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### Aesthetics and Art of Friendship

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# 13

## Aesthetics and the Art of Friendship

*Sheila Lintott*

What is so pleasant as these jets of affection which make a young world for me again? What so delicious as a just and firm encounter of two, in thought and feeling? How beautiful, on their approach to this beating heart, the steps and forms of the gifted and the true?

Ralph Waldo Emerson, 'Friendship'

In the spirit of exploring fresh perspectives, I offer this investigation into the aesthetic aspects of personal relationships with a focus on friendship.<sup>1</sup> Glossing the aesthetic aspects of friendship, as we too often do, impoverishes our understanding of the value and meaning of friendships, relationships which give shape and content to our lives, which animate our lives or, as Nancy Sherman (1993) puts it, relationships which structure the good life. The friendships we forge and those we forgo, the loves we cultivate and those we lose, these varying and variable relations broaden (or impoverish) our experiences, intensify (or diminish) our feelings, and help (or hinder) our self understanding and self creation. I wish to explore here how friendships are aesthetic expressions and impressions in and of our lives, as form and color are aesthetic expressions and impressions in and of paintings. I do so by pursuing an analogy between art and friendship as well as by investigating some of the aesthetic aspects of friendship: how cultivating and enjoying friendship invites creative and relatively free expressions of self, the ways aesthetic taste factors into with whom we are friends, and the manner in which friendships can help to harmoniously round out a life.

## 1 Friendship: freedom and openness

Ralph Waldo Emerson (1991) explains that with a friend, ‘I may think aloud...I may drop even those undermost garments of dissimulation, courtesy, and second thought, which men never put off, and may deal with him with the simplicity and wholeness with which one chemical atom meets another’ (p. 225). Friendship, along these lines, is sometimes compared to a home, to a place where one is comfortable and can be her true self, a place where she can shed the various masks she dons throughout her day. We need not put on airs for our good friends, at least not typically, and we feel confident that they know and like us for who we are, blemishes and all. We might say that there is a good degree of interpersonal freedom found in friendship which allows for greater creative expressions of self, greater both quantitatively and qualitatively. Friendship is a site rich in potential for the sort of creative activity that is most commonly associated with art appreciation and art making.

Compared to most other social interactions, friends are relatively free in the company of one another. There is little by way of a social script for friends to follow. As Alexander Nehamas points out, friendship is difficult to represent pictorially because there are no necessary or typical activities associated with it, unlike the relationships we foster with parents, lovers, and co-workers. Friends, he tells us, can be doing anything together, from fighting with one another to embracing in a tender hug. This makes it difficult to read friendship off any single moment:

We can’t tell whether two people are friends simply by looking at them on a particular occasion any more than we can do so in painting, because there is no clear path that leads from a discrete interaction between two people to their friendship. Even dying for me – that staple of our mythology of friendship – does not necessarily show that you are my friend. (Nehamas 2010, p. 269)

A less eloquent way of expressing this observation is to say that there seem to be relatively few clichés to fall into in friendships, whereas the feeling that one is behaving in a common, at worst, even cliché manner can be uncomfortably common among lovers and within families.

So, there is a degree of freedom in friendship that is not common in other social interactions, even other intimate relations. This freedom, of course, demands as much as it affords: we are supposed to be sincere, honest, and ‘real’ with our friends. This freedom is enacted both in

moments of receptivity and in moments of expressivity. Friendship demands sincere curiosity and an attitude of openness, lest our encounters with friends be reduced to utilitarian exchanges or narcissistic co-existence. Consider Yi-Fu Tuan's characterization of a good person: 'One kind of definition of a good person, or a moral person, is that that person does not impose his or her fantasy on another. That is, he's willing to acknowledge the reality of other individuals, or even of the tree or the rock. So to be able to stand and listen' (Yi-Fu Tuan, quoted in Saito 1998, p. 135). Admittedly, the ability to 'stand and listen' is not a sufficient condition for being a moral person, but it seems to be a necessary one.<sup>2</sup> Likewise, when friends 'stand and listen' to one another, they act out of friendship and are being good people in Tuan's sense.

