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Friendship for the Flawed: A Cynical and Pessimistic Theory of Friendship

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Original Publication Information

Trujillo, Jr., G.M. "Friendship for the Flawed: A Cynical and Pessimistic Theory of Friendship." 2020. *Southwest Philosophy Review* 36(1): 199-209.

ThinkIR Citation

Trujillo, Glenn "Boomer" Mac, "Friendship for the Flawed: A Cynical and Pessimistic Theory of Friendship" (2020). *Faculty Scholarship*. 455.

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SOUTHWEST PHILOSOPHY REVIEW

Vol. 36, No. 1

January, 2020

PRESIDENTIAL PLENARY SESSION: PHILOSOPHY AND WINE

JULIE KUHLEN 1

*CONFESSIONS OF A RECOVERING PHILOSOPHER:
INTRODUCTION TO PANEL ON PHILOSOPHY AND WINE*

MICHELLE WILLIAMS 5

SPIRITUALITY AND THE WINE'S SOUL

ARTICLES

SCOTT AIKIN 13

*THE OWL OF MINERVA PROBLEM
PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS*

DAN LARKIN 23

*INCONSISTENCY IN SOCRATIC CONSISTENCY:
THE CURIOUS CASE OF SOCRATES' δαιμόνιον
PRESIDENTIAL PRIZE AWARD WINNER*

ZAK A. KOPEIKIN 35

*A SEPARABILITY PRINCIPLE, CONTRAST CASES,
AND CONTRIBUTORY DISPOSITIONS*

JONAH GOLDWATER 45

SIX ARGUMENTS AGAINST 'OUGHT IMPLIES CAN'

CHRIS KING 55

HYPOTHETICAL CONSENT AND POLITICAL OBLIGATION

BRYAN SMYTH 65

*DE-MORALIZING HEROISM: ETHICAL EXPERTISE AND
THE OBJECT OF HEROIC APPROBATION*

JOSEPH SPINO 75

*THE BROADER THREAT OF SITUATIONISM TO
VIRTUE ETHICS*

Friendship for the Flawed: A Cynical and Pessimistic Theory of Friendship

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Abstract: When considering the value of friendship, most philosophers ignore the negatives. Most assume that humans need friends to flourish, and some argue that friendships can be good, no matter the risks entailed. This makes conversations about the value of friendship one-sided. Here, I argue that Cynics and Pessimists have an important view on friendship, despite it being ignored. They hold that: (a) friendship is unnecessary for flourishing, and (b) friendship presents ethical risks, especially to one's own self-sufficiency. I defend these views. Then I conclude with reflections on why Cynics and Pessimists actually make great friends. By helping people to focus on vulgar human nature and the flaws that humans have, they create an unpretentious basis for friendship.

Cicero writes, "For when fortune smiles on us, friendship adds a luster to that smile; when she frowns, friendship absorbs her part and share of that frown, and thus makes it easier to bear" (1991, p. 88).¹ No one denies that friendship makes life better. But maybe that is a problem. Maybe most philosophers addressing friendship are guilty of confirmation bias, seeking only opinions that prove themselves right about the positive value of friendship.²

However, it is a big philosophical leap from recognizing friendship's frequent benefits to deeming it necessary for flourishing or good apart from moral evaluation. Yet many authors do just that. They affirm that friendship is necessary for a good life (e.g. Aristotle, 2002; Sherman, 1993). Or they argue that friendships have their own type of goodness that can exist even in morally compromising situations (e.g. Cocking and Kennett, 2000). These two evaluations puzzle me because they seem selective in their focus.

I want to argue against these prevalent trends in the friendship literature by taking an intermediary position. It involves defending two things. First, while friendship often helps someone flourish, it should not be thought necessary for flourishing for all people (contra Aristotle). Second, the value of friendship cannot be separated from its moral risks, especially to our own characters (contra Cocking and Kennett).³

