since in friendship it is her interests *as such* that are important, not her interests under some

<sup>11</sup> See Blum's discussion of the conscientious teacher who spends considerable time after hours assisting a student he does not much like—"Vocation, Friendship, and the Community: Limitations of the Personal-Impersonal Framework," in Owen Flanagan and Amelie O. Rorty, eds., *Identity, Character, and Morality* (Cambridge: MIT, 1990), pp. 173-98, here pp. 176-81.

<sup>12</sup> For a more detailed presentation and defense of this account, see our "Friendship and the Self," *Ethics*, cviii, 3 (1998): 502-27.



description that has no essential connection to her. The interests of the other in friendship, whether serious or slight, are not, in general, filtered through one's antecedent tastes and interests or subjected to rational or moral scrutiny before they acquire action-guiding force. As Elizabeth Bennet says to Mr. Darcy in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*<sup>13</sup> of the influence of friendship on action: "A regard for the requester would often make one yield readily to a request, without waiting for arguments to reason one into it" (*ibid.*, p. 43). To say, then, that one is directed by one's close friends is to point to the distinctive and commonplace ways in which one's choices are shaped by the other, and one's interests and activities become oriented toward those of the friend. In this way, the process of mutual direction characterizes and helps explain an important part of the particularistic nature and value of close friendship.

A second significant feature of close friendship is the way in which friends contribute to each other's self-conception. Close friends often recognize and highlight aspects of one another's character, they often accept such interpretations from one another, and their self-conception is often changed and enriched by seeing themselves through their friend's eyes. I notice, for instance, my friend Stephen's finely tuned, obsessive sensitivity to minor irritations, such as to noises I would have thought even dogs cannot hear. When I highlight this feature to Stephen, he may not only come to see these sensitivities as a salient part of his character and personality, but my interpretation may impact upon how this character trait continues to be realized—so now, for example, he jokes of his sensitivities by exaggerating them even further. Thus, Stephen's character and self-conception are also, in part, drawn or shaped by my interpretations of him.

Having one's interests and attitudes directed, interpreted, and so drawn in the ways described is, in our view, both typical and distinctive of companion friendship. This process of mutual drawing goes beyond the altruistic concern and respect for the well-being of the other which is also fundamental to friendship, and clearly shows how the self in friendship is, in part, a relational thing that is developed and molded through the friendship. Understanding one's attachment to a friend in the light of this mutual drawing process helpfully explains the broader and more complex nature of the interest one has in a friend and the distinctive ways in which friendship contributes to one's character and gives rise to reasons not shared by others.

<sup>13</sup> New York: Oxford, 1990.

As a friend, I am partly determined by my friend's interpretations of me, and I have reasons to act that are directed by *her* quite ordinary interests, such as her interest in ballet or movies, as well as by her more serious welfare interests.

Now, with respect to these sorts of reasons which we have on account of friendship, the connection to reasons arising from moral considerations is importantly contingent. It is here that our view clearly parts company with the plural moral-values view. It is an important part of a pluralist moral view of the good of friendship (as well as of a highly moralized view) that friendship provides an opportunity for moral transformation and growth. We agree that friendship does have this potential. But one should not make too much of a connection between friendship and moral transformation or growth in the attempt to locate its value within morality. For it is in large part due to the special receptivity to the other's direction and interpretation in friendship that such transformation through friendship is possible. Presumably, the mutual drawing that goes on in friendship will, for the most part, neither lead to moral improvement nor lead us astray, but just as it may lead us to act in morally right or good ways, so it might also lead us to act in morally wrong or bad ways. It is not uncommon for minor moral vices to play a part in a good friendship. Indeed, a good friendship might well include a focus on certain vices. Recklessness is not morally admirable, but it might be what I like about you and it may well structure the ways in which we relate to each other and the activities we share. I am just as likely to be directed by your interest in gambling at the casino as by your interest in ballet. Or perhaps I might break a promise to give a colleague some free tickets to the movies which I have won in a raffle, when out of the blue you call me and suggest that we go. Friends may be just as inclined to accept from each other interpretations that highlight their minor vices in some attractive way as ones that present them as fundamentally good. My friend might interpret an incipient tendency toward gambling or promiscuity or doing unflattering imitations of acquaintances as exciting, wild, cool, or hilarious, and this might change both my self-conception and my reasons for action.