The openness required in friendship is similar to that required in art appreciation. Yuriko Saito applies Tuan's conception of a good person to the aesthetic realm and argues that as art and nature appreciators, provided we wish to engage in genuine appreciation, we must attend to the object of appreciation on its own terms. Following Dewey, she maintains that 'art... both challenges and entices us to overcome (at least to a certain extent) the confines of our own perspective by inviting us to visit an often unfamiliar world created by the artist' (Saito 1998, p. 136). To visit that unfamiliar world, one needs to be able to see past one's own agenda and obsessions. Jerome Stolnitz (1960), for example, describes the aesthetic attitude as one that is disinterested and sympathetic. In other words, when appreciating something or someone aesthetically, one should not be preoccupied with, but rather distanced from her own interests or expectations, yet simultaneously, one should also be deeply attentive to the object of appreciation.

When we truly appreciate something or someone's aesthetic features, we do so, as Saito (1998) puts it, on its own terms, not on ours. Arnold Berleant (2005) comments on the power of the aesthetic when it is engaged in openly: 'From the central place accorded perceptual awareness, aesthetic experience is, at least in principle, unconstrained by preconceptions...' and 'those who can set aside the preconceptions of aesthetic distance... may discover that the fullest and most intense experiences of art and natural beauty reveal an intimate absorption in the wonder and vulnerability of the aesthetic' (p. 152). Likewise, one who cares for one's friend and wishes to understand her is invested in her world; she strives to refrain from projecting her own agenda and expectations on her friend. Of course, this is an ideal and, moreover, one which some individuals are better able to approximate than others. My contention is that like Tuan's good person, a good friend, all things

being equal, can set one's agenda aside, allowing a friend's needs or desires to trump her own. The balance of this other-regarding behavior fluctuates in friendship as the lives that surround a friendship fluctuate as well. In moments of openness with friends, we are also free to create ourselves with our friends and are expected to help and allow them to create themselves. In this mutual freedom we find wonder and vulnerability; comparing the attitudes and approaches of good friends with those of good aesthetic appreciators discloses a parity that is remarkable.

## **2 Friendship: from freedom to creativity**

We do not generally apply means-ends thinking within friendships. Elizabeth Telfer (1970–1) warns against trying to take such pragmatic shortcuts in the process of forming friendships, shortcuts that she argues are counter-productive; if one aims explicitly at an end, such as accumulating friendships, one thereby curtails the free expression and freedom to explore found in the forming and maintaining of friendships:

Too much dwelling on the values of friendship has its own dangers. It may lead people to concentrate on looking for friendships rather than friends... it may well be that this attitude ... is also self-defeating: in other words, that we attain the valuable relationship of friendship only when we cease to think about it and concentrate on the friend himself. (p. 241)

In this warning we hear echoes of familiar sentiments about creating art. Artists are often told 'to stop thinking; stop evaluating; just do what feels right'. Andy Warhol (1975), for example, says:

When I have to think about it, I know the picture is wrong. And sizing is a form of thinking and coloring is too. My instinct about painting says, 'If you don't think about it, it's right'. As soon as you have to decide and choose, it's wrong. And the more you decide about, the more wrong it gets. (p. 149)

Telfer's warning is also comparable to the distinction Collingwood draws between the creation of art and that of craft. Craft, he maintains, always involves a predetermined end that the craftsperson aims to achieve, whereas with art, there is not necessarily a goal or set end: 'the poet extemporizing his verses, the sculptor playing with his clay... the

artist has no idea what the experience is which demands expression until he has expressed it. What he wants to say is not present to him as an end towards which means have to be devised; it becomes clear to him only as the poem takes shape in his mind, or the clay in his fingers' (Collingwood 1958, p. 29). For Collingwood, art-making is more about process than product. Comparably, a friend is less focused on the goal of making or maintaining a friendship than on the way in which the friendship itself motivates and inspires. In a similar vein, Michael Stocker (1993) argues against purely teleological characterizations of acts of friendship, explaining that, 'when one acts out of friendship, friendship is not, as such, a goal, but rather it plays both a sensitivity and a *sine qua non* role' (p. 253).