These ideas come from unlikely sources of wisdom on friendship: Cynics and Pessimists. Taken together, Diogenes of Sinope, Crates of Thebes, and Arthur Schopenhauer present a view of friendship that is honest to human flaws. I put them in dialogue here because their philosophical styles are similar, and almost no other philosophers warn against friendship like they do. I will argue that their view shows that (1) philosophers are mistaken if they consider friendship necessary for flourishing for all, and (2) friendship always imposes risk to your character and sometimes entails burdensome social obligations.⁴ I will conclude by arguing that Cynics and Pessimists show us how to be good friends. To do this, I will (a) set up the two puzzles about friendship that I mentioned here and (b) argue that the combined Cynic and Pessimist view can solve them. My point is not that friendship is bad or that we should be misanthropes.⁵ The point is that we should feel ambivalent. Most good things in life are not just good; they are usually complicated. Friendship is one such good, and that is why I think we should listen to these neglected voices.⁶

Challenge 1: You Need Friends to Live Well

Aristotle set the agenda for philosophizing about friendship. Yet tragedy looms in his theory. On the one hand, humans are naturally political beings, living together with others (1984b, I.2). We have friends and seek associations. Aristotle explains why, “The presence of friends, then, seems desirable in *all* circumstances” (1984a, IX.11 [emphasis added]). Friendship helps us. Friends make misfortune bearable, and without them, the most blessed pursuits become arduous (1984a, IX.9-10). For Aristotle, friendship is not merely ornamental; it is necessary for flourishing. Without friendship, life is incomplete.

On the other hand, Aristotle realizes the difficulty of making friends, claiming that people cannot make excellent friends with many others. Having a few friends is the best we should hope for (1984a, IX.10).⁷ Becoming a good person is difficult, so finding another good person to venture through life with is twice as hard. There is challenge not only on our own singular journeys toward virtue and flourishing, but there is added challenge in finding worthy others to befriend, especially virtuous people who like you and make time for you.⁸ And if we cannot to do this, we are not fully flourishing. Friendship and flourishing therefore depend on luck by relying on other people, an unsurprising conclusion for anyone familiar with Aristotle. Flourishing, for him, just is difficult, and it is subject to misfortune.⁹ But human animals simply need friendships to live well, no matter their scarcity or difficulty to cultivate (see: Nussbaum, 2009, ch. 12).

A Cynical and Pessimistic Theory of Friendship

The Cynics challenged Aristotle's view.¹⁰ The reason Cynics can deny the necessity of friendship is that the goal of philosophical training is to make people self-sufficient in living a simple and natural life. This, in turn, renders the flourishing person completely invulnerable to the vicissitudes of life. Their training program focused on self-mastery. Cynics disciplined their bodies through exercise, and they ignored all academic subjects except ethics. They cultivated themselves through simple living: eating only enough to survive, wearing only a single cloak, and sleeping wherever they could. Diogenes of Sinope's diet of onions and residency inside a barrel were not gimmicks; they were exercises of his philosophical commitment to a natural, simple life.¹¹ This is why the Cynics lashed out at wealth and reputation, and why they confronted anyone who thought or taught otherwise. Their entire lives were efforts to live the best life possible and to show others that they, too, could flourish, if only they abandoned the complications and anxieties of decadence (see: Hard, 2012, s. 96-118).

Just like any external good (e.g. health, wealth, or reputation), friendship could never be a necessary good for flourishing for the Cynics. Friends, like any good thing in life, are just part of the journey to become self-sufficient. And friends do not always contribute to that. Diogenes was plain, "[H]appiness is this and nothing else, to be of truly good heart and never distressed, wherever one is and whatever the moment may bring" (Hard, 2012, s. 106b). There is no mention of wealth, reputation, or others (contra Aristotle, 1984a, I). And friends are important only insofar as they help in this pursuit. Diogenes emphasizes, "[T]o come off well in life, one needs either good friends or ardent enemies; for friends instruct you, and enemies expose your faults" (Hard, 2012, s. 297).¹² On the journey toward self-sufficiency and simplicity, enemies do just as well as friends because they expose your shortcomings. The only important thing is that you learn to improve yourself, that you become self-sufficient and live simply.

The Cynics rebelled against Aristotle's concept of flourishing. They agreed that flourishing involves rigorous training of the self. But they disagreed that flourishing relies on friendship or community. Whatever price they pay in a simple life, they receive a mode of flourishing that can be accomplished by anyone, anywhere, in any circumstances. On the Cynic account, a friendless person could still flourish. I could see them advising a downtrodden, friendless Aristotelian by saying, "You are dissatisfied with life and fortune precisely because you have the wrong view of flourishing." Cynics would say that friends are indeed hard to find and make. But rather than bemoan this, they would offer it as evidence

for why friendships should not be included as a necessary component of flourishing. You should not be afraid of lacking friends.¹³ After all, some are satisfied with solitude and independence. Instead, the Cynics would say that you should fear living a decadent life that makes you depend on other people or that threatens your ability to comport yourself well toward the simple joys of life. Friends might not contribute to this. In fact, they might hinder it. So, they cannot be necessary.

