

**CONFLICT IN FRIENDSHIP: HOW MAY CONFLICTS  
CONTRIBUTE TO A FLOURISHING FRIENDSHIP?**

By  
Boldizsár Borzák

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Department of Philosophy

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Supervisor: Cathy Mason

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## Abstract

This thesis explores the generative potential of conflict within friendships, proposing that conflicts can deepen trust and increase the resilience of the relationship. I propose that short-term ruptures can lead to long-term resilience and flourishing. Conflicts, rather than merely threatening a friendship, can be opportunities to build trust. To clarify the nature of conflict in friendships, the paper introduces a distinction between "peripheral conflicts" – those involving trivial or non-foundational disagreements – and "central conflicts" – disagreements that are concerned with core aspects of our identity, values, and the foundation of the relationship itself. Peripheral conflicts contribute to the formation of habitual interactional patterns and interpersonal tolerance, while central conflicts, if resolved well, allow for meaningful self-disclosure and the reaffirmation of mutual trust. The paper draws on established theories of trust and friendship. In the paper I distinguish my approach from that of Sullivan and Niker (forthcoming), whose account focuses on ruptures that arise from misguided attempts to act for a friend's well-being. I discuss how both our papers engage with the largely overlooked question of conflict in friendships. I conclude that our accounts are complementary, but the framework I provided accommodates a broader scale of cases. I conclude that while conflict is not necessary for friendship to flourish, it may contribute to its resilience and strength.

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## Introduction

Muscle fibers experience small tears at the microscopic level when one performs strength training, like weightlifting. This damage triggers an inflammatory response, activating satellite cells, which are muscle stem cells that help repair and grow muscle tissue. Pruning (cutting back a plant) makes it grow stronger through biological processes that encourage new growth, improved structure, and increased nutrient efficiency. Blacksmiths use metal strengthening to make stronger swords and tools. Via hammering, bending, and twisting, they rearrange the metal's structure, making it tougher and more resilient against ruptures. It seems that it is like many structures that short-term damage to them leads to or contributes to long-term benefits and gains. In fact, for them to exist in a particular way, these damages or ruptures might even be necessary.

I will argue that friendships (and more generally, intimate relationships) are on this list. A damage or rupture to a friendship occurs, for example, when a serious conflict arises between the two friends. A conflict may threaten the foundations of friendship. Realizing that we are different about something that is important to us can make us question the rightness of the choice to befriend each other. This doubt is the damage to the structure. When we resolve a conflict, I claim, the (structure of the) friendship becomes more flexible and more resilient. Knowing that despite possible differences and even challenges we remained friends strengthens the bond that we have because it increases trust in each other and the relationship, and we reaffirm ourselves in the validity of our choice to befriend each other.

This is not to say that things of the same kind – equally good friendships – cannot exist without such a history. It is possible to make a sword without blending and twisting, but it will be qualitatively different from swords that are not made using this technique. A friendship that becomes and is without any difference or conflict is perfectly possible (however seldom). But,

I will argue, that there is something to friendships that have gone through storms and ruptures that make them distinguished from those that did not. Specifically, I am claiming that what is gained by these ruptures is – contra intuitively – trust.

## Trust

The common thread in the influential literature on trust that I have reviewed (Baier 1986, Hawley 2014, Jones 1996) is that it requires an acceptance of vulnerability towards the entrusted. Trust stretches beyond the conceptual framework of mere reliance. It assumes the good intentions of others (Baier 1986, Jones 1996), and nurtures normative expectations (Hawley 2014); it involves expectations about how others should act, not just how they will act. As Baier puts it: "Trust (...) is accepted vulnerability to another's possible but not expected ill will (or lack of goodwill) toward one." (1986, p. 235) A minimal definition of trust that connects the three papers I have referred to above is, then, that trust implies a sense of vulnerability and an assumption of the other's goodwill.

It would seem that trust is the glue that holds together a cooperation based on a mutual assumption of goodwill of the other: it is difficult to conceive a genuine and well-functioning friendship without trust between the two parties. As it will become apparent in the literature review on the nature of friendship, most accounts explicitly (Carreras 2012) or implicitly refer to the reciprocal shaping of one another. Some (Cocking & Kennett 1998) go as far as defining friendship as a distinct attitude of openness to direction and interpretation. One may or may not see this as a definitive feature of friendship. Whether one conceives friendship primarily in terms of mutual shaping or otherwise, it is plausible that openness to be influenced and guided by our friends is a good thing. A precondition for this openness is trust – the assumption of the goodwill of the person that has such a significant influence on us, and the vulnerability that comes with it.

That is, trust is good in a friendship and we should aim for it. Trust, in turn, is based on the assumption that it will not be exploited by the other. On the other hand, it implies vulnerability. Thus, trust is deeply interrelated with mutual shaping.

There are two aspects of the relationship between trust and conflicts that I want to consider here.

First, the assumption of goodwill of the other may facilitate a successful settlement of differences. In this regard, the existence of trust in some cases makes it more likely that conflicts are either avoided altogether or contained. On the other hand, trust may encourage the parties to be willing to express themselves, which is a prerequisite of conflict. As Jones (1996, p. 16) argues, trust is something that is cultivated through practice.<sup>2</sup> Conflicts may challenge one's belief of the other's goodwill, and thus put trust to a test. A successful resolution of a conflict can reaffirm to the parties that difference does not obscure mutual goodwill.

Second, conflicts expose vulnerabilities. By implication, since trust entails vulnerability, in a conflict between friends one may be inclined to revoke trust from another in order to avoid future exposure. In other words; by making vulnerability apparent, conflicts can threaten the foundations of trust. Overcoming a conflict by common effort can show the parties that despite their vulnerability they are safe with the other person, that is, it will not be exploited. Furthermore, it can furnish us with a sense that we are not so fragile after all. As Baier (1986) pointed out, sustaining trust requires forgiveness for (some) failings (1986, p. 238) and the will and ability to overcome disappointments (1986, p. 239).

I have given a minimal definition of trust and discussed its relation to friendship and conflict which I consider most relevant for my thesis. I am now proceeding to give an overview of the philosophy of friendship.

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<sup>2</sup> Her (Jones 1996) approach to trust is via its emotional dimensions and she claims that it is an affective attitude. While I disagree with her view that trust as such is something that cannot be willed, I adopt the reduced claim that trust is something that arises through practice.

## The concept of friendship

Literature on friendship has a tendency to avoid a razor-sharp definition of the term. Most texts that engage with it tend to give a description of certain attitudes and behaviors that are characteristic of a good friendship. There is pretty much a consensus that mutual well-wishing and care for each other, affection, desire for time spent together and shared experiences are features that appear to be necessary for a genuine friendship (Biss 2011, Carreras 2012, Cocking & Kennett 1998, Cooper 1977, Sherman 1987, Sullivan & Niker, forthcoming, Yao 2020). For the purposes of this paper, I will adopt this list of necessary conditions. It is indeed difficult to imagine a genuine friendship between two persons where one or both of them lack a caring attitude towards the other, or has no desire to spend time together. Because of the plausibility of these characteristics, I will assume that these are given when I discuss friendship<sup>3</sup>.

Interestingly, trust is not on this list of commonly mentioned necessary conditions. I think there are good reasons to add it, however. Trust is the glue that holds a friendship together and that increases its resilience to challenges. Trust implies multiple things in a friendship. In the first place, the belief that the other person possesses the 'items' on the above-outlined list. If I did not trust my friends, I could not firmly believe that they had my best interest in mind, that they wished me good, and that they wanted to spend time with me for who I am. Furthermore, trust is an assumption or attitude based on which cooperation in good faith between two persons is

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<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, I will assume that the power dynamic in friendships is balanced. This seems to be an implicit assumption on all – except, perhaps Yao's (2020) – accounts I discuss. For example, Aristotle's (2019) notion of virtuous friendships or Cocking and Kennett's (1998) conditions of a mutual openness to direction and interpretation imply equality between friends. The reason why this assumption is necessary particularly in my case is because power imbalances influence the process and outcome of conflicts. Discussing variants of conflict depending on the particular power dynamic is outside of the scope of this paper.

possible.<sup>4</sup> Trust also presumes that there is some common understanding – knowledge – of each other.

There are multiple paths to building trust between two persons. My thesis is that conflicts in friendships can contribute to trust building. This is a limited claim. I am not stating that every instance of conflict strengthens trust, nor do I argue that trust cannot (should not) be built in other ways too.

