

AS



PROCEEDINGS OF THE ARISTOTELIAN SOCIETY
HOSTING AND PUBLISHING TALKS IN PHILOSOPHY SINCE 1880

Equality, Friendship, and Politics

JOSEPH CHAN

2020-2021
141ST SESSION
VOLUME CXXI

CHAired BY BILL BREWER
EDITED BY GUY LONGWORTH

SENATE HOUSE
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

PROCEEDINGS OF THE ARISTOTELIAN SOCIETY
141ST SESSION

ISSUE NO. 3
VOLUME CXXI
2020-2021

EQUALITY, FRIENDSHIP, AND POLITICS

JOSEPH CHAN
UNIVERSITY OF HONG KONG

MONDAY, 10 MAY 2021

12.30-14.00

ONLINE VIA ZOOM

Please visit our website for further details

CONTACT
mail@aristoteliansociety.org.uk
www.aristoteliansociety.org.uk

© 2021 THE ARISTOTELIAN SOCIETY

B I O G R A P H Y

Joseph Chan is Professor in the Department of Politics and Public Administration at The University of Hong Kong. He is Global Scholar and Visiting Professor at the University Center for Human Values of Princeton University in 2019-2021 spring semesters. His recent research interests span Confucian political philosophy, comparative political theory, democratic theory, social and political equality, and popular sovereignty. He is the author of *Confucian Perfectionism: A Political Philosophy for Modern Times* (Princeton, 2014) and co-edited with Melissa Williams and Doh Shin *East Asian Perspectives on Political Legitimacy: Bridging the Empirical-Normative Divide* (Cambridge, 2016). He has been published in numerous journals such as *Ethics, Philosophy and Public Affairs, Oxford Journal of Legal Studies, History of Political Thought, the Journal of Democracy, Philosophy East and West*, and *China Quarterly*.

E D I T O R I A L N O T E

The following paper is a draft version that can only be cited or quoted with the author's permission. The final paper will be published in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Issue No. 3, Volume CXXI (2021). Please visit the Society's website for subscription information: aristoteliansociety.org.uk.

EQUALITY, FRIENDSHIP, AND POLITICS

JOSEPH CHAN

IN RECENT YEARS, there has been a growing number of theorists arguing for relational or social equality as an alternative to understanding equality as a distributive principle. “Equality,” according to these theorists, should refer first and foremost to an egalitarian ideal of social relations. Various goods are distributed in order to secure a society in which people are related as equals. Equal social relations might or might not require equal distribution of various goods, depending on the nature of the good in question and its impact on the relations between people. In short, for these theorists, social equality is more fundamental than distributive equality. Let’s call theorists endorsing this view “relational egalitarians.”

To qualify as a fundamental social ideal, relational equality has to meet several criteria. First, as a *fundamental* ideal, it must have a substantive content clear enough to generate implications for social or political issues. It must, for example, be possible to show how certain social or political arrangements can be justified or rejected by appealing to it. Second, as a *distinctive* ideal, its content must not be reducible to other values. Relational equality is often associated with other ideals, such as reciprocity, fairness, or mutual respect. What needs to be shown is that relational equality contains at least some elements that are not identical with these or other non-egalitarian values. Third, as a *general* social ideal, it must have wide applicability in different social and political contexts. The ideal is not something invented by theorists, but embedded in many social relationships in modern society with which people are familiar.

Some theorists believe that the ideal of relational equality does satisfy these demands. Their strategy of argument starts with some personal relationships that they think are generally regarded as egalitarian. Through analysing the nature of these relationships, one can grasp what the abstract idea of equality amounts to. And because these personal relationships are valuable for their own sake, their constitutive principle, namely relational equality, is also valuable. Once the meaning of relational equality is pinned down and its value affirmed, its implications for relationships in other contexts such as politics and the workplace can be explored. It can be asked, for example, whether equality in personal relationships can support equality in the political relationship of citizens.