Now, in the promise-breaking case, the moral stakes are not high. My colleague might be looking forward to seeing his favorite actor in a new movie but will not likely suffer serious harm or distress at my letting him down. Although I might tell a lie to provide a more palatable cover for my change of plans, the deception here is surely more a misdemeanor than a crime. Still, I do act in a morally wrong or bad way, and the moral stakes are not altogether insignificant. Equally telling in such a case is that my friend's well-being is not

significantly at stake when I am drawn by her interest to act against the available moral reasons. We need not suppose that my friend's welfare importantly hangs on the night out at the movies, or that my deeply felt concern for her sake is what moves me. Similarly, any concern for the other's welfare cannot plausibly explain how we might embrace certain moral vices in a friend, such as their recklessness or cruel wit.<sup>14</sup> Thus, while the plural moral-value view might, as we saw, plausibly embrace the good of friendship in *Death in Brunswick* type cases as a moral good, it will not account for a large part of the good of friendship which we pursue in these more everyday cases where friendship conflicts with morality.

It would be foolish to suggest of those cases where friendship moves us against competing moral reasons that we thereby exhibit a lesser friendship or realize less of the good of friendship. It might not be morally praiseworthy of me to spin a tale to my colleague and break my promise to her so that my friend and I can go off to the movies together. But it is hardly the case that I am not being a good friend here. I might be a perfectly good friend. I might just not be a perfectly moral one. And the nature of the interest I have in her as my friend, and the reasons I have to act as her friend which I do not share with others, such as, for example, my colleague, is more naturally explained by my special receptivity to her direction than by any distinctively moral concern for her welfare.

We think the above sorts of conflict cases, and the explanation we give of them, will have some interesting implications for the contemporary debate over whether the good of friendship can be accommodated by our major moral theories. If we are right, and it is a familiar and common enough feature of true and good friendship that we would be directed to disregard moral claims in acting for or with the friend, it may be a mistake to think that our major moral theories could accommodate friendship. This will be a particular problem for them if one thinks they ought to be able to. But before we address this point, there are some key objections that might be made to our account of how good and true friendships can lead us into moral danger. Let us consider, then, stronger and weaker versions of objections to our claim of conflict between friendship and morality.

#### IV. OBJECTIONS TO THE CONFLICT CLAIM

First, there is a strong line of objection that would reject either or both of our claims that we may be led morally astray by the demands

<sup>14</sup> This point must, of course, be limited by this concern: it is not true and good friendship to encourage your friend into alcoholism or a game of Russian roulette.

of a relationship that is properly called a friendship and that such a relationship is valuable. One common, and seemingly plausible way of putting the strong line against both of our claims is this. Rather than it falling within the scope of good and true friendship for me to, say, tell a lie or break a commitment to another to go to the movies with my friend, such action must surely lead her to wonder how I can be a good friend to her, for now she should think that I might just as well lie to her. And if she cannot trust me not to lie to her, how can we possibly be close friends? Now, lying to and cheating a friend is plainly against friendship. The objection, thus, seems to have some bite against our claims. But the underlying point upon which the objection rests—namely, that someone who behaves badly in their dealings with one person or set of people cannot be trusted to behave well in that respect with others—is clearly false. Heinrich Himmler organized the mass slaughter of Jewish people, but he may well have been a conscientious and loving husband, father, and friend. Certainly, his family and friends did not have to fear that he was plotting *their* deaths. And there is nothing odd in supposing that a rapacious business tycoon may be a very model of generosity toward those dear to him. Indeed, it is quite commonly the case that individuals compartmentalize their behavior in these ways. So, though I might rightly be worried if I noticed that my friend routinely lied to and cheated on her other close friends, it seems that her behavior in lying to her work colleagues or even to her spouse need have no worrying implications for her behavior toward me and her trustworthiness as my close friend. Her behavior in lying for me is surely proof of friendship rather than something that might undermine the friendship. After all, she takes on the moral burden of telling the lie *for me*.

