

On the Ethics of Teacher–Student Friendships

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THE DIMENSIONS OF FRIENDSHIP

Fifteen years ago, when I was teaching at an elementary school in Krakow, Poland, a student became my friend. I taught his class English in fourth, and then fifth, grade, and he participated in an after-school program I ran. The school was in a gritty industrial suburb of the city, and most of the boys were, in the way of boys of such places, sweet but acquiring a pose of exterior toughness. The boy who became my friend, however, loved butterflies. He also loved art, and after I'd been teaching there for a few months, he stayed after class one day to show me some watercolor paintings he'd made of sunflowers. I loaned him a children's book in English, and in thanks he gave me one of the sunflower paintings that I'd admired. Throughout my year and a half of teaching, he continued to show me his paintings and his photographs of butterflies, and occasionally he'd accompany me to my tram stop, explaining the key geographical features of his neighborhood, like where Tomasz broke his arm and which dumpster the older boys stood behind to smoke. Once, after some students in his class had been unusually rowdy during their English lesson, he came up to me afterwards and told me "Don't get upset about it. They do that to all the teachers." We never engaged in more conventional friendship activities such as socializing on weekends, sharing a wide range of details of our thoughts and lives, or asking for help with personal problems, but I thought of the relationship as a real friendship and so did Olaf. We stayed in touch over the years, and I last saw Olaf, now 27 and still photographing butterflies, when I was in Krakow last summer.

At the time, the relationship felt ethically unproblematic, but later I began to wonder about the ethical dimensions of teacher–student friendships. Can students and teachers really be *friends* across the barriers posed by unequal authority? What about the teacher's obligation to be impartial? What about the potential negative effects of friendship on student learning? These are serious challenges. Yet, given the amount of time teachers and students spend together, the importance of their relationship to the flourishing of each, and the frequency of failed connections that leave students and teachers feeling misunderstood, disrespected, and unappreciated, teacher–student friendship — a potential balm for such institutional afflictions — begs for consideration. This essay grapples with the most important objections to teacher–student friendship. Ultimately, it argues that although the hazards of such friendships are real, they are not insurmountable. One might then conclude that teacher–student friendships are possible but not worth the risk, but this essay further argues that sometimes the benefits so outweigh those risks that students and teachers not only can, but *should*, be friends. At best, teacher–student friendships may enable teachers and students to flourish in an environment, institutionalized schooling, that too often demoralizes those who spend time there.

Because friendship is a deeply social conception, it will not do to start with too precise a definition.¹ Aristotle's understanding of friendship as reciprocated and

mutually recognized wishing the other's good for the other's sake, however, seems to express friendship's core qualities, while still leaving plenty to be shaped by culture.² Aristotle famously distinguishes three types of friendship: friendships of utility, pleasure, and virtue. John Cooper calls the third type "character friendship" to better capture the notion that these are intimate, lasting relationships rooted in knowledge and appreciation of the other as a complete human being.³ Friendship may not be as neatly categorizable as Aristotle suggests, but his types offer two important insights. First, "friendship" covers a wide spectrum of human relationships, including some (for example, fellow citizenship) that modern societies consider impersonal and therefore posing none of the ethical demands of genuine, interpersonal relationships. Second, Aristotle's analysis does mark off certain human relationships, namely character friendships, as especially significant to human flourishing.

Though pleasure and utility friendships are founded on the gains each gets from the other, it bears emphasizing that such friendships do involve a wish for the good of the other that goes beyond self-interest. Because these friendships are based on more tangential, and often fleeting, commonalities and qualities than are character friendships, they are easier to establish than character friendships and involve fewer commitments. If these less demanding relationships are included in the category of "friendship," teachers and students certainly can be friends. Students and teachers often wish the good of the other for the other's sake on the basis of the utility or pleasure they provide, and this is relatively unproblematic. One might even say that it is a problem when students and teachers are *not* friends of this sort. As Cooper emphasizes, such friendships are not simply transactional calculations of favors owed but, rather, involve genuine commitment to the wellbeing of the other. Many of the ethical problems arising in institutionalized schooling — involving, for example, dishonesty, negligence, apathy, disrespect, and unkindness — take root in teacher–student relationships that are merely instrumental, where genuine mutual concern is lacking.

I suspect most teachers, parents, and students, as well as philosophers, would agree that mutual well-wishing along the lines Aristotle suggests is a far better model for the pedagogical relationship than is the economic calculation suggested by the contemporary logic of assessment-driven school reform. Such a conclusion, however, still leaves hanging the more perplexing question of whether teachers and students can be *character* friends, which is what our word "friendship" generally implies.

