Find Brutal Friends

BY JAMES MUMFORD

IS FRIENDSHIP ABOUT AFFIRMATION AND NON-JUDGMENTALISM OR CHALLENGE AND TRUTH-TELLING?

Few endeavours in life are as risky as true friendship. Give your friend the brutal honesty you think they *need*, the brutal honesty you *owe* them, and you inevitably run the risk of rejection. But in the end only people prepared to lose friends will prove good friends.

This is precisely what happens at a decisive moment in *Emma*, Jane Austen's novel of 1815. Emma, after orchestrating a game for her companions on an afternoon outing, has just publicly insulted the impoverished spinster Miss Bates. Each player, Emma stipulates, must say "one thing very clever" (recite a poem or a passage of prose), or "two things moderately clever," or "three things very dull indeed."

Miss Bates, intimidated and insecure, chooses the third option. At which point, so we're told, "Emma could not resist" saying to Miss Bates, "Ah! ma'am, but there may be a difficulty. Pardon me, but you will be limited as to the number—only three at once." The narrator records Miss Bates's reaction:

> Miss Bates, deceived by the mock ceremony of her manner, did not immediately catch [Emma's] meaning; but when it burst on her, it could not anger, though a slight blush showed that it could pain her.
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> "Ah! well—to be sure. Yes, I see what she means" (turning to Mr Knightley), "and I will try to hold my tongue. I must make myself very disagreeable, or she would not have said such a thing to an old friend."

Quite pitiful. An old, anomalous woman made to feel worthless by high society.

Afterward, though, as Emma waits for her carriage, Mr. Knightley catches up with her. "How could you be so unfeeling to Miss Bates?" he says. Assuring Emma that Miss Bates *did* comprehend the full meaning of the jibe, Mr. Knightley is dismayed. He "had not thought it possible" that Emma could be "so insolent in [her] wit to a woman of her character, age and situation."

"It was badly done," he says to her.

THE TRIUMPH OF THE THERAPEUTIC

A true friend, we like to think, makes the good of another person their own. What does this mean? Our therapeutic culture takes the definition a particular way. "Making the good of your friend your own" means "helping your friend pursue her *own* good." On this view, I am a true friend only if I help my friend seek whatever ends she has already elected. According to one self-help writer, friends "are the ones who know the best ways to convert our weakness into strength so that we can achieve our goals." Those goals are predetermined. In this conception a true friend helps me get where I want to go, cheers me on my way, aids me in overcoming the obstacle on the path I have sought.

Accordingly, *Psychology Today* lists non-judgmentalism as a key quality of a real friend: "The ability to be non-judgmental reflects our ease in accepting a friend's choices, regardless of how they may differ from our own." The true friend does not impose her own agenda. She is understanding and tolerant, accommodating and empowering. We put this premium on non-judgmentalism because we think this is the only way friendship can be genuinely altruistic. That's the root ethic. Only by helping me pursue my own good can a friend care about me *for my own sake*. Anything else, we think, would fall short of the ideal of regard for others.

Now, this picture of friendship is attractive, compelling, and widespread. It's also completely flawed.

The picture is flawed because it is in thrall to what C.S. Lewis called "the poison of subjectivism."

Take philosopher Valerie Tiberius's book *Well-Being as Value Fulfillment: How We Can Help Each Other Live Well*. Tiberius insists that, if we really want to promote the well-being of our friends, we ought to focus on helping them actualize their values. We have to ask "what it is for a person's life to go better or worse *for them*, and how to improve people's lives *for their own sakes*."

Focusing well-being on values is attractive because it ensures that, when we help our friends, we "do something that *they* can see as helpful (something that won't seem manipulative or alienating to the person we're trying to help)." On this view the worst vice of friendship is paternalism, recommending what *you* should do based on what *I* think is right. And the requisite virtue for friendship is humility.

Tiberius's account of friendship follows from her conviction that values are ultimately subjective. She rejects the view that "there are objective standards to which our values must measure up."

"I am a subjectivist at heart," she acknowledges; "what is good for a creature is to achieve what matters to it." "*Values* are the projects, activities, relationships and ideals that we value, and to *value* something in the fullest sense is to have a relatively stable pattern of emotional, motivational, and cognitive disposition or tendencies toward what is valued." Something is valuable, in other words, to the extent it is valued. Those values do not correspond to any kind of transcendent framework.

THE PROBLEM OF DEFECTIVE DESIRES

But subjective accounts of friendship like this run into a major difficulty—the so-called problem of "defective desires."

We're all too familiar with wanting what is bad for us, whether we know that at the time or not. I was a workaholic, for example. Work was an addiction, an obsession. It was my overriding goal and my chief value. I expended almost all my energy, time, and money on work. Now I can look back and discern the dysfunction. I can see it was unhealthy never to take a day off or a holiday. I even worked on Christmas Day. The rationalizations and excuses I made—the supposed worthiness of the cause, the sacrosanct calling—are clear to me now, and I can see how detrimental this addiction was to

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my family. It saw me neglect other goods and gifts and responsibilities in my life, like my children. Plus it was bad for me. I was failing to live a balanced life.