Another version of the claim that a relationship that leads you astray is not after all a true friendship goes like this: a good and true friend is surely not the kind of person who will get into serious trouble as Carl did and call on you in the middle of the night; they would not expect you to break a promise or to cover for them with their partner, and, if they do, they exploit you, which is clearly against good and true friendship. Now, it is undeniable that some requests that might be made under the guise of friendship amount to exploitation. We would do well to be wary of a so-called friend whose chief interest in us seems to be as the provider of an alibi for her philandering. And we may well tire of repeated urgent and disruptive requests to bail out a friend who will not learn from past mistakes. But insofar as this version of the objection is directed against the kinds of examples we have given, it seems to rest on both a misplaced optimism about the circumstances of human life and a misplaced

idealism about human nature. We are fallible in judgment, susceptible to loss of control with respect to our own desires and emotions, and, often enough, without much control of the external circumstances in which we find ourselves. It is thus hard to imagine that there would be anyone left with whom we could be friends if we were so rigid as to rule out from friendship anyone who might make a mistake, get into trouble, and ask for help; for anyone of us might find ourselves in a mess and in need of help, as Carl did. And it is hardly against friendship to turn to our friends at such times, even though the help we require may involve some moral wrongdoing. Nor is it against friendship to respond to such requests. Indeed, to reject my friend just when she is in trouble, whether through her own fault or not, suggests that I am, after all, only a fair-weather friend.<sup>15</sup>

A second, weaker line of objection would be to argue that we have overstated the claim of conflict between friendship and morality by underselling the resources of morality to accommodate the conflict. We have already considered one such line of thought in our discussion of the plural moral-values account of the *Death in Brunswick* case. There we were mostly concerned to make two points. First, while the plural moral-values view might plausibly characterize such cases as presenting conflicts *within* rather than *against* morality, such conflicts still present a serious worry for highly moralized accounts of friendship. Second, even if *Death in Brunswick* type cases are properly conceived as conflicts within morality, there are other, more everyday conflict cases that are not plausibly conceived in this way.

It has been put to us, however, that while there may be these more everyday, less serious, conflict cases, the *Death in Brunswick* type cases not only do not present a case of conflict against morality, they do not even present a case of conflict within morality; for even from an impartial moral view, one has, like Dave, good reason to help Carl move the body. After all, Carl is an innocent man, and helping him in these circumstances is necessary to avoid the great injustice of an innocent man being wrongly convicted of murder.

<sup>15</sup> It is true that it is reasonable to expect that close friends would not *readily* place each other in situations where the other must dirty her hands by, for example, lying or breaking a commitment for him. But the fact that we expect that our close friends will not readily put us in conflict situations does not suggest that, once in those situations, the weight of moral reasons necessarily overrides our interest in our friends. For we might also reasonably expect that, were the situation reversed, our close friends would favor our interest against competing moral concerns. It is just that as the close friend of another we do not want her to be placed in such a conflict situation.

While it may be true that anyone has reasons arising from considerations of justice to help Carl in these circumstances, it is not true that this is Dave's reason. Dave is not concerned about justice; he is concerned about his friend. Moreover, it is clearly appropriate that Carl's being Dave's close friend has special reason-giving force for Dave, and it is plausible to think it admirable that Dave is so moved. So, while Dave's action might also gain support from impartial morality, this does not suggest that he does not have good reason to help simply on account of his friendship with Carl. It remains true that his being Carl's good friend does give him compelling reason to act against other moral considerations involved in the case.

To see this, we can redescribe the *Death in Brunswick* case so that Carl's distress at the prospect of police involvement, and Dave's reason to act on that distress, does not involve any appeal to the avoidance of some greater moral wrong, such as the conviction of an innocent for murder. On one such redescription, Carl does not fear that the police will think him guilty of Mustapha's murder, but he is currently involved in some unrelated, less serious wrongdoing which the police would certainly uncover if they were to look closely into his life at this point, and which, if uncovered, would cause him significant distress and reduce his already messy life to shambles. In this case, then, Dave's concern to help his friend and avoid a heavy police involvement in Carl's life by lying to Mustapha's family, disposing of the body, and helping to cover up Carl's minor wrongdoing—say, the stash of marijuana Carl has at home—is not adequately supported by moral considerations available to any conscientious moral agent. Nevertheless, it might be thought that Dave has, on account of his close friendship with Carl, good and sufficient reason to act against these moral considerations and help Carl.

