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# On having bad persons as friends

Intuitively, one who counts a morally bad person as a friend has gone wrong somewhere. Yet it is far from obvious where exactly they have gone astray. Perhaps in cultivating a friendship with a bad person, one extends to them certain goods that they do not deserve. Or perhaps the failure lies elsewhere; one may be an abettor to moral transgressions. Yet another option is to identify the mistake as a species of imprudence—one may take on great personal risk in counting a bad person as a friend. In this paper, I argue that none of these intuitive explanations are entirely convincing; for many such proposals run contrary to widely accepted features of friendship. However, they do point us in the direction of a more satisfying explanation—one which concerns a person's moral priorities. An individual who counts a morally bad person as a friend is, I propose, one who betrays a distinct kind of defect in her values.

## Introduction

Most of us are fortunate enough to count morally decent persons among our friends. Such friends not only provide us with love and support, but extend their kindness to others as well. Yet it is no condition of entry for friendship that one be morally exemplary. Indeed, it does not seem at all incoherent to suppose that someone might count a *morally bad person* among their friends.<sup>1</sup> Such cases are by no means unfamiliar—Nietzsche was friends with Wagner, Copperfield with Steerforth, Rick Blaine with Louis Renault. Yet they surely strike us as puzzling all the same; one who

<sup>1</sup> Hereafter, I omit the 'morally', and intend for 'bad person' to denote a *morally* bad person.

enters into a friendship with a bad person very much seems to have *gone wrong* somewhere.

In what follows, I limit my investigation to what I take to be the most interesting cases. These exhibit four key features. First, the individual who counts a bad person as a friend is not herself a bad person. This is not to say that the individual in question is a *moral saint*. She may very well be guilty of the occasional moral lapse. Yet she is certainly someone to whom we would be hesitant to attribute a morally bad character.

Second, the individual who counts a bad person as a friend does not suffer directly as a result of his dispositions or his actions.<sup>2</sup> On the contrary, we can imagine that this person treats her incredibly well. Perhaps he is always keen to offer support, and never fails to make good on his promises. Insofar as the effects of the bad person's character are concerned, it is only ever *others* who may suffer.

Third, and relatedly, the bad person's dispositions or actions are hardly—if ever—made salient to the individual who has entered into a friendship with him. His disgraceful values and misdeeds are seldom drawn to her attention. This is not to say that the individual has befriended a bad person *unknowingly*. She is most certainly aware of his moral vices. But she finds it rather easy to look the other way, and continues to do so as she enjoys his kindness and good company.

Finally, this person is quite uncontroversially *a bad person*. It is not merely that he is guilty of moral mishaps; his faults are far from benign. Perhaps he harbours a strong disdain for the poor. Or maybe he is inexcusably racist. He might even have a long

<sup>2</sup> Purely to avoid ambiguity, I will use the female pronoun to refer to the individual who counts a bad person as a friend, and the male pronoun to refer to the bad person.

history of lending support to reprehensible causes. (I shall have more to say about the kind of vices I have in mind shortly.)

Now, it is incredibly plausible that something has gone awry here. There is the strong intuition that the individual who counts a bad person as a friend has made some sort of *mistake*. Or, in any event, familiar reactions to these friendships would seem to suggest as much. It is not uncommon to express exasperation here ('I don't know how you could be friends with such a person!') or bewilderment ('He's really your friend?'), and indeed, moral judgment ('You really shouldn't be friends with him'). All such responses seem not only commonplace, but warranted. And all suggest that our individual has, at least in some sense, gone wrong.

Yet *where* exactly does the individual who befriends a bad person go wrong? My aim in this paper will be to supply an answer to this question. As will become evident in the ensuing discussion, our answer to this question bears upon a number of other questions of interest in the contemporary debate surrounding the nature of friendship. These include (but are not limited to) how we should best conceive of the distinctive duties to which friendship gives rise, and whether friendship is properly thought of as a phenomenon that lies beyond the scope of morality. Though I will not take a strong stand on these latter issues here, I do believe that my arguments have important implications for how we ought to approach them.

The road ahead is as follows. I begin by motivating the possibility of friendships with bad persons; for some are of the view that such friendships are not properly called friendships at all (§1). I then move on to consider three solutions to our puzzle that seem plausible on first appearances. These are, respectively, that the person who extends friendship to a morally bad person goes wrong by violating requirements of

moral desert (§2), being indirectly responsible for his moral misdeeds (§3), and taking on great personal risk (§4). To my mind, none of these proposals are entirely plausible. This is not to deny that each proposal is getting at something important; my claim is not that we ought to reject them wholesale. My more moderate contention is that they are at best partial explanations that don't seem to get to the heart of the phenomenon under investigation. In §5, I develop what I take to be a far more satisfying explanation. According to the proposal that I shall develop, an individual who counts a bad person as a friend goes wrong in cultivating an objectionable sort of moral complacency, discounting important moral values that ought to occupy a suitable role in her moral priorities.

## **§1. Is friendship with a bad person possible?**

For the philosophical purposes of this paper, I will assume that a friendship with a bad person is possible. Though this strikes me as highly plausible, it does run contrary to the well-domesticated Aristotelian idea that true friendship must be premised upon mutual recognition of moral goodness.<sup>3</sup> This theme lives on in some contemporary accounts of friendship, which take it to function as a kind of apprenticeship in moral character (Thomas 1989, Sherman 1993).