Elizabeth Telfer's analytic account of friendship adds helpful detail to Aristotle's conception.⁴ Although I have my doubts about applying analytic philosophy to so culturally embedded a concept as friendship, Telfer's piece can be read as offering a definition of what many contemporary Anglo-American users of the word friendship mean by it. In such a reading, her account gives Aristotle's notion of friendship contemporary resonance. Telfer lays out three necessary and sufficient conditions for friendship: shared activities, the "passions of friendship," and mutually recognized commitment. That friends must engage in some shared activities

seems indisputable. Because we also share activities with many people who are not our friends, Telfer continues, certain motivations for these shared activities are necessary for the relationship to be one of friendship. Friendship, in Telfer's words, "depends not only on the performance of certain actions, but also on their being performed for certain specific reasons — out of friendship, as we say, rather than out of duty or pity or indeed self-interest."⁵ This addendum is more questionable, as there are often people with whom we associate out of obligation or for the sake of the activity itself, such as professional colleagues, classmates at school, or teammates in athletic activities, toward whom we do feel affection, to whose good we are committed, and whom we consider friends. Telfer's logic suggests that we would have to seek out additional occasions for interaction for these relationships to be real friendships, although quite often, due to the busyness of modern life, we do not. Times have changed, and so, perhaps, has friendship. Her condition that we feel the "passions of friendship," feeling affection for someone, liking him or her, and having a sense of a bond, is more plausible.⁶ Finally, Telfer notes that friendship must involve "commitment and choice." We do not choose our passions, of course, and it is true, says Telfer, that "we cannot choose to be the friend of just anyone, since the relevant passions cannot be summoned up at will."⁷ All the same, if a person feels the "passions of friendship," he or she has still to choose to act on them.

Telfer's necessary and sufficient conditions neither rule teacher–student friendships out nor in. Teachers and students engage in shared activities, often know one another well, and frequently feel affection, loyalty, and other "passions of friendship" for one another. (Again, ethical and practical problems arise when they do not.) But the bar for friendship is higher, and the issue of commitment and choice is troubling, as it indicates an unequal distribution of concern. Should the teacher be more committed to the good of her student–friend than she is to the good of all her students? And since friendship implies mutual commitment and concern, will a student's friendship with a teacher interfere with learning? Furthermore, teachers and students share in classroom activities, but, given the distance unequal authority creates between them in the classroom, can their relationship ever really become one of friendship?

Before moving on to consider some of the objections to teacher–student friendship, I wish to restrict the field somewhat, because the answers to these questions surely vary depending on the age and status of the student. By students and teachers, I mean school-aged children and youth, between the ages of about six and eighteen, and their teachers. Friendships between teachers and younger children, and between college and graduate students and their professors, raise different issues. I also take it as a given that romantic or sexual attachments between teachers and students of this age are unacceptable. This is certainly so from a legal standpoint. It is perhaps arguable on grounds of ethics, but not a claim I would contest. With less conviction but plenty of optimism, I assume that friendship without implications of sex and romance is possible, and that, therefore, the sex and sexuality of the teacher and student are no bar to a genuine friendship. We do friendship, and the multiplicity of human love, a disservice when we insist that sex lurks in every corner (which is

not to deny that it lurks in some). Love is in the picture here; sex and romance are not.

OBJECTIONS

Sex aside, there are at least three good reasons to think that teachers and students cannot be friends. First, the teacher's authority may prevent true friendships with students from ever being established. Second, teachers have an obligation to be impartial, and impartiality conflicts with the demands of friendship. Third, such friendships might interfere with the student's learning.

Are teacher–student friendships even possible? Equality, after all, is usually considered essential for friendship, as it seems to create the grounds for mutual knowledge and genuinely shared experiences. Perhaps the teacher's greater authority, as well as greater age, experience, and knowledge, makes friendship with a student impossible. Perhaps, but not necessarily. As R.S. Downie, Eileen Loudfoot and Elizabeth Telfer argue, whether or not inequality interferes with the bonds of friendship

depends on how the parties view the inequality. If one rejoices in it while the other does not ... then perhaps there is a difference between them which is too major for the sense of a bond to exist... If on the other hand both parties are agreed that there are spheres in which one has the authority, and agreed on the reasons which justify this authority, the inequality, far from preventing the bond, might be an added bond.⁸

Additionally, the differences in authority between persons are so myriad and complex, involving race, social class, gender, educational attainment, life experience — and the list could go on — that if one applies the requirement of equality too stringently, hardly anyone could be friends. In most friendships, I suspect, there is a constant shifting back and forth of authority. In some friendships, one person generally has more but this is viewed as acceptable and justified by both friends. If the teacher did not overreach in her uses of authority (which might entail recognizing the greater authority of the student in some domains), and the student had a basic appreciation of the enterprise of adult authority, they could be friends.

