
ON THE POSSIBILITY OF FRIENDSHIP BETWEEN TEACHERS AND
STUDENTS: THE PEDAGOGICAL SUSPENSION OF THE AMICAL

Gregory D. Loving
University of Cincinnati and Clermont College

The discussion participants follow Aristotle in deciding that friends are concerned with each other's welfare for their own sake and cannot be reduced to utility or pleasure, adding that the contemporary notion of friends involves the notion of equal overall power. They find three difficulties with teachers and students being friends. First, friendship requires a bias for the friend that is inappropriate to the teacher-student relationship. Second, the classroom requires one-way bureaucratic judgment that mere learning between friends does not, which necessarily involves an imbalance of power. Third, friendships require time and intimacy to form, which is rarely possible in the restricted setting of the educational system. Although teachers and students may rarely become friends in the larger flow of events, the teacher must normally suspend the possibility of friendship within the classroom relationship.

We heard the door fly open and hit the wall. Mark stumbled into the bar swearing, "I don't know why you're friends with him." Gayle had always been skeptical of Mark.

"That's okay," I replied. "He doesn't know why I'm friends with you either."

Mark paused a minute at the bar to talk to the bartender—blonde—and then worked his way through the crowd to our table. "What's the topic of conversation today?" he asked.

"We're discussing Greg's overly generous notion of friendship," Gayle said, half under her breath. Not far enough under.

"Greg and I aren't friends, we're family," Mark said, looking around for the waitress.

"You don't choose your family," said Gayle.

"To tell the truth," I said, "I don't exactly remember *choosing* Mark. I admit it was voluntary, but I wouldn't say it was an act of free will. It sort of just...happened."¹ She couldn't leave it alone.

¹ Ellen Fox, "Paternalism and Friendship," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 23, no. 4 (1993), 582.

“Yes, but you’re stuck with family in a way you’re not stuck with friends. Family is an obligation born of a genetic accident—friendship is at least voluntary in keeping it, if not forming it.”²

“Well, then, what *is* a friend?” Mark was clearly challenging Gayle, not inquiring. I started to answer but was quickly interrupted.

“*You’re* friends with too many people to answer that,” Gayle said. “As the old saying goes, ‘a friend to all is a friend to no-one.’ You think everyone who is friendly is friends.”

“No, I wouldn’t say that at all,” I defended. “To just be friendly with someone actually proves you’re not friends. Friendliness assumes a sort of distance that friends don’t have. You don’t have to be friendly with your friends. In fact, friends are about the only people you can get away with being unfriendly to and they won’t be offended.”

“Yep, Greg’s a true friend—not friendly to me at all,” Mark added, helpfully.

“Aristotle called them ‘other selves.’”³ It wasn’t any of us. We looked around to see Jim Bloughardt, a professor at the university I was attending. Bastard gave me an A- instead of an A once. He continued, much to my disappointment. “Basically meaning that two people care about each other solely for the others’ good,” he continued.

“Other selves,’ I like that,” responded Mark. “Compadres, tied together by destiny. What else did Aristotle say about it?” I tried to kick him under the table.

“I’m sure Professor Bloughardt has better things to do than discuss friendship with us,” I said, smiling, friendly.

“Please, call me Jim,” he said as he pulled up a chair. Damn Mark. Damage done. Mark’s attention drifted as he tried to flag down the waitress. Blonde. “Jim.” God.

“Friendship can happen in any relationship—family, coworkers, even teachers and students—as long as they care for each other solely for the good of the other.”

“I don’t know about the teacher student thing,” I said, the memory of the A- stinging a bit. “You’re not exactly another self to me.”

“We may not be friends,” Jim replied, “but that doesn’t mean that it’s not *possible* for students to be friends with teachers.”

² Sandra Lynch, “Aristotle and Derrida on Friendship,” *Contretemps* 3 (2002), 100.

³ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. D. P. Chase (Toronto: Dover, 1998), 141.

“Depends on what kind of friends, doesn’t it?” Mark offered, sort of half listening. He was still trying to get the waitress’ attention. My drink was empty anyway. And our new friend Jim sure wasn’t jumping in to buy drinks.

“Well, The Philosopher said there were true friends—the kind I just mentioned—then friends of pleasure and friends of use,” Jim responded. He liked to call Aristotle “The Philosopher” like Aquinas did. The Theologian.

“I think we can rule out friends of pleasure right away,” I said.

“I don’t know,” Jim said with too much humor, “some of the comments on Rate My Professors dot com say I’m easy on the eyes.”