Let me briefly say something by way of response. It does not seem at all true to me that friendship need be premised upon any mutual recognition of virtuousness. Far from

<sup>3</sup> In fairness to Aristotle, he does allow for different kinds of friendship. However, it would be a mistake to classify him as a pluralist. On Aristotle's view, a friendship involving a bad person is but a shadow of the real thing (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1157a12–19). Only those who "... are good in themselves" are "most truly friends" (1156a6–12).

being an apprenticeship in moral character, friendship can sometimes require us to act contrary to our moral obligations. There is something to the old joke that “a friend will help you move house, a good friend will help you move a body” (Cocking & Kennett 2000, p.278). Though tossing corpses into rivers and lying to a deceased’s relatives are not hallmarks of virtuous character, they may very well be the hallmarks of an excellent friend.

Moreover, and as Alexander Nehamas observes, friendships can be expressed through “crime, cruelty and immorality” (2010, p.277; see also Cocking and Kennett 2000, p.286). The titular characters of Ridley Scott’s (1991) *Thelma and Louise* are certainly not invested in one another’s moral flourishing; they shoot people, force others into the boots of cars, and commit armed robbery. And each does so for the sake of the other. But it is difficult to deny that they share a deep and genuine friendship.

I have said something about what friendship is *not* (or need not be). It will be helpful to say a bit more about what friendship is.<sup>4</sup> In regarding the relationship between our individual and the bad person as a friendship, I will be supposing that it exhibits many qualities that are commonly thought to be important for (if not constitutive of) it. I will assume, for instance, that their relationship is marked by a concern for one another, and mutual affection. I will also suppose that they desire one another’s company, and that they share experiences together; they are excited by the prospect of spending time together, and each is disappointed if they rarely have occasion to do so. Though there are surely other hallmarks of friendship, the significance of these features in particular

<sup>4</sup> I thank an anonymous referee for pressing upon me the need to do so.

is widely recognised. (See for example, Telfer 1970-71, Annis 1987, and Jeske 1997.)

And to my mind, they are of fundamental importance.

Some (though perhaps not all) may take these to be features only of what is sometimes called ‘true and good friendship’. Perhaps we would be inclined to judge our individual less harshly if she were merely a friend to the bad person, rather than a *good* friend to him. As we shall see, however, it is surprisingly difficult to fault a person for being a good friend—even when her doing so conflicts with moral ideals. This is not to suggest that our individual is immune to moral evaluation. But I will suggest that she is more readily criticisable for how she chooses her friends than how she treats them.

A final clarification concerns what is needed to count as a morally bad person. Developing necessary and sufficient conditions for morally bad personhood would take me too far afield. But let me say a little more to clarify what I have in mind.<sup>5</sup> I am concerned here with characteristically moral vices that we tend to regard as especially serious—cruelty, strong disregard for the welfare of others, callousness, and the like—that shape an individual’s practical projects, and how they navigate their way around the world. (Whom they would choose to hire for a job, or the social policies they favour, for example.) We might compare these with less serious moral vices such as rudeness and miserliness. We might also distinguish them from other traits that may reasonably be called ‘faults of character’ but don’t obviously qualify as moral vices; ineptitude and

<sup>5</sup> I am very grateful to an anonymous referee here for helping me to avoid ruling out too many persons as appropriate friends.

cowardice, say.<sup>6</sup> The latter strike me as closer to personal failings than moral ones, though they may very well affect how our moral characters manifest themselves.<sup>7</sup>

We should also distinguish those who are explicitly racist (say) from those who are explicitly egalitarian but harbour implicit racist attitudes. The latter may certainly have room for moral improvement. But I think we should be hesitant to label everyone with unsavoury results on an implicit association test a morally bad person—especially if their implicit biases conflict with the values with which they identify. (See Zheng 2016).

In what follows, then, I will take a morally bad person to be distinguished by their having (i) serious moral vices, and (ii) explicit morally reprehensible attitudes with which they identify that (iii) shape their normative outlook on the world and their practical projects. (Implicit attitudes can of course shape someone's practical projects as well. But they do not always do so in ways that the individual would endorse.) These qualities plausibly come in degrees; people can surely be more or less bad.<sup>8</sup> I hasten to add that this is nothing approaching a systematic view of morally bad personhood. But I hope it will be enough to set us on the path forward.

<sup>6</sup> It is admittedly difficult to erect a neat and tidy distinction between moral and non-moral vices. Those who are unsympathetic to the distinction I draw here are free to take me to be asking a more restricted question: a question regarding what (if anything) is morally amiss in befriending someone with these qualities in particular.

<sup>7</sup> As Daniel Haybron (2002, p.272) observes, ineptitude and cowardice do not seem to improve someone's moral character even if they "defang" her moral vices.

<sup>8</sup> Indeed, there must plausibly be some constraints upon the extent of a person's badness of character if we are to imagine that a 'morally ordinary' individual counts him as a friend. While it is not absurd to suppose that such an individual might enter into a friendship with a racist, it stretches the bounds of plausibility to suppose that she might befriend the head of the Klu Klux Klan.



## §2. The Desert View

According to what I shall call *The Desert View*, a person who forges a friendship with a bad person goes wrong in extending to him certain goods of which he is undeserving. The goods in question are the dividends of friendship: kindness, support, good company, and the like. It is tempting to think that one ought to give reward only where reward is due. And the person who counts a bad person as a friend seems to have failed woefully in that regard. The kindness, acceptance, and support that are characteristic of friendship are surely goods of which a bad person is undeserving.

Though it may be tempting, *The Desert View* is, to my mind, implausible. It is far from obvious that extending goods to our friends that they do not deserve is a form of wrongdoing. We often forgive our friends even when they don't deserve our forgiveness, offer them our sympathy even when they are undeserving of sympathy, and give them another chance even when they don't deserve it. (Sometimes we may even be admirable in virtue of doing so.)

