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## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Understanding friendship

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**Abstract**

This article takes issue with two prominent views in the current debate around epistemic partiality in friendship. Strong views of epistemic partiality hold that friendship may require biased beliefs in direct conflict with epistemic norms. Weak views hold that friendship may place normative expectations on belief formation but in a manner that does not violate these norms. It is argued that neither view succeeds in explaining the relationship between epistemic norms and friendship norms. Weak views inadvertently endorse a form of motivated reasoning, failing to resolve the normative clash they seek to avoid. Strong views turn out to be incoherent once we consider the question of whether the requirement to form an epistemically partial belief is independent of whether the belief in question would be true. It is then argued that an epistemology of friendship should recognise the special role that understanding plays in friendship. On this view, friendship normatively requires understanding the truth about our friends. This entails that epistemic partiality, far from being a requirement, is in fact at odds with good friendship.

**KEYWORDS**

epistemic partiality, friendship, norms of belief, permissivism, understanding

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Do the norms of good friendship require partiality in judgement as well as in action? It is hardly contentious that we are—and, in fact, ought to be—to some degree partial towards our friends in how we act. If we have a spare ticket for a concert and a friend of ours would like to join, it would be extremely odd to give away our ticket for free to a stranger. If a friend asks us to revise a research proposal they have to submit by tomorrow morning, we might make an exception to our no-work-after-dinner rule and help them, which is something we would not do for other colleagues. Yet, things get more complicated when it comes to epistemic partiality—i.e., partiality in how we think. On the one hand, it seems plausible that we think favourably about our friends and expect them to think favourably about us in return. On the other hand, epistemic norms governing belief demand impartiality, as only truth-related considerations bear on what one ought to believe.

Recent discussion about this normative clash has developed in two main directions. According to one camp (e.g., Keller, 2004, 2018; Stroud, 2006), there is a genuine, irresolvable clash between these normative domains. In certain situations, friendship requires us to be epistemically partial in such a way that directly violates traditional epistemic norms such as *one must believe only that which is supported by one's evidence*. We shall refer to these as *Strong* views of epistemic partiality. In contrast, a different set of views hold that we can make sense of epistemic partiality without the violation of traditional epistemic norms. According to these views, friendship indeed places normative expectations on the way we form beliefs but not in such a way that requires us to violate epistemic norms. We shall refer to these as *Weak* views of epistemic partiality.

This paper has three goals. First, we aim to show that *Weak* views of epistemic partiality are committed to a form of motivated reasoning as they involve applying different epistemic standards to evidence about one's friends as compared to other evidence. We argue that this form of motivated reasoning is paradigmatically irrational and thus that *Weak* views are unable to avoid the normative clash after all. Second, we aim to show that *Strong* views of epistemic partiality are unmotivated. The arguments offered in defence of *Strong* views at best support the claim that we ought to believe well of our friends when those beliefs match the facts, but this falls short of their intended conclusion that we ought to believe well of our friends independently of the facts. Third and finally, we aim to show that far from there being a normative clash, there is in fact harmony between norms of friendship and epistemic norms. We defend an *epistemic conception of friendship* according to which friendship requires understanding our friends where this involves grasping truths about who our friends really are, what they are like, what motivates them, and so on. This means that to the extent that one violates epistemic norms by being epistemically partial towards a friend, one fails to adhere to the norms of friendship. These three goals are respectively pursued in the central sections of the paper. Section 1 introduces the original discussion of epistemic partiality as well as Stroud and Keller's own arguments for going *Strong* while in Section 5 we conclude.

## 1 | STRONG VIEWS AND THE NORMATIVE CLASH

One case used to illustrate the apparent tension between norms of epistemology and norms of friendship comes from Simon Keller (2004). Rebecca is giving a poetry reading at a café where she knows that an important literary agent will be present and hopes to make a good impression on him with her poetry. Rebecca invites her friend Eric who, unbeknownst to her, is a regular at the café and knows the place is almost always host to mediocre poetry. Eric previously had no idea that Rebecca was interested in poetry, but he agrees to attend her reading.

What should Eric think about the likely merits of Rebecca's poetry ahead of her recital? He has good evidence that the poetry at this cafe is almost always mediocre, and no evidence that would indicate Rebecca is likely to be any exception. This suggests that Eric ought to believe that Rebecca's poetry reading is likely to be mediocre. However, suppose Rebecca expects to feel supported and encouraged by her friends. As a friend, Eric ought to do the best he can to provide her with such support and encouragement. Might this involve not just acting as though he believes her poetry is likely to be exceptional but genuinely believing this? Keller thinks so. He writes that Eric ought to "be open to the beliefs that are required in order to see her poetry in the way she sees it" (344). But this normative pressure to be open to her perspective does not provide Eric with any evidence about the quality of Rebecca's poetry and thus in shaping his belief in this way, Eric will inevitably violate epistemic norms.

A second paradigmatic case from Sarah Stroud asks us to imagine a friend who has been accused of wrongdoing (2006). Suppose a third-party reports that your friend Sam recently slept with someone and then cruelly never returned any of that person's calls, knowingly breaking their heart. This is new information for you, so you do not know whether the story is true. As with the above case, the situation is one in which evidence pulls in one direction and the expectations of friendship pull in another. If you give credence to the accusations, judging them to be true or likely true, then you risk damaging the friendship. But if you rally to your friend's defence, judging the accusations to be false or likely false, you fail to believe what is supported by your evidence. A good friend, Stroud thinks, will take the latter of these two options, preferring to violate epistemic norms rather than the normative expectations of friendship (505).

