Value and Friendship: A More Subtle View

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T. M. Scanlon has cited the value of friendship in arguing against a 'teleological' view of value which says that value inheres only in states of affairs and demands only that we promote it. This article argues that, whatever the teleological view's final merits, the case against it cannot be made on the basis of friendship. The view can capture Scanlon's claims about friendship if it holds, as it can consistently with its basic ideas, that (i) friendship is a higher-level good consisting in appropriate attitudes to other goods and evils in a friend's life, (ii) these goods and evils have agent-relative value, i.e. more value than similar states of strangers, and (iii) the attitudes constituting friendship have less value than their objects. Given these independently plausible claims, the teleological view can agree with Scanlon that, e.g., it is wrong to betray a friend in order to promote more friendships among other people.

Friendship is often cited in criticisms of impartial consequentialist moralities such as utilitarianism. By requiring equal concern for all people, critics say, these moralities fail to capture the value of our special attachments to friends and other intimates. More recently, T. M. Scanlon has appealed to friendship in arguing against a broader position that he calls the 'teleological' view of value. This view holds, first, that the bearers of value are always states of affairs and, second, that the only response value demands of us is to promote it, or to bring it into and keep it in existence. The teleological view is presupposed by impartial consequentialism but, as Scanlon notes, is in two respects broader. First, it is not committed to full impartiality but can allow agent-relativities in value, whereby a state is good only from one person's point of view or has more value from his point of view than from other people's. Thus, egoism, which tells each person to promote only his own good, can be teleological in form, as can self-referential altruism, which tells each person to give more weight to the good of people close to him, such as his family and friends, than to strangers. Second, the teleological view is not committed to consequentialism about the right, but can allow that there are deontological constraints making it sometimes wrong to do what will have the best consequences. Its only claim is that when value is in play – which it then cannot be in grounding the constraints – the only appropriate response is to promote it. Whatever other reasons there may be, the reasons generated by values are only to bring them into or keep them in existence.

Scanlon allows that this teleological view is plausible for the specific values of pleasure and pain, but he denies that these are the only

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intrinsic values: there is more to the good life than feeling good. And he argues that the additional values needed for a plausible theory of value do not fit the teleological picture. He bases his case on two examples, one of which is scientific knowledge. But he attaches the most weight to the example of friendship, which is an appropriate choice given its centrality in the ideal consequentialism of G. E. Moore. While holding that pain is a significant evil, Moore denied that pleasure is a significant good; he therefore identified the greatest intrinsic goods as aesthetic contemplation and 'the pleasures of human intercourse', or of personal relationships such as friendship. And as a partisan of the teleological view, he held that the good of friendship, like other goods, is only to be promoted.

Scanlon allows that this is part of the truth about friendship. Someone who values friendship will believe that she has reason to maintain her current friendships and to cultivate new ones; she may also try to encourage friendships among other people. But Scanlon denies that this is the only or most important part of friendship. Someone who values friendship, he says, 'will take herself to have reasons, first and foremost, to do those things that are involved in being a good friend: to be loyal, to be concerned with her friends' interests, to try to stay in touch, to spend time with friends, and so on'. And he argues that these reasons are the most central to friendship, so they take priority over reasons to promote friendship when the two conflict: 'We would not say that it showed how much a person valued friendship if he betrayed a friend in order to make several new ones, or in order to bring it about that other people had more friends.'[1] Friendship, in other words, is not a value that calls mainly for its promotion; it generates other reasons, and these others are the primary reasons associated with it.

My aim in this article is not to vindicate the teleological view of value as a whole; the topic is too large, and in any case the view may well be false. I will instead argue that the case against the view cannot be made on the basis of friendship. This is partly because the teleological view, especially given the resources Scanlon allows it, can give an account of friendship that meets his objections. But it is also because, given the type of value friendship is, it cannot settle this issue but instead presupposes that fundamental questions about value have already been decided.

A plausible teleological account of the value of friendship will, I think, have three main features. First, it will treat friendship as a higher-level intrinsic good, one that involves appropriate attitudes to

[1] T. M. Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other* (Cambridge, MA, 1998), pp. 88–9.