In proposing that an individual does wrong in extending the goods of friendship to one who is undeserving, *The Desert View* would also seem to misconstrue the nature of friendship. It is no essential part of our job description as friends that we be moral book-keepers who dole out kindness and support to our friends only insofar as they deserve it. Indeed, there is something inherently discomfoting in the thought that a friend's kindness may be the product of some kind of moral balancing act. This discomfort is nicely brought out by a scenario that Lynne McFall invites us to consider—that of the do-gooder who cheers you up over lunch:

Feeling better, you express your appreciation, tell him that he is a good friend. He says he is only doing his moral duty... Over Caesar salad he tells you about his dear wife, whom he married because no one was more in need of love, nor so unlikely to find it. Somewhere between the main course and the coffee you realize he was not kidding. He is only doing for you what he would do for anyone in your sorry state—his duty. (1987, p.16)

McFall's do-gooder's excessive preoccupation with morality would seem to alienate him from those whom he professes to care about. He does not cheer up his friend over lunch because he harbours a special concern for her, or because she is *his friend*. He does so because this is simply what duty requires of him. And he appears to do worse *qua* friend as a result. The Desert View would seem to risk rendering us akin to such a do-gooder; as people who extend sympathy and kindness to their friends only insofar as they take sympathy and kindness to be deserved.

Of course, an advocate of The Desert View may respond that she need not be committed to any particular claim about the *motivations* upon which friends should act. Perhaps she is only committed to the claim that, whatever one's motivations, one does wrong by extending the goods of friendship to those who are undeserving.<sup>9</sup> But then, The Desert View has the potential to bring about a worrying sort of disharmony between our motivations and our moral reasons. (See Stocker 1976.) An advocate of The Desert View thinks that we ought to extend goods to our friends only when such goods are deserved. But this seems difficult to reconcile with the distinctive sort of

<sup>9</sup> I thank an anonymous referee for pointing this out.

partiality that characterises our deep concern for those closest to us (Blum 1986, Kolodny 2010). The motives upon which we act when we extend kindness to our friends do not seem subordinate to moral principles. Indeed, perhaps they *cannot* be if we are to succeed in being true friends to others. True friends are surely moved to cheer each other up by the special sort of concern that they have for one another *qua* friends—not by the fact that doing so would help them to meet their daily quota of good deeds.<sup>10</sup>

But perhaps we have been unfair to the advocate of The Desert View. Perhaps it is not an unearned benefit to which she objects, but rather, the absence of a suitable kind of penalty. She may take the failure involved in counting a bad person as a friend to be one that concerns *punishment* rather than reward. It is not implausible that we may have duties to condemn the corrupt and vile persons whom we encounter. And these duties would seem to apply to our friends as well; for we often *do* call out our friends on their moral failures. We might tell them off for ignoring the pleas of a hungry beggar, or criticise their infidelity. So perhaps the individual who enters into a friendship with a bad person goes wrong by not availing herself of such duties. She lets his moral failings pass over.

The latter variety of The Desert View seems promising. We may very well have duties to help our friends to navigate a respectable path through life. Indeed, this might

<sup>10</sup> Historically, these sorts of considerations have been thought to tell against impartialist views, according to which our duties to be partial towards our friends have their source in basic normative principles. Such views have been thought to carry the uncomfortable implication that our commitments to our friends are subordinate to our commitments to particular moral values (Stocker 1976, Brink 1999). I do not here assume that the impartialist cannot answer to this charge. However, I do think she had better be capable of doing so (promising attempts include Baron (1991), Jeske (1997), and Collins (2013)). If the impartialist cannot satisfactorily accommodate the commitments that we have towards our friends, then (I am inclined to think) so much the worse for the impartialist.

be thought to be part and parcel of treating them as moral agents. In failing to treat our friends as they deserve, then, perhaps we do them a disservice; perhaps we do wrong *to them*.

Yet we should be careful not to make too much of our duties to exact penalties upon our friends when they fall by the moral wayside; for we tend to regard such duties as defeasible. We very often make *exceptions* of our friends. Perhaps my close friend Jones merits reproach on account of her penchant for fur coats, the animal fur industry being something that I regard as morally objectionable. I am usually disposed to rebuke others for such purchases, or to shoot them dirty looks as they walk on by. Nonetheless, it is not at all unintuitive to suppose that I might refrain from extending the same treatment *to Jones*. I might very well think to myself ‘Jones is a good sort. She is always incredibly kind to others, and is far more supporting of my personal projects than anyone else. So I’ll let this one slide’.

Sponsors of The Desert View might agree that cases like that of myself and Jones are commonplace. But it may be thought that such behaviour is properly regarded an inevitable moral hazard of forging personal relationships—it is behaviour that ought to be tolerated rather than acclaimed. In making exceptions of our friends, then, perhaps both our individual and myself are indeed guilty of a mistake: we both fail in our duties to condemn them.

But contrary to what some might expect, I think that a friend’s tendency to make exceptions of us is something that ought to be celebrated. Far from being a mistake, this habit seems to be something that underwrites our willingness to reveal our true selves to them. It is our friends to whom we turn to confess our moral sins. And these confessions don’t seem merely incidental to the phenomenon of friendship. They

arguably play an important role in enabling close relationships to flourish. Mutual self-disclosure not only cements bonds of trust, but also functions to signal the good will that friends expect of one another (Thomas 1987, p.223; Annis 1987, p.349; White 1999, p.82; cf. Reiman 1976, p.32; Cocking & Kennett 1998, p.518).

