

Friends with Beneficence: Asymmetry and Teacher Identity

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Amy Shuffelton's essay provides convincing responses to some common fears regarding teacher–student friendships, including inequality, partiality, and motivation. In refuting these arguments and outlining some positive potentials in pedagogical friendships, she also references another characteristic of character friendships, namely a mutuality of knowledge and recognition between friends, which remains unexamined in relation to pedagogical relationships, and may benefit from consideration. By contrasting our expectations of mutual knowledge in friendship and in pedagogical relationships, I suggest that the student's lack of knowledge about the teacher plays an important role in learning, and may also shape what is possible in teacher–student friendships.

Shuffelton hints at the significance of knowledge to friendship in paraphrasing Aristotle's "understanding of friendship as reciprocated and mutually recognized wishing the other's good for the other's sake," but it is in her invocation of John Cooper's term "character friendship" as a form of relationship "rooted in knowledge and appreciation of the other as a complete human being" that the importance of each friend's knowledge of the other becomes clear.¹ For Shuffelton, this requirement does not pose a problem: she claims that "[t]eachers and students ... often know one another well" and that their knowledge and recognition of one another may serve as "a potential balm for ... institutional afflictions." While in Shuffelton's account friendship provides a positive alternative to "the frequency of failed connections that leave students and teachers feeling misunderstood, disrespected, and unappreciated," we might still ask if the manner in which students and teachers know one another is similar to the mutual knowing shared between friends.

The history of educational philosophy exhibits asymmetrical knowing as a foundation of pedagogical relationships, with a strong preference for the teacher's knowledge of the student. Plato's noble lie, Augustine's relationship to a God who numbers every hair on his head, Jean-Jacques Rousseau's pedagogical theatrics in gardens and at carnivals, and John Dewey's translation of the logic of adult discourse into a pedagogical message for children variously confirm that the teacher's privileged place with respect to knowledge extends beyond her command of subject matter and skills to her knowledge of the individual student as subject to the social norms learned in school. The teacher's power to place the student in an order of being, and ability to teach the student how best to take up that place, demonstrate the common understanding that the teacher knows the student better than the student knows herself. In contrast, the student is defined as lacking not only knowledge of the world but especially of the teacher, whose power over words and rules remains a mystery that the student strives to know.²

The asymmetry of knowledge between teacher and student is clearly at odds with the "knowledge and appreciation of the other as a complete human being"

claimed as a trait of character friendships, not only in the manner it connects but in its power to produce the subjects involved. This productive difference between friendship and pedagogical relationships is illustrated in the film *The Wizard of Oz*, in which a group of friends find themselves on a quest to meet the title character, who they believe will help cure the individual flaw that marks each of them.³ Dorothy, the Scarecrow, the Tin Man, and the Cowardly Lion all know one another's flaws and failures, and are brought together by their limits in order to achieve a shared goal, but none looks to the others as a source of self-completion, as they do to the Wizard. At the end of the journey, they find that the man behind the myth is far less than they believed him to be. But just at the moment when their adventure seems to have been ruined by the fact that it was motivated by a falsehood, the Wizard reveals to them that each one has overcome the affliction of his or her flaw in the process of coming to find him. The Wizard's revelation is paradoxical: the journey was moved by a false hope in the Wizard's power, but without the false belief, the friends would never have received the benefits of their transformative journey.

In a similar fashion, the benefits students obtain from relationships with teachers may not be separable from a broader set of spurious but effective beliefs about what the teacher knows, what kinds of knowledge are attainable, and what sort of happiness and human completion is attainable given those kinds of knowledge. Following the film as a metaphor, we might ask what would happen if Toto pulled the curtain back on the teacher before the student's journey reached its end, establishing the sort of mutual knowing we usually associate with friendship. Would the teacher be able to motivate and inspire students toward an imaginary point of self-completion without in some aspect embodying that completion herself? The fact that we must consider questions regarding the student's striving toward an end of education, rather than taking the friendship as an end in itself, demonstrates that pedagogical relationships are set apart from character friendships according to their end: the flourishing of the student as subject to social norms.

Shuffelton provides a claim that highlights pedagogical goals as a limit of teacher–student friendships: “friends are the people to whom we often turn for honest evaluation of our merits and shortcomings.” While a teacher may welcome students' critiques of her teaching, she is not likely to welcome students' evaluations of her aesthetic, moral, or political leanings, or even to share these commitments with students in an unguarded fashion, unless she can employ her students' knowledge of her particularities in a pedagogical manner. Shuffelton's suggestion that teachers might extend their friendship to boys who like butterflies or to other students who suffer their differences from the norm underscores the pedagogical purposes always present in teacher–student relationships. By considering the effect of her friendship on a student's flourishing, the teacher participates in an existing imbalance of mutual knowing, while at the same time establishing a significant fact about her motivations that she would not want the student to know.

But if the pedagogical friendship is founded on the student's ignorance of the teacher's motivations, as well as false presumptions about the teacher as a knowing subject, perhaps the most important questions that Shuffelton raises in her essay

relate to these unknown teacher motivations. If in friendship individuals seek mutual recognition and self-knowledge through the mirror of their knowledge of the other, what do teachers want from their relationships with students? Do teachers gain satisfaction and a feeling of completeness by being misrecognized as complete by their students, even as they participate in a play of openness and mutuality? Or are the fragments of weakness and particularity that a teacher discloses all the more prized because both teacher and student know that there is something transgressive in what they share? The question of what teachers want, and what pleasures they take from their work is often raised and just as often dropped, but mirroring the student's misapprehension of the teacher's knowing, our elision of this question may be a perfect example of the forgetting Friedrich Nietzsche describes as necessary to going on with life.⁴

If this is the case then, returning to the ethical question with which Shuffelton begins her essay, it may not be possible to be friends with students and remain a teacher, because the intimacy that friendship entails may conflict with the conditions of the student's flourishing. But if student flourishing is the end of teaching, then established teacher identities may be a casualty of teaching itself. As Shuffelton reminds us, "[h]uman ethical life is full of incommensurable demands and tragic choices," and at times it may be more important for a student's flourishing to know that their teachers are failed, fragile, and have learned to put on a strong face and go to work than to believe that mastering algebra will help them figure out the rest of their lives. In such a case, sacrificing the identity of the teacher for the sake of the student is in keeping with the purposes of education in the first place.

1. John M. Cooper, *Reason and Emotion: Essays on Ancient Moral Psychology and Ethical Theory* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999).

2. This phenomenon has been considered an instance of transference by a number of educational theorists, including Robert Brooke, "Lacan, Transference, and Writing Instruction," *College English* 49, no. 6 (1987).

3. *The Wizard of Oz*, directed by Victor Fleming (Los Angeles: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1939).

4. Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Francis Golffing (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1956).