

# Epistemic partiality of friendship, belief polarization, and virtue epistemology

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# 1 The norm of friendship in the realm of belief

- Sam's case

Suppose, for instance, that 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 that person's heart ... how, as a good friend, should you respond to this new information? I don't mean what actions you should take in this situation, but rather what you should make of this new information. What conclusions should you draw from it?(Stroud 2006, 504).

# 1 The norm of friendship in the realm of belief

- “Differential epistemic practices” (Stroud 2006, 505).
  - Interpreting these cases in less damning ways
  - giving greater credence to such alternative interpretations
  - spending more time and energy on minimizing the effect of damning data regarding friends and giving such an alternative construal greater credence

# 1 The norm of friendship in the realm of belief

- What is illuminating about this claim?
  - The way we are encouraged to believe in friends by Stroud is alleged to go against **what the evidence straightforwardly suggests.**

# 1 The norm of friendship in the realm of belief

- Rebecca's case

Rebecca is scheduled to give a poetry reading at a café. She is nervous about reading her poetry in public, but has decided to do it on this occasion because she knows that a certain literary agent will be present and she hopes that her work might catch his attention. She lets her good friend Eric know that she'll be giving the reading, and asks whether he'd mind coming along to be in the audience (Keller 2004, 332).

# 1 The norm of friendship in the realm of belief

- Eric should listen to Rebecca's poetry with a "sympathetic ear" (332)
- friendship requires us to make a special effort
- This sympathetic ear in friendship not only as a descriptive, but also as a normative, concept.
  
- How epistemologists reacted to this debate?
  - See also Goldberg 2018; Hawley 2014; Kwall 2013

## 2. Friendship as a dynamic process

- Friendship is dynamic and comes in stages.





## 2. Friendship as a dynamic process (maintenance)

Social relationships are not fixed, static entities but are prone to decay such that they become less close over time. ... To prevent this decay, and keep the relationship at a particular level of emotional intensity, active maintenance is required (Roberts and Dunbar 2011, 187).

If you are working towards a goal, like increasing your fitness or performing well on an exam, you might benefit from having a coach who doesn't just teach you skills and give you specialized information, but provides motivation and encouragement (Keller 2004, 339).

## 2. Friendship as a dynamic process (maintenance)

- Friendship requires special kinds of maintenance behavior.
- Friendship is a *care relation*

In adult, on-going relationships, the usual expectation is that the parties will exchange positions regularly: I may be carer in one encounter and cared-for in the next (Noddings 2012, 53).

## 2. Friendship as a dynamic process (construction)

- Unlike some other close relationships, friendship is voluntary (Oswald 2016)
- Ambivalence
  - If someone claims to believe a friend's testimony because she is his friend, he is putting the cart before the horse (Hawley 2014; Keller 2004).
  - It is not the case that we make friends with someone for their knowledge either.

## 2. Friendship as a dynamic process

- Partisan Affiliation (Rini 2017)

I learn something about the political and moral values she endorses” (Rini 2017, E-50–51).  
There are significant diversities within parties but, when I learn my partisan affiliation is shared  
by someone, “I learn that she tends to get normative questions right (by my normative lights)”  
(E51)

## 2. Friendship as a dynamic process

- I would like to extend this idea to epistemic domains: *friends tend to share epistemic values* as well.
- We have value commitments related to our inquiries
  - When you inquire into something, what is the first thing you do?
  - What do you think allows one to reach the truth?
  - What makes one's testimony more probable?
  - What kind of intellectual character traits do you think are truth-conducive?
  - Who, do you think, are reliable informants and why do you think so?  
***-epistemic partisanship (but this is a double-edged sword)***

### **3. The epistemic partiality of friendship and belief polarization**

- Two disagreeing individuals on a matter exposed to the same set of mixed evidence regarding the disputed topic, rather than converging, tend to “make initial disagreements even more pronounced” (Kelly 2008, 612).
- It is known that (rather counterintuitively) paying more attention to counterevidence gives rise to the polarization phenomenon.
  - This is because, according to Kelly, the way we react to new evidence is dependent on one’s prior attitude toward the hypothesis.