Cases like these seem to suggest that we sometimes face genuine dilemmas in how we respond to evidence and form beliefs about our friends. If such dilemmas are genuine, then we may ask further questions about how to respond to them. Which set of norms should get priority? One way to approach this question is to think about the priority of our values. Which do we value more, being a good friend or being a rational epistemic agent? Keller takes this approach to argue that friendship is a source of important goods that we value and, in at least certain cases, the right thing to do will be to adhere to norms of friendship rather than epistemic norms (2004, p. 346). Similarly, according to Stroud one way out of the dilemma is to concede that friendship requires epistemic irrationality: "[i]f the canons of epistemic rationality, or the standards for justified belief, are incompatible with friendship, then—one might say—so much the worse for epistemic rationality or justified belief" (2006, pp. 518–519).<sup>1</sup>

One might wonder whether there is anything epistemically problematic in the suggestion that we ought to respond differently to evidence about our friends compared to our non-friends. After all, we surely stand in a privileged epistemic relation to our friends, possessing a wealth of evidence about them that we would not typically possess about non-friends. Stroud, however, thinks that our differential epistemic practices towards our friends cannot entirely be accounted for in evidential terms—indeed, these practices often "run counter to the evidence" (516). This involves drawing inferences and arriving at conclusions that are out of step with the weight of evidence, seizing on anything that could discredit negative evidence, fastening on any possible hypotheses that are more favourable to one's friend, and withholding belief in propositions that are well-supported by the evidence and which would be natural conclusions for an impartial observer to draw (*ibid.*). Such conduct runs counter to standard epistemic norms of belief and inquiry and so this conception of friendship is indeed *Strong* in the sense of generating obligations that conflict with our epistemic obligations.

Turning back to the cases, *Strong* views suggest that Eric, ahead of the poetry reading, ought not form the belief that Rebecca's poetry will likely be bad or mediocre. This is perhaps not too

much of a problem because Eric, despite knowing of the low quality of the usual readings at that café, could grant the benefit of the doubt to any new reader. More problematically, these views demand that even after listening to Rebecca's mediocre poetry, Eric should refrain from forming the epistemically appropriate judgement. Instead, he ought to do whatever he can to view her performance in a positive light, highlighting its strengths while attenuating its weaknesses. A similar story can be offered in the wrongdoing case. A good friend is expected to discredit the negative evidence provided by the third party, to contemplate alternative and less problematic interpretations of Sam's conduct, and ultimately form a more favourable belief about Sam's conduct than is supported by the evidence.

How do proponents of *Strong* views justify accepting such a radical normative clash? Consider two arguments offered by Stroud (511–512). The first is concerned with the grounds of friendship relationships and appeals to the Aristotelian idea that we befriend people whom we consider to be good (Whiting, 1991). We might start a friendship around a variety of things—like mutual interests in life, needs, and views about politics or the community—but typically such a relationship grows to the extent that we esteem each other's character and conduct. If this were not the case, Stroud's argument goes, then there would not be any internal pull towards treating friends differently than other people, both in action and judgement. The second argument is concerned with the conservation of the relationship over time. Friendship involves a reciprocal commitment to each other: my friend does not need to show me every day that they are a good person; I trust that they still are and that they trust that I still am a good person too. Thus, committing to a person involves granting them over time the esteem we had developed in the past and not assessing their merits on each occasion, as we would do with other people.

Alternatively, Keller argues that epistemic partiality is justified by the special goods and interests at stake within our friendships (2018, pp. 25–26). Above all, we expect friends to be supportive and encourage us at times when other people may not. We also expect them to be able and open to put themselves in our shoes and see the world as we do. Naturally, support and openness are distinctive goods that, qua friends, we are also supposed to offer to our friends in return. However, according to Keller, since we are talking about distinctive goods of our friendship relationships, it cannot be the case that they only involve acting as if we were on our friend's side. Rather, they also require that we do think as someone who is on one's friend's side: something which, on some occasions, may well amount to forming beliefs that are not based on the available evidence.<sup>2</sup>

In contrast to the Stroud-Keller approach, many epistemologists will be inclined towards a view that rejects the very idea of non-epistemic reasons for belief. An alternative response to embracing the dilemma is simply to reject the possibility of any genuine normative tension. Such a view will hold that the very idea of a non-epistemic reason for belief is a kind of category mistake. A reason for belief that is not an indication of the likely truth of the relevant proposition is not a genuine reason for belief. For those who are sympathetic towards this approach, the question that demands an answer is: what to say about the original cases and about the apparent intuition that friendship can make demands on what one ought to believe. A flat-footed dismissal of the cases as unconvincing or uninteresting is one option. Alternatively, one can acknowledge that the cases illustrate something interesting about the relationship between friendship and belief but try to argue that we can make sense of what is going on without needing to posit a normative clash. Such an approach to epistemic partiality is 'Weak' in the sense that it makes no demands on us to violate epistemic norms. The next set of views we turn to are weak in this sense.