Our choice to confide in our friends is, at least in great part, underwritten by the expectation that they won't be so quick to deliver judgment upon us when we do so. Under such circumstances, one anticipates tolerance and understanding—not a weigh-in on the moral scales. Indeed, this seems to be precisely what renders a friend an apt moral confidant; it is their willingness to give us the benefit of the doubt, to see things from our perspective, and to provide an environment in which we can comfortably admit that we are far from paragons of moral virtue.

Importantly, none of this is to suggest that our friends never do (or should) call us out on our wrongdoing. Our friends may even be especially well-placed to criticise us, since they can do against a background of acceptance where there is less need to get defensive.<sup>11</sup> It is not my intention here to suggest that influencing a friend's moral character for the better is something we should never do. I only claim that there is far more to friendship than moral education. Moral lenience can be important for friendships to flourish, and we can sometimes be justified in setting aside any duty we may have to improve our friends as moral agents.

The variety of The Desert View that emphasises an absence of punishment therefore seems to make too much of our duty to penalise our friends when they fall short of moral standards. In doing so, it suggests a highly implausible account of friendship;

<sup>11</sup> I thank an anonymous referee for pointing this out.

one which paints a friend as judge, jury and executioner. The Desert View would have us withhold the goods of friendship from the morally unworthy. Yet it seems characteristic of friends that they respond to moral misdeeds with lenience and empathy—not a healthy dose of moral desert.

Still, even if our duty to condemn our friends is defeasible, one may deny that such a duty *is* defeated in this case, the bad person being a bad person and all. An advocate of The Desert View might insist that our individual is indeed obliged to ensure that the bad person reaps some sort of penalty—via criticism or reproach, perhaps. However, this seems to amount to a partial explanation at best; one that doesn't get to the real root of our puzzle. For suppose now that the individual were to take our advice; suppose that she *did* chastise the bad person for his moral failings. Would we then deny that she goes wrong in maintaining a friendship with him? It is certainly possible that she goes wrong *to a lesser degree*. But it strikes me that there is still some moral residue in need of explanation. She can rebuke him all we like, but there remains the distinct impression that she goes wrong somewhere in counting him as a friend.

### **§3. The Abetting View**

The Desert View proposed to explain the wrong involved in counting a bad person as a friend in terms of the wrong that one does *to them*. The Abetting View suggests a different perspective; perhaps our individual does wrong *to others* when she extends her friendship to a bad person. In cultivating this friendship, she may very well be an abettor to moral transgressions; for her support and kindness makes life rather good for the bad person, and moreover, it suggests to him that he can, despite his woeful character, continue to function as an accepted member of society who is capable of

forging meaningful relationships with others.<sup>12</sup> Her friendship therefore does something to weaken any motivation this person may have had to improve himself as a moral agent. She thereby does wrong *by others* who suffer as a result. She is, to some significant degree, *responsible* for the harm that ensues.

I think there is room to question the extent to which our individual can properly be held responsible for the bad person's misdeeds on account of their friendship. It is certainly not obvious that friendship in and of itself can implicate us in a moral crime. Suppose that my friend has what I regard as a moral vice: she is indifferent to the suffering of animals, and has no qualms about ordering veal when out to dinner. Do I thereby claim some significant degree of responsibility for the lives of the calves that she consumes? That seems hard to swallow, and it has some pretty unsavoury results if it is accepted (if you'll excuse the puns).

If I am out to enhance my moral credentials, then it seems that I should do my best to cut ties with those friends whom I regard as morally sub-par, and instead seek to fill my address book with the good Samaritans and humanitarians of the world.<sup>13</sup> In forging friendships with such moral paragons, I can hope to be an accomplice in making the world a better place; for the support and kindness that is part and parcel of my friendship will make life rather pleasant for these good folk, and moreover, it will suggest to them that they are worthy of forging meaningful relationships with others. My friendship will

<sup>12</sup> On this point, see Annis (1987, p.350), and White (1999, pp.85-6), who suggest that friendship enhances self-esteem through helping us to conceive of ourselves as beings of value.

<sup>13</sup> Of course, the suggestion here is slightly tongue-in-cheek. One cannot plausibly *replace* a stock of morally mediocre friends with a stock of virtuous ones. Following Millgram (1987, p.362), friends don't seem fungible in this way.

therefore motivate them to continue in their efforts as exemplary moral agents. I thereby do right by *others* who benefit as a result. I am, to some significant degree, *responsible* for the good that ensues.

But this is madness. The extent to which one can claim credit for another's moral accomplishments is not merely determined by whether or not one has entered into a friendship with them. It is consistent with being friends with someone that one contributes very little if at all to (at least some of) their personal endeavours. Friendship is consistent with being indifferent—or indeed, firmly opposed—to the good that one's saintly friends are doing. It seems that we would at least be inclined to attribute *less* responsibility to someone under such circumstances. One would surely merit *far more* acknowledgement for a friend's noble charity ventures if they had themselves donated generously, or actively participated in the fundraising.

This is not to suggest that one must contribute directly to a friend's accomplishments if they are to merit *any* acknowledgement. We often thank friends and family in our speeches when we accept awards, not necessarily because they contributed to the book or to the scientific theory, but because they supported us with love and encouragement.<sup>14</sup> My intention has only been to suggest that it is debatable whether our individual is to any *significant* or *morally interesting* degree responsible for the bad person's behaviour purely on account of their friendship. Were she to actively encourage his morally questionable pursuits, then such an attribution of responsibility may very well be fitting. But it doesn't seem essential to friendship that we encourage or affirm everything that our friends do.