A few theorists have argued somewhat along the above line. Samuel Scheffler claims that “one of the advantages of the relational conception is that it represents equality as a value that applies to human relationships of many kinds, and we may learn things by looking at its nonpolitical applications that will help us to understand how it applies to the political

case.”¹ Daniel Viehoff shares the same view: “Equality is an ideal central to many of our relationships. If that ideal carries over—directly or indirectly—from these relationships to our political arrangements, ... then this could provide independent support for democratic procedures and the demands they make on us.”² James Wilson adopts a similar strategy, “Knowing roughly what it is to relate as equals, a conception of egalitarian relations informs our ideal of a society of equals. We extend the egalitarian ideal beyond familiar interpersonal relationships to more complex relationships and social structures, with respect to which our immediate intuitions may be unreliable, uncertain, or simply absent.”³

Relational egalitarians typically regard friendship as a paradigmatic case of relational equality. For them, friendship embodies equality.⁴ Understanding what friendship is and how it works elucidates the more abstract idea of relational equality. Relational egalitarians have also explored the implications of egalitarian friendship for political equality. Scheffler and Wilson claim that despite many differences between friendship and citizen relationships, the central features of equality in friendship can apply to politics.⁵ This essay will raise critical questions about these theorists’ arguments. Does friendship embody an ideal of equality, as relational egalitarians claim? How far can the norms of friendship apply to the political context? I argue that friendship is not a paradigmatic case of relational equality, and it is a poor model for political relationships.

I.

It is important at the outset to distinguish two different approaches to analysing the relationship of friendship and equality. The first approach is to *apply* the philosophical idea of equality to friendship and see how friendship looks like *if* friends relate to one another as equals. The second is to look at how friends commonly relate to each other in real life, and see if friendship as a *social phenomenon* in fact embodies the norm of equality. If the first strategy is philosophical, top-down, then the second empirical, bottom-up. I shall argue that only the second is acceptable if the

1 Samuel Scheffler, “The Practice of Equality,” in *Social Equality: On What It Means to Be Equals*, ed. Carina Fourie, Ivo Wallimann-Helmer, and Fabian Schuppert (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 24.

2 Daniel Viehoff, “Power and Equality,” in *Oxford Studies in Political Philosophy: Volume 5*, ed. David Sobel, Peter Vallentyne, and Steven Wall (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 4.

3 James Lindley Wilson, *Democratic Equality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), 36.

4 Although Scheffler focuses on marriage or partnership, his analysis is meant to apply to friendship as well. See Scheffler, “The Practice of Equality,” 32.

5 Viehoff, however, is sceptical of its applicability.

strategy of relational egalitarian is to work.

Sometimes some of the language that egalitarian theorists use does seem to give people the impression that they adopt the first approach. Scheffler writes that equality is “a value that applies to human relationships of many kinds.” He invites his readers to “consider the assertion that a marriage or partnership *should be* a relationship between equals”, and then asks, “What might this mean?” “Suppose we have two spouses or partners, each of whom is committed to conducting their shared relationship on an egalitarian basis. How might this affect the way they relate to each other?”⁶ Similarly, in analysing the “*friendship* conception of relational equality,” Viehoff argues that “equal power is... a constituent component of *egalitarian* friendship,”⁷ as if he is taking equal power as a constituent component of only *a type* of friendship shaped by the norm of equality, rather than of friendship in general.

The problem with this approach is that since friendship is defined with reference to a philosophical conception of equality, friendship *necessarily* embodies equality. Under this approach, equality is presumed to be of an independent value and has an independent meaning, only to be applied to friendship. Friendship thus does not elucidate the meaning of equality or vindicate its value. “[E]quality is a constitutive component of certain non-derivatively valuable relationships”⁸ is true only by philosophical stipulation, in that the norm equality is imposed on friendship.

To be fair to Scheffler and Viehoff, they may well maintain that, as a matter of *social fact*, egalitarian friendship is a paradigm of friendship as such. They may claim that friendship is a social practice “conducted on a footing of equality,” (Scheffler)⁹ or that “friendship and similar relationships involve a genuine commitment to an ideal of equal power.” (Viehoff)¹⁰ But if that is the case, the real force of their argument lies in the fact that friendship *as a social practice* embodies the value and norms of equality. Such an argument follows the second empirical, bottom up approach rather than the philosophical, top-down one. Under the empirical approach, friendship and other personal relationships as generally practiced are shown to be underpinning equality, thereby giving it a nonderivative value – equality is nonderivatively valuable because it is a constitutive element of the practice of friendship whose value is nonderivative. Then the next question to ask is whether friendship and its

6 Scheffler, “The Practice of Equality,” 24; italics added.

7 Viehoff, “Power and Equality,” 25; italics added.

8 Viehoff, 8.

9 Scheffler, “The Practice of Equality,” 24.

10 Viehoff, “Power and Equality,” 29.

constitutive egalitarian norms can be applied to the political sphere.