## 2 | AGAINST THE NORMATIVE CLASH: WEAK VIEWS

### 2.1 | Three versions of the weak view

Several *Weak* strategies have been recently offered to explain how adopting differential epistemic practices towards a friend does not entail departing from epistemic normativity. We shall briefly consider three such recipes, respectively appealing to pragmatic encroachment, epistemic permissiveness, and zetetic considerations.<sup>3</sup>

One way to explain epistemically partisan practices in inquiry about our friends' deeds appeals to practical interests and, in particular, practical facts about the friendship. As Jason Kawall has recently argued (2013, p. 366), such things as the potential harms resulting from falsely believing something negative about a friend raise the practical stakes of the situation and hence require us to reach a particularly strong epistemic position before closing the inquiry. Getting things wrong in a situation like Stroud's wrongdoing example could jeopardise the relationship with our friend. This potential harm raises the threshold of evidence that the good friend must acquire in order to be justified in believing something bad about a friend. The fact that qua friends, we are epistemically required to inquire in a way that we would not otherwise do explains the partisan bias towards our friends.<sup>4</sup>

A second version of a *Weak* view reconciles partiality towards our friends and standard epistemic norms by appealing to the rationality requirements of the doxastic attitudes we ought to take towards a given proposition. According to Katherine Hawley, the idea of a clash between norms of epistemology and norms of friendship is grounded in a simple counterfactual test: if friendship makes you adopt a doxastic attitude you would not adopt towards non-friends, then friendship tips you into epistemic irrationality (2014, p. 2039). The key thought behind the test is that since friendship is an irrelevant factor for our epistemic conduct, we should not expect our doxastic attitudes to vary depending on the relationship we share with the object of our inquiry. If we end up forming a belief about a friend that we would not have formed were its object a non-friend, then the standard we are applying to the friend is not epistemically rational. As Hawley points out, the plausibility of this test is premised on the truth of the *Uniqueness Thesis*, according to which given one's total evidence, there is a unique rational doxastic attitude that one can take to any proposition (White, 2005; Feldman, 2007).

Rejecting the Uniqueness Thesis thus presents one potential strategy for *Weak* views of partiality. For Faulkner (2018), Hawley (2014), and Paul and Morton (2018), partiality towards our friends need involve no epistemic norm violation once we embrace *Epistemic Permissivism*, according to which more than one doxastic response to a body of evidence is epistemically permissible. Much like in the case of scientists disagreeing about the implications of a theory despite sharing the same evidence, situations involving friends may permit a variety of rational doxastic responses. In the wrongdoing case, for example, two epistemic options are available to the good friend: believing that the accused friend is guilty, as testimonial evidence supports; or suspending judgement pending further inquiry. Since both options are permissible, friendship can legitimately exert its influence and allow the good friend to opt for belief suspension, thereby justifying a partisan bias without violating epistemic normativity. In generating reasons to view our friends in the best possible light, friendship acts as a tie-breaker between multiple epistemically permissible responses.

A third version of a *Weak* view explains epistemic partiality within standard epistemic norms by appealing to the nature of inquiry, particularly in cases where the zetetic activity involves a



subject that we value for some non-epistemic reason. Valuing something generates what Sanford Goldberg (2019) calls *value-reflecting practical reasons*: that is, *prima facie* reasons to act in ways that foster and preserve the thing we value, or that avoid damaging it.<sup>5</sup> The valuing-relationship involves epistemic reasons too, in that one can have an epistemic reason to believe that something has a strong value for someone else. In this respect, *value-reflecting epistemic reasons* are *prima facie* epistemic reasons to believe that such a person has a practical reason to preserve or avoid damaging the thing that values. The *Weak View* grounded in zetetic considerations takes friendship to be a paradigmatic example of something we value. On this view, friendship generates (a) practical reasons to preserve the friendship, and (b) epistemic reasons to believe that our friend values our friendship too, and hence has practical reasons to preserve the friendship.

Value-reflecting reasons explain away intuitions of epistemic partiality in friendship. Imagine a scenario like the wrongdoing case in which a friend F is telling us that they have not committed the crime they're accused of. In such a scenario, F's testimony is an invitation for us to trust them. Thus, F has a value-reflecting practical reason to tell us the truth and avoid lying, as this is precisely what preserves the value of the relationship and avoids damaging it. Similarly, F's testimony provides us with a value-reflecting practical reason to act in a way that reflects the friendship's value. According to Goldberg, this amounts to doing what minimises the risk of failing to trust F when F is telling us the truth. The reciprocal awareness of the practical reasons to preserve the friendship also generates an epistemic reason for us to believe that F will tell us the truth, as this minimises the risk that we will not trust F. But what can we do to preserve the friendship and avoid damaging it in a case in which F tells us that F has been wrongly accused of some crime? The recipe here is not much different from what several other views propose. What we can do is re-open the inquiry in light of F's testimony to reassess available evidence in search of explanations of their deeds that are consistent with their innocence and seek new evidence to exculpate them. But value-reflecting reasons explain why what appears to be vicious epistemic partiality in friendship is in fact a perfectly rational stance to have in situations where normative values are at stake. The risk of compromising a relationship we care about provides us with reasons to inquire in a different way than we would do if friendship were not at stake.<sup>6</sup>

Though they differ in the precise details, all three views share one important thing in common: they aim to account for epistemic partiality without epistemic norm violation by applying different epistemic standards to beliefs about friends and beliefs about non-friends. For example, where evidence is acquired that puts one's friend in a negative light, higher epistemic standards are applied. This is most clear for the pragmatic encroachment approach whereby the threshold for epistemically justified belief varies depending on the value or disvalue of certain beliefs about one's friend.<sup>7</sup> The permissivist view is similar but instead of a shift in the threshold for justified belief it posits a range of epistemically permissible attitudes and then allows friendship to restrict this range by requiring one to opt for the most convivial option. The zetetic view involves responding to any negative evidence about one's friend by re-opening inquiry, re-construing the evidence, attempting to find additional defeating evidence, and searching for possible alternative hypotheses that would explain the negative evidence. Details aside, what purportedly allows *Weak* views to reject the thesis that epistemic partiality in friendship involves a kind of irrationality is precisely the fact that they allow us to apply different, albeit legitimate, epistemic standards when responding to evidence about our friends as compared to evidence about non-friends. In the following section, we will argue that they are ultimately unsuccessful in this regard—*Weak* partiality does lead to violation of epistemic norms after all.