<sup>14</sup> I am grateful to an anonymous referee for the excellent example.



There is, however, another recourse for sponsors of The Abetting View. They may argue that it is not our individual's friendship with the bad person *per se* that is problematic, but rather, the terms of their interaction. What is likely to be of particular concern is that our individual allows her friend's bad behaviour to go unchecked; she absolves herself of any duty to shape his actions or his character. Indeed, she may even be especially well-placed to influence him for the better; for he may care about his friend's opinion in a way that he does not care about the opinions of others.<sup>15</sup> Thus, perhaps our individual's responsibility lies in her failure to exercise this influence; in her failure to try to shape her friend's actions or his character.

Yet this suggestion seems to run into similar trouble as the advocate of The Desert View did when she elected to emphasise an absence of reproach. Suppose that the individual were to take our advice; suppose that she did endeavour to influence the bad person to improve himself as a moral agent. Would we then withdraw our verdict that she goes wrong in maintaining a friendship with him? Once again, it is possible that she goes wrong *to a lesser degree*. Her efforts might be somewhat exculpatory. So perhaps The Abetting View does at least offer us some insight into what her failure consists in. But this still falls short of providing us with a satisfying explanation; even if our individual did attempt to mould the bad person into a better person, it is still difficult to shake the intuition that she goes wrong somewhere in having such a friendship—even if it is admitted that she goes wrong to a lesser degree.

Before proceeding, I should note that I do not wish to deny an intuition from which The Abetting View seems to derive much of its appeal: that our individual does wrong

<sup>15</sup> I thank an anonymous referee for bringing this to my attention.

by *others* in counting a bad person as a friend. My intention has only been to suggest that the language of moral responsibility may not be the most fruitful way of understanding the wrong that she does to them. In my view, the wrong is better thought of as an *expressive* one. I defer further development of this idea to §5.2. To my mind, it is a more promising avenue for accommodating the intuitions that seem to motivate The Abetting View.

## §4. The Risk View

We are yet to find a satisfying answer to our question. But perhaps this is because we've been looking for explanations in all the wrong places. Perhaps the person to whom our individual really does wrong is *herself*. This is the explanation suggested by The Risk View. According to this proposal, one who enters into a friendship with a bad person places herself in serious jeopardy. A bad person is likely to have a long history of treating others rather badly (or a strong disposition to do so). What's to stop him from treating his friends the same way?

Of course, we stipulated at the outset that this is unlikely to happen; we assumed that the individual who counts a bad person as a friend does not suffer directly as a result of his actions. The stipulation wasn't unmotivated; for bad persons tend to be remarkably *discriminatory* in their treatment of others. Alongside selective maltreatment, one often sees remarkable kindness extended to a select and precious few. Whatever we have to say about slave owners in the US, many served as loyal friends to one another. And Heinrich Himmler was, by all reports, a loving father; "... his family and friends did not have to fear that he was plotting *their* deaths" (Cocking & Kennett 2000, p.288, emphasis in original).

Yet even if such compartmentalising is common, we shouldn't suppose that it is foolproof. The bad person's attitudes do seem to reveal a worrying potential. Today he is discriminatory towards group *x*. But so long as he is prone to prejudice and malice, there is the danger that he could come to develop the same reprehensible attitudes towards group *y* tomorrow—a group of which a friend forms a part. So I think we can at least grant that bad persons pose a certain kind of risk; they could one day extend to their own friends the same malice and contempt that they extend to others.

According to *The Risk View*, then, our individual is being imprudent, or perhaps even downright reckless. Yet even if this were true, it cannot be the whole story. *The Risk View* takes our individual to be guilty of a prudential error. In doing so, it puts her failure on a par with that of the diabetic who befriends the owner of the local sweets store. But her failure is surely nothing of the sort. Insofar as she goes wrong in counting the bad person as a friend, she plausibly goes wrong in a *moral* sense as well. *The Risk View* would therefore seem to misidentify the nature of the fault in question; it mistakes a moral error for a prudential one.

But perhaps we simply haven't appreciated the magnitude of the risk in question. Perhaps the real risk here concerns the individual's *reputation*. It is often said that our friends are reflections of ourselves. In cultivating a friendship with a bad person, one may be tarred with the same brush. Yet this won't do either. We very often risk our reputation for the sake of other things that we value, and our choice of friends is no exception. Perhaps in befriending a gambler or a snob, I risk being perceived as reckless or snooty. But so long as the trade-off is one that I regard as worthwhile, it seems difficult to charge me with a prudential mistake. If my reflective standpoint is one from

which I would endorse the goods of such friendships over the reputation-related risks that they pose, then my trade-off is surely not properly thought of as a profound error.<sup>16</sup>

Indeed, the danger here would seem to be overblown in any case. To befriend those with faults is not necessarily to play fast and loose with one's reputation. We do not tend to find ourselves fretting over the dangers that our stuck-up or reckless friends may pose to our moral profile (though this may no doubt be the province of those desperate to keep up appearances). I myself am inclined to let my humble, low-maintenance habits do the talking—purchases from thrift shops, microwave dinners, and the like.