Challenge 2: Good Friends Help You Move House; Great Friends Help You Move a Body

Dean Cocking and Jeanette Kennett say that you would be a good friend to someone by helping them move a body, like the plot of *Death in Brunswick* (1990) where Dean helps his friend Carl hide the body of a person he kills. For them, friendship only has a contingent connection to morality.¹⁴ Even friendships that compromise your moral standing might properly be called “true and good” (2000, p. 279). Friendships are relationships that have mutual affection, commitments to each other’s interests and wellbeing, desires for shared experiences, a disposition to be directed by the other person’s interests and activities, and mutual conceptions and interpretations of the self. None of this need be connected to morality. To them, friends helping each other hide a body might be morally compromising but nonetheless indicative of a true and good friendship (2000, sec. III). They therefore expunge questions of the moral value of friendship from questions about the quality of its constitution.

What makes Cocking and Kennett’s thesis so controversial is that the friendship literature leans Aristotelian. Aristotelians claim that true friendships are those where people are interested in each other’s ethical characters and flourishing. And any friendship that jeopardizes either is, by definition, not the best form of friendship and so cannot be assessed as a *true* or *good*.¹⁵

I see the Cynics as an intermediary between these two camps. With Aristotle, they agreed that friendship should be evaluated primarily in ethical terms. But they also shared the caution and negative focus of Cocking and Kennett in considering morally compromising situations. Rather than focus on the benefits of friendship, the Cynics often warn against aligning yourself with people of questionable character. Diogenes said, “How absurd it is that when we are intending to set off on a voyage, we care to select the best travelling-companions, and yet, when we have resolved to live well, we choose whomever chance sets in our path as our companions in life” (Hard, 2012, s. 300). Rather than separating

A Cynical and Pessimistic Theory of Friendship

friendship from ethical evaluation, the Cynics warn that friendships can have negative impacts. They notice that people often settle for befriending those they meet by chance, rather than actively seeking out others with similar moral commitments. This is curious to them because people scrutinize less serious affairs, such as travelling, more than they scrutinize their own choices of friends, who can influence every facet of life.¹⁶

The Cynics did not take friendship lightly. Not only does it affect your own journey toward self-sufficiency, but it also comes with obligations. They argued that friends must stick up for each other and, if they do not, they are as bad as anyone maligning the friend (Hard, 2012, s. 304). Schopenhauer adds to this insight, arguing that ‘friends’ often try to loan money from you, and the more intimate a person is, the more likely he is to transgress the bounds of propriety to take advantage of you, insult you, or generally be rude (1902, §28).¹⁷ Schopenhauer also observes that people often live their entire lives, including friendships, with ulterior motives or personal interests that they keep secret. ‘Friends’ do not actually share the innermost aspects of themselves, which are sometimes the driver behind their lives. He even jokes that ‘friends’ talk badly about each other behind each other’s backs and that, if you ever heard what your ‘friends’ said about you, you would stop talking to them (§33). These comments highlight that befriending anyone presents moral risk and burden. In associating yourself with someone, you associate yourself with who they are, what they do, and what they value. For Cynics, this is dangerous because it can compromise your self-sufficiency. And for Pessimists, it is a risk that might not be worth the labor because ‘friends’ keep significant secrets from each other and are not so friendly when they leave the room.

The Cynics and Pessimists agree with Aristotle that friends impact the ethical quality of your life, but not always, or even usually, in a positive way. Rather, they can distract you from self-sufficiency and create obligations. Friendships take work. And given that life is difficult, they might be unworth the effort. Cynics and Pessimists take this ethical risk seriously. And insofar as friendships jeopardize your character or self-sufficiency, you are better off without them. Not only, then, are there practical worries about how difficult it is to make friends, as the first challenge suggests. But there are also ethical worries about the risks entailed. For Cynics and Pessimists, it is often the case that having no friends is better than having bad (or even mediocre) ones. Enemies, after all, will do the most important tasks that a friend might. And there is no shortage of them.