I am using the term 'friendship' as one that includes romantic relationships as well. My reason for that is the difficulty of analytically separating the two. It seems to me that the way I describe the essence of a genuine romantic relationship (mutual well-wishing and care for each other, affection, desire for time spent together, and shared experiences) does not differ from how I would define a true friendship. Consider that some friendships are more passionate and emotionally charged than certain romantic relationships. Even the condition of a shared sexual life fails to separate the two categories since there are people who are asexual, and still are in a romantic relationship. Therefore I assume that the category of genuine romantic relationships is a special subset of friendships.

As I see it, when it comes to friendships, there are two primary, interconnected questions that we should posit: what is a friendship (what is its nature), and what is it for (what is its value)? These two inquiries are interrelated. A good account of the nature of friendship will not be entirely neutral about its value. It illuminates why friendship is worth pursuing and an important part of our lives (see also Cocking & Kennett 1998, p. 502). Thus, an adequate theory about the

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<sup>4</sup> Of course cooperation occurs just in every case that two persons interact and act together. But this means cooperation occurs even between two people who are trying to play each other. The limits of this paper do not allow for me to engage with an elaborate description of cooperation in good faith; let us take the intuitive claim for granted that trust is necessary for it.

nature of friendship explains something about the value of it as well. This is true for philosophical texts that do not state this connection explicitly.

In the following few paragraphs, I will introduce some – from ancient to contemporary – theories of friendship that attempt to describe its fundamentals and the essence of its dynamic. My purpose is to provide a general idea of what connects and what distinguishes these conceptual frameworks. In this paper, I am relying on what is common in their description in order to have a minimal concept of friendship that I can engage with. I want to point out that – as I will show in later sections of this paper – these accounts lack an emphasis on a common feature of friendships. Nevertheless, I aim to show that the account I am developing is compatible with all.

## The nature of friendship

The first well-known, and ever-since influential philosophical account of friendship was presented by Aristotle in Book VIII of the *Nicomachean Ethics* (2019). Regardless of their position vis-à-vis him, it is common practice for the authors of the literature on friendship to refer back to his ideas.

In the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle distinguishes between three kinds of friendship, based on what each is founded on. 'Friendship of utility' is a type of relationship in which people are friends because they find each other useful; each person gets something particular out of the relationship (like 'friendship' between political allies). In the case of 'friendship of pleasure', people are friends because they enjoy each other's company, e.g. they find each other pleasant or entertaining (as would be the case with me and my regular chess partner). These friendships tend to be temporary because they last only as long as the utility or the pleasure does. Friendship of the Good (virtuous friendship) is the highest and truest form of friendship. It is based on mutual respect and admiration for each other's character and virtue. A virtuous friendship by necessity incorporates into itself the goods of friendship of utility (because having a virtuous friend is profitable) and pleasure (because having a virtuous friend is pleasurable).

Aristotle thought that true friendship – as opposed to friendships that are only based on profits or pleasure – is the privilege of people who are virtuous. For him, friendship is possible only between good people, because only friendships that are rooted in a virtuous character are durable enough to last. His reasoning is that virtues are by nature and definition persistent, therefore virtuous persons are by necessity consistent in their character, tastes, morals, and preferences in general. Only friendships that are built around the mutual recognition of each other's virtues are resilient to external pressures and changes. Furthermore, only good people

want the good for the other person for that person's sake (instead of that desire for their good being instrumental in something).

According to Aristotle, the virtuous (therefore, flourishing) person enjoys their own company because they are good – consequently, they are complete and self-sufficient. Why does, then, a virtuous person need friends in the first place? If friendship were merely a remedy for deficiencies, then a flourishing person wouldn't need it. On the other hand, on this account, friendship is only possible between the virtuous. In order to solve his own puzzle, here Aristotle connects the purpose of friendship with its nature.<sup>5</sup> He claims that friendship is intrinsically part of flourishing, rather than a mere consequence of it. Cooper (1977) reconstructs the Aristotelian thought so that it is such that

(1) For a good person, life itself is a good and pleasant thing; it is always pleasant to be aware of oneself as possessing good things; therefore, the good person's awareness of himself as being alive is very pleasant and highly desirable to him.

(2) A man's friend is to him a "second self," so that whatever is good for him as belonging to himself will also be good for him when possessed by his friend.

(3) Since the good man's life and his awareness of it are pleasant and desirable to him, he will find the life of his "second self" and his awareness of it also pleasant and desirable.

(4) But he cannot satisfy this desire to be aware of his friend's existence except by living in company with him, so he will need his friend (...). (Cooper 1977, p. 293)

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<sup>5</sup> as articulated by me above

In other words, "features of friendship come from features found in the virtuous person's relation to himself" (Carreras 2012, p. 319). The enjoyment of the self (self-love) of the good person is the paradigm case for the love that they have toward their friend. For Aristotle<sup>6</sup>, friendship also is a means to self-knowledge – which in turn plays both an instrumental and an intrinsic role in flourishing. Social life and its highest form, true friendship plays a significant role in self-knowledge, because the friend – a second self – is a mirror through which we gain a better understanding of our virtues. Friendship therefore has an important role in self-knowledge for Aristotle. Two persons befriend each other and do so based on their similarity in their excellence in character and virtuousness. In the Aristotelian logic, the brave would have no reason to befriend a coward. Virtues are something that defines a flourishing life, but also one's relation to the good. Someone for whom bravery is an important virtue (an expression of the good) will find no joy in the company of someone for whom it is not, since for the brave, a coward is not virtuous, therefore not good, therefore not enjoyable. But if two friends are necessarily similar, it follows that what is true about my friend will be true about me. If my friend is brave and I am brave, and my friend acts bravely in a particular situation, it is reasonable to believe that in that situation I will act bravely as well. Thus, if I observe my friends' lives, I learn not only about them but also myself. It is in this framework that Aristotle conceives a friend as a second self, which mirrors me and my virtuous character. What I am highlighting here is the emphasis on similarity in character as a foundation of friendship in Aristotle's work on it.

Building on this account, yet contesting Aristotle's conceptualization of the friend as a mirror, Biss suggests that the friend "constitutes another self not as a mirror image but rather as a partner in moral perception" (Biss 2011, p. 125). In Biss's view, the Aristotelian second self

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<sup>6</sup> Friendship is an important means to self-knowledge for Aristotelians in general, like Biss (2011) and Carreras (2012).

should be interpreted not as a passive mirror, but rather another self that one shares a perception of external and internal objects. Biss's account focuses on explaining specifically how friendship is an important source of self-knowledge and knowledge of the world.

Friendship as Reciprocal Shaping is yet another neo-Aristotelian view, constructed by Carreras (2012), who argues that flourishing should be understood as a dynamic notion, and it can be captured in terms of activity. Carreras' interpretation understands friendship as changing over time by necessity, as the two friends mutually shape each other (Carreras 2012, p. 328). Friendship is the common being, a consensus of two selves that evolves as both selves interact with one another. This account proposes that

[W]e should think of the mirror as *reflecting that very consensus*, rather than thinking of the mirror as reflecting the image of one's self that preexists co-deliberation and shaping. In this way, both the conception of the friend as a mirror and the conception of the friend as a partner become integral to understanding how friendship facilitates self-knowledge. (Carreras 2012, p. 330. italics added)

The Reciprocal Shaping account essentially claims that the friend is a mirror that reflects not a pure image of oneself, but rather the *shared being*, an 'us' instead of an 'I': "A loves B because B is the actualization of A. The argument implies that there is a "shared being between friends" (Carreras 2012, p. 325). In other words; if A is actualized in B, then the happiness of B is among the causes for the happiness of A. This '*shared being*' that Carreras (2012) is discussing belongs – though not made explicit by him – to the '*union view*' of love.<sup>7</sup> The common feature of the position of authors who argue for a *union view* (Fisher 1990, Scruton 1986, Sherman 1987, Solomon 2010) is that the distinction of interests and desires of separate selves blur; the '*we*'

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<sup>7</sup> Love is understood as an emotion – or by some, a relationship – that may apply not exclusively to romantic relationships.

ascends and often gains priority over the 'I' and 'you'. As we have seen, the absence of a clear distinction between the selves is already present in Aristotle's philosophy of friendship, though he does not make an explicit reference to a union in the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

As yet another neo-Aristotelian, Nancy Sherman puts it:

[F]riends realize *shared ends* which are constitutive of the friendship and which *do not pre-exist* it. Thus specific common interests develop which are a product rather than pre-condition of the relation, so, together, my friend and I develop a love for Georgian houses having had no real interest in them earlier. (Sherman 1987, p. 599-600. italics added)

When A and B are friends A shapes B, and B shapes A. Their changed characters will further shape each other, which yields a shared being that evolves as long as the relationship stands. The concept of the emergence of a '*shared being*' is important for my thesis. A shared being, the '*us*' comes to be as the two selves interact with each other.<sup>8</sup> Any change on behalf of either of the selves affects this shared being. Aristotle and Biss do not put emphasis<sup>9</sup> on this angle – they focus on conceiving friends along the lines of similarity, like a mirror or a partner in perception.