“Stockholm Syndrome,” piped in Gayle. “Trust me. Anyway, pleasure and use are the same thing. Pleasure is just a type of use.”

“Oh, right,” chimed in Mark. Apparently he had no luck with the waitress and decided to become an actual part of the conversation for a minute. “If I said to you ‘gee, I’m only with you because you’re useful,’ you’d take it the same way as if I said ‘I’m only with you because it’s pleasurable?’”

“If *you* said it to me, yes, I would take it the same way.”

“The point is, people,” I was trying to stop the slide, “that Aristotle didn’t think either type of friendship was true friendship—you have to care about the other person’s well-being not for any pleasure or benefit you get, but just because.”

“I’m glad someone’s been doing their homework,” Jim said. I ignored it.

“And that’s why I don’t think students and teachers can be friends. I don’t think they really care about each other for their own sake. They might be friendly, but they’re not friends.”

“Come on, I can care about a lot of people for their own sake. You’re being a little cynical saying it’s not even *possible*,” Jim shot back.

“That’s part of the problem I have with Aristotle’s definition. Even he admitted that friendship in the sense we’re trying to get at is very rare.⁴ Teachers are supposed to treat all students the same—no favoritism, right?” I asked. Jerk still hadn’t offered to buy us poor students a drink yet. Some talk about being friends.

“Well, ideally, yes,” Jim replied.

“That’s just it then—our friends are our *favorites* almost by definition. We do treat them differently—with *favoritism*. We put up with a lot more, cut

⁴ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 142.

them slack, give them the benefit of the doubt we don't give anybody else. If your friend does something stupid you don't see it in the same way you do with a stranger. You can't do that with students. I would hope teaching has some standard of objectivity."⁵

"Not *supposed* to doesn't mean it doesn't happen," Gayle commented.

"I see what you mean as an *ideal*, though," Jim responded. "Kant had the very same problem with his overall definition of friendship. He wanted to make friendship a universal feeling toward others but at the same time recognized that universalizing something like friendship almost gutted the term of all its normal meaning."⁶

"Well, hell, those are two different kinds of friends," Mark said. "I can care about a lot of people as friends in a sort of a shallow way. Don't wish them any harm, even try to help them out. Sort of Christiany friends—be a friend to all as an ideal, that sort of thing."⁷ That doesn't mean that we're friends the way Greg and I are."

But the way Mark and I are wouldn't work for this either, but I wasn't going to say it in front of Gayle. Mark and I are the rare type of friends Montaigne spoke about as happening only once in three centuries, so closely were the souls mingled together.⁸ For good or ill, I couldn't deny it and really couldn't figure it out myself. That concept wouldn't work for teachers and students simply because almost no one is friends on that model. So I guess we're left with the Goldilocks type of friends—not too exceptional to happen so rarely, not so many that you don't really know them and care for them enough to go out of your way for them. As I said before—show them favoritism. Without wanting anything in return. We don't do that with just anybody.

"I like to draw on Kant's 'What is Enlightenment' here," Jim brought me back in from thought. "I like to think of myself as an 'enlightening friend' who aids others in coming to their use of reason."

I bet you do, I thought, but then "that only gets back to the universality problem. If you treat *all* students like that, then it's hard to call them friends, isn't it?"

⁵ Troy Jollimore, "Friendship without Partiality?" *Ratio* 13, no. 1 (2000), 76.

⁶ Immanuel Kant, "Friendship," *Lectures on Ethics*, trans. Louis Infield (Gloucester, MA: Harper & Row, 1978), 209.

⁷ The Christian notion, well expressed in the 12th century by Aelrad of Rievaulx ("Spiritual Friendship," *Other Selves: Philosophers on Friendship*, ed. Michael Pakaluk [Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1991], 131-135) was secularized by Kant as a universal ideal seldom reached in reality.

⁸ Montaigne, "Of Friendship," *Other Selves: Philosophers on Friendship*, ed. Michael Pakaluk (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1991), 188, 192.

“We’re not talking about if he can be friends with *all* students, just with some,” Gayle reminded us.

“Greg and I learn stuff from each other all the time. Fact stuff, life stuff,” Mark said as he tried to light a cigarette. The waitress came rocketing over and told him to put it out. Nice bounce. He apologized profusely and asked her if she could show him to the smoking area. He winked at me where she couldn’t see. As he left, “and we’re still friends.”

“I don’t know why...” Gayle said after he walked away.