So it is with our friends. We're all too familiar with occasions when *they* want what is bad for themselves, whether they know that or not.

Take the twenty-two-year-old Danny. Danny craves "peak experiences" and thinks the best way to secure them is by getting regularly wrecked on drugs and alcohol. That's the only way he feels free, the only way he can numb the pain of his childhood. He's in denial about the fact that he has become an addict. He uses rationalizations like "everyone's doing it" or "you're only young once." But those desires *at the time* really are Danny's desires. Getting wrecked really is his chief value.

So if I as Danny's friend am committed to actualizing his core value, on what grounds can I suggest he go to rehab? Surely such advice would be to impose my own agenda on him. Surely I would be ignoring his values if I intervened.

There are other kinds of defective desires. There is the person who sets his heart

on just one thing and fails to achieve it—Jay Gatsby, for example, in Fitzgerald's great novel: "He paid a high price for living too long with a single dream." Should we help our friends pursue their dreams at all costs?

INESCAPABLE PATERNALISM

If we are committed to a subjectivist position, challenge and truth-telling are unwarranted. Affirmation is the only possible register, acceptance the only appropriate forthcoming attitude.

What have champions of the subjectivist understanding of friendship to say about the problem of defective desire? Do they bite the bullet and admit there are no grounds on which they can recommend rehab to Danny? Or do they have alternative solutions?

They try to provide alternative solutions. Nineteenth-century philosopher Henry Sidgwick suggested we shouldn't take people's desires at face value. We have to ask whether people's expressions of desire are *informed*. Are they in their right minds when they say they want to drive home drunk? Sidgwick answers that we should screen out what people say they want and instead focus on "what *would* be desired . . . if it were judged attainable by voluntary action, supposing the desirer to possess a perfect forecast, emotional as well as intellectual, of the state of attainment or fruition." In other words, we should help people obtain what they want only if they have adequately realized what it will be like for them when they obtain it.

Tiberius lands on a similar position. Because of the way "systems of values can be more or less suited to fulfillment over time," we can speak of values "[affording] standards of improvement that allow the helper to reach beyond the person's *limited current perspective*." Our friend can't see as far as they should. *But we can*. We have a broader perspective than our friend. We can take a wider view.

Surely, though, this solution simply builds paternalism back into the equation. If you've ever been told that you would want something *if only you knew better*, you know that, as Robert Adams says in *Finite and Infinite Goods*, that thing is *not* being commended to you "on the basis of 'your' own preference, but on the basis of supposedly superior wisdom."

Say, for example, your marriage is in trouble, and your friend tells you that what you really want, deep down, is to honour your marriage vows and make it work. But what if you genuinely no longer recognize that former desire? If your friend persists, is she not actually recommending a fundamental value—the value of fidelity—on the basis of its objective

goodness? Is she not ultimately being paternalistic?

THE HIGHEST FORM OF LOVE

What if we do not accept that values are subjective? What if it is our conviction that values are discovered, not determined? Does that entail a different take on friendship?

In the *Symposium* Plato offers such a contrast. Socrates attends a raucous drinking party, and each guest is summoned to give a speech in praise of love. Socrates goes last. What does he say? He says that the highest form of love is "procreative." He's not referring to sex and the propagation of actual children. The love he's talking about is love that seeks to reproduce in another the love of goodness. Love seeks what is best for another, which is virtue.

How does that play out concretely? Plato isn't content to leave his conception of love abstract. Straight after Socrates has spoken, Alcibiades bursts in—a young, handsome Athenian general whose charisma and class have already secured him a following. The speech Alcibiades is easily persuaded to give, which wraps up the *Symposium*, testifies to the fact that procreative love is not just something Socrates *talks* about. It's precisely this kind of love Socrates actually offers too.

Recounting his attempt to seduce Socrates, thereby reversing typical Athenian roles whereby the older man initiates a sexual relationship, Alcibiades says that he wanted to become Socrates's lover. But Socrates held out against Alcibiades's charms and offered the young man something else instead. Socrates showed he cared about Alcibiades by challenging him to become a better version of himself and forcing

Friends of pastime, friends of advantage, friends of the good.
Artist unknown, 15th century.

him radically to question the meaning of his life. Alcibiades was left thoroughly discombobulated, "dissatisfied with the slavishness of my life." He says that Socrates "makes me admit that my political career is a waste of time, while all that matters is just what I most neglect: my personal shortcomings, which cry out for the closest attention."

Socrates's love seeks to birth goodness in Alcibiades, which is a necessarily interpersonal challenge: Procreative love challenges the values of the beloved. The transformation of myself becomes the business of my friend.