## 2.2 | Weak views and irrationality

Consider the following example. Nina is an avid fan of her local football club and believes that they are the best, most wonderful team in the world. Nina is also the kind of person who cares a great deal about not violating epistemic norms, meaning that she only ever forms beliefs on the basis of sufficient evidence. However, Nina is also motivated by a desire to view her team in the best possible light. Consequently, Nina applies higher epistemic standards to forming negative beliefs about her team than to other beliefs. In other words, Nina engages in a form of epistemic partiality analogous to the partiality in friendship discussed by *Weak* views. The details of how Nina engages in epistemic partiality are not crucial to the argument—we can imagine versions of her case where she simply raises the evidential threshold for belief and versions of the case where she engages in further inquiry, considers possible alternative construals of her evidence, etc. What matters instead is that none of the beliefs she forms about her team lack evidential support even though she does hold some of those beliefs to higher evidential standards.

Is Nina a rational, responsible epistemic agent? We submit that she is not. Consider her full set of beliefs about her team. Let us label those beliefs which put her team in a good light as ‘positive’ and those which put her in a negative light as ‘negative’. Given her desire to believe that her team is the greatest, positive propositions have a much easier time making their way into her belief box—i.e. the set of beliefs she holds—than do negative beliefs, which are held to higher epistemic standards involving double checking, further inquiry, and a higher evidential threshold for belief. As a result, Nina’s overall view of her team’s relative merits is positively biased. The relatively lower epistemic standards she applies to positive beliefs about her team, although still high enough for those beliefs to count as individually rationally justified, nonetheless mean that she forms more of these beliefs than she does negative beliefs. Consequently, she believes more positive things about her team than she does negative things, all else equal<sup>8</sup>, and she does so for epistemically arbitrary reasons.

This is one sense in which the different standards she applies to her beliefs lead to a positive bias. But it is not the only sense. Not only does Nina have relatively more positive beliefs than negative beliefs as a result of the different epistemic standards she applies, but it will also be likely that more of her positive beliefs are false relative to her negative beliefs. So long as we can presume that Nina’s belief-forming methods are reasonably reliable, then applying higher standards to a certain subset of her beliefs means those beliefs will be relatively more likely to be true. For example, if Nina raises the evidential threshold for negative beliefs about her team—say, from .9 to .95—then the negative beliefs that pass this threshold will have a higher evidential probability of being true than her positive beliefs which only needed to pass the lower threshold of .9. Likewise, if Nina responds to negative evidence about her team by engaging in further inquiry, double-checking, and so on, then any beliefs that do make it past this more stringent process will be more likely to be true than the overall likelihood of the positive beliefs she forms that do not go through this process of double checking and hypothesis testing.

Note that things are worse still for Nina. She can know all of the above. That is, she can know that her differing epistemic standards have led to her having formed relatively more positive beliefs about her team and she should be confident that relatively more of those beliefs are false than are the negative beliefs to which she applied greater scrutiny. What should Nina think about this? We suggest that recognition of these facts ought to induce a degree of epistemic anxiety in her. To be clear, this is not necessarily because she has reason to think that any particular belief is false or unwarranted. After all, each belief is formed on the basis of sufficient evidence. Rather,



the overall picture she has formed of her team is positively biased in such a way that she has good reason to believe it is misrepresentative of the truth about her team.

What might Nina say in response to the criticism that she is epistemically irresponsible? Nina might insist that she is perfectly responsible given that she has never formed a belief about her team based on insufficient evidence. If one is epistemically irresponsible or criticisable only if one forms beliefs on insufficient evidence, then she is not epistemically irresponsible or criticisable. Furthermore, Nina might point out that there cannot be anything wrong with applying higher standards to certain beliefs relative to others because we do this sort of thing all the time in ways that we typically think of as epistemically virtuous. For example, suppose that you want to win the cash prize on an upcoming quiz show on which you are due to make an appearance. During the show, you will be asked several rounds of questions related to horses. You begin to devour all the reliable information about horses that you can. Given that in the quiz it is imperative that you answer correctly, you apply extremely high epistemic standards to your newly acquired equestrian beliefs, double and triple checking everything, only forming beliefs in the relevant propositions once you are completely certain of their veracity. In doing so, you end up with a lot of true beliefs about horses as a result of the higher epistemic standards you apply in this area. And, furthermore, your reason for doing this is epistemically arbitrary—you are motivated by financial reward. So, are we saying that just like Nina, you are epistemically irresponsible and criticisable? We are not. For there is an important difference between the two cases.