According to Charles Thomas Taylor (2006), 'friendship is essentially subjective, not objective; a habit, not a methodology; and an art, not a science' (p. 92). In other words, friendships and their respective codes are created by the subjects involved in them while in the process of creating them. As we have discussed in the previous section, freedom plays a key role in friendship and Laurence Thomas offers a way to understand the freedom in friendship that helps illuminate some of the creative activity inherent in friendship. Thomas puts social interactions on a continuum from those that are maximally structured to those that are minimally structured, where maximally structured social interactions are highly governed by social roles, rules, and conventions, and in minimally structured social interactions, factors such as roles, rules, and conventions are less relevant. Thomas (1993) maintains that most social relationships are structured to a high degree, with the notable exceptions of friendship and love:

Friendships and romantic loves are characteristically and paradigmatically minimally structured interpersonal relationships. Even matters of etiquette and protocol are often put aside. We would not know quite what to make of two such individuals who, for instance, insisted upon addressing each other formally or holding each other to the minutest detail of etiquette when they are alone together, save that this was a precious form of amusement between the two of them. Deep friendships and romantic love are the only two forms of interpersonal relationships in which the two parties interact immensely and frequently, but yet, aside from the rules of morality, the nature of that interaction is not defined by this or that set of social rules. (p. 51)

This freedom from rules and expectations is reminiscent of the freedom that can be felt in artistic creation. The aesthetic notion of genius is another point of comparison that highlights the freedom and creativity in both art and friendship. Perhaps a good friend is a sort of interpersonal genius. Kant (1987), for example, conceives of artistic genius as follows: ‘*Genius* is the talent (natural endowment) that gives the rule to art’ (p. 174). The genius doesn’t follow any rules, but rather makes her own rules in the process of creating. The absence of rules, however, is not to be likened to an absence of the property of being exemplary:

Genius is a *talent* for producing something for which no determinate rule can be given, not a predisposition consisting of a skill for something that can be learned by following some rule or other; hence the foremost property of genius must be *originality*... Since nonsense too can be original, the products of genius must also be models, i.e., they must be *exemplary*; hence, though they do not themselves arise through imitation, still they must serve others for this, i.e., as a standard or a rule by which to judge. (Kant 1987, p. 175)

An excellent friendship is not excellent because it is like other excellent friendships. Montaigne (1991) describes his peerless friendship with La Boétie in such a fashion: ‘This friendship has had no ideal to follow other than itself; no comparison but with itself.’ (p. 10). An excellent friendship is excellent in and of itself and on its own terms, but it may also serve as an ideal, as a model which other friendships, in their more formative stages, might follow. Perhaps it’s an exaggeration to say that there are no rules in art or friendship, but those that exist are more rules of thumb or guidelines than strict and specific codes of conduct and creation. A good friend, like a good artist, is able to succeed in original and context sensitive ways within the loose bounds of convention (Berleant 2005, p. 155). For example, in my friendship with my dearest friends, although I admittedly behave in some conventional ways, the vast majority of our interactions feel improvised on the spot.

### 3 Friendship: escape from alienation

The bonding or feeling of camaraderie with another is reminiscent of a kind of pleasure one might derive from the aesthetic experience of art. Lewis’s (1960) description of finding another self in friendship is potent: ‘It is when two such persons discover one another, when whether with

immense difficulties and semi-articulate fumbblings or with what would seem to us an amazing and elliptical speed, they share their vision – it is then that Friendship is born, and instantly they stand together in an immense solitude’ (p. 65). Compare this with Tolstoy’s (1996) description of the communion, indeed the spiritual union, found in the apprehension of great art:

The receiver of a true artistic impression is so unified to the artist that he feels as if the work were his own and not someone else’s – as if what it expresses were just what he had long been wishing to express. A real work of art destroys, in the consciousness of the receiver, the separation between himself and the artist...In this freeing of our personality from its separation and isolation, in this uniting of it with others, lies the chief characteristic and the great attractive force of art. (pp. 139–40)

Friendship is an obvious example of one way we seek to escape alienation and loneliness. But in addition to finding companionship, in friendship we can experience an awareness of self with other that is similarly enjoyed via art appreciation. As Arnold Berleant (2005) claims, ‘in both art and love we may have a sense of being in place, of a dissolution of barriers and boundaries, of communion. And in both an intimate connection can develop. Such connectedness, such continuity, such engagement lie at the very centre of the aesthetic’ (p. 156). Like art, friendship destroys or at least momentarily obscures the awareness of a division between self and others: when with a friend, we can become aware that we are in the presence of, as Aristotle put it, ‘another self’ (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1166a32). Even in silence with a friend, we can feel a sense of communion. In fact, even when alone, provided one knows she has a true friend somewhere, she may not feel lonely.