It seems that Wilson follows the empirical approach. In “extending the egalitarian ideal”¹¹ beyond friendship to politics, the egalitarian ideal to be extended is not defined independently of friendship but extracted from it. Wilson writes that “we typically (perhaps necessarily) consider friends our equals. The norms that partially constitute the relationship—*the common understanding* between the friends of what it means to treat each other like friends—are egalitarian.”¹² “From this *observation* that true or good friendship requires equality, we can extrapolate... that citizens in general have reason to pursue and support equal social relations.”¹³ This view that friendship requires equality is not a philosophical stipulation, but an empirical observation that, as Wilson claims, reflects a common understanding of the social practice. The crucial question for this empirical approach is whether friendship as a common social practice is indeed constituted by norms of equality. Wilson thinks it is, and in what follows I will take Scheffler and Viehoff to be sharing the same approach. Let us now see what they take those norms to be.

II.

For Scheffler, while personal partnership or friendship draws on values such as reciprocity and mutual respect that are not specifically egalitarian, the relationship does contain “distinctively egalitarian elements.” He identifies two elements. The first is what he calls *egalitarian deliberative constraints* – “each person accepts that the other person’s equally important interests... should play an equally significant role in influencing decisions made within the context of the relationship.”¹⁴ The second element is what can be called *equal entitlement to participate in decision-making* – “neither participant is seen by either of them as possessing more authority than the other within the context of the relationship, and each sees the other as entitled to participate fully and equally in determining the future course and character of the relationship.”¹⁵

Viehoff thinks that friendship is a paradigmatic example of egalitarian relationships, and that we have a reasonably straightforward grasp of its egalitarian nature. On his view, friendship starts with *special concern* for one another – generally speaking, my friend’s interests make greater demands on me than those of strangers. Friendship also requires *equal concern*, which is similar to Scheffler’s egalitarian deliberative constraints.

11 Wilson, *Democratic Equality*, 36.

12 Wilson, 33; italics added.

13 Wilson, 56; italics added.

14 Scheffler, “The Practice of Equality,” 25.

15 Scheffler, 24.

But there is also “a requirement of *equal power* over the relationship.”¹⁶ “Friends should have equal power—understood as equal opportunity for influence—over the character of their relationship and the norms governing it; and failure to distribute power over the relationship equally means that the relationship falls short of its egalitarian ideal.”¹⁷

For Wilson, friends recognize that there are several norms that constitute their relationships, such as reciprocal benevolence and goodwill. Similar to Scheffler and Viehoff, Wilson maintains that true or good friendship also involves two special elements. The first is “mutual recognition of equality,”¹⁸ in the sense that a friend does not take her needs, interests, or demands as generally having greater precedence over those of her other friends. The second is “equal sharing of authority.”¹⁹ Friends share equal authority to decide what they will do together. “Friends are in this sense political equals.”²⁰

Summing up these three theorists’ understanding of friendship, we have the following general description of friendship: In addition to central features like reciprocal goodwill, benevolence, and respect, friendship is constituted by two norms of equality: equal considerations of interests and equal power or authority. Now we can ask: How far does this account conform to people’s common understanding of friendship? Is friendship as a social practice in fact constituted by the two norms of equality?

III.

We need an empirical account of friendship to answer these questions. An empirical account of friendship, however, will not have the tidiness of a philosophical account. The practice of friendship varies from society to society, and so do people’s understandings of the practice. It seems impossible to come up with an empirical account of friendship that captures all sorts of practices and understandings. To put it in another way, it seems impossible to extract a set of necessary and sufficient conditions of friendship which is based on the common practices of friendship. But if we adopt a less rigorous account of the nature of friendship, we might be able to find a range of features that are usually, though not necessarily

16 Viehoff, “Power and Equality,” 26; italics added.

17 Viehoff, 26.

18 Wilson, *Democratic Equality*, 56.

19 Wilson, 56. Note that Wilson’s notion of authority is weaker than the more common view that links authority to obedience. For his account of authority and its contrast with power, see Wilson, chaps. 2 and 4. In this essay I do not take issue with the different views of power and authority articulated by Viehoff and Wilson, and I use the two terms interchangeably.

20 Wilson, *Democratic Equality*, 56.

always, present in the common practices of friendship or in ordinary people's reflective accounts. Some social scientists call this a "prototype" view of friendship,²¹ or a "family-resemblance" view.²²

Fortunately, there is substantial social science literature on friendship, furnishing us with robust information about people's views of the practice of friendship. Let us take a brief look at some of the findings and see if we could piece them together to form a coherent picture of laypeople's (as opposed to those of academics) conception of friendship. Beverley Fehr has reviewed a large number of social science research findings on how laypeople understand the meaning and norms of friendship.²³ When asked to complete the sentence "A friend/close friend is someone...", adult respondents from several countries in the UK and US in a series of research gave very similar answers: I can trust and call for help, whose company I enjoy, with whom you share things, who accepts me, with whom you have a caring relationship, and so on.²⁴ Fehr also discusses other research on adults' conceptions of friendship, which commonly include the following features: enjoyment of one another's company, trust, intimacy, common interests, reciprocity, loyalty, and self-disclosure. Friendship is a matter of degree. The closer the friendship, the stronger or more intense are those features.