Cynics and Pessimists Make the Best Friends

I have argued two things: (1) friends are not necessary for flourishing for all people, and (2) friends present moral risks. But none of what I have argued on behalf of the Cynics and Pessimists implies that they are committed to being callous. Instead, the opposite is the case. Two stories about the Cynic Crates of Thebes bear repeating, as they show that Cynics and Pessimists often make fantastic friends. First, Crates heard that Metrocles of Maroneia was going to kill himself. Metrocles was an Aristotelian, holding that reputation matters for living a good life, and he had ruined his by farting while giving a lecture. Ashamed, Metrocles shut himself in to starve himself to death. Crates went to Metrocles and tried to convince him that he did nothing wrong, as it was natural to fart. Whenever his words failed to convince Metrocles, Crates farted in front of him, thus showing that it was not shameful to fart while discussing philosophy. Metrocles recovered from his melancholy and consequently became a Cynic (Hard, 2012, s. 459). Second, Hipparchia of Maroneia, Metrocles' sister, fell in love with Crates. She ignored all other suitors, and she threatened to kill herself if her family forbade her from marrying him. The family spoke with Crates, requesting that he change her mind. Crates agreed, went to Hipparchia, and argued that she should not marry him. She remained unconvinced, however. So, he stripped naked and said, "Here is your bridegroom, here are his possessions, make your choice accordingly; for you will be no fit companion for me if you do not share the same way of life" (Hard, 2012, s. 455). He expected his display of poverty and aged nakedness to stop her pursuit of him. Instead, she matched his mode of dress and committed her life to Cynicism.

What can we draw from these stories? It would be incorrect to say that the Cynics did not make friends. Crates married and had friends, and they mutually supported each other in efforts to live the Cynic philosophy. But what separated his friendships from others (and probably from many of ours) is that he emphasized that the deepest, most intimate connections we have with people ought to be natural, unashamedly displaying human vulgarity and imperfection. Flattery, or even rhetorical dressing of human vulnerabilities, never serves friendship. Rather, being comfortable about natural functions and being open about human flaws do. Schopenhauer offered similar advice for living with other people. Whenever you meet people, look at them and accept them for who they are—peculiar, immoral, or dim as they may be. Do not scorn them or hope that they will change, unjustly making their lives harder. Instead, consider who they actually are

A Cynical and Pessimistic Theory of Friendship

and interact with them accordingly (1902, §21). Schopenhauer did not want to interact with many people, but he understood it took many types to live in this world, and they deserve to be as they are too.

Cynics and Pessimists warn us about high-minded ideals of flourishing; they refocus us on self-sufficiency and cultivating our own characters. And their remarks on friendship do the same. The Cynic and the Pessimist both say that we should accept people's flaws and natural ways of being, rather than ignoring them or hoping them to be something else. Whenever you look at a person for who they actually are, then you can understand the ways they might fit into your life. This does not mean that you must befriend them. But it means that you have a better idea of what a friendship with them would be. Most people let their hopes, fears, and desires distort the reality of relationships. We see what we want or fear more often than reality.

I am not a Cynic or a Pessimist. But I think they have central points about friendship right and have been ignored for too long. Friendship is not always good, and, in fact, it can present grave risk and generate heavy obligations. To separate the moral evaluation of friendship from the quality of the friendship is a mistake, otherwise it is not worthy of the title "true and good friendship." And such a risky endeavor as friendship should not be necessary for flourishing for all people. Cynics and Pessimists understand that we crave friendship, but they also understand that deep friendships are not always possible in every circumstance in life. Rather than take this as evidence that friendless people cannot flourish, Cynics and Pessimists encourage all to work on self-sufficiency and simplicity in living, which more surely lead to flourishing. They reveal that having no friends is better than having bad ones. And they savor the friendships that they do have when they have them. This flaws-first approach to relationships—farts and wrinkles and all on display—creates a more human/e basis for friendships. Sometimes, we need that Cynical or Pessimistic friend to remind us that our expectations are too high, and that if we leave behind pristine ideals for natural reality, we can be happy. In dire straits, we need friends like Cynics and Pessimists. They nudge our vision away from our failures to live up to heavenly ideals and retrain our vision on the flawed here, the imperfect self, and the ways that accepting our human simplicity will serve us better than anything else.¹⁸

Notes

¹ When citing the Cynics, I will draw exclusively from Robin Hard's anthology and translations, and I will give the saying number rather than the page number because it is more precise. Most times, his main reference text is G. Giannantoni's *Socratis et Socraticorum Reliquiae*.