While the Reciprocal Shaping account rejects the Aristotelian claim that the mirror reflects a pure self, it is compatible with Biss' idea of friendship. Altogether, I think that it is an improvement to the previous ones, for two reasons. First, it accounts not only for how the Aristotelian friendship facilitates self-knowledge but also explains the relationship between the love of the self and the love of the friend (and thus also implies a *union view*). Second, and –

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<sup>8</sup> On one interpretation, it is the very interaction between the two selves.

<sup>9</sup> Though it is compatible with their (Aristotle 2019, Biss 2011) views.

for the purposes of this paper – more importantly, it portrays friendship as an interactive and dynamic thing. It allows for changes in the self and the relationship. It is implausible to have a concept of friendship that lacks the element of mutual influence, such that it continuously changes the parties involved. Biss' interpretation of Aristotle is useful because it explains how a virtuous friend can contribute to one's development for the better.

Carreras is an improvement vis-à-vis Biss because it accommodates the fact that influence between friends is mutual and continuous, such that their being is integrated into the other person through that influence. Furthermore, it constructs the *shared being* – the entity that emerges from a *union* – as a dynamic thing. I will return to this concept of a shared being later on when I discuss conflict. In any case, all theories that I have introduced so far emphasize some commonality in the traits of the characters of friends. When Aristotle conceives friendship as two similarly virtuous individuals that share a perception or mutually shape each other, they ignore the possibility of significant differences in the selves being in a friendship.

However, it is implausible that only people who are remarkably similar can be true friends. To demonstrate this, one needs to think only of well-known cinema: Silent Bob and Jay from 'Clerks', Anakin Skywalker and Obi-Wan Kenobi from 'Star Wars', Legolas and Gimli from 'Lord of the Rings' or Harry Potter and Hermione. One would not question (at least not on the basis of their different character), that these people had genuine friendships. It is a classic trope that differences may play an important role in a friend's shared life as their similarities might.

Therefore I see no good reason to claim that similarity in itself is an important mark of friendship. One might object that there is an observable tendency for us to pick people as friends who are like ourselves. This is certainly true. Research suggests that people tendentiously befriend people who are similar to them in aspects like education, occupation, class, religion,

age, gender, and race – see, for example; Ertug, Brennecke, Kovács & Zou (2022) and – most notably – McPherson, Smith-Lovin & Cook (2001).<sup>10</sup>

To such an objection I reply that it is a matter of emphasis, whether we discuss similarity or difference. The similarity in certain aspects does not rule out difference in others, and it is a matter of one's choice of methodology, which properties<sup>11</sup> do we consider as bases of similarity. Sticking to my last example of one of the most famous friendships in literature; Harry's and Hermione's. They are in the same year at the same house at the wizard school, they are both morally good, both courageous and so forth, similar in many respects. Nevertheless, they are also very different; Hermione is diligent, Harry not so much, Harry is one of the most famous wizards to ever live, Hermione is the daughter of two dentists, Harry has little respect for rules, and Hermione tries to stick to them. In any case, even if similarity in certain regards is a strong predictor of friendships, it certainly is not necessary on the one hand, and not the only feature that we should pay attention to on the other.

What I am pointing out here is that because of the complex nature of our characters, it is likely that we are going to be both different and similar to our friends, depending on which aspect of ourselves and the friendship we are considering. Importantly, differences can define the dynamic of friends at least as much as similarities do. Cocking and Kennett (1998) concur. Their paper shares a number of common features with the Reciprocal Shaping account. They agree that "the self my friend sees is, at least in part, a product of the friendship" (Cocking &

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<sup>10</sup> Even according to these papers, however, similarity is *not a prerequisite for friendship*. In fact, the closest friendships constitute somewhat of an *exception* from the general tendencies: "In spite of the fact that we see strong educational, occupational, and class homophily in strong ties like marriage and confiding relations, there is some indication that such similarity is perhaps *more important in the less intimate ties* of one's network." (McPherson, Smith-Lovin & Cook, 2001 p. 427. italics added)

<sup>11</sup> I would like to draw attention to the fact that these papers focus on social properties, like class and gender, rather than personal ones like 'being extroverted'

Kennett 1998, p. 505). However, contra Aristotelians, they believe that similarity or difference is not among the necessary – or defining – conditions of friendship:

[F]riendship would not be marked by the recognition of further or greater resemblance of one to another (any more than it would be by the recognition of further or greater contrasts between one another), but rather by the emergence and acceptance of a degree of direction and interpretation of each by the other. (...) If there is anything at all in the idea of how a friend's objective presentation of character increases self-awareness and by so doing further develops one's character, it can't crucially depend on the presentation of similarity, for clearly an objective contrast can be as illuminating to one's picture of oneself as an objective likeness. (Cocking & Kennett 1998, p. 508 & p. 512)<sup>12</sup>

They construct a thesis that states that the distinguishing feature of friendship is a particular degree of receptiveness to be directed and interpreted by the other. Their account differs from the Reciprocal Sharing in four important regards. First, as shown, they do not require the parties to be similar in their tastes, preferences ideas et cetera. Second, having a virtuous character is not necessary for someone to have friends. Third, by implication, on their account, the change that occurs as a result of mutual influence may not always be a positive one (Cocking and Kennett 1998, p. 514). Fourth, they seem to believe that the process and the attitudes that influence and shape it are more important than the result itself. Rather than making the emergence of a shared character the distinctive feature of friendships, they argue that it is the cause of that emergence, the receptivity for direction and interpretation is what characterizes friendships.

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<sup>12</sup> They do not deny that similarity makes it more likely that two persons become friends. The quoted text argues that similarity is not necessary for a conceptual analysis of friendship.

The novelty introduced by Cocking and Kennett (1998) is the argument that the similarity or sameness of character is not necessarily amongst the most important features of friendship. Similarities and differences are important constituents as long as they play a role in the direction and interpretation of one another – what matters is what plays a role in us shaping each other, but that thing does not need to be something that is common to us. From Aristotle to Sherman, to different degrees, but all accounts allow for some difference. For me, the relevant difference between the accounts is the weight they put on the question of similarity and the nature of influence. Aristotelians have no consideration of the possible negative effects of a true friendship, primarily, because for them being good is a prerequisite to being a true friend. A good person however is not very likely to have an influence other than what is good. This is, however not always the case. Furthermore, introducing an emphasis on difference is important for my purposes since it is a prerequisite of conflict; the reason why I consider the question of similarity and difference relevant is their role in the emergence of conflicts and ruptures.

I have given a review of some of the influential philosophical literature on friendship. In the following chapter I will discuss my position on the role of similarities and differences in friendships.

## The question of similarity

I have noted already that two persons do not need to be remarkably similar in order to have a friendship. Very different people become friends with each other quite often – as I have shown a few paragraphs earlier. Someone might object to this, claiming that if we were to observe parties in a friendship, we would always find some common ground – common values, interests, passions et cetera. Therefore similarity is necessary, while difference is not. How else could the friendship get off the ground in the first place? To this objection, I have a two-folded reply.

First, to say that two persons need at least some common ground in order to have any kind of relationship is a tautology: of course, we are only able to engage with one another if we share the same language, a minimal understanding of what certain concepts mean and some basic interpretation of the world around. Mutual ground does not pick friendship out of other categories of human relationships. Second, if we were to observe any two persons from reasonably similar backgrounds (for example, cultural sphere, type of place of living, and such) we could have a long list of what is common to them. Within the walls of the university, most people are going to be – by and large – sharing values, interests, and passions with me. Yet, it will not mean that they are all possible candidates to be friends, in fact, most of them are not. Again, I am not denying that some similarity is necessary. Friends have a desire for – among other things – shared time and experience, and it is reasonable to assume that friends will often spend time together doing things that they are both interested in. Some similarity is, then a prerequisite for friendship, while difference is not. Even if we could construct a theoretical case of two persons (in a friendship or otherwise) being exactly the same, in reality, two persons are likely to exhibit a large number of differences.