The institutional authority of the teacher does suggest one important limitation on teacher–student friendships, though. Such friendships should start with the student. Before the teacher moves to make the relationship a friendship, she should have good reason to believe that the student is actively seeking a closer relationship.⁹ It does sometimes happen that a student will seek out attention from his teacher after class, share details of his life outside of school, and take an interest in the teacher herself, which qualifies as grounds for the teacher to respond with attention, interest, and sharing something more of herself than she does with other students. Of course, the teacher might be misreading the student's intentions, but friendships take time to develop. If the teacher encourages her relationship with this student to develop into a friendship, she must be sensitive along the way to how the relationship affects him.

A stronger case against teacher–student friendship can be made on the grounds of a teacher's obligation to be impartial. To fulfill the role of a teacher, any teacher must evaluate students impartially, which, besides evaluating students' work,

includes assigning praise and blame for classroom situations, and assigning roles in classroom activities. When it comes to any kind of evaluation, there does appear to be a conflict between a teacher's inclination — perhaps even obligation, if special commitment to the other's good is part of friendship — to be partial to a student–friend and her duty to be impartial.

Consider, for instance, a teacher grading student papers. Obviously it would be unfair to give her student–friend a higher grade than he deserves, and this would not be good teaching. Besides being unfair to those outside the class who care about grades, such partiality would be unfair to other students in the class, both because suspicion that standards are being applied differently rankles and because other goods (prizes, advancement, college placement, and all the material benefits these bring) correlate with grades. Furthermore, it would be unfair to the student–friend, as well as poor teaching, to give him an unearned grade, since accurate evaluation of one's work is crucial to learning. But say the student has written a bad paper. Won't the teacher be tempted to give it a higher grade than it merits?

There are two ways of understanding this critique. One is that perhaps the teacher is aware that the paper does not deserve a good grade but will give it one. This is indeed a potential problem, but there is no reason to assume that the teacher will do this. Nothing about friendship implies that within the bounds of the relationship all other ethical obligations can be dropped. Nor do character friends necessarily expect that of one another; in such friendships, one of the bases for mutual well wishing is appreciation of the other's good qualities, for example, honesty and integrity. Additionally, keeping one's feelings out of evaluations is hardly limited to instances of teacher–student friendship, as no matter how impartial teachers strive to be in their affections, inevitably teachers like some students more than others. I suspect all teachers who are honest with themselves can recall instances when they wished they could justify giving particular students higher, or lower, grades. Good teaching always involves overcoming inclinations and preferences, and a good teacher develops this capacity. Finally, grades are not prizes; they are tools for teaching and learning, and ought to be understood as such. If the student and teacher are unable to see grades this way, or do not have a fundamental respect for teaching and learning, then indeed friendship with integrity might be impossible, but many teachers and students do possess ample respect for and understanding of their institutional roles. There are high-stakes situations, such as a make-or-break final exam, or a letter of recommendation, when the teacher might have to recuse herself or ask for a second opinion, but if she acts responsibly and the student recognizes that obligation, friendship is possible.

A second version of the critique is that the teacher might not be able to see the student's work for what it is. Maybe friendship will cause the teacher subconsciously to look for its merits and ignore its deficiencies. Or, more insidiously (since the teacher could always ask for a second opinion on a paper), perhaps generally in the classroom the teacher will see only praiseworthy features of the student–friend and be blind to instances when he requires correction. This criticism, however, relies on a questionable assumption: that we cannot see our friends for what they really are.

Most philosophical accounts of friendship (starting with Aristotle, but including Montaigne, C.S. Lewis, and other classic texts) present the contrasting view that clarity of vision is one of the essential characteristics of friendship, distinguishing it from romantic love. Reflection on some of our real friendships supports this view, inasmuch as friends are the people to whom we often turn for honest evaluation of our merits and shortcomings. One of the functions of friends is that they give us access to the judgments of the world, tempered by affection, and allow us to adjust our behavior accordingly. The fact that we do turn to friends for evaluation of our behavior, expecting honesty, suggests that friendship and evaluation are not mutually exclusive.