Another way humans find relief from alienation is in play. To some, including me, play is an essential element in a good life. For example, Martha Nussbaum (1999) includes play, which she characterizes as ‘being able to laugh, to play, to enjoy recreational activities’ in her list of activities that together are definitive of a *human* life (p. 42). Focusing on the role of play and playfulness in friendship also helps point up similarities between the value and the creation of friendship and of art. The concept of play is extremely important in many theories of aesthetics; the so-called play-theory was once a leading theory of art which we can find evidence of at least as early as Plato, and also in Schiller, Kant, Hegel, and Spencer. What is play but an activity that



is enjoyable for its own sake and perhaps for the sake of some other end? The end in play, for example, winning a game, is not everything (although admittedly it's not nothing either); it's worth playing even if you lose. According to play-theories of art, the artist adopts a playful attitude in the process of creating art. Playfulness opens up possibility; self-consciousness and norms constrain it. As Warhol advises artists: 'Don't think about making art, just get it done. Let everyone else decide whether it's good or bad, whether they love it or hate it. While they're deciding, make even more art' (Warhol quoted in Makos 2002, p. 112). And although to some, play connotes something trivial, a life without play would hardly resemble a human life, and definitely not a desirably human life. As Lewis (1960) says, 'Friendship is unnecessary, like philosophy, like art... It has no survival value; rather it is one of those things which give value to survival' (p. 71). And as Aristotle says, 'no one would choose to live life without friends even if he had all other goods' (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1155a5).

The playfulness one is likely to feel in the company of friends has potential beyond its mere enjoyment. This playfulness allows one to see beyond the given, to envision alternatives to the status quo. When we feel safe and free, we can be playful. Among friends playfulness should flourish. The social and political importance of playfulness is also underscored by María Lugones in her inspiring essay, 'Playfulness, "World"-Travelling, and Loving Perceptions' in which she explores the importance of playfulness in a human life. She says, playfulness is 'in part, an openness to being a fool, which is a combination of not worrying about competence, not being self-important, not taking norms as sacred, and finding ambiguity and double edges a source of wisdom and delight' (Lugones 1987, p. 17). Friendship, like art that engages our imagination, can help us see anew and feel less alone. Amy Mullin (2003) explores how feminist art does just that:

The imagination involves our capacity to think in detailed ways about states of affairs with which we are not immediately acquainted. We can imagine the past and the future, and we can imagine as well states of affairs that may never or could never exist. Through our imaginations, we can explore both possibilities and impossibilities, and combine things not generally seen as coexisting. It is uncontroversial to maintain that artworks may imaginatively explore patterns, colors, shapes, the movement of bodies, and the interaction of a number of such elements. It should be uncontroversial, as well, to acknowledge that artworks may imaginatively explore moral and

political ideas, and the emotional responses they engender. When artworks attempt to explore aspects of our moral and political lives, they may have both artistic and moral or political significance. (pp. 196–7)

Marilyn Friedman (1989) also articulates this power of friendship, one that I maintain it shares with (at least some) art: ‘Friendship is more likely than many other close personal relationships to provide social support for people who are idiosyncratic, whose un-conventional values and deviant life-styles make them victims of intolerance from family members and others who are unwillingly related to them. In this regard, friendship has socially disruptive possibilities’ (p. 286). Friendship and art are both potential sources of solace and inspiration, places where the disenfranchised can feel enfranchised.

#### 4 Aesthetics: ties that bind

Let’s now explore a truth that might be difficult to admit: we choose our friends partly for aesthetic reasons, that is, due to their personal appearance, their aesthetic likes and interests, and their projected persona. It seems that aesthetic similarities are one major factor in friendships, and social science research supports this conjecture. For example, in a recent set of four studies, psychologists found that people are most likely to behave in a friendly manner toward and congregate with those who seem, based on sensory perception, similar to them; and salient similarities include not only race and gender, but also factors such as hair color and length and the wearing of eyeglasses (Mackinnon, Gordon, and Wilson 2011). This initial self-sorting helps to further explain previously noted correlations between friends’ levels of attractiveness (Cash and Derlega 1978). Finding someone’s physical appearance welcoming and attractive because they seem like us is often the first step in social exchanges. Admiring or being captivated by another’s appearance and projected persona can motivate further curiosity and instill a sense of comfort, which together might give way to active listening and self-disclosure – both key elements in friendship. In at least one sense, we are attracted to our friends in a manner akin to the way we are attracted to our lovers.