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other, previously given goods and evils or, more generally, to other previously given normative considerations. This was certainly Moore's view. He took friendship to involve the admiring contemplation of another's good qualities, and said that this distinguishes friendship from his other good of aesthetic appreciation, whose object is only beautiful and not also significantly good.[2] Moore also used this fact to explain the value of friendship, by appealing to the general idea that appropriate attitudes to goods and evils are themselves good, so the positive attitude of loving an intrinsic good for itself is an additional intrinsic good, as is the negative attitude of hating an intrinsic evil.[3] His description of the higher-level goods in friendship was in several ways too restrictive. He often wrote as if the only valuable form of love is admiration for or pleasure in goods already present in another's life; a more plausible account will find similar value in desires for goods that do not now exist and, perhaps especially, in active efforts to help produce them. In speaking only of 'admiration' Moore also implicitly restricted the goods a friend loves to perfectionist ones, and really recognized only one such good, namely a friend's appreciation of beauty, as if the supreme expression of love were 'What fine taste in pictures you have.' A more plausible account will again extend his view, so a friend cares about other perfectionist goods in a friend's life, such as knowledge, achievement and virtue, and also about her pleasure and happiness. The account will say that friendship is good because it involves the full range of positive attitudes, including desire, active pursuit and pleasure, to all aspects of another's good, both perfectionist and hedonist, and similar negative attitudes to all aspects of her evil.[4]

These higher-level attitudes do not exhaust friendship, which as Scanlon notes also involves simple pleasure in another's company and a desire to spend time with her. But these elements do not seem so central to the distinctive value of friendship. After all, two people can enjoy each other's company and want to spend time together without caring for each other at all; for example, they can just find each other

[2] G. E. Moore, *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge, 1903), p. 203.

[3] For Moore's endorsement of this general idea see *Principia Ethica*, pp. 177–9, 204, 208–11, 217–18, 220–1, 224–5. I defend the idea at greater length in *Virtue, Vice, and Value* (New York, 2001).

[4] To say friendship involves attitudes to goods in a friend's life is not to say it need involve attitudes to them as goods, or with explicit thoughts about value. Scanlon pictures friends as explicitly recognizing reasons regarding each other, but that fits the general intellectualism of his view of motivation (*What We Owe to Each Other*, pp. 37–41). If we reject that view, we can see friends as desiring, say, each other's happiness without necessarily thinking of that happiness as good or as something they have reason to desire. Still, if they desire each other's happiness as happiness they desire something good for the property that makes it good, which is enough on the view I am assuming to make their desire a higher-level good.

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funny. In this case I do not think we would say their relationship has the full value of friendship, and some may deny that it is a friendship at all. That is because the central good in friendship is the higher-level one of appropriate concern for goods and other normative considerations concerning another's life.

Second, a plausible teleological account will say the objects of friendly attitudes have agent-relative value. This was not Moore's view. Since he denied the possibility of agent-relative goodness, he could only hold that our friends are people toward whom we have to a higher degree attitudes we ought to have equally toward everyone. But Scanlon allows a teleological view to include agent-relativities, and if it does it can say that from each person's point of view the happiness, knowledge and virtue of a friend have more value than similar states of a stranger. This makes her caring more about her friend's states positively appropriate, since it responds more to what from her point of view has greater value. If these agent-relativities are to figure in the analysis of friendship, what gives a person's states more value cannot be that he is a friend; it must have some independent basis. But this basis is plausibly seen as historical. What gives someone's happiness, knowledge and so on greater value from my point of view is that she participated with me in a certain shared history, one of doing good, either reciprocally or to outsiders, and perhaps of suffering evil, but not of doing evil. And how much extra value her states have depends on specific facts about that history, such as how closely it related to us and how much good it involved.[5] But given the history, her happiness, knowledge and other goods count more from my point of view than those of strangers, and my caring more about them is positively good.

It can even be argued that this historical element is essential to friendship. Two people can care more for each other's good than for anyone else's yet not intuitively count as friends, because they have never met or otherwise interacted. (Perhaps each just read about the other in the newspaper and on that basis formed a special concern for her good.) This can be explained if a necessary part of friendship is sharing a history and caring more for each other because of that history. Then friendship is a special type of higher-level good, one where concern for another is at least partly based on a historical relationship with her.

This second feature of the teleological account, its taking friendly attitudes to concern agent-relative values, enables it to accommodate some important points of Scanlon's. He allows that part of friendship is wanting to promote another's interests and to make her happy, where these are teleological values. But he also holds that there are

[5] See my 'The Justification of National Partiality', *The Morality of Nationalism*, ed. R. McKim and J. McMahan (New York, 1997).