In redescribing the *Death in Brunswick* case, however, so that Dave acts without the support of the impartial moral concern for justice and against some other important moral considerations in helping Carl, we need not suppose that the need to conceal some further wrongdoing plays any motivating role. Carl might simply have a pathological fear of the police—perhaps as a child he witnessed the secret police of his homeland murder his parents—and so, for this reason, panics at the thought of their involvement in his life. Knowing this and knowing Carl's fragile mental state, Dave sees he has good reason to help Carl avoid heavy police involvement in his life at this point, and so helps him move the body. Perhaps he even sends Carl home and moves the body without involving Carl. Here, Dave's reason of friendship seems reason enough for *him* to act against the moral considerations involved in the case, though this would clearly

not be sufficient reason for just any morally conscientious agent. While avoiding significant distress for Carl might be a relevant consideration for any moral agent, there is also the greater distress of Mustapha's family to be taken into account, and this distress is significantly increased by Dave's actions in concealing Mustapha's death. The impartial morally conscientious agent would have a much weightier reason to report the death and ease the distress of Mustapha's family than to conceal it for Carl's sake. So, while cases like the *Death in Brunswick* case might involve a cooperating reason to favor the friend from impartial moral concerns, this does not at all suggest that the reason-giving force attached to the friendship in these cases is not central to the conflict of values presented by these cases.<sup>16</sup>

#### V. THE COMPATIBILITY OF FRIENDSHIP AND MORALITY

In recent times, there has been a particularly lively debate on the issue of whether our major moral theories, specifically Kantianism and consequentialism, alienate us from our close personal attachments. The central target of this kind of attack has been the picture these moral theories give us of a moral agent who, in some psychologically significant sense, is moved, guided, or governed to act toward those to whom she is personally attached by the criterion of rightness put forward by these moral theories. Many writers now take the view that friendship is a basic human good which, for most of us, is central to the living of a worthwhile life. But if this is correct, and if there is some essential conflict between being a true and good friend and being a good moral agent, then morality has only a limited claim upon us. For most of us, it would not be reasonable to be governed by the criterion of rightness of a particular morality, where to do so would involve sacrificing our pursuit of close personal attachments. As Peter Railton<sup>17</sup> puts it, "we must recognize that loving relationships, friendships...are among the most important contributors to whatever it is that makes life worthwhile; any moral theory

<sup>16</sup> It might be thought that the reason-giving force attached to friendship is especially morally loaded so that, though impartial morality cannot favor helping the friend in these cases, helping the friend will nonetheless turn out, on a plural moral view, to be the correct thing for *Dave* to do. But it is conceivable that, even after allowing for some special moral duties and permissions attached to friendship, the weight of the moral reasons will still not favor moving the body. So, even on a pluralist view, and even from his own point of view, Dave might well act against the moral reasons in moving the body; he does what he, on balance, believes he ought not (morally speaking). And the same may be true of the case where we lie to conceal a friend's infidelity.

<sup>17</sup> "Alienation, Consequentialism, and the Demands of Morality," in Samuel Scheffler, ed., *Consequentialism and its Critics* (New York: Oxford, 1988), pp. 93-133.

deserving serious consideration must itself give them serious consideration.... If we were to find that adopting a particular kind of morality led to irreconcilable conflict with central types of human well-being...then this surely would give us good reason to doubt its claims" (*ibid.*, pp. 98-99).

We have put forward two main sorts of cases of conflict between friendship and morality. Both, we think, are very familiar kinds of cases and quite widely and ordinarily thought to present an agent who acts from reasons of friendship, and who, though in doing so, does not act as a perfect moral agent, nevertheless acts well within the scope of true and good friendship. In the first, *Death in Brunswick* type case, the friend acts against very significant moral claims, from concern for the well-being of his friend. In the second, more ordinary or everyday kind of case, we indulge in minor moral vices with a friend, or break a commitment to another for him, without paying much attention to the competing moral claims.

Now, if we are right, and these sorts of conflict cases present common and ordinary examples of the kinds of reasons we have on account of friendship, and if in these cases the agents involved are correctly understood as acting within the scope of true and good friendship, then being governed by a commitment to morality which would direct one to uphold the sorts of moral considerations that are violated in these conflict cases does directly conflict with our pursuit of true and good friendship. Moreover, our account shows how this conflict arises due to the very nature of friendship itself. It has often been claimed, of course, that friendship is incompatible with our major moral theories, that is, Kantianism and consequentialism. This debate has largely targeted the particular moral interests these theories would have us uphold—that is, duty and the maximization of the good—and sought to show how *these* interests are incompatible with friendship, while remaining silent on the nature of the allegedly conflicting good of friendship at stake. So it is possible that some of those who have claimed an incompatibility between friendship and consequentialism might nonetheless hold, say, the highly moralized view of the good of friendship. Our claims of incompatibility do arise from a view on the nature and value of friendship that is at stake in cases of conflict with morality, and this shows why the potential for such conflict is more pervasive than moral theorists have recognized. This has at least two implications for the current debate over the accommodation of friendship by our major moral theories.