Attraction and similarities in appearance are not the only aesthetic factors at work in friendship. As C.S. Lewis (1960) explains, ‘friendship arises out of mere Companionship 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)' (p. 65). The shared element in question is sometimes a shared aesthetic taste, for example, a shared liking for something like steampunk, opera, folk art, pinot noir, or B-horror films. The realization that another shares your aesthetic interests and taste can help to solidify a nascent friendship. If David Hume (1998) is correct that 'we choose our favorite author as we do our friend, from conformity of humour and disposition' (p. 150), then it is not surprising that shared aesthetic tastes and interests are good indicators of potential for friendship.

Aesthetic attraction between individuals based on personal appearance and shared aesthetic tastes can lead to great friendships, but these aesthetic groundings of friendship are also potentially socially and politically problematic. Friendship, after all, is by its nature exclusionary and leads to preferential treatment. We think it perfectly natural for and indeed expect people to privilege their friends. The fact that people are most likely to befriend others like them raises important issues related to, for example, racism, sexism, homophobia, classism, and ableism.

Take social class as an example. Class is often associated with very specific aesthetic and artistic tastes: 'At its most basic, class is one way societies sort themselves out...Classes are groups of people of similar economic and social position; people who, for that reason, may share political attitudes, lifestyles, consumption patterns, cultural interests, and opportunities to get ahead' (Scott and Leonhardt 2005, p. 8). Artistic tastes tend to differ along class lines, although admittedly not without exception. David Novitz argues that there are clear political reasons for such artistic divisions. Again, it seems that people seek comfort; as Novitz (1989) explains: 'The dominant classes...find high art congenial. Art that raises disturbing political, moral, economic, or religious issues, that questions gender relations, or points a finger at the sexism, racism or economic injustices that abound in our society, is sometimes dismissed as mere propaganda, or, at best, as popular or as political art' (p. 224). And aesthetic class divisions are not only political; they are also economic, based on what people can afford. People who divide their time between different classes, perhaps working in a setting inhabited by people of high socioeconomic class relative to their own, are aware of subtle marks of fit or alienation; they are 'sensitive to the cultural significance of the cars people drive, the food they serve at parties, where they go on vacation – all the little clues that indicate social status' (Scott and Leonhardt 2005, pp. 64–5). These 'little clues' function to produce a predominance of class segregated friendships,

which, with their close bonds and preferential treatment, tend to perpetuate the concentration of wealth and influence in the hands of a few.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, as Friedman (1989) points out, these relationships can be stifling, as ‘besides excluding or suppressing outsiders, the practices and traditions of numerous communities are exploitative and oppressive toward many of their own members’ (p. 281). Many people, for example many women, homosexuals, and persons of color, know the feeling of being alone in a crowd, of finding themselves nested in a community of ‘friends’ whose values and commitments one feels at odds with.

Whether we are aware of it or not, we are constantly interpreting the self-presentations of those with whom we have contact, and sometimes our interpretation moves from aesthetic apprehension to moral evaluation based on mere associations and without ample evidence for the moral assessment. In her excellent book *Staring: How We Look*, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson discusses ableism and the cultural construction of the disabled body. Garland-Thomson (2009) explores examples of ways in which we interpret persons based on their appearance, from perception to association and judgment:

We are exquisitely sensitive to the nuances of meaning encoded in appearance variations and to the rituals of social encounter that tell us who we are in relation to others. Think of the hint implied in a wink, the moral equation of good posture and upstanding citizenship, the gendered connotations of sitting with one’s legs spread apart. (p. 38)

These associations are dangerous because, although they are merely metaphorical in origin, they can become literal in use. Consider, Garland-Thomson urges us, the implications of the associations with bodily comportment and posture for a person with facial tics or who navigates the world in a wheel chair; a person with facial tics might be taken as winking or even as manic, and a person in a wheelchair, regardless of posture, is unlikely to be associated with the resolve and confidence of a standing person with excellent posture. She asserts that ‘someone permanently seated in a wheelchair...confounds the usual interpretive web of social significances clustering around what we might call the postural arrangement of bodies’ (Garland-Thomson 2009, p. 38).