“Long story,” I replied, not really defending him. (Should I have?) “But we *have* learned a lot from each other.”

“*Because* of each other, not *from* each other,” Gayle countered.

“No, *from* each other too—we each know things the other doesn’t, and we do actually learn from each other. I think we’ve also become better people because of each other, which was Aristotle’s whole point about friendship being a virtue.⁹ He’s taught me a lot of guitar, I’ve taught him a lot of philosophy, there are a lot of things we have learned from each other that we could have learned in school. Maybe even more effectively than school.”

Jim jumped in again, redirecting us to his previous comment. “Kant’s ‘What is Enlightenment’ says that everyone needs to use their own reason, but has to put themselves under control of another temporarily *until they can use* reason on their own.¹⁰ I see that as the teacher’s duty, and Kant also saw that as a teacher’s duty—show others how to use their own reason, regardless of the outcome—so, in essence, for their own sake, because it’s the duty of teaching.”¹¹

“But Mark’s right about you switching the definition of friendship here,” I said, trying to get Jim to listen a bit. “You’re still talking about friends as a generality, not the very specific true friends we’ve been trying to talk about.”

“And besides, friends learning from each other is different from the teacher student thing,” Gayle added. “Mark and Greg can learn things *from each other*, and I can see that that can be very egalitarian, following our common understanding of friendship. But I’ve heard many professors spouting this ‘oh, I’m just a facilitator of learning’ thing. That’s just a load of crap. You’re trying to play yourself off as a friend to students, but you’re not.”

⁹ Talbot Brewer, “Virtues We Can Share: Friendship and Aristotelian Ethical Theory,” *Ethics* 115 (2005), 725.

¹⁰ Immanuel Kant, “What is Enlightenment,” <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/kant-what-is.html>.

¹¹ G. Felicitas Munzel, “Menschenfreundschaft: Friendship and Pedagogy in Kant,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 32, no. 2 (1998-99), 252.

“But that *is* how I see myself—as the enlightening friend,” Jim argued back, still not offering to buy anyone a drink. “I help them learn, provide tools, resources and guidance for learning. I also learn a lot of things *from* students.”

“Learning is different from teaching,” Gayle continued. “Learning doesn’t imply judgment. I can learn all day, and Greg can learn all day from Mark, you can learn from your students, but that doesn’t mean learning is teaching. Learning doesn’t imply any judgment at all. We can all sit around in a great big hippie learning circle and not judge anyone. Equal as the day is long. What *you* do is *judge* students—did they learn well or not. You have power over them that they don’t have over you. It’s built into the system.”

“Judging does not necessarily mean an exercise of power,” Jim leaned back in his chair, looked up at the ceiling and continued. “Anybody teaching someone else has to judge them, or they won’t be helping them get better at whatever it is, either knowledge or a skill. That’s the whole enlightening friend concept. Just because I am superior in one area doesn’t mean I’m superior in all areas. Friends may be equal in power overall, but not necessarily in each area. Judging can take place from a space of equality.”

Gayle pounced. “You’re not just giving feedback helping someone to improve, you’re *grading* them—it’s an institutional setting. Grades follow us everywhere, change our possibilities. Students don’t have that kind of *power over you*, so it’s always unbalanced in a way that makes true equal friendship impossible, even granting that skill in isolated areas will be different.”

“But students *do* have institutional power over me,” Jim responded. “Students fill out course evaluations all the time. Just like I grade them, they grade me. That brings back in the balance element necessary for friendship. Not equal power in all areas, but balance of power overall.”

“Not the same thing,” I said, clinking my empty glass. Damn Mark. Damn my “new friend” the professor. “You judge people *individually*, and it matters *individually*. When we judge you it’s *collective*. Just one of us really can’t have any power over you. It goes back to the individuality of friendship. It’s an *individual* relation; and institutional, bureaucratic judgment matters in individual relations. In *collective* relations it’s not near as much of an issue. We may throw pebbles at you. You drop rocks on our heads.”

“I know professors who have lost jobs over poor student evaluations,” replied Jim. “Now that’s power.”

“But it’s still not an *individual* judgment,” I said. “There was no one person who looked you in the eye and judged you and you lost your job. The collective weight of a lot of judgments is different. Real friendship is individual, not collective. And favoritism is still built into it. I would hope you don’t practice favoritism when grading.” Though I knew he did.

“And frankly if that many students think you suck, you probably do,” added Gayle. “But in the end you have power they don’t and that means you can’t be friends.”