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non-teleological elements in friendship, such as a desire to be loyal to one's friends and not to betray them. Some writers on self-referential altruism use the term 'loyalty' to refer to an appropriately greater concern for the good of those close to one, so one betrays a friend if one declines to give her a slightly smaller benefit in order to give a slightly greater benefit to a stranger.[6] If it affirms agent-relative values, the teleological account demands loyalty in this sense. But this is presumably not what Scanlon has in mind, since he allows that values can be agent-relative but denies that reasons of loyalty are teleological. He must therefore understand these reasons as constraints, which make it wrong to lie to or cheat a friend even if that will produce the most agent-relative good, including in her life. For him some ways of treating a friend are incompatible with friendship even if they benefit her. But since the teleological account can recognize constraints – remember that Scanlon does not restrict it to consequentialism about the right – it can also endorse this view. One way is by adopting a position parallel to the one attributed above to Moore and saying our friends are people toward whom we are in fact more averse to doing things it is equally wrong to do to anyone. While it is equally wrong to lie to anyone, we are especially reluctant to lie to friends. But the account can also say that the constraints have agent-relative force, so however wrong it is to lie to or cheat a stranger, it is even worse to do so to an intimate.[7] This is a plausible view: just as goods such as happiness have greater weight when they belong to those close to us, so constraints have greater force when they concern those close to us. The teleological account can adopt this view, and if it does it will say that being more averse to lying to a friend is positively good, since it responds more to a consideration that has greater normative weight. This aspect of friendship no longer concerns a teleological value, since its object is a constraint. But this does not stop its own value from being teleological, or something that is only to be promoted. Being averse to lying to a friend, like wanting her happiness, is an appropriate response to a previously given normative consideration and as such can have higher-level teleological worth.

Finally, the account will hold that friendship is a lesser intrinsic good, in the sense that a particular friendly attitude to an aspect of another's good always has less value than that aspect of her good. This feature of the account generalizes a claim of Moore's. Moore held that compassion

[6] Andrew Oldenquist, 'Loyalties', *Journal of Philosophy* 49 (1982); George P. Fletcher, *Loyalty: An Essay on the Morality of Relationships* (New York, 1993).

[7] Constraints are already agent-relative in one sense, since they tell each person to care more about his own lying or cheating than about other people's. I am suggesting a second type of agent-relativity, whereby lying to those close to one is worse than lying to strangers.

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for another's pain is less good than the pain is evil, so a situation with one person's pain and another's compassion for it is worse than if there were no pain and no compassion.[8] Similar claims are plausible for other attitudes: that a benevolent desire for another's happiness is less good than her happiness, and that a torturer's sadistic pleasure in his victim's pain is less evil than the pain, so that if one can prevent only one of the two one should prevent the pain. Applied to friendship, this view implies that a desire for a friend's success is less good than her success, and being averse to lying to her less important than not lying. The view does not imply that friendship as a whole is less good than any instance of a lower-level good. If we compare one's full range of concern through time for all aspects of a friend's good with a particular pleasure she may experience now, the former may be vastly better. But if we compare a friendly attitude with its specific intentional object, either a particular desire now for a particular pleasure for a friend now with that pleasure, or a lifelong concern for all her good through time with all that good, the attitude always has less value. As a higher-level good, friendship involves attitudes to other goods or normative considerations that come before it, and it is therefore fitting that it has less importance than those previously given objects.

These three features of friendship – that it is a higher-level good, has agent-relative objects and has lesser value – are not unique to friendship. There are other higher-level goods, such as a desire for the happiness of strangers; some of these have agent-relative objects, and all are lesser goods. In addition, the three features imply a further one: that friendship is itself a relativized good, so my current friendships have more value from my point of view now than do other friendships. If attitudes always have less value than their objects, the simplest explanation is that, given a fixed intensity, the value of an attitude is always a constant fraction of its object's value, say, one quarter. This implies that a current friendship of mine has more value from my point of view now than an otherwise similar friendship I might form in the future, since there is not yet between me and the partner in that possible friendship the kind of shared history that would give his states additional value for me now. The priority here is not absolute. People sometimes abandon a current less satisfactory relationship in the hope of starting a better one in the future, and if the anticipated improvement is sufficiently large that choice can be reasonable. But the features we have identified imply that for me now a current friendship has somewhat greater value than a future one. The three features also imply that a current friendship of mine has more value from my

[8] Moore, *Principia Ethica*, p. 219. I defend the generalization of this claim in *Virtue, Vice, and Value*, ch. 5.