The difference between Nina's case and the quiz show case has to do with the fact that Nina is applying different standards to different types of evidence according to whether they support a particular hypothesis—i.e. whether they show her team in a good light or a bad light. In the quiz show case, things are different. Rather than selectively applying higher standards to evidence that disconfirms a hypothesis you do not like, you are simply applying higher standards to all propositions with a domain of interest, irrespective of which hypotheses that evidence supports.

If we then go back to the discussion about friendship, we can now see that just as with Nina, *Weak* views involve a form of motivated reasoning, leading to a problematically biased overall view of our friends. Suppose we form beliefs about our friends only on sufficient evidence. However, suppose also that when we find sufficient evidence to believe something pleasing about our friends we form the belief, while when we find sufficient evidence to believe something displeasing about our friends we apply higher epistemic standards—i.e., we raise the threshold for justified belief, suspend judgement, or reopen the inquiry. We grant that this may involve no direct epistemic norm violation in the sense of forming a belief on insufficient evidence. However, we do take this to be a form of motivated reasoning that involves applying higher epistemic standards to evidence that supports unfavourable hypotheses about one's friends than other evidence. And we take it that engaging in such motivated reasoning is paradigmatically irrational.

The goal of this section was to show that the strategy *Weak* views deploy to avoid the conflict between epistemic norms and friendship norms fails. In the next section, we offer a novel argument against *Strong* views that is grounded in the role played by objective facts in the construction of the paradigmatic cases.

### 3 | FRIENDSHIP AND FACTIVITY

Think back to how the cases are initially set up in the literature. A case is described in which a body of evidence presents a friend in an unfavourable light. The tension arises—if it does—from an apparent normative expectation to form a more favourable belief about one's friend than that

supported by the evidence. The normative expectations of friendship pull in one direction, while the epistemic norms pull in another. One assumption underlying this presentation of the cases is that the actual truth about the friend makes no normative difference. For example, whether or not the friend is in fact a talented poet is seemingly irrelevant to the apparent intuition that we ought to be epistemically partial, given the way the cases are described. This and other cases in the literature are described neutrally, with no mention of whether the impartial belief would be true or false.

There are two ways that the truth about the friend might be relevant to the normative questions that we are interested in. It might affect the epistemic norms, or it might affect the friendship norms. Starting with the former, it is not uncontroversial that epistemic norms are truth-independent. On any factive conception of epistemic norms such as a knowledge norm or a truth norm, whether a belief about one's friend violates epistemic norms will—at least in part—depend on the corresponding truth. But these are not the kind of epistemic norms that Stroud and Keller have in mind when they set the cases up to illustrate normative conflicts. In setting up the cases in the way that they do, Stroud and Keller presuppose an internalist, non-factive conception of an epistemic norm, having to do with responding rationally to the evidence rather than whether the belief in question would be true or known. For this reason, it is unsurprising that the cases are described without stipulating what is true about the friend. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that in order to get the cases going Stroud and Keller need to presuppose a substantive conception of epistemic normativity to the exclusion of alternatives.

If the truth about the friend does not affect the non-factive conception of epistemic normativity that Stroud and Keller presuppose, might it nonetheless affect the normative questions of friendship? Recall the original poetry case. Rebecca hopes to impress an important literary agent at an upcoming poetry reading event. Eric knows Rebecca well but does not have any prior knowledge of her interest or talent in poetry. What should Eric believe about the likely merits of Rebecca's poetry? Keller argues that if Eric is a good friend then his care for her demands that he go against his evidence and form an optimistic attitude about the likely merits of the poetry. But now contrast two possible alternative versions of the case. In version one, Rebecca is indeed a talented poet and will go on to impress the literary agent, securing the publishing deal that she so dearly desires. In version two, Rebecca is a mediocre poet and somewhat embarrasses herself in front of the important literary agent. Is Keller's argument for epistemic partiality unaffected by these changes in the truth conditions for the epistemically partial belief? It is certainly easy to see how Keller's argument works in version one. Even though the evidence suggests her poetry will be mediocre, friendship requires Eric to show a caring attitude, supporting Rebecca by believing in her talents. However, why think that the caring and supportive thing to do in version two is to share in Rebecca's misplaced optimism rather than to recognise the potential for shame and embarrassment in front of the publisher and to attempt to temper Rebecca's expectations so as to avoid disappointment?<sup>9</sup> In this version of the case, where the epistemically partial belief would be false, Keller's argument grounded in care for the friend's wellbeing plausibly supports the conclusion that Eric ought not form an epistemically partial belief.

Similar concerns arise for Stroud's partiality argument grounded in considerations of virtue and a mutual commitment to preserve friendships over time. Suppose for the sake of argument that Stroud is right and that friendship is grounded in mutual recognition of virtue and that we are committed to doing what we can to avoid damaging the friendship. Recall the bad behaviour case in which evidence strongly suggests that your friend acted immorally. As before, consider two alternative versions of the case. In version one, the evidence is misleading and your friend did not in fact commit the alleged transgression. In version two, the evidence is not misleading, your

friend really did commit the transgression. Is the argument based on mutual recognition of virtue and a commitment to avoid damaging the friendship unaffected by these differences to the original case? The first thing to note is that it is only possible to damage the friendship through believing in line with the evidence in version one (assuming the relevant ‘damage’ we are interested in arises from believing something negative but false about your friend). This is because only in that version is it possible for you to form the belief based on the evidence and for that belief to be false. In version two, forming the belief based on the evidence would not damage the friendship in the relevant way because the belief would be true. In this version, it is your friend having committed the transgression that is damaging to a friendship grounded, as Stroud conceives of it, in mutual recognition of virtue. They have let you down by doing wrong, rather than you letting them down by recognising their wrongdoing.