“Maybe in our culture, but in the Confucian ideal, friendship always implied differential power and a sort of mentorship,” Jim countered.¹² “Even in the Aristotelian idea of friendship, he assumed that many friendships would be unequal in power, often including a sort of teaching function.”¹³

“You can get out of whatever you want by changing the definition,” Gayle smirked. “If we’re talking about an egalitarian kind of friendship people assume here and now, then that rules out the Confucian idea.”

“There are about a billion Chinese who might disagree with you there,” Jim commented.

“Remind me again how women fare in the Confucian ideal,” Gayle replied. “I don’t care what their idea of friendship is, our idea today has equality as a key part of it. Equal power overall—not in individual skills or anything, but an overall equality in the sense of one not controlling the other.”¹⁴ I didn’t think she was giving the Confucians a fair shake, but she was shooting Jim down, so I let it go.

“Now *you* are talking in an ideal sense,” responded Jim. “In real friendships—as the Confucians would point out—there is almost always one friend who is primary. One is usually the leader, one the follower. Why can’t the leading friend be a teacher?”

I had to admit that I had always seen Mark as the leading friend. He always took more chances than I did and drug me along on quite a few adventures I wouldn’t have gone on otherwise. He drove. I rode shotgun. I said as much.

Gayle was about to reply when Mark came back over.

“Making new friends, are we?” I asked.

“I’m close, I’m close,” Mark said. Famous last words.

“Could you at least have your new friend bring us over a few drinks?” I was done waiting for the professor to cough up some liquid friendship.

“Could I borrow an auto insurance card?” Mark asked.

¹² Norman Kutcher, “The Fifth Relationship: Dangerous Friendships on the Confucian Context,” *The American Historical Review* 105, no. 5 (2000), 12.

¹³ Brewer, “Virtues We Can Share,” 748.

¹⁴ Lara Denis, “From Friendship to Marriage: Revising Kant,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 63, no. 1 (2001), 5.

“A what?” Gayle just rolled her eyes.

“An auto insurance card. I’ll give it right back. Trust me.”

“When anyone says ‘trust me’ that means *don’t trust them*,” Gayle advised. I gave Mark my auto insurance card with a reminder that it come back with some drinks. Gayle scowled.

“Where were we?” asked Jim when Mark had left. Rhetorical question. “Ah, yes, Gayle had ruled out friendship in teaching on the basis of omnidirectional bureaucratic judgmentality.” I bet he had been sitting there trying to think of that ever since Mark walked up.

“I think Gayle’s got a point on the power thing,” I said. “When you’re in a class the teacher does have power over you, which does make friendship very hard. And I’m not letting go of this favoritism thing. I mean, two people can do something exactly the same, but if one is your friend you judge it differently.”

“Like when Mark does something stupid you think it’s cute?”

“Well, sort of, yeah. You’re involved in it at a level you aren’t with other people. You will either be a bit more harsh or a bit more generous, like if your friend has an idea. You either shoot it down or give it the benefit of the doubt, and you wouldn’t do that with other people. Like putting your kid’s crappy picture on the refrigerator. If anyone else did it, you would call it what it was. I would hope as a teacher you treat each idea the same regardless of who had it, and grade the same idea the same.”

“But the relation between student and teacher is a lot more than just the moment of grading. That’s just a small part of it—one episode in a longer story. To eliminate the possibility of friendship for that seems a bit extreme.”

“But that’s just the point. For Aristotle, friendship is a virtue, right?”

“Why yes, that is correct,” Jim replied. I wasn’t really asking.

“And virtues are something that have to be practiced, built over years and many experiences. In that case, the teacher student thing is just one episode in a longer story that includes a lot more experiences. I mean, friendship requires a lot of time together, life under your belt.¹⁵ We can’t judge a friendship by only looking at one episode. Half the time we can look at an episode between friends and they don’t look very much like friends at all.”

“*Then* you can still call them a friend only if you’re a sucker...” Gayle offered.

¹⁵ Brewer, “Virtues We Can Share,” 743.

“But I do see Greg’s point,” Jim countered. “Everything in the virtues is based on habits of practice that can only be judged at the end of it all. That’s one of the basic problems with the concept of friendship as *use*—you never know if a friend is useful on the whole until the end, and you wouldn’t know that when you started the friendship, so you can’t base a friendship on usefulness that can’t be judged until it’s too late to do anything about it. So the most you could say is that *friendship* is useful for life, but not any *particular friend*.¹⁶ And isn’t that self-defeating?” Jesus. He rambled like this in class, too. Imagine a semester of that.