The philosophical accounts of friendship that I have presented allow that there may be differences<sup>13</sup> between two friends. However, their discussions nevertheless seek to understand the nature of friendship through different aspects of similarity – e.g.: being alike in virtuousness for Aristotle and Aristotelians. Altogether, differences between two friends are possible by all accounts. Importantly with regards to the central claim of this paper, the impact of these differences on the dynamic and nature of friendships can be significant enough for us to pay attention to them. I could always show how particular differences yield a specific dynamic between two persons. In fact, I am making an argument about how differences may contribute to a friendship. But I do not, by any means, claim that these differences are necessary, only that they might have particular consequences that we should consider.

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<sup>13</sup> Cocking and Kennett explicitly mention (1998, p. 512) the possibility of difference, while in other cases it is only compatible with the framework.

## Consequence of difference

What do I mean when I am speaking of possible consequences of difference between two persons? Conflict between two persons can vary. It might be about things that are very important, as well as things that are less so. I am using conflict as a broad term here: conflict describes every instance of expressed incompatibility or opposition between the desires, beliefs, interests, et cetera of two persons, such that these oppositions present themselves as a zero-sum game to the parties. This is regardless of the manner in which they are expressed or the overall significance of the object of the conflict. For example, you and I may have a different belief about a current event in the world, or we might have a different preference between Chinese and Indian food et cetera. To share a life – to interpret the past and present, to plan the future together, to think and perceive together, to decide together, to act together with one another necessitates interaction between the selves. Throughout action and interaction, the two selves express their beliefs, desires, preferences, and so on.<sup>14</sup> For example, two persons may have different beliefs or desires when determining common action.

If we accept the idea that two selves will most likely be different at some points, it follows that in cases where those differences are relevant, conflicts might<sup>15</sup> emerge. Similarly to two parallel vectors that never cross each other, two persons who believe the same and want the same will not collide. In other words; difference is a necessary but not sufficient condition of conflict between two persons. What makes these differences conflicts is whether they manifest (become relevant) in a particular case. There are reasons why these differences might not manifest in the form of a conflict. Suppose you and I are going out, and we have to decide where to eat (suppose

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<sup>14</sup> The nature of the interaction of two persons will likely be defined by the traits, habits, beliefs et cetera of the parties involved. The interaction of two extroverted persons will be different than that of an extroverted and an introverted one, different between organized and chaotic, liberal and conservative, and so forth.

<sup>15</sup> The emergence of a conflict depends on a wide scale of variables, such as the (changing) perception of the participants on the object of the conflict, the psychological state of the participants at a given time, the overall dynamic of their relationship and so forth. Considering all these conditions is well beyond the scope of this paper; I aim to provide only necessary and sufficient conditions.

that we can only go to one place). Presume that I prefer Chinese food and you prefer Indian, thus we are different in our desires. If we went out to have dinner together, and we found a restaurant that offers both<sup>16</sup> we would not have a conflict. Alternatively, it might be the case that you are a compromising person, or your preference for Indian food is not as strong as mine for Chinese. It seems that this is a case where we have different desires, yet no conflict emerges. One of us not acting on our preferences will yield the same result. One person may, for example, have a tendency to please people, or they might be shy. In such a case, since their preferences are not articulated, the difference does not yield a conflict.

Thus, conflict emerges only when some (beliefs, desires, interests et cetera) are different, and parties are willing and able to express that.<sup>17</sup> The different desires of two friends will not cause conflict if, for example, they have an opportunity to satisfy both desires or if one of them is fine with giving it up. What is, then, the distinction between this case and one where we have a conflict about where to eat? The fact that 1) it is perceived as a zero-sum issue (there seems to be no way to satisfy both desires), 2) both preferences are expressed,<sup>18</sup> and 3) that neither parties intend to give their claim up. Applied to the previous example: despite the difference, there would be no conflict if 1) we could find a place that offers both options or 2) you did not let me know in some way that you wanted something else than I did or 3) you decided that despite your preference you would not mind eating Chinese after all. Conflict thus only emerges if all these conditions are met.

Here you might object that things like beliefs are not zero-sum issues. I may believe what I believe and you what you do. This can be true. But there are good reasons why they might yield

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<sup>16</sup> Though, in my experience, it is good to have some suspicion of such places.

<sup>17</sup> For this reason, conflict is tied to self-expression. Two persons exhibit different characteristics, like one of them has green eyes and the other having brown is a difference that is manifested, but it is not about the expression of the self, since having green or brown eyes is not something that we do: acting in a certain way, having emotions, desires, beliefs is.

<sup>18</sup> Expression need not be limited to verbal ones.

conflict. Beliefs are representations of the world (see for example: Crane 2013, 2017). Holding a belief about something entails that I hold certain propositions to be true or false. Therefore beliefs are concerned with truth.<sup>19</sup> Thus, if we hold different beliefs, it is reasonable to assume that at least one of us is to some extent wrong. Should we assume that to be the case, conditions 1), 2), and 3) could be satisfied? In this case, as in other cases too, whether conflict emerges depends on a very broad range of variables – whether the two persons in general are confrontative or not, how important the desires, beliefs, preferences et cetera are to them, how fragile do they perceive their relationship to be and so on. Giving a complete analysis of the question is worth a discussion of its own, and it certainly exceeds the scope of this paper. My aim is only to provide a list of necessary and sufficient conditions for conflict.

For the purposes of this paper, this limited definition<sup>20</sup> should be sufficient, since I am not concerned with the psychological motives behind conflict. I have given a working definition: 0) difference, 1) the perception that the object of difference is a zero-sum issue, 2) mutual expression of difference, and 3) neither side willing to give up their claim. In the next section, I proceed to categorize conflicts. Furthermore, I will not discuss cases where difference stands but conflict is latent or not manifest, nor will I consider what implications my thesis has for those cases. I am only discussing cases where the difference between two parties culminates into an explicit conflict, of which both parties are conscious.

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<sup>19</sup> Note that beliefs are necessary for intentional action. Sharing a life with someone means among other things acting together, and is the beliefs that we hold play an important role in that.

<sup>20</sup> Conditions of conflict: conflict iff difference & desire and ability to express it.

## Conflict in friendships

Conflict in friendship is different from conflict in other types of relationships. Given that all the accounts (Aristotle 2019, Biss 2011, Carreras 2012, Cocking & Kennett 1998, Cooper 1977, Sherman 1987) of friendship that I have presented share the claim that friends have a special effect<sup>21</sup> on our character – or, self – it is reasonable to assume that a conflict with them will be different. What is specific about conflicts in friendships is the implications they have for the relationship.

It might be the case that the thing that we are having a conflict about is important to both of us or only one of us. Earlier<sup>22</sup> I have introduced the concept of a *shared being* that emerges when two people are friends. I have emphasized that this shared being changes whenever either or both of the sides change. This applies to the very character of the selves as much as their thoughts, emotions, and so forth. Because of this, to have a serious conflict between two persons in a friendship it is sufficient that only one of them feels that the difference that grounds the conflict is important. Since the shared being is constituted in some manner by me and you, one of us being in a particular way implies that this shared being is in that particular way: my happiness becomes our happiness, my troubles become our troubles. What makes a conflict between friends distinguished is that this shared being is impacted by it. As described before – by Carreras (2012, p. 330), for example – the shared being between friends reflects a *consensus* between the selves. In case of a conflict, elements of this very consensus are questioned.

In other types of relationships – that of acquaintances, for example – the outcome of the conflict carries a lesser (or at least, different) significance. For example, my chess partner's strange view on gender relations, though unacceptable to me, is not as alarming to me as if my friend had the

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<sup>21</sup> The difference between the accounts lay in what that effect exactly entail; flourishing, (self-)knowledge or a change in our character.

<sup>22</sup> See: *union view* in the chapter 'The nature of friendship'.

same view. If it is a given that in my<sup>23</sup> choice of friends rests on a vaguely shared Worldview, if it turned out that my close friend had a significantly different view on the (ethical, political etc.) implications of gender than I do, it would be essential that we find some kind of resolution. This is not necessary with my chess partner, because what connects us – playing chess together – does not have to do with our views on society, and therefore a resolution to the conflict is not necessary.<sup>24</sup> I may have a conflict with the same content with my chess partner and my friend, but only in one of the cases does this conflict have further implications.

Again, I need not agree about everything that is important to me with everyone. That requirement would make an active life in a society near impossible. Furthermore, I am not even claiming that I need to agree about every important thing with my friend. But in the case of relationships that are not friendships, the resolution of the disagreement (conflict) is not necessary – or at least, less important – because of the nature of the relationship. In a friendship, a conflict about something important implies that something that I do not agree with affects myself and my life. Therefore these conflicts, if unresolved, can be a threat to the existence of friendship. This is true for non-friendships too, but I argue that in those cases it is often possible and satisfactory to overlook and pretend to forget those differences. I am more than happy to pretend that my chess partner's mentioned view on genders does not exist. I am only playing chess with them, after all. My chess partner's views on gender are not likely to affect me (unlike their knowledge of chess). Doing the same in a genuine friendship would make me uncomfortable, at the very least.