One possible conclusion from all this is that perhaps all Stroud and Keller need is the claim that one ought to be epistemically partial only in those cases where the partial belief would be true. There is no requirement—so the thought would go—to be epistemically partial in contexts where the epistemically partial belief would be false. So long as the friend really is a talented poet, or really is innocent of the alleged transgression, then the good friend will take their friend’s side and form an epistemically partial belief, but otherwise one ought to simply obey the epistemic norms. We might think of this as a factive conception of epistemic partiality insofar as the normative expectation depends on objective facts about the agent. Though this move promises to avoid the above problems, it nonetheless faces bigger problems of its own. If one ought to be epistemically partial in some contexts but not others, then a good friend will need to be sensitive to which context they are in. But how to do this? Suppose Eric is deciding whether to form an epistemically partial belief about Rebecca’s poetry. In order for him to decide whether this is a context that demands partiality, he needs to be able to judge whether Rebecca really is a good poet. But this is precisely the belief about which he is as yet undecided whether to be partial. There is thus no way for Eric to judge whether or not he should be epistemically partial prior to forming a belief about Rebecca’s poetry.

This leaves the *Strong* version of epistemic partiality à la Stroud and Keller in the following position. The claim that friendship may require the violation of epistemic norms can be understood in one of two ways. Either the demand to be epistemically partial is independent of whether the partial belief would be true or it depends on the partial beliefs being true. If the former, then the claim is unmotivated because the arguments Stroud and Keller give in defence of partiality work, if at all, only in those cases where the belief would be true. If the latter, then friendship seems to make impossible demands on us, requiring that we are able to judge whether a belief would be true prior to forming it. Thus, neither of these two ways of understanding the relationship between the *Strong* partiality thesis and the objective facts about friends seems to survive scrutiny. In the next section of the paper, we will consider what we take to be a more attractive picture of the relationship between epistemology and friendship.

#### 4 | FRIENDSHIP, KNOWLEDGE, AND UNDERSTANDING

In the previous section we considered the possible connection between norms of friendship and factive epistemic norms. We found that there was no obvious way to make sense of the partiality thesis in either a fact-sensitive or fact-insensitive manner. Nonetheless, we believe that there is an important connection between friendship and epistemology. These two normative domains are not in conflict. Rather, relations of friendship are themselves partly constituted by epistemic

relations. To be friends with someone is in part to see them for who they truly are. On this view, partiality—insofar as this involves the violation of epistemic norms—is thus at odds with genuine friendship. To the extent that one violates epistemic norms by failing to grasp the truth about someone—either through believing something false or through luckily happening upon the truth—to that same extent one fails as a friend to do what friendship requires.

Call this view an *epistemic conception of friendship*. On an epistemic conception of friendship, our friends are those people who see us for who we truly are. Of course, this claim is merely a necessary condition on friendship. It is possible to see one's enemies for who they truly are, for example. And a bond of friendship may be broken without a loss of knowledge. Nonetheless, genuine friendship cannot exist without a shared knowledge of one another. Furthermore, this conception presupposes a graded notion of friendship: we do not always know everything about our friends, and we have a deeper relationship with some than with others. In some cases, we get to know something important about a friend years after having developed the friendship. What we typically say in circumstances of this sort is that we have now learned something more about who they truly are and, as a result, our friendship has deepened.

The plausibility of this view is evident when considering whether it is conceivable to be friends with a person whom one does not know. Not in the sense of being unacquainted with the person—obviously one cannot be friends with a stranger—but in the sense of not understanding who they truly are, what they are like, what motivates them, and so on. We take it that deep, systematic failures to see the truth about someone preclude genuine friendship.

One interesting implication of the epistemic conception of friendship is that it is possible to be mistaken about whether one is friends with someone. Consider how you would feel upon discovering that a person whom you took to be one of your closest friends turned out to be an impostor. As far-fetched as the possibility may sound, we are nonetheless all familiar with cases of undercover police officers or spies forming intimate relationships with the subjects of their inquiries, often spending years living a false life. The notorious 'spy cops' scandal in the UK is one particularly disturbing example in which victims were lured into romantic, sexual relationships with undercover police officers. One such victim, Donna McLean, learned that a man who she had been engaged to was in fact an undercover police officer, was married to another woman, and had fed McLean a fabricated story about his life and background. Looking back on the relationship, McLean writes that she had "discovered my partner of two years didn't exist."<sup>10</sup> The epistemic conception of friendship entails that McLean was mistaken about whether she had a genuine friendship with this person.<sup>11</sup> Given that she was wildly mistaken about who this person truly was, the epistemic conception of friendship entails that there was no friendship there to begin with. This lines up with McLean's own view that the person she thought she was friends with did not in fact exist.

We are not the first to advocate for an epistemic conception of friendship. Nor even are we the first to advocate such a view in relation to the epistemic partiality debate. Katherine Dormandy (2022) has defended an epistemic view of special relationships according to which they issue norms of belief, more specifically standard epistemic norms that promote accuracy in belief. According to Dormandy, in other words, adhering to epistemic norms is what makes love and friendship excellent. This means that there can be cases in which one is committed to giving up on epistemic norms while forming beliefs about a friend or a loved one but in such cases, friendship or love are not as excellent as they could be (218). A fully realised relationship is one in which each party has an accurate view of—i.e., accurate beliefs about—the other.