² Due to space constraints, I cannot fully address what *friendship* is, which is separate from my primary concern of what friendship's *value* is. The two questions are related but distinct.

³ Oddly enough, not many philosophers address the risks of friendships in detail. Aristotle tries to distinguish virtuous friendships from less virtuous types, but the goal is to identify the best forms, not warn of the risks (1984a, VII-IX). (Bernard Williams, 1981, pp. 15-6, makes this same observation when he says that Aristotle requires that friendship minimize risks due to his implicit view of self-sufficiency.) One exception among philosophers is Augustine of Hippo, who recalls youthful stories of him stealing things for fun. But he admits that he would not have done it if he were alone. Instead, his friends added pleasure to the theft (1998, II.vii-x; see also: Nawar, 2015). This leads him to warn readers about the company they keep. A last notable contemporary exception is Alexis Elder (2014), who defends an Aristotelian idea that bad people cannot be good friends.

The contemporary aversion to addressing the ills of friendship contrasts with common wisdom. Many I spoke with were able to give sayings about the risks of friendship. Lawyer Dustin Faeder gave me the aphorism, "Lie down with the dogs, and you'll rise up with the fleas," which is attributed to Benjamin Franklin. Minister Matthew Flores reminded me of the New Testament's version, "Do not be deceived: 'Bad company corrupts good morals'" (1 Corinthians 15:33 NASB). Artistic examples abound too, especially in youth genres. Philosopher Coleen Watson turned my attention to *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, where Dumbledore says, "It takes a great deal of bravery to stand up to our enemies, but just as much to stand up to our friends." And mother Skye Wachtman mentioned *Pinocchio* (1940), where Pinocchio befriends Lampwick, who corrupts him and takes him to Pleasure Island, where boys get turned into donkeys for slavery. Given the plethora of common advice to be cautious about friendships, the relative lack of philosophical warnings is surprising.

⁴ Often, I will call "moral risk" this susceptibility to degradation of your character and incurring obligations toward others. Friendships can affect the ethical or moral qualities of your life. But it is important to distinguish that the Cynics and Pessimists mean *personal* moral risk, about how your character is changed or how your projects might become more complicated. They are not concerned with *interpersonal* risks of, say, giving your friends the wrong advice or failing them when they most need you, i.e. the risks that your friends take in befriending you and how those affect your friendship.

⁵ Schopenhauer was a misanthrope, as seen in his advice for making friends: "And in this view it is advisable to let every one of your acquaintance—whether man or woman—feel now and then that you could very well dispense with their company" (1902, §28), or again: "For my own part, I should certainly pay more respect to an honest dog wagging his tail than to a hundred such [superficial]"

A Cynical and Pessimistic Theory of Friendship

demonstrations of human regard.... The egoism of human nature is so strongly antagonistic to any such sympathy, that true friendship belongs to that class of things—the sea-serpent, for instance—with regard to which no one knows whether they are fabulous or really exist somewhere or other” (§33). But I think there is a way to appreciate his insights on human sociality that does not entail misanthropy, or so I hope for this paper.

⁶ I could not find a single work devoted to any Cynic or Pessimist on friendship. I would gladly receive recommendations.

⁷ Aristotle claims that people who live under the rule of tyrannical governments cannot make friends with each other (1984a, VIII.11). This introduces not only subjective and social luck, but broader political luck.

⁸ I am assuming here that the social element does not decrease the difficulty of attaining virtue. Friendships increase the complexity of social relationships and external goods; they make things more difficult in certain ways. It does not seem that, for Aristotle, having friends makes the paths toward virtue and flourishing easier. If we need to lift a heavy rock, more people would be preferable to fewer. But if we need to perform surgery, more people might ruin things. It is unclear which metaphor is more appropriate for how sociality affects the feasibility of flourishing.