I tried to bring him back a little. “All I’m saying is that friendship is more than a series of events, it’s greater than the sum of its parts, and you can’t judge a friendship based on any one episode. Teaching can be one of those episodes.”

“But according to that, grading is just one episode in teaching, so why can’t teachers and students be friends in the longer story?” Gayle asked.

“I’d say that teaching can be a moment in the friendship, but maybe in that moment *qua* moment (I threw that in for Jim) friendship is not possible. If the isolated classroom experience is all we have as the relationship, then teachers and students can’t be friends because the grading dynamic takes too much precedence. Professors might not think so, but students sure do. They can care about each other, they can be friendly, they can like each other, but as far as the type of friendship idea where people are roughly equal, know and care about each other, have lived life together, then no. Real friendships have to take more time and types of activity together to form into the real thing.”

Jim started to giggle. “Why, I think I have it,” he said, grinning.

“Have what?” I asked.

“Why, Kierkegaard, my dear boy!”

“What does Kierkegaard have to do with it?” I realized at the time that maybe I shouldn’t have asked, but what the hell.

“The *teleological suspension of the ethical*—the concept that to be truly moral you have to suspend ethics, go against the rules. You see, Kierkegaard...”

“And what does *that* have to do with friendship and teaching?” I wanted to keep him on track. If he started explaining Kierkegaard we’d be here all night with him. Not drinking.

¹⁶ Edmund Henden, “Restrictive Consequentialism and Real Friendship,” *Ratio* 20, no. 2 (2007), 191.

“Well, if the relationship of friendship is a larger story with possibly episodes of teaching within it—meaning that teachers and students can be friends in the larger story but technically not friends within the episode of teaching due to the power differential, which I’m still not sure I agree with—then we have established the concept that friendship has to take sort of a hiatus during the episodes of teaching and resume when that teaching—meaning the structural judgmental dynamic—has ceased.”

“Alright, I’m with you now, so what’s so funny?”

“I believe what we have here...” Jim beamed, waiting just long enough for me to want to strangle him, “is the *pedagogical suspension of the amical!*”

I just stared at him a minute. Gayle rolled her eyes again. She hated this sort of cutesy philosophy vocabulary stuff. I was about to try to poke a hole in this precious new idea, but... “Actually, I kind of like that,” I was forced to admit. “Teachers and students can be friends in a larger sense, or they may become friends over time. But for the episode of teaching, we have to suspend several of our key notions of friendship—like partiality.”

“And equality,” Gayle continued. “As much as you might want to, we can’t ignore the difference in authority and power in the classroom. The intimacy—and the vulnerability that goes with it—that friendship requires pretty well erode both authority and power.”

“That still doesn’t mean, though,” added Jim, “that the professor runs roughshod over the students and doesn’t let them have reciprocal effects.” I was surprised to hear this based on my classroom time with him, but I agreed in principle. He continued. “At least for friendship to be possible between teachers and students, we need to see teaching as a *doing-with*, not a *doing-to*. It’s a common endeavor, selves open to each other, like friendship itself is. If friends are willing to be changed by each other, the teacher must be willing to be changed by the student.”

“Hippie crap again,” objected Gayle. “You still can’t escape the control you have over them that they don’t have over you.”

“I get that the teaching relationship has some elements in it that may put off friendship until later, as a later development in the series of events.” I didn’t want to spur him on, but I was actually getting interested now. “Even if friendship can’t technically happen while you’re teacher and student, it can develop out if it later. But what if you’re already friends with someone when they take a class with you? Can you really suspend partiality and intimacy in that case? Even if you say you can, aren’t you just lying to yourself?” I knew I was asking for it, but was too sober not to wonder. Jim didn’t have a chance to answer.

“Looky what I got here,” said Mark, beaming as he threw himself back in this chair, holding his phone up for us to see. “She put the number in herself.”

“Call her,” I said.

“I can’t call now. I don’t want to be too fast on the trigger.” Gayle was about to make the obvious reply, but I cut her off.

“Just call her,” I said. He hit the button, looked puzzled, grin draining out onto the floor.

“It’s a low cost spay and neuter clinic,” he said, sheepishly.

“Looks like you’ll have one less friend of pleasure tonight, bud,” I said through a chuckle. “And where are the drinks?” Mark was conspicuously empty handed.

“Some friend he is,” Gayle mumbled as she got up to go to the bar.

“Long story,” I said. “Long story.”