In a series of cross-country opinion surveys of people in Britain, Hong Kong, Japan, and Italy with regard to their views on the norms of friendship, Michael Argyle and Monika Henderson found that the following norms are regarded by the respondents in all of the four places as "really important for friendship": show emotional support; volunteer help in time of need; strive to make him/her happy while in each other's company; share news of success with the other; trust and confide in the other; and stand up for the other person in his/her absence.²⁵

We may also consult the findings of qualitative research on friendship.

21 Beverley Anne Fehr, *Friendship Processes* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1996), chap. 1.

22 P. E. Digeser, *Friendship Reconsidered: What It Means and How It Matters to Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), chap. 1.

23 Fehr, *Friendship Processes*, chap. 1.

24 Fehr draws upon these two studies: Linda A. Sapadin, "Friendship and Gender: Perspectives of Professional Men and Women," *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 5, no. 4 (November 1988): 387–403, and M. Crawford, "What Is A Friend?," *New Society* 20 (1977): 116–17.

25 Michael Argyle and Monika Henderson, "The Rules of Friendship," *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 1, no. 2 (June 1984): 233–34. For a more recent study in Portugal that shows similar findings, see Verónica Policarpo, "What Is a Friend? An Exploratory Typology of the Meanings of Friendship," *Social Sciences* 4, no. 1 (February 10, 2015): 171–91.

Liz Spence and Ray Pahl conducted sixty interviews with men and women of different ages, from different socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds, and living in different parts of Britain.²⁶ Their research “confirmed the findings of many other studies in this field.”²⁷ The two authors charted the following picture of friendship: friends are voluntary relationships that have to be established; friends share something in common – similar interests, lifestyles, the same stage in their lives, for example; friends are people who enjoy each other’s company and doing things together; friends can relax with each other; friends offer each other practical help; and friends can confide in one another. Spence and Pahl also note that a committed friendship implies “a certain kind of morality.” Good friends have a sense of allegiance and loyalty to one another. They are trustworthy, accepting friends as who they are, and committed to a loose but genuine ideal of balancing reciprocity.²⁸

Putting the above empirical findings together, we get the following portrait of friendship as generally understood by ordinary people, and I propose to analyze it in three dimensions: *motivations, actions, and norms*. The most fundamental *motivation* of friendship is (mutual) affection – people become friends when they like each other and find each other’s company pleasurable for its own sake (partly because they share things in common). This motivation is what separates friendship from merely benevolence towards another person. Closely connected to affection is the motivation to make one’s friends happy. Friends wish each other well and are delighted in doing things that make each other happy. These motivations naturally lead to *actions*. Friends spend time together, do things together, give gifts to express affection, offer each other help, confide in each other, and share each other’s joy and sorrow. Furthermore, friends’ actions are guided by certain *norms*. Friends, or at least close friends, should trust and be trustworthy to each other, loyal to each other, refrain from publicly criticizing each other, and stand up for each other in their absence. Friends should reciprocate goodwill and assistance. Reciprocity, however, is not a precise notion, and it should not be interpreted rigidly. It is not that if I have treated or helped you two times, you have to do the same to me twice. People’s abilities to reciprocate vary according to the resources and time they have. The spirit of reciprocity is rather that friends do *not* take each other’s goodwill and assistance *for granted*, and that they reciprocate in ways they can afford.

Undoubtedly the above portrait can be amended or enlarged upon

26 Liz Spencer and Ray Pahl, *Rethinking Friendship: Hidden Solidarities Today* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).