# 3. The epistemic partiality of friendship and belief polarization

Hypothesis H is a potential explanation for evidence E: if one is already convinced H is true, confronted with E, she tends to take H as the explanation of E. If convinced H is false, however, upon hearing E, one is more prone to look for an alternative explanation H\* to account for E (619).

- Back to Sam
  - Sam's case and belief polarization are isomorphic.

# 3. The epistemic partiality of friendship and belief polarization

- Paying more attention to counterevidence gives rise to polarization (Kelly 2008).
  - Similarly, the epistemic partiality of friendship requires us to pay more attention to the counterevidence against our friend, rather than to dismiss it
  - We invest extra time and effort into interpreting their friends charitably, with sympathetic ears.
  - Interpreting counterevidence against our friend charitably is one way of expressing our care for friends in maintaining our friendship.



# 3. The epistemic partiality of friendship and belief polarization

- what precisely is worrying about this phenomenon?
  - Belief polarization contains a distinct *directedness*
  - The order in which we acquire evidence make causal differences to the total evidence we hold later in time, making our belief fragile and contingent.
  - One's total evidence is skewed in a way that favors those beliefs held in the beginning. What we believe initially has a strong influence in shaping the outline of what we believe later.
  - The epistemic partiality of friendship, as per belief polarization, not only clashes with the epistemic norm but also has a direction favoring the belief held at the outset.

# 3. The epistemic partiality of friendship and belief polarization

- An echo chamber is an epistemic structure in society where the relevant alternative is manipulatively discredited. Different relevant voices are actively shunned (Nguyen 2018)
- How to get away from an echo chamber?
  - ***Social epistemic reboot*** (Nguyen 2018, 17): people are expected to epistemically re-start socially from scratch by reconsidering testimonial sources without using their old credentialing beliefs.
  - Easier said than done.
  - In case of friendship, it is even more difficult, as leaving an echo chamber means leaving from a circle of friendship.

# 4 Virtue epistemology for the imperfect human

- Virtue epistemology (Virtue Responsibilism)
- There is a distinct epistemic dimension in a good life. Acquiring intellectual virtues and avoiding intellectual vices are necessary for such an epistemic part of flourishing.
- A virtue epistemological approach is consistent with accepting the epistemic partiality of friendship
  - No one thinks that the value of epistemic goods should precede other goods at all times

## 4 Virtue epistemology for the imperfect human

- This point becomes more robust if we take *imperfectionism* seriously.
- “Certain conflicting values cannot either separately or in some kind of diluted combination make for a perfect whole” (Slote 2013, 150).
- Even a maximally epistemically virtuous agent would need friends.

# 4 Virtue epistemology for the imperfect human

- Remember the directedness of belief polarization inherent in the epistemic partiality of friendship.
- This leads us to pay close attention to the **construction stage of our friendship.**
- Epistemic partisanship (it is dependent on my subjective epistemic evaluative commitments. ) can partly explain why we think our friends are right.
- In the maintenance period, such epistemic partisanship is reinforced under the name of friendship.

# 4 Virtue epistemology for the imperfect human

- What kind of epistemic value commitments one is affiliated to in the beginning matters.
- We have strong motivation to hold on to the right kind of epistemic standards in society at the individual level.
- Epistemic virtues are known as character traits responsible inquirers may hold.
- The fact that we are prone to believe our friend puts extra practical pressure on us to cultivate epistemic virtues at the individual level.

## 4 Virtue epistemology for the imperfect human

- This does not necessarily mean we should self-cultivate these virtues at this stage
- We become friends with someone from a young age, the cultivation of intellectual virtues needs to be implemented at least around the same time, at an early stage of life, to mitigate the effect of epistemic partisanship and the subsequent epistemic polarization by friendship.

# 4 Virtue epistemology for the imperfect human

- “Self-cultivation may be the exception rather than the rule with respect to our initial possession of virtues and vices” (Battaly 2016, 214).
- The environmental route for virtues
  - Education, the construction of nudges, social situational interventions and paternalistic interventions, and so on (see Battaly 2016; Engelen et al. 2018).