The connections between cultural clues and friendship and between friendship and preferential treatment should concern us. And we should work to cross aesthetic and cultural boundaries in social interactions,

to trouble cultural associations between appearance and moral virtues and vices, and to find some less obvious common ground on which to meet. Doing so is required for the sake of diversity and equality, but also for our own sakes – for we can learn so much from our friends, and this potential is severely diminished when our friends are all carbon copies of one another and ourselves. As Socrates asks in the *Lysis*, ‘when something, anything at all, is like something else, how can it benefit or harm its like in a way that it could not benefit or harm itself?’ (214e). Some commonalities must hold us together with our friends, but there is a wide variety of possible commonalities, perhaps a shared history or a shared commitment, and differences between the friends must exist in friendship so that the friends can learn from and about one another and about themselves. Among our friends, we should seek beauty as Francis Hutcheson (2004) conceives of it, ‘Uniformity amidst Variety’ (p. 28); something should tie us to each friend, but not the same thing in every case, and much variety should enter into the mix.

## 5 The ineffability of friendship and aesthetics

G.E. Moore thinks that the personal affection felt in friendships is directed at a person we assess in a positive aesthetic light, but he insists that the knowledge of the person’s character and personality serves to enhance our apprehension and appreciation of them as an aesthetic object. In *Principia Ethica* he explains as follows:

In the case of personal affection, the object itself is not *merely* beautiful...but is itself, in part at least, of great intrinsic value. All the constituents which we have found to be necessary to the most valuable aesthetic enjoyments, namely, appropriate emotion, cognition of truly beautiful qualities, and true belief, are all equally necessary here; but we have the additional fact that the object must be not only truly beautiful, but also truly good in a high degree. (Moore 1929, p. 203)

Moore continues, musing over how mental or subjective states are instantiated by appropriate physical expression and appearance:

Wherever the [personal] affection is most valuable, the appreciation of mental qualities must form a large part of it, and... the presence of this part makes the whole far more valuable than it could have been without it. But it seems very doubtful whether this appreciation, by

itself, can possess as much value as the whole in which it is combined with an appreciation of the appropriate *corporeal* expression of the mental qualities in question. (p. 203)

It's also worth noting that friends are not only attracted to one another's personal appearance and aesthetic tastes; friendships deepen as a result of a mutual understanding and appreciation of one another's person and persona. Contra Aristotle, we can form true friendships based not only on virtue; more so, we like our friends for who they are as people, for their character, which includes not only their virtues, but also their vices. The mixture of virtues and vices, habits and peeves, and likes and dislikes as they intermingle in a friend result in a distinctive and unique individual whom we love for being just as they are.

A personal example will help me explore this insight. My dearest friend, we'll call her 'P' because she is intensely private, is the most beautiful woman I have ever met.<sup>4</sup> When I say that P is beautiful, however, I don't only mean that she is physically beautiful (which she is, very much so; she is a woman whose presence literally causes men to walk into walls). P, however, is a beautiful person in every sense. She is beautiful *and* she looks beautiful. She is, as we sometimes say, beautiful on the *inside* as well as on the outside. She is a brilliant scientist, a caring mother, and an incredibly generous and fun and funny person. Of course, she is more than all of that and I cannot possibly connote here even half of the special features that make her so wonderful, both in herself and, to me even more so, in our friendship. However, neither is she nor our friendship flawless. Perfection is not beauty; perfection is boring, beauty is interesting. Kathleen Higgins (2000) argues that flawlessness is one of the contemporary 'false paradigms of beauty' that has 'obscured the fact that human beauty manifests an ideal of balance and health that is neither self-conscious nor a consequence of deliberate effort' (p. 87).

So, just as we don't want to reserve valuable friendships for moral saints alone, neither should we want to reserve valuable friendship for aesthetic saints alone. For example, P can be impatient, proud, and stubborn and we sometimes butt heads because we share these traits. Yet, this occasional friction also grounds a deep mutual respect and creates precisely the friendship we have. Without these 'flaws', she wouldn't be P and our friendship wouldn't be as it is; I wouldn't feel for her or our friendship just as I do. And I absolutely cherish her and our friendship. Indeed, I wouldn't be precisely who I am if she were flawless; our friendship, which has spanned most of my life, and all the virtues and vices

that have been honed and dulled within it have helped to create me. Over many years, we have grown and learned with and through one another; for example, due to my close friendship with P I have gotten a sense of what life is like for the visually stunning and have learned, to my surprise, that is it a mixed blessing and curse.