This difference in attitude is because of the special role a friendship has in my life. This special status comes from me and you having a shared life. Sharing a life with someone has both

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<sup>23</sup> This is not necessary for every friendship: it is only problematic that my friend has a different view on x if in my choice to befriend people x plays an important role.

<sup>24</sup> This is true to a personally varying, and generally reasonable degree, of course; I am not suggesting that playing chess with raging misogynists is something we should do.

practical and more abstract implications. Sharing a life means doing things together, like eating together or pursuing hobbies together as much as having shared emotions and thoughts. Conflict impacts this shared life in a unique way; conflict with a friend has different implications for my life than conflict with a colleague does because I do not share my life with my colleague the way I do it with a friend. With a friend, I share my life in a distinct way as outlined by Cocking and Kennett (1998).

I am arguing that for these reasons, conflicts about things that we hold valuable in friendships reach beyond their immediate scope and content. They are about the friendship itself. Because of this, both the conflicts themselves and their resolutions may produce distinct goods in friendships.

## Kinds of conflicts

I think it is wise to categorize conflicts in friendships into two kinds: the ones that are about things that have to do with the specific dynamic or essence of the friendship, and the ones that do not. For example, if in our friendship intellectual excellence plays a significant role, the fact that I believe in a conspiracy theory (which is an intellectual shortcoming) will yield a conflict that has to do with the very dynamic that the friendship is founded on/built around. In a different case, where my friendship with you is built around creativity, my belief in a conspiracy theory will likely have a more moderate effect on the relationship. Of course, these categories are not absolute; they rather mark the two ends of a scale.

You may now object that this contradicts my claim against the Aristotelians in that it seems that similarity is evidently very important for friendships. However, the claim that differences about things that both selves hold important may result in conflict is a limited claim. Some people may be conflict-avoidant and are happy to acknowledge differences with their friends without thinking that they hold significance with regard to their relationship, even if it is about something that is important to them. This of course is often not the case. Yet, even if the difference stands and it results in a serious conflict, it does not necessarily result in the end of the friendship. Quite on the contrary – and this is the central claim of this paper – it often contributes to the friendship in a distinct way.

In the framework that I have created around conflict in friendships, I think it is wise to distinguish conflicts of two kinds. The separation is based on the importance of the thing about which the conflict is. Importance in a friendship is therefore not an objective term. You might think that what one's position is about gender inequality is, is an extremely important question. I suppose you are right. But it is conceivable that there are friendships where this is a secondary

issue. Therefore, when I discuss importance, I refer to importance as conceived by the two persons with regard to their friendship.

The first kind is conflict about things that are not particularly significant for the friendship. You and I may have a disagreement (conflict) about whether Harry Potter or the Lord of the Rings are better books. It may even be a heated one. But – unless our love for fantasy books is a foundation, or important aspect of our friendship – this is not a conflict that has to do with the reasons why we are friends. The second kind is conflict about things that we consider significant for the friendship. If being environmentally conscious is an important thing for me in choosing my friends, and it turns out that you have a huge car (say, you just bought it), we are likely to have a conflict. This conflict is more serious than it would be if we disagreed about Harry Potter, because for 'us' it is not an important thing.

I will label the first kind of conflict as a '*peripheral conflict*' and the second kind as a '*central conflict*'. Both kinds of conflicts may yield goods.

## Peripheral conflicts and the goods they produce

Peripheral conflicts are not a direct threat to the friendship, because they are not about the very foundations of it. Nevertheless, they may contribute to the friendship. It is indeed sometimes difficult to share a life with people. Constant cooperation can be exhausting. In a way, it is so much easier to be alone, since the only thing I need to consider is my own preferences, emotional states, beliefs, and so on. If we pay special attention to someone, it is only natural that sometimes we disagree about things like what to do, how to do it, or what is true, and what that truth implies. These disagreements need not be very important for a conflict to arise – in these cases the conflict is peripheral. Resolving peripheral conflicts probably requires a smaller effort, since the stakes are lower. However, it is also more likely that we will have more of this kind, since it is unlikely that there are many things that we consider very important (hence their special status as 'important') on one hand, and be different about it.

Because of their frequency and what they are about, peripheral typically<sup>25</sup> conflicts have to do with our habits; things that we do regularly, and are able to do without paying special attention to their execution. Going through and resolving peripheral conflicts in a friendship contributes to a habitual nature of sharing a life. Through time, the friends learn to resolve peripheral conflicts without investing special effort, because they have learned tolerance of the other, for example. This is the good that peripheral conflicts yield in a friendship.

The friendship that has had these peripheral conflicts is different in nature from friendships that did not. In terms of my habit of sharing a life, my friendship with a friend with whom I experienced many of these differences is likely to be much more effortless than it is with a new friend. That is because, with this new friend, we still have to make it a habit that we have to resolve the different preferences and beliefs about some minor issues. I feel more relaxed

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<sup>25</sup> But not exclusively

around someone with whom this already is a habit because I know that dealing with a peripheral conflict will not require as much attention and effort as it would with someone else. The result is a distinct relaxedness, comparable to the one that an animal that has been around a human for an extended period of time (not sure about this one).

You may ask, what about an easy-going person for whom this relaxed and tolerant attitude is a given? What do their friendships gain from these peripheral conflicts – do these conflicts produce the same good as in other cases? First, they are much less likely to experience them. I am not claiming that peripheral conflicts are necessary to achieve the goods I have discussed. For some relationships, they are a given in a way that are not for others. My claim is only that these conflicts exist for a reason (as outlined in the chapter on the emergence of conflicts) and that if they exist, they may produce goods that strengthen the friendship.

## Central conflicts and the goods they produce

I have given an account of what I have called 'peripheral conflicts'. In comparison, 'central conflicts' are fundamentally different in nature. Peripheral conflicts are conflicts over issues that do not essentially define the relationship. Central conflicts occur when the difference that is expressed by both parties in the friendship is about something that is considered to have significant relevance by either one of them.<sup>26</sup> I have already explained that central conflicts are a threat to the friendship itself because they are about something foundational. There are two goods that central conflicts may yield; the disclosure and expression of the self, and an increased trust in each other and the friendship – an increased trust in the resilience of the '*shared being*', if you like. I am beginning with the former.

## The expression of the self in conflict

I have stated that a prerequisite for conflicts to emerge is the expression of preferences, interests, beliefs, desires et cetera by both parties. The good that conflict yields is, then, the very same thing that makes it possible: an expression of something that we are, something we want, something we believe. What adds weight to self-expression in conflict is that conflicts are a zero-sum game; in a conflict, I am either right or I am not right, and my desire either gets satisfied or it does not.<sup>27</sup> If, however, this is the case, and thus the stakes are higher, it may become all the more important that my position – my beliefs, desires, interests et cetera – is represented accurately.

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<sup>26</sup> Relevance for one person is sufficient, because of the emergence of the '*shared being*' that I have described before. Naturally, if an issue is not particularly important for someone, they are more likely to give in to the other's expectations about it. I am, however, not concerned about this, since I am only laying down necessary and sufficient conditions for central conflicts to emerge.

<sup>27</sup> I acknowledge that the nature of beliefs and desires is that they are complex, therefore they cannot be expressed by a single proposition in their totality (see: Crane 2017, Crane & Farkas 2022). This is why when, for example, a conflict is settled, often both parties acknowledge that there is some truth to the other. But even if a belief is expressed by a range of propositions, individually those propositions will have a truth value.

An immediate, and perhaps natural objection could be thrown in here; is self-expression a good that is produced by conflict? Is it not a precondition to it? This is a reasonable objection. To this I respond by arguing that conflicts are a processes, not static things. Though the precondition of conflicts to emerge is self-expression, but conflict itself – once ongoing – generates self-expression too.