Of course, it might be thought that the snobby and the reckless differ from our bad person in the severity of their flaws. Those who tolerate benign moral faults such as these may very well inherit less moral taint than those who forgive extreme vices. (I shall return to this thought in §5.) But even if we grant that there is some risk to our individual's reputation, this doesn't seem to get to the heart of the problem. If she perceived any real danger here, then she could very well elect to keep her friendship with the bad person hidden from the public eye.<sup>17</sup> Doing so would seem to do little to immunise her from the charge that she has gone wrong somewhere. We would still

<sup>16</sup> Of course, our verdict here will likely depend upon what we take an individual's prudential good to consist in. Though my remarks suggest an idealised desire conception, my case does not rest upon it. Objective list theorists might likewise regard friendship as part and parcel of an individual's good—perhaps even one to which her reputation ought to be subordinate.

<sup>17</sup> I believe that this also answers to the worry that one's friendship with a bad person may endanger one's other friendships. Goering (2003, p.405) notes that bringing along an unsavoury character to happy hour is apt to scare others away. This may be true, but it is certainly possible for someone to divide her time among her friends (as many of us plausibly do).

think that such a friendship was a mistake on her part, even if it were a mistake that she kept well-hidden.

But not all is lost for The Risk View just yet. There is another variety of the proposal to consider: perhaps it is *moral danger* to which we expose ourselves when we enter into friendships with bad persons. After all, what's to prevent the bad person from requesting his friend's help when his bad habits land him in trouble? This is consistent with our stipulation that the bad person's actions are hardly ever made salient to our individual. We are only supposing that there is some small risk that he will, on one occasion, enlist her services when he finds himself in a spot of trouble. Perhaps this is all it would take for the danger here to present a real worry.<sup>18</sup>

Though the moral variety of The Risk View seems more promising than its prudential counterpart, I don't think that exposure to moral risk gets to the heart of the important species of moral failure that is involved in counting a bad person as a friend. A willingness to place oneself in moral danger is close to being constitutive of friendship in any case. If we are concerned to be true friends to others, then it seems that we must sometimes be prepared to act wrongly when doing so is necessary in order to do right by them. There is an important element of truth in the claim "a friend will help you move house, a good friend will help you move a body". Following Dean Cocking and Jeanette Kennett, "true and good friends may well be led to act against

<sup>18</sup> As well as the danger of (i) failing to fulfil moral duties to others, one might claim that there is the additional danger of (ii) failing to fulfil moral duties to oneself. (I thank an anonymous referee for pointing this out.) Given considerations of space, I cannot afford to consider this possibility in any great detail. But I suspect that what I say in response to (i) applies (with appropriate transformations) to (ii) as well. Just as friendships more generally can lead us to act contrary to our moral duties to others, they may very well lead us to act contrary to our moral duties to ourselves as well.

competing moral considerations in the pursuit of one another's welfare"; "one might even think [this] a requirement of close friendship" (2000, p.280).

Indeed, and as Cocking and Kennett observe, friendships *of all sorts* would seem to place us in moral danger. If we were to restrict the pool of potential friends to those who would never land themselves in trouble, then there may very well be no one left to befriend. So it doesn't seem like an exposure to moral risk can adequately explain the wrong involved in cultivating a friendship with a bad person. If our individual goes wrong in cultivating such a friendship, then so too do we all who enter into friendships with those who are less than morally perfect.

## **§5. Friendship and moral priorities**

We began with the question as to where an individual goes wrong in counting a bad person as a friend. The answers canvassed so far don't seem to provide us with much in the way of a satisfying explanation. In what follows, I will suggest that we can identify such an explanation by focusing our attention upon the individual herself; for her choice of friends tells us something important about *her*—most notably, it tells us something about her moral priorities.

### **§5.1 Choosing friends**

Before we can properly understand the nature of our individual's fault, we first need to appreciate the sense in which our friends are something that we *choose*. Here, I want to draw upon certain remarks from Laurence Thomas (1987), whose work on the element

of choice in friendship is instructive.<sup>19</sup> As Thomas rightly notes, we do not tend to go about life shopping for persons to put on our speed dial. That is to say, our choice of friends is not typically the result of an intentional pursuit on our part. Instead, there is a "...sense in which we grow into friendships". Indeed, "we can even be surprised that our interaction with someone has given rise to" such a relationship (1987, p.218).

However, and importantly, this is not to deny us any agential say in the matter. Friendship is not merely something that 'happens' to us. We can choose whether or not to forge these relationships. Though it is perhaps not so easy to avoid being drawn to someone, we do have the capacity to reflect upon just what it is that attracts us to them, and whether or not it ought to. "It is", Thomas maintains, "...one thing to be intrigued, fascinated, and even captivated by a person...it is another thing to lose entirely one's sense of reason and perspective on things" (1987, p.221). But whether friendship is the product of captivation or something far less seductive, to choose someone as a friend is surely *to evaluative them favourably*. It is difficult to make sense of the suggestion that we might choose to enter into a friendship with a person for whom we harboured a deep dislike.<sup>20</sup>

The point that I wish to emphasise, however, is this: we do not generally like *everything* about our friends. Or in any event, my suspicion is that precious few of us

<sup>19</sup> Since I take the element of choice to be important for understanding where our individual goes wrong, what I have to say may not apply (at least not straightforwardly) to the relationships that we have with our family members. The element of choice seems diminished here, if not absent.