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point of view than a similar friendship among strangers, since again their states do not have as much value from my point of view as my friend's. It does not yet follow that a current friendship of mine for a given person has more value than someone else's friendship for that person; the latter has the same objects and in that respect the same value. But the account can be extended to yield this further relativity. It can say that from each person's point of view his own appropriate attitudes have more value than similar attitudes of other people, and his own inappropriate attitudes more disvalue. This claim is plausible in other contexts. Many will say a person should feel more intense shame at his own vicious actions than regret at the similar actions of others, implying that from his point of view his own vice matters more. And if it is extended to friendship, the claim makes that value doubly relativized. My current friendships have more value from my point of view both because they are directed at states that, given a shared history, have more value from my point of view than states of strangers, and also because they involve attitudes that have more value from my point of view just because they are mine.

This teleological account of friendship is more subtle than one that treats friendship as an underivative good that is to be promoted impartially in all people. It is consistent with the teleological view of value because it uses only materials which Scanlon allows to that view, such as relativities in value and non-value-based constraints. But, given its subtlety, it can capture the phenomena Scanlon says a teleological account of friendship cannot.

Scanlon says it would not show how much a person valued friendship if he betrayed one friend in order to make several new ones or in order to bring it about that other people had more friends. On one reading, this remark says it is wrong to abandon a current friendship in order to promote slightly better friendships for oneself in the future or for other people. Since it treats friendship as a time- and agent-relative good, the teleological account entirely agrees. By giving more, and in principle considerably more, value to each person's own current friendships, it implies that a proportional concern for the value of friendship will focus more on one's current friendships than on future friendships or those of other people.

This reading may not be what Scanlon intends, since he relates betrayal primarily to the first-level reasons implicit in friendship rather than to the value of friendship as such. He may instead mean that it is wrong to sacrifice significant amounts of a friend's happiness or to lie to or cheat her in order to promote other friendships. Since the teleological account also treats friendship as a lesser good, it again agrees. If one's own future and others' friendships have less value than one's current friendship, and that friendship in turn has less value than

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objects such as the friend's happiness and not lying to her, then the former friendships fall even farther short of those objects' importance. A proportional concern for the reasons implicit in friendship will focus much more on the current friend's happiness and not lying to her than on promoting other friendships. The priority here is again not absolute; one may well pass up a slight increase in a friend's happiness if that will encourage valuable friendships for others. But if attitudes in general have less value than their objects, and other attitudes less value than one's own current ones, there are two reasons not to sacrifice a friend's happiness or to violate constraints concerning her for the sake of promoting other friendships.

Scanlon also claims, more generally, that the first-level reasons associated with friendship are the most important such reasons, so promoting a friend's happiness and not lying to her are more central to recognizing the value of friendship than is promoting the existence of friendship. Given its claim that friendship is a lesser good, the teleological account again agrees. At the (admittedly sentimental) end of *A Tale of Two Cities*, Sydney Carton sacrifices his life, and therefore the possibility of any future love for Lucie, to secure her happiness, by taking the place on the guillotine of the man she loves. The account agrees that Carton acts heroically, since he prefers the greater good of Lucie's happiness to the lesser good of his own love for it.

It may be objected that the teleological account fails to connect the first-level reasons with friendship in the right way. It says that there are first-level reasons to care about a friend's happiness and higher-level reasons to care about that caring, but it treats the two as essentially separate. Scanlon, by contrast, talks of the first-level reasons as following from the value of friendship, so a person recognizes the reasons because she values her friendship. Any adequate account, it may be objected, must make that tighter connection.

There are two replies to this objection. First, if Scanlon thinks a friend must derive her first-order reasons from her valuing of friendship, his own account is inadequate and even obnoxious. It is precisely not the mark of a true friend to be motivated primarily by thoughts of her own friendship. If she sees you in pain, her primary desire is just to relieve your pain, and while she may recognize that in doing so she will be acting as a friend, and may take that as an additional reason to help you, her primary focus is just on your pain. If it were not, and thoughts about her friendship for you were her primary motivation, she would in that respect be lacking as a friend.[9] The same point applies more generally. It is not characteristic of virtuous people to be motivated

[9] If she cares more about relieving your pain than about relieving a stranger's, she must think of it as the pain of a person with whom she shares a certain history. What

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primarily by thoughts of their own virtue. A truly benevolent person cares most about other people's happiness, and if he cared more about expressing his own benevolence he would be not virtuous but morally self-indulgent.[10] If Scanlon requires friends to be motivated primarily by thoughts of their own friendship, he in effect requires them, too, to be self-indulgent.