Another objection could be made against my choice to categorize self-expression as a good produced specifically by central conflicts. Is it not the case that my 'self', my preferences, beliefs, and so on are expressed also in cases that are not conceived as significant by me? If this is the case, then the expression of the self is a good that peripheral conflicts could yield too. This is true. However, when one conceives themselves as a self, things that are considered more important or valuable play an incomparably greater role. Nota bene, our sense of self is defined by things that we believe are important.<sup>28</sup>

This does not mean that insignificant things do not. My preference for a Jaguar instead of a BMW is part of my conception of self. However, I have very little interest in cars in general. If I told someone that I prefer a Jaguar to a BMW, though I did indeed express my preference – therefore I disclosed a part of myself – I probably would not feel like I have expressed an important part of my authentic self, because this preference does not define me.<sup>29</sup> Expressing my preference between Hellenic and early modern philosophy is a different case because I am a student of philosophy. Expressing something about my preference regarding the latter two says something substantial about me. This is not the case in the former two. While strictly

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<sup>28</sup> This claim is flexible; what we consider important is to an extent context-sensitive.

<sup>29</sup> I.e. since the objects of this preference do not bear importance to me, the preference is very much a peripheral feature of me as a person. I would be essentially the same person if my preference in this regard was the other way around.

speaking it is true that a part of the self is expressed even in peripheral conflicts, for the reason I have just given I do not think that those cases yield the goods I am discussing.

There are two, related reasons why the disclosure of who we are is good in a friendship.

First, expressing oneself provides knowledge to the other person about me.<sup>30</sup> It grants me the belief that the person to whom I have expressed myself has a better understanding of me than they did before.<sup>31</sup> This is important because we want to be loved and wanted for who we are, not for the image that others have of us. It goes the other way around as well; we want to love our friends for their true selves. Expressing ourselves benefits our friend too because they will be closer to an understanding of us. An accurate impression of each other in a friendship is essential for a genuine relationship. Being loved and loving others for who they are fosters authentic connection, and overcomes alienation and shame (Yao 2020)<sup>32</sup> and forms the basis of intimacy. This kind of love is attentive, gracious, and truth-seeking. True friendship is about understanding – seeing who our friends are and responding to them truthfully and respectfully. Friendship requires us to see our friends, "understanding who they truly are, what they are like, what motivates them, and so on" (Croce & Jope 2024, p. 381). Thus, the expression of self is an important way for others to acquire knowledge about who we are, which – as Croce and Jope (2024) and Yao (2020) pointed out – facilitates genuine friendship.

Second, the assumption that I am being understood is something that facilitates trust. This is because my reasons trust that the other person will act in a way that benefits me if I have the

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<sup>30</sup> Of course, there are cases where I express myself but it is not heard, or it is misunderstood. Therefore I am not claiming that every instance of self-expression will invariably yield the goods I am discussing. When I am making these claims, I refer to the function and purpose of self-expression. In this sense, this is a limitation to my claims.

<sup>31</sup> The disclosure of self does not necessarily have to do with deeply personal questions like childhood memories; for example a strongly held view on a moral question can have a status akin to them (for example, see: Dover 2022).

<sup>32</sup> Yao's account takes this claim to an extreme, making her paper somewhat controversial. Nevertheless, the core claim – that to truly love someone requires understanding and acceptance of who they are – remains plausible.

assumption that they have the relevant knowledge of me. Furthermore, it is plausible that there is a strong connection between the authenticity of love that I receive and the vitality of reasons I have to trust someone. If I knew that I was accepted for who I am, I have good reason to assume that I can be vulnerable towards that person.

In the chapter where I have introduced the concept of trust, I have argued that it is an attitude that is required for a good friendship. Friends have a distinctive impact on one another, making them vulnerable vis-à-vis each other. Trust is constituted by the very recognition and acceptance of that vulnerability (Baier 1986, Hawley 2014, Jones 1996). Without allowing oneself to be vulnerable – trusting the other person – it is unlikely that one could achieve the kind of openness that is characteristic of friends. Trusting the other person requires the assumption that they have goodwill towards us and that their actions are guided by that goodwill. It is true that I do not necessarily need to assume that the other person knows anything about me in order to assume that they act out of goodwill. Suppose that I have a strong allergy to cow milk. I can assume that my friend would not order a coffee that he knew would be bad for me. But I can assume this even if I knew that they did not know about my allergy.

The fact that they know about my allergy gives me additional reasons to trust them because I can count not only on their goodwill but also on how they are able to act on it in a way that benefits me. Every action is based on some belief, and so it is necessary that for the action to fulfill its purpose, the belief that it originates from is true.<sup>33</sup> Therefore my trust in the other person includes the assumption that the belief (of me) that grounds their action is true – otherwise the likelihood of a preferable outcome is reduced. Hence, having true beliefs about

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<sup>33</sup> Aristotle (2019) discusses this connection in the *Nicomachean Ethics* Book VI. Anscombe (1999, 2012) builds on the Aristotelian definition of practical truth to discuss the concept of adequate action.

each other in a friendship is important for reasons other than the trust that is gained through the parties assuming that they have it.

The disclosure of self furnishes the other party with the ability to act in accordance with the prerequisite of friendship: in my interests. In other words; believing that the other person has not only the goodwill but also the adequate knowledge of me to act on that goodwill gives me reasons to trust you. For example, imagine that we are sitting in a café, and you order for me. I prefer coffee with oat milk instead of cow milk, and you are my friend (that is, you wish me good). You have to know that I prefer oat milk in order to perform the right action (getting me what I prefer). In cases where these preferences are really weighty (for example, if I had a strong allergy to cow milk) the need to have true beliefs is even more important.

You may now object that conflicts are not the only case where the self is expressed. I am perfectly able to, in fact, often do, express myself in scenarios that are not an expression of difference to someone else. This is true. I am not arguing that disclosure of the self does not produce these goods in cases where conflict is not manifested. I am claiming that – contrary to intuition – conflicts in a friendship can be useful because they fall into the range of cases where the self is disclosed, which, in this framework, I regard as a valuable thing. I want to remind you that I am not claiming that self-expression is not good it emerges only in conflicts – quite the contrary. My claim is merely that conflicts may produce this good.

The third reason why the disclosure of the self is valuable is because of what it implies to the status of the friendship. The nature of the content that we share with each other indicates<sup>34</sup> the nature of the relationship that we have. For example, it is not fitting for me to share details of my sexual life or my deeply held beliefs about an ethical question with a bystander at the bus

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<sup>34</sup> So much so, that an entire view of friendship – the 'secrets view' – is built around this notion. Cocking and Kennett (1998) give us reasons why to reject the claim that this distinguishes friendship from other relationships.

stop. If I share such information about myself, I do so because I assume that the person with whom I share it wants to hear it, I can trust them to treat it with discretion, and am equipped to give an adequate response to it. The fact that I believe that the person that I discuss such issues with is the right one indicates<sup>35</sup> that I regard them as someone close to me. What I have claimed regarding the first reason to hold self-expression valuable stands in this case as well. Self-disclosure in conflict is only a subset of all the cases where the self is expressed and therefore a particular status of the relationship is indicated. Yet again, what makes self-expression in conflicts unique in this sense is the height of the stakes. The belief that I can confront someone about something important that I think or feel differently about implies not only what is implied by any case of disclosure of self, but more: that I consider our relationship as one where such confrontations are possible.

For example, social norms prescribe that we do not engage in a heated argument with the officer in the bank, even if they express, say, a political opinion that we do not agree with. If we engaged with them, we indicated that our roles as customers and employees of the bank changed to two 'private' persons discussing personal questions. This third good yielded by self-expression is a weaker one compared to the first two.

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<sup>35</sup> The norms of interaction generally prescribe a certain degree of confidentiality depending on the status of the relationship one has with their conversational partner.

## Resolution and resilience

Another way conflicts can contribute to the strengthening of trust – and, by implication, the resilience of friendship – is by putting it to the test. This contribution is made more so in conflicts that can be characterized as central conflicts.

Central conflict exposes the vulnerability of the participants and puts the nature of the intentions of the other into question. I have described central conflicts as conflicts about things that are significant for one or both of the friends. Central conflicts are about things that constitute the foundation of friendships – i.e. that has to do with the reasons why two people are friends. A conflict about something foundational exposes our vulnerability to our friend. As I have shown, conflict presupposes opposition to what I believe, desire, prefer et cetera. In a friendship, this opposition comes from someone who assumes to be accepting of who I am. This acceptance is put into question by opposing something that is valuable and important to me. Thus, central conflicts reveal my vulnerability to my friend, vis-à-vis whom I am open to be interpreted and directed.<sup>36</sup> It would seem, then, that central conflicts are, if anything damaging the relationship instead of improving it. In itself, this claim would be true, if it was not for another condition.