<sup>20</sup> I intend to refer to a broad kind of evaluative assessment here; one that includes but is by no means restricted to a *moral* assessment. Our choice of friends is plausibly influenced by qualities aside from someone's moral worth; wit, coolness, and common interests, for example (Wolf 1982, pp.421-3; White 1999, p.80).

do. Most of us will readily acknowledge that our friends have their shortcomings. Sometimes, we even like them *for* their shortcomings. My friend may be hopelessly inept at keeping up with foreign affairs, and I may bemoan her lack of interest in the world's troubles. But perhaps I find this quality oddly charming. It might even be amusing for me, since I can often trick her into believing that something has happened when it really hasn't. Other-times, we like our friends *in spite of* their shortcomings. I may be disapproving of my friend's meat-eating habits, but love her in any case because she has other qualities that recommend her; perhaps she makes generous donations to the poor, and never hesitates to come to my aid when I call upon her to do so.

But when we like a friend because of or in spite of their shortcomings, this is surely because such shortcomings aren't faults that we regard as *particularly weighty*. Thus, to accept such friends is not, in Thomas's words, to "lose entirely one's sense of reason and perspective on things". The consumption of meat and an insufficient concern for the world's troubles are (arguably) moral faults. Yet they are usually faults that we are willing to live with—especially when their bearer has other qualities to recommend them.

## **§5.2 The Moral Priorities View**

I have suggested that our friends are something that we choose, and that our choice is ordinarily sensitive to certain features of their moral character. This is not to say that we choose our friends *for* their moral credentials. Nor is it even to suppose that their moral credentials are what is of the greatest importance to us. What I do want to claim is that we usually expect an individual's choice of friends to be *responsive to* another's virtues and vices in the following sense: we expect that there are certain vices of which



she could not possibly be forgiving—that there are particular moral flaws which no wholly decent person could tolerate. To discount such flaws would be to commit the very error that Thomas cautions against; it would be to “lose entirely one’s sense of reason and perspective on things”.

Of course, turning a blind eye to a friends’ misgivings is not always reprehensible. Friendship may be thought to have implications for our beliefs as well as our actions. (See Keller 2004 and Stroud 2006.) We may very well be permitted, if not required, to be epistemically partial toward our friends. But there comes a point at which we cross the line between a permissible bias and an objectionable species of moral complacency. And the individual who counts a bad person as a friend very much seems to have crossed it.

Some values are incredibly weighty, and as such, they ought to occupy an important role in our moral priorities. One could understand an individual who was willing to forgive a friend’s failure to recycle; for this is a fault in spite of which we could plausibly accept someone. But an individual who discounted a friend’s rampant racism would suggest to us that she could not care less about the values which tell against racism, or for the potential victims of racist attitudes. At the very least, she would suggest to us that she does not stand for (or is not standing up for) such values in the fullest sense. Her willingness to discount vices of this extreme sort would suggest that there are certain values to which she is not properly responsive.

I think that this gets right to the heart of where our individual goes wrong in counting a bad person as a friend. The problem is that she likes him in spite of his shortcomings, and the shortcomings in question *are* incredibly weighty. But it would seem that they are not sufficiently weighty *for her*, and this points towards something

worrying about her moral priorities. In choosing to pursue a friendship with a bad person, she effectively suggests that a serious moral flaw—vehement racism, say—is a minor vice that can be outweighed by a person’s other recommending qualities.

The answer that I want to propose here, then, is that an individual who counts a bad person as a friend goes wrong in cultivating a particular fault of character. More specifically, she is guilty of an objectionable sort of *moral complacency*—she excuses that which ought not to be excused. Her choice of friends is indicative of something awry in her values; for her moral priorities seem wholly disordered. She would prioritise the good company or the benefits that this person affords her over the values that he flouts with abandon. To her mind, it is not particularly important if a friend does wrong by others, so long as he does right *by her*. Indeed, that her friend’s immorality is not a sufficient concern for her suggests that *she* may not be a wholly decent person either.

Call this proposed explanation *The Moral Priorities View*. Before proceeding to draw attention to the benefits of this approach, let me first assuage a potential concern. One might worry that my arguments here contain the seeds of their own undermining. I began by supposing that our individual was someone whom we would be hesitant to call a bad person. Yet I have now suggested that she may not be perfectly decent. Does this not suggest that she is a bad person after all?

Though moral complacency is indeed a moral flaw, I do not think that it suffices to warrant classifying our individual as *a bad person*. It need not follow from her complacency that she identifies with any reprehensible moral values. And moral complacency is not a vice that we tend to regard as especially serious. Many of us are prone to trade in our values when opportunity presents itself; to buy chocolate that is

not fair trade because we prefer the taste, or to purchase clothes that were made by people subjected to poor working conditions because they are more affordable. There is certainly room for moral improvement here. But it doesn't seem to follow from such complacency that we are morally bad people.<sup>21</sup>

Having (hopefully) dispelled this potential concern with the proposal, let me say a little more to motivate it. The Moral Priorities View can, I think, capture many of the intuitions that motivated its rivals, while avoiding their associated problems. Though I agree with sponsors of The Desert View that it is unfitting to extend the goods of friendship to a bad person, I do not propose to understand this unfittingness in terms of desert. The unfittingness attaches instead to the disordered moral priorities which underlie choosing him as a friend in the first place. To count a bad person as a friend is to prioritise the potential gains of a friendship over the moral costs paid in the currency of one's own values.