27 Spencer and Pahl, 59.

28 Spencer and Pahl, chap. 3.

further empirical investigation. But what is striking about this portrait is that there is no mentioning of any norm of equal power or authority in decision-making when friends do things together. How to explain this conspicuous absence? One possible explanation is that the absence may just be a result of certain omission in research design. It may be the case that the researchers were not interested in finding out how friends make decisions when they do things together, or how they resolve conflicts in the relationship. The thought may be that if the respondents were prompted to talk about issues of power in friendship, they would tell the researchers that they regard equal decision-making power as an important norm. But this absence-because-of-omission explanation is not very plausible. If conflict and power is an important issue in the social practice of friendship, it is likely that researchers or respondents would talk about it. If equal power or authority is an important norm in friendship, again it would likely appear in empirical studies on the rules or norms of friendship.²⁹

Furthermore, in exploring how friends maintain their relationship and how they resolve conflicts, Fehr's review of research studies on friendship points to a completely different picture:³⁰ the issues that people in friendship commonly face are not about equality or inequality of power, but tensions between voluntary association and intimacy, freedom and commitment, independence and dependence, and openness and self-protection. People are concerned about how to strike a right balance of these competing values in friendship, not about *who can decide* on how these tensions are to be dealt with. In other words, the prominent issue in friendship is *first-order* competition of friendship values, not *second-order* power to resolve first-order problems. Those tensions arise from mundane, everyday interactions in a relationship, and are dealt with through mundane interactions without following any decision-making norm. Instead, friends resort to implicit strategies such as avoidance, discussion, and negotiation to address the tensions. But more often, these tensions are tolerated by the parties in friendship, and sometimes friends maintain their relationships simply through spending time together and trying to allow friends to be who they are. Finally, Fehr's review also suggests that the common causes of hurt, anger, and conflict in friendship are "rebuff or rejection, being mocked or minimized, cumulative annoyances, negligence or lack of consideration, unwarranted criticism, and betrayal of trust."³¹ Again, inequality of power does not appear on the list.

29 Equality is not mentioned at all in the Argyle and Henderson, "The Rules of Friendship."

30 Fehr, *Friendship Processes*, chap. 6, "Friendship Maintenance". What follows in this paragraph draws upon this chapter's review of research findings.

31 Fehr, chap. 6.

IV.

If the empirical findings are reliable and indicative of the actual practices of friendship, we may ask why power or authority is not a major concern reported by respondents or researchers. Spencer and Pahl's observations about the voluntary nature of friendship suggests a clue. They write:

Because friendship is a chosen relationship, it is based on voluntary commitment rather than formal obligations. Although friends may hope for loyalty, constancy, trustworthiness, acceptance, honesty and reciprocity, they cannot expect these *as of right*. Friends recognize that 'you shouldn't push friendship too far', ... the idea of setting limits to expectations... seems to encapsulate the essence of commitment within chosen relationships.³²

The quote highlights two important facts about friendship as a social practice. The first is that it is voluntary – friendship is chosen and created, and people can exit anytime from the relationship. The second is that unlike family or political relationships, friendship is informal – its norms are not defined or regulated by the law. While there are friendship norms and obligations, they are not enforceable, and their very requirements are open to interpretation and negotiation. Given the voluntary and informal nature of friendship, differences of expectation are seldom settled by one party *claiming one's right* or *legitimate expectations* against the other party. Instead, such differences are often subtly handled or negotiated through gestures, hints, or requests gently made (“I would like to do this, but I wouldn't mind doing something else”). Very often friends reach “agreements” by one party *going along* with the party that happens to have a clearer or stronger preference.

What about the situation where friends have equally strong but conflicting preferences in deciding what to do together? What would be the relevant norms to deal with this situation? Relational egalitarians may claim that since equal authority constitutes friendship as a social practice, friends would naturally find ways to resolve the clash in ways consistent with equal authority. Friends can take turns to decide, or agree to choose the second-best, or defer to an impartial third party, or use some other egalitarian decision procedure that “*they accept as binding*.”³³

I agree that friends may indeed do this to resolve conflicts, if they happen to endorse equal authority as a norm of friendship. But friends may act upon other norms, especially ones that are commonly thought to constitute friendship. One such norm is this: good friends wish each other

32 Spencer and Pahl, *Rethinking Friendship*, 86. Italics added.

33 Scheffler, “The Practice of Equality,” 25–26; Viehoff, “Power and Equality,” 28. Italics added.

well and will do things to make each other happy. In deciding what to do together with my good friend, suppose I know she has a strong preference for an option, but I happen to have an equally strong but conflicting preference. What should I do as a good friend of hers? I may be happy to accommodate and defer to her preference, because I want to make her happy. This is what the Chinese people have called “rang” – yielding, deferring, or giving way. And of course, this norm of yielding applies to my friend as well. So, she could also yield, in which case we have a situation of mutual yielding, which oddly creates another kind of conflict, a “happy” conflict one might say, that still needs a resolution. In reality, often the conflict is resolved by the relative strength of one’s insistence to yield. If my insistence to yield is stronger and more persistent than my friend’s, then my friend’s preference will be adopted as our common plan of action.