Another version of an epistemic conception of friendship is Cathy Mason's account of friendship as a relationship constituted by knowledge (2020, 2021, 2023). Mason's view is itself inspired

by Iris Murdoch's writing on the philosophy of love (1959, 1970), according to which love, or friendship, has "an epistemic dimension" involving knowledge, discovery, or perception of the individual and reality (2023). Mason proposes an epistemic conception of love in which part of what it means to love another is to see them as they truly are, where this amounts to knowing them. Love is constituted in part by one's knowledge of the object of love. Three features of Murdoch's view of love are key to Mason's account of friendship: first, the above states are meant to be factive ones; second, the relationship calls for gradual progress towards a deeper knowledge of the friend; third and finally, the kind of knowledge that matters for friendship is knowledge about a friend's character, deeply held beliefs, and values (2020, p. 2449). On these grounds, Mason argues that there is no room for a clash between epistemic norms and friendship norms: just as acquiring accurate beliefs about a friend contributes to the growth of the relationship, likewise forming inaccurate beliefs about them damages the relationship.<sup>12</sup>

We are sympathetic to both conceptions of love and friendship, as they contribute to dismantling the idea of an irresolvable conflict of norms between epistemology and friendship—namely, one that leaves us wondering which one to sacrifice depending on the peculiar features of the situation.<sup>13</sup> However, we want to suggest the epistemic state truly relevant to friendship is not propositional knowledge but rather *understanding*. Propositional knowledge alone is not enough to ground friendship. One must also understand how these propositions 'hang together', as it were. In other words, we agree that seeing our friends for who they are involves knowing their virtues and vices, personal qualities, deep commitments, values, and so on. What we dispute is that *knowledge about* such things suffices to let us see them for who they are—or know them as a person, as Mason has it (2449). If intended in a factive sense (e.g., Kvanvig, 2003; Kelp, 2021; Pritchard, 2009), *objectual* understanding is the more apposite epistemic state (Carter & Gordon, 2014). For one thing, objectual understanding involves a network of propositions about a topic and requires grasping the relations that make the network a coherent set—mere propositional knowledge will not suffice. For another, it involves the ability to make sense of new pieces of information within the network as well as the ability to address a wider range of questions about such topics. Thus, in the case of friendship, having objectual understanding of a friend amounts to, say, grasping the relationship between their values and their upbringing, as well as being able to explain why they might have behaved a particular way in a given situation. Not only does framing an epistemic conception of friendship in terms of understanding make better sense of what it takes to see a friend for who they truly are. It also explains why the process of cultivating a friendship amounts to broadening and deepening our understanding of them—that is, making room for new information concerning them in a coherent network of beliefs—rather than merely acquiring more propositional knowledge about them.

One might worry that this notion of understanding objectifies friends in a problematic way. Inquiring into what makes a person act a certain way, how their values shape their decisions, and so on, is the role of the psychotherapist, not the role of a loving friend. The attitudes one ought to take towards a friend will not be those of the disinterested enquirer, but those of the sympathetic listener. To the extent that understanding is relevant to friendship, so this objection goes, it is not *objectual* understanding that is required but rather something like *empathy*. Friendship involves attuning to our friends' emotional states and deploying our imagination to put ourselves in their shoes: that is, the empathic response typical of those who 'feel for us', which is not the same thing as objectual understanding.

By way of response, note that nothing we have argued for conflicts with a widely shared view according to which friendship has an affective dimension, requiring mutual caring, empathy, and love. Compatible with the epistemic conception of friendship, there may be additional normative



dimensions of friendship. These may include expectations to respond affectively in appropriate ways to certain situations—for example, feeling care and sympathy for a friend currently going through a tough ordeal.<sup>14</sup> The epistemic conception we have defended here is not an alternative to this affective dimension of friendship but is complimentary to it. Moreover, this affective side of friendship may even form the basis of certain forms of understanding relevant to friendship. For example, Olivia Bailey argues that empathy represents “a unique source of a particular form of understanding” which she calls “humane understanding” (2022). This consists of “the direct apprehension of the intelligibility of others’ emotions” (ibid). The emotional lives and perspectives of our friends is, therefore, just one of many objects of understanding relevant to the epistemic conception of friendship we have defended.<sup>15</sup>

We also agree that therapists ought to acquire a high degree of objectual understanding of their patients. Yet this does not entail that objectual understanding is not necessary for friendship. Friends need not reach the degree of objectual understanding that therapists have of their patients, but on the epistemic conception we have proposed here acquiring some degree of objectual understanding allows us to provide the support we expect of each other qua friends. Without understanding of how our friends react to personal challenges and why they are considering quitting their job to opt for a different career, we would not be able to figure out whether we are expected to encourage their move or to help them appreciate their professional value and to suggest they persevere in their current position. Situations of this sort strike us as cases in which advice is not only welcome from therapists but also from friends who see us for who we truly are.

Where does this leave us with respect to the initial claim that friendship requires epistemic partiality and to the cases which purportedly illustrate this phenomenon? The view we have been exploring agrees with defenders of partiality over one thing: friendship generates normative obligations for belief. Where the view departs with the partialist thesis is over whether these normative obligations conflict with the ordinary epistemic norms governing belief. Partialists hold that our obligations towards our friends can indeed conflict with ordinary epistemic norms, requiring us to form beliefs that violate those norms. In contrast, the present view holds that while friendship does generate special obligations concerning what we ought to believe, these are in harmony with our epistemic obligations, requiring that we understand who our friends truly are.