If teacher–student friendships are possible and do not conflict with the ethical obligations of the teacher, what then of the student? Does friendship with a teacher conflict with learning? In *Caring*, Nel Noddings argues that it does.¹⁰ Both the teacher–student relationship and friendship are Buberian “I–Thou” relationships involving reciprocity, she argues, but if the student cares for the teacher as the teacher does for the student, the caring will fatally interfere with education, as it will distract the student from his learning.

If ... the student were to attempt inclusion with respect to the teacher, to discern her motives, to concentrate on what she was trying to accomplish, he would be distracted from his own learning task.... Instead of concentrating on the objective elements of the problematic situation in, say, mathematics, the student focuses on what the teacher wants. The result is a catalogue of non-mathematical heuristics that the student compiles in order to cope with the demands of schooling.¹¹

Instead, says Noddings, the student is to respond to the teacher as cared-for by showing her his “personal delight” or “happy growth,” which gives the teacher pleasure.

There is indeed something wrong when students compose “a catalogue of heuristics” rather than learn. Surely, though, such problems stem not from the teacher–student relationship but from the complicated roles schools play. Actual schools are not just places for learning; they are also places that divide those who will get ahead in the world from those who will not, and students know it. This problem supports the case that having teachers work as sorting mechanisms distorts the teacher’s role, but not the case against friendship.

It should also be remembered that, in friendship, the friends are not solely focused on each other. Friendship looks outwards, to shared interests in the world. As David Hawkins argues in “I, Thou, and It,” so does good teaching.¹² Hawkins reminds us that children are acutely uncomfortable when the gaze of adults is focused straight on them with the world blinkered out. Far more conducive to mutual appreciation and understanding, as well as to learning, is a shared focus on some “It” in the world that interests both adult and child, teacher and student. And if the material is initially uninteresting to the student — or interesting only instrumentally, as a means to some unrelated end — friendship with a teacher may lead the student to reconsider. If the student sees the material through the eyes of a teacher who values it, perhaps he will see the reason for actually learning. Subjects that seem dull or

useless at first can become worthwhile when we see them through the eyes of someone who appreciates them, and we are more inclined to look twice at matters valued by a friend.

WHY BOTHER?

Teachers, I conclude, can be friends with their students *but it is a demanding relationship, and things can go wrong*. Although the conflict between roles is not insurmountable, problems can arise, perhaps more often than not. So why not recommend that teachers only be caring and friendly, never students' friends?

It might be argued that character friendships are rare and serendipitous enough that every chance to develop one ought to be seized. Some may doubt this, but consider this as well: children and youth, whose uses of time and space are tightly constricted by adults, have access to a very limited circle of potential friends. Adults who find no friends around them can always pick themselves up and look someplace else — either by moving houses or jobs or by seeking out other company in their spare time. Children cannot. This is especially true of contemporary American children, whose free time is increasingly booked into organized activities composed of age-ranked peers, and who also spend an unprecedented amount of time by themselves.¹³ In the past, children were part of wider social life, interacting with adults as well as with fellow children, as they quickly became part of the economic machinery. Since the growth of compulsory schooling, however, children and youth have been confined, for ever-increasing amounts of time, in educational institutions that limit children's access to adults, to paid work, to mobility — and thereby to a wider circle of friends. There are some major benefits to structuring children's lives this way, of course, but the drawback — the isolation of childhood — demands consideration.

Most children, of course, find sympathetic peers with whom they can form friendships that are at least sufficient. Not all do, though. Inasmuch as our friendships are the relationships that reflect us back to ourselves, they are the foundation of identity and play a critical role in human flourishing. The limitations of one's peers are therefore a severe limitation to one's capacities. I am thinking particularly of children who are different from their peers in ways that mark them out for peer disapproval or misunderstanding. LGBT youth are an important example, as are children who are unusually gifted or talented in contexts where their inquisitiveness and interests are not appreciated. So too are children struggling with a disability or major illness that their peers may be incapable of understanding. I am thinking also of boys in tough neighborhoods who like butterflies, small quirky differences that fall into no sociological or psychological category but merit attention. Friendship with adults opens up possibilities — of growth, of an escape from alienation, of recognition that the world is much bigger than the classroom or neighborhood — that are desperately important to some of these children. There are children who need adult friends — and if friendship with a teacher opens up these possibilities, it would be a mistake to deny it simply because of the risks it poses. The risks of isolation are sometimes far greater.