Relational egalitarians, however, might argue that the decision to go along or yield does not mean that equality of authority is not the guiding norm in the relationship. To test if the norm of equal authority is at work, the argument goes, we should look at what would happen if one party in the relationship *refuses* to go along. Wilson writes,

[E]quality between friends need not be formal or explicit. There need not be avowed, regular procedures for deciding what to do together. The equality could even be “virtual” in the sense that one friend generally defers to the other’s suggestions about what to do or how to share goods. This could still count as a relationship in which authority were equally shared, *so long as the deferential friend could refuse to defer, that the refusal would be respected*, and that there is suitably common knowledge between the friends about these facts.³⁴

I think this argument moves too quickly. The fact that the “deferential friend could refuse to defer, and that the refusal would be respected” does not necessarily mean that equal authority is the norm that guides (even implicitly) friends’ behaviour. That fact may simply reflect that the parties recognize and accept the *voluntary* nature of friendship. In friendship, no one can be forced to accept the demand or request of another; if pressed too hard, the relationship will be damaged, and one could just leave the relationship. The deferential friend could refuse to defer simply because commitment to a friendship is voluntary and can be withdrawn if things go too badly. Similarly, that the person respects the deferential friend’s refusal may just be because she accepts that friendship is voluntary.

Relational egalitarians may reply that appealing to friendship’s voluntariness cannot completely dispel the equal-authority (or power) account of friendship. They may argue that if a deferential friend, A,

34 Wilson, *Democratic Equality*, 58; italics added.

voluntarily submits herself to *every* demand made by her other friend B, it is a *worse* friendship even if A *never* refuses to defer. In this case of absolute, voluntary deference, the problem of B's violating the voluntariness of friendship will not arise. But the friendship is still a worse one, the argument goes, and the proper explanation of that is that the egalitarian norm of friendship is violated.

I agree that this is a worse friendship, but this need not be because it violates any norm of equal authority (which seldom appears in the empirical literature on friendship), but because, in all likelihood, it violates the norm of reciprocal goodwill and care (which is a central norm of friendship according to the empirical literature). In the real world, a deferential relationship is likely to result in exploitation of the deferential person. Person B who regularly accepts A's deference would likely be a self-centred person paying little attention to A's needs or preferences, thus failing to reciprocate goodwill and care. Moreover, if B recognized A as an independent person whose agency and autonomy matters to B as well, then B would not accept A's absolute deference, because in the long run, such a deferential relationship undermines not only the reciprocal relationship but also A's agency. If B was a good friend of A and cared for her wellbeing, she would not accept A's absolute deference.

If my argument so far is correct, the voluntary and informal nature of friendship, together with its norm of reciprocity of goodwill and care, can go a long way to explain a lot of what people do (and should do) in a friendship. Friends settle differences through subtle and gentle communications, going along, yielding, or deferring to each other. They *may*, of course, take turns to decide, or go for the second best. But it is not the case that the nature of friendship dictates that they *must* do so. In any event, friends do not commonly resort to decision-making procedures that invoke equal power or authority, still less to feel that they need any "binding" procedure to resolve difficult conflicts. Insisting on equal authority as a necessary norm for friends to follow seems not only unnecessary but also inappropriate. The paramount motive of friends is to maintain a happy relationship that is voluntary, informal, and reciprocal. Resorting to any notion of "binding" decision-making procedures simply goes against this special nature of friendship.

v.

We need to consider two more possible rejoinders from relational egalitarians. The first rejoinder is a conceptual argument. Egalitarians may argue that a constitutive feature of friendship is *non-hierarchical* (in power or authority), which, they may claim, implies that people in the relationship (are supposed to) enjoy *equal power or authority*. So, friendship is egalitarian *because* it is non-hierarchical. But this argument

is mistaken. Indeed, friendship is not hierarchical. It is true that if a relationship is not hierarchical, it does mean that “neither party to the relationship is under the authority of the other.”³⁵ But it does *not* imply that each party possesses equal authority. Another possibility is that there is simply an absence of power or authority in the relationship – it is just *anarchical*. Non-hierarchy is consistent with the *absence* of authority, but equal authority implies the *presence* of authority.