We should seek brutal friends, friends who refuse to accept us as we are. Friends challenge and coax; they don't just help us realize our pre-established goals. They question whether our goals are the right ones in the first place.

FREELY CHOOSING THE GOOD

Why does the idea that "my transformation is my friend's business" sound so unacceptable? I think it's intolerable because it offends our deepest *political* sensibilities.

At the heart of liberalism is the fear of coercion. The idea of someone forcibly imposing their agenda on us—the university telling us what to think, our family telling us whom to marry, the state telling us how to behave—fills us with dread. The refusal to impose *one* comprehensive vision of the good is at the heart of liberalism's settlement. Accordingly, any attempt by the state to endorse substantive values is tyrannous: it constitutes at bottom some citizens coercing others to live on terms to which they have not subscribed.

We wince at the idea of my transformation being my friend's business because we carry our fear of tyranny from the public sphere into the private sphere. But in the private sphere we are not talking about coercion. The good life involves responding to objectively good things, yet that doesn't negate the fact that I have to *appropriate* those things for myself.

Imagine an absentee father. He spends all his time working, or keeping up with friends, or fighting for social justice. For years his children grow up with his *telling* them (on the occasions he does see them) he loves them, but not proving that in the currency of attention. Then his wife decides she can't stand it any longer. She tells her husband that not only is he neglecting their children; he is missing something that would be good to have in his life. He would be so much more fulfilled if he fully engaged with their children. In ethical terminology, we would say he is in danger of irreversibly failing to flourish as a human being.

And so his wife decides to kidnap him and chain him to the wall in the kitchen. Now he sees his kids all the time!

No doubt this would send counterproductive signals to the children. It would also prevent the father from flourishing even though he now has the objective good he had been missing (that is, now he sees his children all the time). As philosopher Mark LeBar puts it, "Happiness isn't something that happens to us; it is a way we live our lives." If happiness were something that just happened to us, being forced to engage in some good (like parenting) might make sense. But you have to choose happiness freely. I have voluntarily to engage as a parent if I am to realize that good in my life.

My friend, therefore, can challenge me, can confront me with a vision of virtue, can try to make goodness compelling. But in the end, if she *forces* me to live according to that vision, she would thwart rather than realize my happiness. LeBar again: "I can make myself happy by living my life in a certain way, but I am quite unable to do this for others." Another philosopher, Micah Lott, adds,

> Unlike some tasks, [the task of living well] cannot be delegated. If it is your job to deliver some letters, you can have someone deliver them for you. But no one can act virtuously for you. . . . Grasping the good, and acting from that grasp, is not the sort of thing one could do on another's behalf. Each of us faces her own task of bringing the good into view, and responding appropriately.

We should seek brutal friends, friends who refuse to accept us as we are. Friends challenge and coax; they don't just help us realize our pre-established goals.

So our concern should be with ourselves *first* in the sense that self-concern is not substitutable. Nobody can live our lives for us, and we can't live their lives for them. But because in our relationship we both stand under the same good, my friend does not stand on a higher plateau from which she delivers instructions aimed to mould me into an object of her pleasing. We aim at it together.

ASSOCIATES IN GOODNESS

There is a theological dimension to this aspect of friendship too. St. Augustine in one place exhorts his readers to "relate" the help we give our friends to God. First, he says we shouldn't discriminate between people who can reciprocate the help we give them and those who can't.

Then he adds, "But it should be our desire that they all love God together with us, and all the help that we give to . . . them must be related to this one end." Out of context, the quotation might seem to recommend instrumentalizing practical help, and indeed (some have thought) instrumentalizing social action. But Augustine's thought in fact echoes, as well as baptizes, Plato's logic. A few lines later Augustine says, "If they turned to [God], it is inevitable that they would love him as the goodness which is the source of all happiness and love us as *joint participants* in such goodness."

Any potential power dynamic is quashed by the fact that my friend and I both stand under the good, now revealed to be God. We are, in Augustine's Latin, *socios*, "joint participants," "associates" in a goodness external to us both. And if we believe, Augustine concludes, that God is the source of all goodness, where my friend's good lies as well as mine, it follows that authentically other-regarding friendship will involve "referring" her to God, but not coercively—pointing not prodding, suggesting not cajoling, sharing not imposing.

COURAGE

It is said that friendship must involve grace and constancy. It must involve accepting someone in whatever state they are in. It must involve promising to be present with someone through thick and thin. And that's true. For, returning to the theme I opened with—genuine friendship as an inherently risky endeavour—the rejection in question is not *your* rejection of your friend. It is your *friend's* rejection of the good. Emma accepts Mr. Knightley's rebuke to her betterment, and to the betterment of their relationship. I know in my own case that I may tell myself that the reason I don't confront my friends is that I fear being paternalistic, interfering, and presumptuous. But, usually, the real reason is that my fear of rejection is greater than my concern for their good. Their flourishing is not ultimately as important to me as our friendship, and our friendship is thus not oriented to the good that is beyond us.

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