⁹ Much of the ancient world reacted against Aristotle’s views on flourishing. They made flourishing too fragile, especially for philosophers desiring more self-sufficiency. Most famously, the Stoics carved up the world into things you can control and things you cannot (see: Epictetus, 1983, s. 1). And friends fit into the category of things you cannot, so they cannot be necessary for flourishing. But it is also worth noting that the Stoics wrote many beautiful odes to friendship because it still held some non-ethical value to their lives. Friendship was a good, but not one that contributed to flourishing (see: Cicero, 1991; Seneca, 1991). Even to philosophers who question dependence on social goods, such as the Stoics, friendship holds an important place in life. An interesting complication is that Stoics sometimes held ambivalent attitudes toward romantic love, which might have parallels here for friendship (see: Cicero, 1927, Bk. IV).

¹⁰ I am putting aside interpretive concerns about whether the Cynics represent a unified philosophy with positive views. I assume that they do. But I would gladly entertain critics who would tease apart the different views of different Cynics, for example by distinguishing Diogenes from Crates.

Though not a Cynic himself, Theodoros the Atheist expressed something the Cynics could have affirmed. He rejected friendship based on an observation: foolish people have superficial relationships that end as soon as the instrumental advantages end, and wise people are so self-sufficient that they do not need friends (Hard, 2012, s. 633). The conclusion: friendship is not necessary for good living. Friendship is nice to have, but lacking it will not break anyone.

¹¹ The importance of simple living cannot be overemphasized. Aristotle’s view of flourishing requires that people live in complex communities. Whenever that happens, people must depend on each other for various things. The more complex a community, the less self-sufficient it can be (ignoring science fiction utopias where technology can do everything). For Aristotle, humans are animals that live in complex communities, so they must be social.

The Cynics would say that humans have lived in complex communities. But they can live more simply and more self-sufficiently too. The more simply you live, the less you must rely on others. This lack of dependence makes self-sufficiency and simplicity mutually supporting. Schopenhauer magnifies this point by saying that independence is actually the best way to cultivate friendship. That you do not need anyone makes you more open to better friendships (1902, §28).

Cynical training involves inoculating people against dependence on other people for goods like friendship. Cynic training was called a “shortcut to virtue,” a quick path to the destination of flourishing. But like all shortcuts, living the Cynic life was grueling and transformed only those who survived.

¹² Schopenhauer says something similar, “Your friends will tell you that they are sincere; your enemies really are so. Let your enemies’ censure be like a bitter medicine, to be used as a means of self-knowledge” (1902, §33).

¹³ I see this same motivation alive in contemporary literature. Cocking and Kennett, for example, mention multiple times that a problem with assessing friends with rigorous moral values makes friendship nearly impossible (2000, pp. 281, 289). I think Aristotle and the Cynics would both respond: so what? No one said friendship would be easy. But whereas Aristotle would say friendship is nonetheless necessary for flourishing, the Cynics would say that its risk is why they do not include it in flourishing.

¹⁴ “It would be foolish to suggest of those cases where friendship moves us against competing moral reasons that we thereby exhibit a lesser friendship or realize less of the good of friendship” (Cocking and Kennett, 2000, p. 287).

¹⁵ I intentionally write “best form of friendship” because it is clear that the Aristotelians reference friends of virtue or excellence. Aristotle is quite happy to call other relationships friendships too, whether of pleasure or utility or some other quality. Dean and Carl’s friendship would certainly be a useful friendship. But that cannot be the debate here. For Cocking and Kennett’s argument to go through, they need for Dean and Carl’s friendship to be the most superlative form of friendship, analogous to virtuous friendship (without the moral component). They need people, probably philosophers, to agree that what Dean did for Carl is be a “true and good” friend to him (2000, pp. 279-81). If they do not take this route, their paper becomes trivial because Aristotle would agree that Dean and Carl are friends, just not of the highest sort. The distinction and superlativeness matter.

¹⁶ Cynic Bion of Borysthenes echoes the same point, “We should keep a close eye on our friends to see what kind of people they are, so that one should not be thought to associate with rogues, or to turn away people of worth” (Hard, 2012, s. 512).

¹⁷ In *Brave New World*, Aldous Huxley has a similar insight, “One of the principal functions of a friend is to suffer (in a milder and symbolic form) the punishments that we should like, but are unable, to inflict upon our enemies” (2006 [1932], p. 179).

¹⁸ I discussed many of the central ideas in this paper with Scott F. Aikin and Robert Engelman, both of whom read a draft of this paper. I thank them for accepting my ideas, flaws and all, while also helping me with them.

A Cynical and Pessimistic Theory of Friendship

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