One may recall that in the introduction of this paper, I have compared ruptures in friendships to exercise, plant cutting, and metal bending. The increased resilience of these structures comes from the process that is the damage and what comes after. A muscle is able to recover after an exercise if sufficient rest and nutrition are provided. A plant may only grow stronger after being cut back if it receives adequate care (like being watered). The twisted metal tool is made more resilient once it is hammered (its structure is recreated). In all cases, increased resilience is conditioned to what happens after the short-term damage to the structure. Such is the case with exposed vulnerability in friendships. In the analog that I used, the short-term damage is conflict,

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<sup>36</sup> On direction and interpretation see: Cocking and Kennett (1998).

which exposes vulnerability. Like in the three cases I have used as examples, in friendship too, for the damage to contribute to greater future resilience, an adequate follow-up is necessary. That follow-up is the resolution of the conflict, which – in the sense I use resolution – requires forgiveness and overcoming disappointments.<sup>37</sup>

Central conflicts increase the resilience of the friendship only if the friends are able to find a resolution that is satisfactory to both of them and are able and willing to nurture their friendship (the shared being) in the future. As Jones (1996, p. 16) observed, trust is something that is cultivated. Plausibly, cultivation involves some reflection. Throughout a central conflict, my trust in the other is put to a test, because my vulnerability is revealed. After a resolved conflict one is reaffirmed in their trust in the other person because the very fact that the conflict is resolved is proof that their vulnerability is not exploited. In other words; it is confirmed that trust is a fitting attitude towards the other.

I dispute Jones' claim (1996, p. 16) that trust cannot be willed. While I agree with her that trust is also a product of a gradual process – cultivation via practice – I am not convinced that conscious decisions can play no role in its formation. Conscious reflection on beliefs, desires, and emotions can influence their content (Crane & Farkas 2022, p. 311). In this regard, it is inaccurate to claim that trust is not something that can be willed. Reviewing and understanding my reasons for trusting another person can facilitate the rise and strengthening of such an attitude. Knowing that should conflicts arise, a successful resolution is possible is certainly a good reason to accept my vulnerability and assume the goodwill of the other. Thus, reasons to trust my friend are expanded after a successful resolution of a central conflict. A friendship that never experienced any resolved central conflicts lacks this kind of assurance – plainly because trust was not put to a test in such a way. It must be repeatedly emphasized that my claims about

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<sup>37</sup> I am introducing these conditions in order to fit Baier's (1986, pp. 238-239) requirements for sustaining trust.

the goods that central conflicts may yield are limited to genuine friendships. Without mutual well-wishing and care for each other, affection, desire for time spent together and shared experiences, a conflict remains a mere confrontation of two persons, without hope of incorporating the goods it produces into the relationship.

This is not to say that the cultivation of trust is not possible without conflicts. Though I find it challenging to imagine an intimate relationship that never goes through a central conflict, it is possible that such friendships exist. People cultivate trust and increase the resilience of their friendships in ways other than through conflicts.

## A paradigm case of productive conflict in popular culture

One of the most famous love stories of all times is that of Mr. Darcy's and Elisabeth Bennett's in Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (2001).<sup>38</sup> Mr. Darcy is a wealthy aristocrat, while Elisabeth is one of the five daughters of a landed gentleman (Mr. Bennett) with a modest income. The dynamic of the two is framed by the class and gender system of early 19<sup>th</sup> century England. Their relationship unfolds throughout the story with multiple occasions of conflicts between the two of them. The conflicts rise from misunderstandings, but are overall the consequence of the incompatibility between the social backgrounds of Elisabeth and Mr. Darcy. Even the misunderstandings around Mr. Wickham are rooted in assumptions that have to do with Darcy's class.

One of the climaxes of the story occurs in chapter XXXIV., when Mr. Darcy suddenly proposes to Elisabeth. Up until that point, their interactions were characterized by the formalities of the higher classes of their time. Mr. Darcy admits that his feelings contradict his reason and better judgment.<sup>39</sup> Elisabeth is deeply offended. The particular manner in which Darcy expresses his feelings sparks a conversation between the two in which these formalities are broken. More importantly, Elisabeth lays charges against Darcy regarding his treatment of Mr. Wickham, and his separation of Elisabeth's sister and Darcy's friend. The conflict between the two of them opens up the exchange of beliefs and desires that have been so far concealed:

*"And this,"* cried Darcy, as he walked with quick steps across the room, *"is your opinion of me!* This is the estimation in which you hold me! I thank you for *explaining it so*

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<sup>38</sup> I have indicated in the introduction of this paper that I consider romantic relationships as a special subset of friendships.

<sup>39</sup> "His sense of her inferiority--of its being a degradation--of the family obstacles which had always opposed to inclination, were dwelt on with a warmth which seemed due to the consequence he was wounding, but was very unlikely to recommend his suit." (Austen 2001, pp. 263-264)

*fully*. My faults, according to this calculation, are heavy indeed! But perhaps," added he, stopping in his walk, and turning towards her, "these offenses *might have been overlooked*, had not your pride been hurt by *my honest confession* of the scruples that had long prevented my forming any serious design. These bitter accusations might have been *suppressed*, had I, with greater policy, *concealed my struggles*, and flattered you into the belief of my being impelled by unqualified, unalloyed inclination; by reason, by reflection, by everything. But disguise of every sort is my abhorrence. Nor am I ashamed of the feelings I related. They were natural and just. Could you expect me to rejoice in the inferiority of your connections? – to congratulate myself on the hope of relations, whose condition in life is so decidedly beneath my own?" (Austen 2001, p. 268. italics added.)

In the following chapter Mr. Darcy writes a letter to Elisabeth in which he explains the circumstances of his actions, letting Elisabeth know about his beliefs regarding the relationship of Elisabeth's sister and his friend. He also lets Elisabeth know about Mr. Wickham's past, which so far has been not known to her.

The confrontation and what follows it is pivotal: it sparks internal changes in both characters. The relationship of Mr. Darcy and Elisabeth is not yet fully developed at the point of their conflict. Mr. Darcy has strong feelings for Elisabeth, while she is conflicted. The clash they have, however leads to a change in their relationship for the rest of the book – it culminates in a second proposal, which Elisabeth accepts.

The clash between Elisabeth and Darcy is a paradigm case of a central conflict. The conflict in chapter XXXIV. revolves around the issues that fundamentally define these characters: their social class, gender and their beliefs concerning ethical norms. The conflict begins with Mr. Darcy's expression of self by declaring his feelings, but evolves into an exchange where much

is revealed by both. Furthermore, the breakdown of previous barriers indicates a change in the status of their relationship from formal to less formal: something more intimate, where both can be vulnerable towards each other. The letter that is written by Mr. Darcy, and their meetings in the rest of the book are all parts of the resolution of the conflict between them. Mr. Darcy, who has been awkward thus far, interacts in a more relaxed manner with Elisabeth in the future. This exchange is what grounds the changes that culminate in their marriage. Thus, this conflict in the story fundamentally defines the development of their relationship; without it, the two may not have ended up being together.

## Objections

In this chapter, I will consider some objections to the account I have presented.

The intuitive way to object to the claim that conflicts are generative is to posit the question: is conflict necessary to achieve any of the goods that are discussed? If it is not so, would it not be better if conflicts between friends did not happen altogether? My answer is, no, conflict is not necessary to achieve these goods. Self-expression is possible without conflicts, and it is conceivable that trust can be cultivated and strengthened even if it is never put to the test. I have not been claiming that a flourishing friendship that is resilient to challenges cannot be built without conflicts.

I do think, however, that these friendships are rare. I have shown that despite our tendencies to befriend people who are similar to us, it is likely that we will exhibit a number of beliefs, desires, preferences and so on that are different from our friends. The possibility of conflict is embedded in these differences, and plausibly, the longer a friendship lasts, the higher the likelihood that at some point a conflict emerges. What I aimed to show in this paper is that even serious conflicts are something that we can approach with a degree of optimism, because are not inherently destructive. In fact, they carry within them the opportunity to understand each other better and give each other reassurances – in the end, an opportunity to increase the resilience of the friendship.

Another objection is to say that frequent conflicts are then producing the goods<sup>40</sup> I have described in a greater quantity, and thus frequent conflicts are desirable. I am willing to bite the bullet on this one. As long as the conditions I have given for conflicts to be productive, and so

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<sup>40</sup> Given that there is resolution to them.

are the conditions<sup>41</sup> that make a friendship genuine are a given, frequent conflicts are desirable. The challenge is of course, whether one is able to maintain their desire for, say, shared time with someone that they have frequent conflicts with. Naturally, there is a point where one feels so burdened by the conflicts that it influences one's friendship with another. There is no absolute line where this point comes, it varies from friendship to friendship. Still, I claim that friends who experience frequent conflicts and nevertheless are able to resolve them and maintain a good friendship experience something qualitatively different than friends who do not.