The difference between equal authority and the absence of authority in friendship can be further illustrated by considering a scenario discussed by Wilson. Suppose there is an informal group of friends who often spend time together (in travelling, eating out, or doing fun projects, etc.). One person happens always to be in the minority of the group because her preferences or judgments about what to do differs from those of the others. What should the friends do in this situation? If equal authority is a guiding norm in the relationship, they could deliberate and vote according to their own personal preferences or judgments; as a result, the “minority” friend would always find herself on the losing side. Wilson thinks that “this need not involve any unfriendly inequality of authority.” He writes,

If the friends sincerely and recognizably attend to the judgments of their idiosyncratic comrade, the friends may *genuinely share authority*, and may be *genuine friends*. Equality, and friendship, may require making special efforts to be sure that the friend who is usually in the minority is properly heard, her authority within the friendship properly respected, and that her acquiescence in the decisions of others is not taken for granted.³⁶

I agree if the friends make special efforts to be sure the minority friend is heard, then there they “may genuinely share authority,” but I disagree that they may be “genuine friends.” Their use of authority, even if nothing inappropriate from the point of view of equal authority, is *unfriendly*. Genuine friends would care for the minority friend’s interests, and would be willing to defer, at least on some occasions, to her preferences, just to reciprocate goodwill and make her happy. Good friends would *not* settle their differences with the minority friend by invoking an egalitarian decision-making procedure that trumps the minority friend’s vote.

From this example, we can see more clearly the difference between the presence of authority (or equal authority) and its absence in a relationship. If authority is *present* in friendship, friends would care about who should possess authority and why, and they would settle conflicts by partly following authority norms. And if the appropriate authority norm is one of

35 Laurence Thomas, “Friendship and Other Loves,” in *Friendship: A Philosophical Reader*, ed. Neera Kapur Badhwar (Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell University Press, 1993), 49.

36 Wilson, *Democratic Equality*, 58; italics added.

equality, then following it might result in the odd situation of a permanent minority, as the example suggests. But if authority is *absent* in friendship, or if authority is considered as an *irrelevant* issue in the relationship, then friends would settle differences in other ways consistent with friendship's constitutive norms, such as reciprocal care and the mutual goodwill to promote each other's happiness. Reciprocal care need not be equal care, but it would certainly rule out the situation of permanent minority.

Wilson responds to this apparently odd situation of permanent minority by saying that “[t]he friends also must take care that they do not neglect the interests of the idiosyncratic friend—for instance, by causing her to get much less pleasure from the relationship than others do.”³⁷ However, Wilson emphasizes that this is still “an egalitarian concern, though not directly a concern about equality of authority.”³⁸ In my view, this need not be an egalitarian concern, for the norms of reciprocity can equally, if not more obviously, explain why the friends must not neglect the minority friend's interests.

Reciprocity is not identical with equal consideration of interests, not an egalitarian norm as such. This brings us to the second possible rejoinder from relational egalitarians. Even if equal power or authority is not a constitutive norm of friendship, egalitarians argue that there is at least one egalitarian norm, namely, equal consideration of interests, that constitutes friendship. For Viehoff, “[f]riends take the demands made by their friends' interests to be symmetrical to those that their own interests make on their friends.”³⁹ Scheffler is more specific. He calls the norm “egalitarian deliberative constraint,” which says that “equally important interests... should play an equally significant role in influencing decisions made within the context of the relationship.”⁴⁰ I would like to raise three questions about this constraint. Is this really an *egalitarian* principle? How is the constraint supposed to work? Is this constraint really at work in the real world of personal relationships such as friendship?

Is this really an *egalitarian* principle? The constraint looks more like a formal principle of *equity* – like interests should be treated alike, equally important interests should be taken equally seriously. Equal consideration is only a *byproduct* of a consistent application of equity in circumstances where people's interests are equally important. The constraint is thus not a substantive egalitarian principle that invokes equality as a fundamental, nonderivative value.

37 Wilson, 58.

38 Wilson, 58.

39 Viehoff, “Power and Equality,” 26. See also Wilson, *Democratic Equality*, 56.

40 Scheffler, “The Practice of Equality,” 25.

How is the constraint supposed to work in a relationship? When looking at equal consideration, egalitarians say that they are concerned about the relationship as a whole and over time, not any one-off decisions. While this holistic approach can avoid the extremely demanding requirement to apply the constraint in each and every decision, it requires an even more demanding epistemic ability to grasp the entirety of a long-term relationship with all its complexity. How do we even begin to evaluate the relative importance of each party's interests (broadly understood as needs, values and preferences) *holistically* in a long-term relationship? Their importance should be understood and assessed in connection with the life history, ambitions and character traits of each individual. Other than minor interests, it is hard to determine the relative importance of each party's interests in the context of their inter-connected life histories.