Perhaps 'liking' as understood by Elizabeth Telfer best captures what I mean by being attracted to a friend's persona. Actually, Telfer's (1970–1) account is quite relevant here as she explicitly refers to the liking involved in friendship as a 'quasi-aesthetic attitude':

Liking is a difficult phenomenon to analyze. Although it is a reason for seeking someone's company, it is not simply equivalent to enjoyment of his company, as might first seem, as we can for a time enjoy the company of people whom we do not basically like – indeed, certain kinds of unpleasant people have their own fascination. It seems rather to be a quasi-aesthetic attitude, roughly specifiable as 'finding a person to one's taste', and depends partly on such things as his physical appearance, mannerisms, voice and speech, and style of life; partly on his traits and character, moral or other.

This account of liking suggests that before we can like someone we have to tot up items in his nature and strike a balance between the attractive and the unattractive aspects of it. But in reality our reaction, like a reaction to a picture, is to a whole personality seen as a unified thing. (p. 253)

The liking we feel for our friends, in other words, cannot be explained like a mathematical equation. It is neither logical nor purely ethical or prudential. It is also aesthetic. According to Richard Avramenko, the best interpretation of Nietzsche's views on the ground of friendship is that friendships are groundless, being based on taste as opposed to reason. Avramenko (2008) explains that 'taste, unlike rationalism, has no universal aspirations... Whereas reason is nonarbitrary, taste is completely arbitrary. Taste resides in the abode of the particular... Taste is dangerous, uncertain, unpredictable; intellect and reason are safe and, at bottom, aim at certainty and predictability' (p. 291).

For example, consider my friendship with Lissa (who is also beautiful and whose name I can disclose because she is not intensely private; note the diversity). Lissa is a relatively new friend of mine and I like her very much, actually I've come to love *and* like her. However, it is impossible for me to explain *fully* why I feel for and with her as I do, which is not to say that I can't explain much about the grounds of our

friendship. Likewise, it is impossible to explain *fully* why I like Louise Bourgeois' sculptures as much as I do, which is not to say I have nothing to say about the aesthetic merits of her work. To say that I am friends with Lissa, for example, because we share philosophy, motherhood, and the joys and struggles of both is true, but this amounts to only a very partial and painfully incomplete explanation of our bond. We're also friends because she is funny and smart with a decidedly dark streak, and in her company I feel at ease. But still, this misses much – and much of what explains my friendship with Lissa is ineffable. As Montaigne (1991) explains, if asked why I love a friend 'I feel that this cannot be expressed, except by answering: Because it was he, because it was I' (p. 192).

On this way of understanding the grounds of friendship, the love in friendship is something like faith: if one can offer a rational explanation of its causes that fully explains the phenomenon, then the feeling is neither faith nor love. We can't say precisely why we are friends with someone – why we like and love him or her. If we could, it would be evidence against the friendship. As Nehamas (2010) puts it, in any attempt to explain why one loves a particular friend there remains 'that most important element that can be expressed but can't be described' (p. 277). This difficulty may also be evidenced in Plato's *Lysis*, in which, as Alyssa Hennig (2010) suggests, perhaps more is *shown* than is said about the nature of friendship.

## 6 Conclusion: friendship and taste

Laurence Thomas (1993) explains how the feelings in friendship are an interesting mixture of, as he puts it, 'a matter of choice, on the one hand, and things that happen to us on the other' (p. 52). For Telfer (1970–1), the liking and sense of bonding essential to friendship is rational: 'In the sense that they are necessarily based on beliefs about the nature of the friend: we *like* a person and we feel we *are like* him because of what we think he is *like*' (p. 226). However, she qualifies this claim to rationality, noting that 'even where we *can* give our reasons for liking someone or feeling a bond with him, we cannot further justify these reasons, or explain why they operate in one case and not in another apparently similar' (Telfer 1970–1, p. 226). The groundless ground of friendship also helps us explain why we cannot predict with certainty whether two of our friends will be able to become good friends to one another, just as it is possible to recommend a film to a good friend in complete confidence that she'll love it, only to learn that she hated it.