Further, I agree with sponsors of The Abetting View that the individual who counts a bad person as a friend does wrong by others. However, I do not assume that she is to some significant degree responsible for his behaviour. Insofar as she does wrong by others, this is because they don't occupy a suitable role in her moral priorities; it is not particularly important to her whether her friend does right by them, so long as he does right by her. Indeed, it may even be argued that such an individual fails in her *expressive*

<sup>21</sup> Admittedly, it is possible that as the badness of the friend in question worsens, the more poisonous the moral complacency could grow, infecting one's own character as well. Even if this were so, however, my arguments would still stand up so long as there were cases in which an individual remains a good person on the whole. And it seems to me that there are very many such cases. We regard David Copperfield as a decent person in spite of his friendship with James Steerforth. However bad his moral complacency, it does not seem sufficiently toxic to contaminate his entire character.

duties. It is not implausible that we have duties to hold particular attitudes towards the victims of wrongdoing (sympathy, for example, or perhaps anger on their behalf).<sup>22</sup> And a friendship with a bad person may very well signal indifference towards their victims. This diagnosis also goes some way towards explaining the intuition that our individual would partially redeem herself were she to attempt to influence the bad person to change his ways; for these efforts would signal to us that other people may occupy a more suitable role in her moral priorities after all.

The Moral Priorities View can also make sense of an intuition that motivates The Risk View—that the individual who forges a friendship with a bad person does wrong to herself in some sense. In cultivating moral complacency, she would seem to have failed somewhat in her capacity as a moral agent. But unlike the Risk View, The Moral Priorities View does not cast her failure as a merely prudential one. Nor does the latter attribute to her the mistake of placing herself in moral danger—a mistake (if it can be called that) that we should think is part and parcel of friendship in any case.

Indeed, if I may offer a diagnosis, this seems to be precisely where alternative explanations of our individual's error went wrong; nearly all proposed to locate her mistake in something that we take to be part and parcel of genuine friendship. Yet if we are really concerned to do justice to the phenomenon of friendship, and to capture the distinctive duties to which it gives rise, then it is difficult to fault individuals for overriding some of their moral obligations in order to be true friends to others. Once we have extended our friendship to another, it seems that we *should* be prepared to make exceptions of them, and to take on associated risks; for that is precisely what

<sup>22</sup> See Brennan and Lomasky (1993), who discuss the ethics of expression in relation to voting.

friendship permits—and perhaps even obliges—us to do. However, and importantly, this assessment is not wholly exculpatory; for we can still fault an individual for choosing a bad person as a friend in the first place. Though we are not generally criticisable for befriending others in spite of their shortcomings, I have argued that we are so criticisable when those shortcomings are incredibly weighty.

### **§5.3 Caveats and clarifications**

An individual who counts a bad person as a friend is, I have suggested, guilty of moral complacency. Let me now supplement this claim with some further subtleties and important caveats. The first caveat concerns the nature of moral complacency. I do not intend for it to refer to a stable trait of character; such complacency may very well be local to the friendship. Our individual need not generally be complacent when it comes to moral issues (though, in some such cases, we may suspect that she is).

The second caveat concerns ignorance. I have been operating upon the assumption that her friend's badness of character is something that has always been *known* to our individual. But some may very well be duped into thinking that a friend is morally upstanding. My proposal does not indict those who befriend bad persons unknowingly.

Though ignorance can excuse, it is a difficult question just how often it does. It is not implausible that an agent's epistemic resources or her historical context could be exculpatory. One who chooses an unapologetically sexist person as a friend today seems considerably worse than one who did so centuries ago. Perhaps the people of the past were not only unaware of the immorality of sexism, but had little hope of ever coming to appreciate it. It is difficult to charge such individuals with moral complacency if we cannot reasonably expect them to have recognised that their friends

were bad people. Some may want to claim that they failed in their duties to be sufficiently reflective. But for those who (like myself) are sympathetic to Gideon Rosen's (2003, p.65) suggestion that "one is normally under no obligation to rethink the uncontroversial normative principles that form the framework for social life", this may be a hard pill to swallow.

This element of moral luck may extend beyond one's historical context. Whereas some of us have the luxury of choice, others may find themselves in social environments in which the pool of potential friends is hopelessly narrow. An agent's social setting may be one in which many candidates for friendship are rather bad people. So we might be reluctant to judge her too harshly should she choose to befriend such persons. We might regard her social context as something that excuses her from criticism. Or we think it inappropriate to blame her for her choice.

This suggests that degrees of criticisability are likely to vary case by case. Someone who knowingly enters into a friendship with a bad person may be less criticisable than one whose friend becomes bad over time. Once we have forged meaningful relationships with others, we naturally want to think the best of them, and it can understandably become difficult for us to see the worst. (This is, in part, why I am inclined to regard the initial choosing as a more fitting ground for criticism.)

A further subtlety arises from cases in which an individual seems to befriend a bad person in the pursuit of some greater good—in order that she may exert some influence over them, and benefit others in turn, say. Far from being the product of moral complacency, this choice appears to stem from deep moral commitments. However, in such cases, I think we should be reluctant to say that an individual has truly chosen another *as a friend*. What she rather seems to have chosen is *to pretend* to be a friend.

As I have suggested, to choose someone as a friend is to evaluate them favourably, and one who enters into an association with a bad person for purely instrumental reasons such as these is unlikely to do so. It therefore seems difficult to maintain that their association is a friendship rather than a farce.

## Conclusion

Although there is a strong intuition that an individual who counts a bad person as a friend goes wrong in some important sense, it is surprisingly difficult to identify where she has gone astray. I suspect that this difficulty is owing to a peculiar feature of friendship. As philosophers have long recognised, friendship seems to be a domain of life in which we often take ourselves to be justified in setting aside some of our moral obligations. Thankfully, however, this feature of friendship only renders the puzzle interesting—not insoluble. Though our duties to our friends have the potential to take precedence over our moral obligations, this is not a *carte blanche* for moral apathy. We can expect decent persons to be suitably discriminating in their choice of friends, and, absent excusing conditions, we can take those who are not to merit moral criticism.

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