First, there is a problem for the project of showing how our major moral theories might govern the morally good agent and still accommodate her pursuit of the good of friendship, namely, that on ac-



count of some common and ordinary features of the nature of our interest in and commitment to our friends, it is not clear that morality could accommodate it. For although friendship has some important constitutive features—such as affection and the altruistic concern for another's good—that might be perfectly compatible with morality or even positively morally admirable, the features on which we have focused—that is, the special receptivity of friends to each other's direction and interpretation—do not sit so well within a moral framework. This might perhaps not be true of, or so clearly a worry for, the consequentialist project to show how a commitment to maximizing agent-neutral value is compatible with commitment to a friend; for whether it is or not will depend upon the relative weights consequentialism assigns the competing considerations in our conflict cases. If, for instance, the empirical facts are somehow determined to be such that the agent-neutral good will be better served by retaining the general practices of friendship depicted in our examples, then the consequentialist criterion of rightness would license our pursuit of such friendships.<sup>18</sup> But this is not clear, since, of course, it is utterly unclear what the answer to such an empirical question might be. Indeed, it is utterly unclear how one would even set about trying to determine the answer. What is clear, however, is that commitment to some other familiar moral criteria, most notably the Kantian commitment to moral duty, could not accommodate the friendships depicted in our cases. Standard Kantian accounts are not going to license lying and breaking commitments, let alone moving bodies for our friends.

No doubt it will hardly be news to the traditional Kantian that our close friendships may lead us into conflict with morality. After all, the fact that our inclinations may lead us astray has long been a central reason for the Kantian concern that we have our attachments, emotions, and affections firmly under the governance of a commitment to morality. On the Kantian view, since an interest in one's friends, like compassion or sympathy, does not, in itself, involve the concern to act rightly, it is an interest without moral content and so delivers right action merely accidentally. And so, the Kantian insists, the good moral agent will have her disposition to act as a friend governed, at

<sup>18</sup> For an argument designed to show that, even if this empirical claim were true and the consequentialist criterion of rightness would then license the pursuit of friendship, there remains good reason to believe that being governed by the consequentialist criterion is nonetheless incompatible with being a good and true friend, see Cocking and Justin Oakley, "Indirect Consequentialism, Friendship and the Problem of Alienation," *Ethics*, cv1, 1 (October 1995): 86-111.

least indirectly, by her commitment to morality. A Kantian objector, then, might accept our first claim, namely, that a relationship that leads us morally astray may nevertheless count as a friendship, but argue that such a relationship is not valuable. On this line of objection, one might think of friendship, not as an intrinsic or instrumental good, but as a conditional or extrinsic good. One might accept that relationships of friendship make their own demands upon us and, indeed, even that some such demands might lead us morally astray. One would claim, however, that friendship is a conditional or extrinsic good because it counts as a good only where it is realized in a nonmorally corrupting way. When it is realized in a morally corrupting way, it simply is not a good at all.<sup>19</sup> Let us now, then, focus on the second of our claims; that a relationship that leads us morally astray may not only properly count as a friendship but also may be valuable in its own right.

We think it will be a problem for the Kantian—or any other theorist with a moral criterion of rightness that would claim for morality an overriding governing role in our deliberations about how we ought to act—that this criterion conflicts with friendship in the sorts of ways we have presented. For if, like Railton, advocates of this view of the sovereign status of moral reasons in deliberation and action wish to endorse the widely held view that accommodating friendship does provide a criterion of the acceptability of adopting a particular morality, then they must think it reasonable that we pursue our friendships only within the framework or scope of the governing morality we adopt. And it is not at all clear that this *is* reasonable.