(P, for example, surprised me by not enjoying *Little Miss Sunshine* after I recommended it to her.)

That the ground of friendship is based on taste, and largely on aesthetic taste, might make such relationships seem somewhat bankrupt or corrupt. Yet although the social and political issues discussed previously are serious and should give us pause, they are not aesthetic issues per se. The mere fact that we are often motivated and affected by aesthetic factors is not something about which we should be ashamed, what's shameful is underestimating these aesthetic motivations and affections, ignoring them and therefore accepting as given whatever consequences follow from them. Nehamas (2004) is right when he tells us that:

It is ignorance, sometimes willful, that prevents people from recognizing that aesthetic experience is neither marginal to life nor restricted to a few privileged arts. Aesthetic experience is, in fact, inextricably woven into the everyday, so that perhaps no experience is completely unaesthetic ... Art and beauty can be found everywhere, and therefore so can interpretation, without which they slip unnoticed by while we sail on oblivious of the wax blocking our ears. (p. 30)

And he continues, noting that the problem isn't that aesthetic matters are intertwined with various other values and motivations, it is rather that we too often fail to consciously attend to and take seriously the aesthetic in everyday life: 'The issue is only whether we know – or whether it matters to us to learn – how to discern the beauty and engage in its interpretation' (Nehamas 2004, p. 30). Noticing the aesthetic influences and nuances in various aspects of our lives, including those within friendships, is a necessary first step in arriving at a full interpretation of the lives we lead.

We have seen that aesthetic taste is involved in various aspects of friendships and sometimes works against our egalitarian commitments. The aesthetic forces in our personal relationships are ubiquitous. We choose friends, whether we want to admit it or not, based at least in part on aesthetic concerns – their appearance, their apparent status, their tastes. We cherish our friends for their unique individuality, which is due in part to apprehension of their aesthetic features and preferences. We create ourselves through interactions with friends and as a result of the aesthetic activities we share with them: the conversations we enjoy, the music we listen to, the films we discuss. The freedom in friendship

intersects, parallels, and mutually informs the freedom and playfulness that is often constitutive of aesthetic appreciation and art making. Our friendships round out our lives, creating, in the ideal, an organic unity. Indeed, my life wouldn't be my life as I know it, I wouldn't be the *I* I am, but for my friendships, for example, with P and Lissa.

Attention to the aesthetic aspects of friendship helps to articulate the value of all friendships, not only those between the closest or best of friends. Of course, the closer the friendships and deeper the affection, the greater the impact the friendship will have on the texture or one's life and the creation of self. Berleant (2005) points out that 'sometimes...a building casts its character over an entire neighbourhood. For buildings are not self-sufficient objects but are places for human activity, determining the patterns of movement toward, into, and out of them, as well as within them' (p. 153). Likewise, sometimes a friendship casts its character over an entire life. For friends are not self-contained objects, but human beings with whom a person interacts, engages, and, as Pindar and Nietzsche put it, with whom she can *become the person she is* (Nietzsche 1974, sec. 270). How graceful or awkward my various friends are, that one is soft-spoken and another brash, the nervous tics of one and the calm resolve of another, one's excellent taste and the idiosyncratic likes of another, my friends' variable attractiveness, wittiness, pessimism, and optimism, all of these things add to the texture and narrative of my life. These features help make my life mine. My friends, that is, are colors, lines, and patterns on the canvas of my life.

## Notes

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2. I thank Damian Caluori for bringing this point to my attention.
3. Thanks to Sherri Irvin for helping me see this point.
4. Readers might think I am biased in this assessment; I am quite confident I am not. Nonetheless, an interesting inquiry into aesthetic partiality in friendship is worth making to complement already existing inquiries into moral and epistemic partiality in friendship (philosophers who have explored the topic of partiality in friendship include, S. Wolf, L. Blum, A. Jollimore, and S. Stroud). Space and time constraints prevent me from pursuing this topic

here, but I plan to do so elsewhere in the near future. For insightful discussions of the interplay between personal feelings for a person and ascriptions of aesthetic properties to that person see David Novitz (1991) and Glenn Parsons (2010).

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