Sometimes it is enough for adults to crack down on bullying, to address the future, to offer possibilities — but genuine friendship offers a kind of validation that more impersonal supportiveness does not. “Friendship arises out of mere Companionship,” says C.S. Lewis,

when two or more of the companions discover that they have in common some insight or interest or even taste which the others do not share and which, till that moment, each believed to be his own unique treasure (or burden). The typical expression of opening Friendship would be something like “What? You too? I thought I was the only one.” ... It is when two such persons discover one another ... that Friendship is born. And instantly they stand together in an immense solitude.... In this kind of love, as Emerson said, *Do you love me?* means *Do you see the same truth?* ... Hence, we picture lovers face to face but Friends side by side; their eyes look ahead.¹⁴

I suspect it is also true, and especially true for children and youth, that maintaining one’s clarity of vision without a friend who shares that vision takes an extraordinary persistence, perhaps even a dangerous persistence. Often enough, a truth that no one else can see is merely a dangerous illusion. Without friends, it can be impossible to know which unique insights are valuable, and which are misperceptions to be rejected. Finding others who can see those insights and perhaps offer refinements, adjustments, or new perspectives, is both validation of that insight and protection against self-deception. Dialogue is a more reliable path to truth than solitary genius.

As this also suggests, true friendship supports learning. Anyone could have praised Olaf’s drawings of sunflowers, but his deeper exploration of the arts required a friend. Anyone could have explained to me the Krakow neighborhood landscape, but it took a friend to introduce me to what life felt like for the children who lived there. Without friendship, Olaf’s education and mine would have been impoverished — and we would both have been lonelier, more isolated, less engaged with the richness of the worlds around us.

I am not arguing that teachers and students should always be (character) friends, as this would be absurd. But when the opportunity and the need for friendship present themselves, so does a host of possibilities for personal and moral growth for both parties. It would be a mistake to hobble friendship because it might go astray. Human ethical life is full of incommensurable demands and tragic choices. The choice has to be for the better, not for nonexistent perfection, and sometimes teacher–student friendships are the better choice.¹⁵ Facing situations in which friendship may conflict with other ethical commitments, we must respond with judgment, attunement to particulars, and respectful engagement with others — which will sometimes lead us to conclude that friendship between a teacher and student would be unethical, but at other times that friendship between teacher and student is the far better, more ethical response.

1. See Anna Wierzbicka, *Understanding Cultures through Their Key Words: English, Russian, Polish, German, and Japanese* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

2. Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. J.A.K. Thomson and Hugh Tredennick (New York: Penguin, 1976).

3. See John M. Cooper, *Reason and Emotion: Essays on Ancient Moral Psychology and Ethical Theory* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999).
4. Elizabeth Telfer, "Friendship," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 71 (1970–71): 223–41.
5. *Ibid.*, 224.
6. *Ibid.*, 224–27.
7. *Ibid.*, 229–30.
8. R.S. Downie, Eileen M. Loudfoot, and Elizabeth Telfer, *Education and Personal Relationships* (London: Methuen, 1974), 170.
9. Having argued that sex has no bearing on teacher–student friendships, I have so far avoided using feminine or masculine pronouns, but as the essay moves into discussion of possible friendships, which are inevitably particular, the third person singular becomes necessary. For sake of clarity and readability, this essay will refer to the teacher as female, the student as male, but as I hope to have made clear, I do not mean to limit the possible friendships to such an arrangement.
10. Nel Noddings, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 69–74.
11. *Ibid.*, 70–71.
12. David Hawkins, "I, Thou, and It," in *The Informed Vision* (New York: Algora Publishing, 2002).
13. On children's time, see Annette Lareau, *Unequal Childhoods* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005). On children's isolation, see Steven Mintz and Susan Kellogg, *Domestic Revolutions: A Social History of American Family Life* (New York: Free Press, 1988).
14. C.S. Lewis, "Friendship — The Least Necessary Love," quoted in Neera Kapur Badhwar, ed., *Friendship: A Philosophical Reader* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1993), 41–42.
15. Isaiah Berlin's conception of value pluralism is the notion drawn on here. The tension between friendship and justice merits the same sort of approach as Berlin's exploration of liberty and equality. This would be a bigger project than this essay can attempt; here I can only suggest that a value-pluralism approach seems to me the best way to respond to the demands of friendship without neglecting the equally important tug of justice.