It is true that we expect our friendships to operate, at least for the most part and in normal circumstances, within the framework of our other serious commitments. Many of us have the commitments of busy working lives, family, and our other interests and pursuits. Nevertheless, we still manage to maintain perfectly good friendships. So the having of serious commitments that provide a framework within which we pursue our friendships cannot of itself be the source of serious conflict between friendship and other goods, such as morality. And most of us would endorse the view that, if a friend's interest would lead us to violate a moral prohibition where the moral stake is very high, then whatever loss might be incurred for the friendship, the moral prohibition must be respected. Although we do not ordinarily go through the process of arriving at an all-things-considered judgment before acting for or with our friend, most of us

<sup>19</sup> We thank Michael Smith for suggesting this point.

will do so in more extreme cases. In almost all cases, the balance of reasons will favor, for instance, not committing murder for a friend, and this is clearly not an unreasonable restriction on our enjoyment of friendship.

Now, if the pursuit of friendship within the moral framework meant that conflict occurred only where we were directed by the other in such base or extraordinary ways, then it would be reasonable to accept that we pursue our friendships only within our adopted morality. The problem presented by our cases, however, is that there is also conflict between being governed by certain moral commitments and pursuing friendship in both admirable and perfectly ordinary ways. The pursuit of the friends' well-being in *Death in Brunswick* type cases is, fortunately, not our common experience, but it is one we commonly think admirable. Our pursuit of friendship in the other sorts of cases we have given of being drawn by their interests and interpretations might not be so admirable, but it does seem quite common. To be restricted by morality from acting out of friendship in all these sorts of cases might well close off the possibility of our enjoying good and true friendships to a very significant extent. Imagine a friend who would not only not commit any serious moral wrong for you, but who would never place your interests, as such, above her commitment to morality in these other sorts of circumstances. She will help you move house but she would never, even in dire circumstances, help you move a body. This may not matter so much to the friendship, given the degree of unlikelihood of your finding yourself in that kind of situation; but suppose, more tellingly, you come to realize that her commitment to conducting her friendships within the framework provided by her guiding moral theory is such that she would never indulge or enjoy your minor vices, and she would never cover for you or break a commitment for you unless the weight of the moral considerations was on the side of doing so. Her disposition to be directed and interpreted by you is thus, to that extent, subordinate to and filtered through moral considerations. Although she may well display particularized and partial care and concern for you and a preference for your company, it is hard to think of such a person as your close and intimate friend. For, given the pervasiveness of minor but nonetheless not altogether insignificant conflicts between the reasons arising from friendship and those arising from moral considerations, the moral framework within which she pursues the relationship imposes a kind of rigidity on her response to you which is inconsistent with the nature of such friendships. There is simply less good, qua friendship, to be had in a relationship like this. While we might be happy enough to have some of our friendly relations

restricted in this way, it would be a serious loss, indeed, if they all were. Given the clear disvalue to friendship of conducting our friendships entirely within the moral framework, it may well not be reasonable to accept that whenever there is a conflict between friendship and morality, the moral considerations must be overriding.<sup>20</sup>

#### VI. CONCLUSION

Our main points have been these. First, various highly moralized and currently quite common philosophical accounts of the nature of the good of friendship seem false, not only as accounts of the good of friendship itself, but even as accounts of what moral good might be central to friendship. Our friends are not normally or constitutively moral exemplars who thus inspire us to moral growth and improvement. Second, while a focus on the pursuit of the other's well-being from a particularized deeply felt care and concern might plausibly be thought of as both constitutive of close friendship and a central moral good of friendship, we shall miss much of the good of friendship, and of what we think we have reason to do on account of friendship, if we focus exclusively on our pursuit of the well-being of the other. Third, we have tried to show how the mutual drawing account of the nature of friendship helpfully explains much of the good one is commonly thought to have reason to pursue in friendship, and we have given some defense of the use of our analysis here. Finally, we have suggested some worrisome implications for the debate over the compatibility between friendship and morality of our consideration of the two central types of conflict cases between friendship and morality. And here we have claimed that the good of friendship does not sit well within the moral framework (or, at least, with some familiar versions of this) by showing that the nature of our commitment to, and interest in, our friends is inherently likely to lead us into moral danger.

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<sup>20</sup> The overridingness of morality has been called into question before, notably by Susan Wolf. For Wolf, an overriding commitment to morality interferes with our attainment of various other goods and life pursuits at which it is *prima facie* reasonable for us to aim—"Moral Saints," this JOURNAL, LXXIX, 8 (August 1982): 419-39.