Moreover, emphasizing that friends should respect the constraint and develop an "effective disposition"⁴¹ to treat each other's interests accordingly would likely lead to erosion of the quality of a valuable relationship. Scheffler is aware of this pitfall:

"If [the egalitarian deliberative constraint] is kept *too* clearly in view or interpreted too rigidly it can encourage a kind of scorekeeping that may erode the quality of the relationship. If the participants in a relationship are constantly preoccupied with making sure that the comparably important interests of each of them are playing comparably significant roles in determining their joint decisions, that may exclude forms of intimacy and joint identification that give personal relationships much of their value. So the trick is to ensure that the egalitarian deliberative constraint is satisfied without itself becoming the focus of excessive attention"⁴²

Scheffler's advice, or trick, is to ask people to find ways to *ensure* that the constraint is satisfied without itself becoming the focus of excessive attention. I think he is asking too much. He himself provides no clue to what sort of trick it is, and how it is supposed to work. There is hardly any way for the parties in a relationship to be *confident* in making comparative judgments about the relative importance of their interests, let alone to find ways to *ensure* that the constraint is satisfied without eroding the mutual affection and intimacy of the relationship. This is why I serious doubt if the deliberative constraint can work as a norm in the real world of friendship, for the constraint can hardly be executed in a complex relationship, and a faithful execution would lead to terrible results. The deliberative constraint requires us to take up an accountant's mind set, always keeping an eye on "who gets what, when, and how," – a fundamental question in *politics*,

41 Scheffler, "The Practice of Equality," 25.

42 Scheffler, 30; italics original.

not in friendship.

VI.

If my account of friendship is correct, friendship is not marked or regulated by the norm of power or authority, or that of equal consideration. Good friends have no need to talk about power, or rely on it to do things together. Friendship is voluntary and informal; its norms (such as reciprocal goodwill and care) are flexible and open to interpretation, and observance of those norms requires a great deal of sensitivity. Friendship is thus minimally structured, highly dynamic and contextual. Friendship is best maintained by acts of mutual affection, intimacy, accommodation, and yielding. The norm of equal consideration and authority, however, turns our attention to rigid, comparative consideration, keeping check on who gets more than whom.

This account also explains why friendship is an unsuitable model for politics. For the sake of argument, let us agree that equal consideration and authority are the constitutive norms of friendship. But there are obvious and important differences between friendship and political relationship between citizens. Friendship is informal, personalistic, and minimally structured; citizen's relationship is anonymous, defined and regulated by the law, and supported by institutions. Friendship speaks in the warm language of mutual affection and reciprocal care; citizenship the cold language of enforceable rights and obligations.

Egalitarians are aware of the differences, yet they think the principles of equal authority and equal consideration can still apply to politics.⁴³ Are they right? If we put aside the substantive differences between politics and friendship, and if we just take the two principles out of the context of friendship, there seems indeed no good reason to think that these principles cannot apply to citizen relationships in a political society. But then why don't relational egalitarians simply invoke the two principles as *independent* principles to be applied directly to politics *as well as* friendship, thereby avoiding the hard work of extending friendship norms to politics? The most plausible reason, I think, is that for relational egalitarians, equality is a *relational* ideal that must be understood in the context of human relationships (rather than as an abstract distributive principle of justice). For them, the meaning and normative force of equality is embedded in personal relationships such as friendship. But this view of relational egalitarians brings us back to the main critique I put forward in this essay, namely, that friendship is not a paradigmatic case of relational

43 See Scheffler, 36–37. Wilson even go so far as to claim that friends are “political equals” because they share equal authority. See Wilson, *Democratic Equality*, 56. An exception is Viehoff, who raises critical questions about the applicability of the model of egalitarian friendship to politics. See Viehoff, “Power and Equality,” 33–34.

equality. Norms of equality do not constitute friendship. What we may learn from the practice of friendship is not about authority or equality, but mutual affection, reciprocal care, and other non-egalitarian norms.



THE ARISTOTELIAN SOCIETY

PRESIDENT: Bill Brewer (KCL)

PRESIDENT-ELECT: Robert Stern (Sheffield)

HONORARY DIRECTOR: Rory Madden (UCL)

EDITOR: Guy Longworth (Warwick)

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE: Alexander Douglas (St Andrews)
Sarah Fine (KCL) / Nicholas K. Jones (Birmingham) / Heather Logue (Leeds)
Komarine Romdenh-Romluc (KCL) / Barbara Sattler (St Andrews)
Helen Steward (Leeds)

MANAGING EDITOR: Holly de las Casas

ASSISTANT EDITOR: David Harris

DESIGNER: Mark Cortes Favis

ADMINISTRATOR: Nikhil Venkatesh