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<sup>41</sup> Mutual well-wishing and care for each other, affection, desire for time spent together and shared experiences are conditions of friendship that I have assumed in this paper.

## Another account of conflict in friendships

There is one academic paper in the literature on the philosophy of friendship that resembles my position. In this chapter, I will introduce that paper, and show how my account differs from that.

In their paper, Sullivan and Niker (forthcoming) construct a case of ruptures increasing the resilience of friendships. They are exploring what are the consequences of ruptures to trust and how that may contribute to the betterment of the friendship in the long run. Their paper argues that ruptures such as misunderstandings and conflicts are not only inevitable in companion friendships but are also essential for their growth.

They argue that "a rupture to a relationship creates an opportunity for repair such that the relationship becomes healthier – i.e., creates a more stable foundation for trust – than prior to the rupture" (Sullivan & Niker forthcoming, p. 8). This claim is akin to my thesis – that short-term damage to a structure (friendship) will contribute to a long-term gain if certain conditions are met. They claim that "the process of bringing to the surface underlying problematic dynamics within the friendship, addressing ruptures, and engaging in relational repair have important roles to play in growth within trusting relationships" (Sullivan & Niker forthcoming, p. 21). Misunderstandings stem from epistemic errors or lack of attentiveness, while conflicts arise from misaligned expressions of care or timing.

The authors indicate that trusting relationships are vulnerable due to the discretionary power friends exercise when acting for each other's well-being. Drawing on the concept of "relational ecology," they propose that these disruptions, while potentially harmful, can deepen intimacy by prompting the recalibration of trust, boundaries and the interpersonal dynamic. Though such ruptures may temporarily damage trust, the repair process can reinforce and strengthen the friendship. The authors distinguish between "innocent ruptures," which offer minor learning,

and "harbinger ruptures," which signal deeper relational shifts. They argue that avoiding all ruptures may indicate a lack of meaningful engagement, while friendships that endure and grow through these trials develop a more stable and resilient foundation.

The premises that my paper is working with – that ruptures in friendships may contribute to their flourishing – are similar to that of Sullivan's and Niker's. I am sympathetic to their distinction of ruptures that separate different cases of conflicts. Furthermore, I agree with them that vulnerability is a central aspect of close friendships. We depart at important aspects, however.

Sullivan and Niker (forthcoming, p. 6) propose that ruptures in a relationship are of two types: misunderstandings and conflicts. Misunderstandings are "a failure of understanding that leads to an act being unexpectedly detrimental to the friend's well-being" (Sullivan & Niker forthcoming, p. 14). Conflicts are "generated by some kind of attitudinal failure. This occurs when an action is received as unwelcome by a friend, even when it is not based on any misunderstanding about such an act supporting their wellbeing" (Sullivan & Niker forthcoming, p. 16). The first case is an epistemic failure on behalf of both parties, the second case is an attitudinal failure. I am highlighting two regards in which my account of ruptures is different from theirs. Note that I am not referring to Sullivan and Niker's terminology. When it comes to my account, conflict is not restricted to cases of attitudinal failures and it accommodates a broader scale of ruptures.

Sullivan's and Niker's paper discusses misunderstandings and conflicts arising only from acting specifically on the other's well-being. However, conflicts often come to be not as a consequence of explicitly acting for our friends' benefit. Ruptures in friendships can arise in cases other than one acting for another's wellbeing, and these ruptures nevertheless share features with those described by the respective authors. Furthermore, I do not need to assume that the conflict is

because of "underlying problematic dynamics within the relationship" (Sullivan & Niker forthcoming, p. 21). Certainly it can be the case that conflicts expose some underlying dynamic that needs to be changed. Conflicts and ruptures may arise because one or both of the parties involved have some kind of shortcomings, indeed. This rupture can expose the problematic dynamic and may provide an opportunity to reconcile. But ruptures and conflicts may originate in difference alone, where none of the individuals have any shortcomings. It might be the case that a conflict arises because I and my friend have a different opinion on an ongoing political event. Presume that the event is controversial or complex enough so that there is moral and epistemic justification for different positions about it. Different positions on the matter would be sufficient I and my friend have a conflict. The paper by Niker and Sullivan does not cover conflicts that arise not out of problematic dynamics but plain differences.

Niker and Sullivan apply a more narrow scope in their paper. They are interested in cases of ruptures that arise as a consequence of actions for the wellbeing of one another. Their focus is how conflict resolution may contribute to the friendship in conflicts that reveal underlying problematic dynamics. Both limitations seem to be unnecessary. The account I have given is compatible with all cases that are given by Niker and Sullivan but gives a broader insight into the generative nature of conflicts in friendships.

Niker and Sullivan compare 'innocent ruptures' and 'harbinger ruptures' to account for different kinds of damages to friendships. By introducing the dual concepts of 'peripheral' and 'central' conflicts I contribute with an explanation of precisely what dimensions make certain conflicts potentially more dangerous than others.

Niker and Sullivan engage with a issue that has so far been largely overlooked by the philosophy of friendship literature; that of ruptures in friendships. With this paper I intend to join them in expanding on this theme. We both represent a position according to which ruptures and conflicts

in a friendship may contribute to its flourishing in the long-term. I have presented an account that accommodates a broader spectrum of such cases.

## Conclusion

Relying on the works on the philosophy of friendship from Aristotle to contemporary philosophers I have created an account of conflict in friendships that is compatible with all the frameworks that I have reviewed. I have argued that conflict in friendship – with certain conditions – can contribute to its flourishing and resilience. To show this, I have established a connection between friendship, trust and conflict.

I have explored the nature of difference in friendship. Many accounts emphasize similarity. I have argued that while commonality and similarity are intuitive and typical features of a friendship, they are not exclusively what define one. Difference can be relevant when it comes to the particular dynamic of a friendship. In particular, differences are among the challenges that can endanger a friendship. On the other hand, they may contribute to a conscious reaffirmation of our decisions to befriend people, when conflicts occur.

In this paper I suggested that in friendships we should distinguish between two kinds of conflicts; ‘peripheral’ and ‘central’ ones. I have argued that peripheral conflicts are minor, often inconsequential disagreements, and central conflicts interact with something foundational in the relationship. Peripheral conflicts, though minor, nevertheless may play a role: they teach us how to cooperate, how to adapt, and how to live with another person’s idiosyncrasies. They teach us patience and compromise. Central conflicts, on the other hand, may be a real danger to the friendship, because have to do with the foundations of it. I have shown that despite of this danger – given particular conditions – central conflicts can produce goods that contribute to the flourishing of the friendship; self-expression and reasons to trust. By connecting conflicts to resilience and flourishing I intended to show that, contrary to intuition, interpersonal conflicts can deepen trust, increase resilience, and foster intimacy between friends. Drawing on analogies

from strength training, pruning, and metalwork, I have framed conflict as a kind of short-term damage to a structure that can contribute to long-term resilience.

In order to create an adequate account of conflicts, trust and friendships I have engaged with some literature on trust . I have concluded that the cornerstones of trust are vulnerability and the assumption of others' goodwill. I argued that conflict tests that vulnerability. In my view, our friendships may emerge from conflicts strengthened, because successfully managed conflicts can confirm that trust is not naïve or misplaced. It is cultivated and reinforced.

Another finding of this paper is the emergence of self-expression in the context of conflict. In expressing what I believe, what I value, or how I feel – especially in disagreement – I'm also revealing something about who I am. I have argued that genuine friendships require authenticity and loving each other for what they are. Thus revealing our true beliefs, values and emotions equips our friend with the opportunity to understand – and, by implication, love – us better.

By making these claims, I do not intend to romanticize conflicts. There are, of course, disagreements that go unresolved or reveal deep incompatibilities. Some conflicts end friendships. My aim is not making a case that conflict is always good or desirable. Rather, I've tried to show that when conflict arises – and it most likely will, especially in long-standing and intimate friendships – the friends are given opportunities to strengthen the relationship.

I contrasted my account to that of Sullivan's and Niker's, who make a related case for the role of ruptures in friendship. I have shown that their account make some unsupported commitments, while simultaneously narrowing down the scope of their thesis.

As I conclude, I want to emphasize again that I am not advocating for conflict as an ideal. I am not suggesting that we should seek it out, or that all friendships must go through it in order to be meaningful. Nevertheless I do want to push back on the intuition that conflict is always a

problem. In my experience, and in the view I have defended, conflict can be a generative process. I believe that there is something uniquely valuable in a friendship that has survived conflicts. That kind of friendship is not just intimate; it is resilient. And that, to me, is what makes it flourish.

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