Second, the teleological account does connect first-level reasons with friendship, just because it sees the latter as a higher-level good. If friendship consists in appropriate attitudes to another person, one cannot veridically value one's friendship with her, that is, value it when it actually exists, unless one in fact cares about her good and about constraints concerning her. The account does not derive these first-level concerns from the value of friendship, as Scanlon sometimes suggests. It works in the opposite direction, taking their objects as given and defining friendship as an appropriate response to them. But given this reverse connection, the account does make the value of friendship imply first-level reasons, since one cannot value a friendship one correctly believes one has without independently caring about one's friend.

It seems, then, that an account of friendship consistent with the teleological view of value can capture Scanlon's plausible claims about friendship. It does not follow, however, that the teleological view is true; it may well be false.

Consider first the value of friendship, and to eliminate relativities consider only friendships among strangers. The teleological view says that these friendships are only to be promoted, but some may disagree. They may say it is wrong to destroy one friendship among strangers in order to promote more friendships among strangers, and they may say the reason why is that this fails to respond appropriately to the value of friendship. While that value calls in part for its promotion, it also demands respect, which means not destroying it even for the sake of greater values of the same type. Or consider constraints such as those against lying and cheating, which friends honour in their behaviour toward each other. While the teleological view can recognize these constraints, it cannot derive them from claims about value. Instead, it must see them as independent of values, as W. D. Ross did. But an attractive alternative view grounds moral constraints in respect for intrinsic values. One version of this view agrees with teleologists that values always inhere in states of affairs, but holds that alongside our reason to promote values is a separate and stronger reason not to

she does not do is care primarily about relieving your pain because it will express her friendship for you.

[10] See Bernard Williams, 'Utilitarianism and Moral Self-Indulgence', in his *Moral Luck* (Cambridge, 1981).

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destroy or choose against them.[11] This implies that if knowledge or true belief is a value, we have some reason to promote it by sharing useful information with others but a stronger reason not to destroy it by lying to them. It likewise implies that if free choice is a value, we have some reason to increase people's freedom by giving them additional options but a stronger duty not to restrict their freedom by removing options from them, as we do if we coerce them. So this view grounds constraints in a non-promoting attitude to values, and in that way unifies them as Ross's approach cannot. The view can also explain why the resulting constraints are stronger concerning friends than concerning strangers. If constraints derive from a demand to respect values, they are surely stronger when they concern greater values. Thus, if pain is an evil, the constraint against inflicting intense pain is stronger than the constraint against inflicting mild pain. But then if a friend's knowledge has more value from my point of view than a stranger's, my reason not to destroy my friend's knowledge by lying to him is stronger than my reason not to lie to the stranger. By recognizing two required responses to value, this view can give a unified explanation of why we have both stronger reasons to promote our friends' good and stronger reasons to honour constraints concerning them.

So the teleological view of value may be false, and if it is, the account of friendship I have proposed needs revision in a non-teleological direction. The value of friendship may become one that is to be respected as well as promoted, and the attitudes that constitute friendship will include respect for aspects of a friend's good as well as a desire to promote them. But whether the teleological view is false is not something friendship itself can show. The reason is just that friendship is a higher-level good. If it consists in appropriate attitudes to other, previously given normative considerations, our view of what it involves will depend on what we take those considerations to be. If they include only teleological values, then friendship will consist only in wanting to promote goods such as happiness in a friend's life, and its value will be consistent with the teleological view.[12] If they include, alongside teleological values, constraints grounded independently of values, friendship will also involve honouring those constraints in relation to a friend but will still be consistent with the teleological view, since its only attitude to values will be one of promoting. But if the relevant considerations include constraints grounded in respect for values, then friendship will include that respect and its value

[11] See e.g. John Finnis, *Natural Law and Natural Rights* (Oxford, 1980).

[12] One could in principle say that while the objects of friendship are all teleological values, friendship itself, uniquely, is to be respected as well as promoted. But on what possible basis could one say this?

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will violate the teleological view. So, far from helping us to decide whether the teleological view is true, friendship is something we will characterize differently given our stance on that question. If the only appropriate attitude to values is to promote them, friendship will include only that attitude; if values are also to be respected, friendship will extend to involve respect. This is just what it means for friendship to be a higher-level good. Friendship is an important intrinsic value, and relevant to many philosophical questions, but not to ones about what the nature of value is.[13]

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[13] I am grateful to Roger Crisp for helpful suggestions.

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