One consequence of this is that the original cases do not illustrate a genuine normative clash, since no such clash exists on the present view. This will count against the present proposal to the extent that the cases elicit a strong intuition of epistemic partiality. But we take it to be far from clear what intuitions the original cases generate. Should Eric believe against his evidence that Rebecca’s poetry will be exceptional? As we argued in section 3, this may depend on further details of the case that are yet to be spelt out, as well as on which version of epistemic normativity one favours. For example, what Eric ought to believe about Rebecca may depend on what Eric is in a position to know or understand about Rebecca’s poetry. If Rebecca is indeed a talented poet, then it may be incumbent on Eric as her friend to see the truth of this. But if Rebecca is lacking in talent and therefore on the verge of embarrassing herself in front of a literary agent, then a good friend such as Eric ought to be sensitive to this and to whether some form of intervention may be required. We take this to be the mark of good friendship. Rather than steadfast optimism, friendship requires *insight*. The good friend is able to see truths that others may miss—whether those truths reveal our best qualities or our worst.



## 5 | CONCLUDING REMARKS

Epistemic partiality in friendship is a normative dilemma. If correct, there are situations where one cannot satisfy the normative obligations of friendship and the normative obligations of epistemology. Some philosophers have attempted to make sense of the ways in which friendship can legitimately require the violation of epistemic norms, others have attempted to show that a more nuanced understanding of our epistemic options allows us to account for partiality without epistemic norm violation. If we have been successful here, then we have shown that all such attempts to make sense of epistemic partiality fail. And furthermore, we should expect them to fail because friendship, far from being in tension with the aims and values of epistemology, is in fact grounded in the epistemic. Good friends understand who their friends truly are.

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### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>The other way to address the problem, on Stroud's view, is to hold that epistemic norms are incommensurable with the norms of friendship. While according to the clash-solution norms of friendship can trump epistemic norms and dictate what we ought to believe simpliciter, according to the incommensurability-solution we cannot expect to find out what we should believe simpliciter by contrasting the respective demands.

<sup>2</sup>For a discussion of further arguments in favour of Strong views of epistemic partiality, see Dormandy (2022), Mason (2023).

<sup>3</sup>One further option for a form of weak partiality that we do not consider here appeals to the special epistemic role that trust plays in friendship. See, for example, Faulkner (2018) and also Marušić (2015). On such trust-based accounts of friendship, we are able to be epistemically partial towards our friends without violating epistemic norms by trusting their testimony where it might not be epistemically rational to trust similar testimony coming from a non-friend. We set aside these accounts for present purposes given that the kind of cases of epistemic partiality we are interested in are not cases involving testimony from a friend.

- <sup>4</sup>For the sake of completeness, note that Kawall also discusses an independent strategy grounded in fallibilism (2013, pp. 368–369).
- <sup>5</sup>See also Goldberg (2023).
- <sup>6</sup>It's important to note that while Goldberg focuses on a testimonial exchange with our friend, value-reflecting reasons work in the exact same way in exchanges with third parties reporting about a friend of ours.
- <sup>7</sup>In addition to raising the epistemic standards for negative beliefs about a friend, the pragmatic encroachment and permissivist approaches may also work here by *lowering* the epistemic standards when it comes to believing something *positive* about a friend. This does not seem to be an option for the zetetic approach, which can only *raise* standards by requiring double-checking, further inquiry, and so on.
- <sup>8</sup>'All else equal' here can be taken to mean that even if the evidence about her team is equally distributed between positive and negative propositions, nonetheless, Nina is highly likely to end up with more positive beliefs than negative beliefs.
- <sup>9</sup>For a related argument against the idea that a supportive attitude in the poetry case requires Eric to believe that Rebecca's poetry will be good, see Arpaly and Brinkerhoff (2018, p. 43), Dormandy (2022, p. 217), and Kawall (2013, p. 357).
- <sup>10</sup><https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2022/jan/29/spy-cops-engaged-to-undercover-police-officer-everything-was-a-lie>
- <sup>11</sup>This is of course a case of romantic love rather than platonic friendship. However, the normative obligations we are interested in will apply to both. One ought to see the truth of one's romantic partners, and failures to do so will undermine the possibility of genuine romantic love. This is reflected in the cliché that one ought to love someone for who they are, not who one wants them to be. Thus, for present purposes we ignore the distinction and treat these two forms of friendship as one.
- <sup>12</sup>For the sake of completeness, it might be worth highlighting two relevant respects in which Dormandy's view differs from Mason's. First, as we have just mentioned, Mason's view focuses on knowing the loved one or the friend as a constitutive dimension of the relationship, Dormandy's focus is on following epistemic norms of accuracy out of a care for such knowledge (2022: 218). Second, while Dormandy's view is normative in the sense that it provides criteria for evaluating an excellent friendship, Mason's is descriptive in the sense that it illustrates the nature of love and friendship.
- <sup>13</sup>For another version of an epistemic conception of friendship, see Crawford (2019).
- <sup>14</sup>For an overview of the affective dimensions of friendship see Helm (2021).
- <sup>15</sup>See also Callahan's account of re-conceived understanding (2018).

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