

ARTICLE

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“Who Do You Think You Are?” The Epistemic Intimacies of Friendship

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Preface

This article was written before Andrea Robin Skinner, daughter of Alice Munro, wrote an essay in the *Toronto Star* on July 7, 2024, describing her mother’s silence in the face of her abuse at the hands of Munro’s husband/Skinner’s stepfather, Gerald Fremlin. I wish to honour Skinner’s story and her courage in coming forward, as well as her wish that “... this story, my story, to become part of the stories people tell about my mother.” I, like so many others, will continue to grapple with Munro’s writing and her reflections on intimate human relationships — as well as her literary legacy — following these revelations.

Abstract

In this article, I explore the epistemic intimacies of friendship, drawing on both the philosophy of Steven Burns and the short stories of Alice Munro. I identify three distinctive forms of what I call “epistemic intimacy.” Friends may *reflect* who we are or they may *shape* who we are via their understandings of us. Beyond these mirroring and constructive roles, we experience epistemic intimacy with friends simply by the distinctive ways in which we *attend* to them, and they *attend* to us. Furthermore, recognizing mismatches between various forms of epistemic intimacy helps to explain why some friendships endure and others fall short.

Résumé

Dans cet article, j’explore les intimités épistémiques de l’amitié, en m’inspirant à la fois de la philosophie de Steven Burns et des nouvelles d’Alice Munro. J’identifie trois formes distinctes de ce que j’appelle « l’intimité épistémique ». Les amis peuvent refléter qui nous sommes ou ils peuvent façonner qui nous sommes selon la compréhension qu’ils ont de nous. Au-delà de ces rôles miroirs et constructifs, nous vivons l’expérience d’une intimité épistémique avec des amis simplement par les manières distinctes dont

nous nous occupons d'eux, et dont ils s'occupent de nous. De plus, la reconnaissance des disparités entre les diverses formes d'intimités épistémiques nous permet d'expliquer pourquoi certaines amitiés perdurent alors que d'autres échouent.

Keywords: Steven Burns; Alice Munro; friendship; narrative; Aristotle

1. Introduction

This is an article about friendship — both about friendship in general, and several friendships in particular. Two of those friendships can be found in stories by Canadian novelist and Nobel Prize winner Alice Munro. It is with her help, along with that of various philosophers (most notably, Steven Burns) that I explore some characteristic *intimacies* of friendship and, in particular, what we might call “epistemic intimacies.” These include the distinctive ways in which we know our friends and they know us, but also the ways in which we come to know ourselves better through our friendships with others — or not, as the case may be.

The two Munro stories I discuss are “Differently” (Munro, 1997) and “Who Do You Think You Are?” (Munro, 1978) — from which I borrow my title.¹ While the majority of my discussion focuses on the first story, the question at the heart of my article is the title of the second. I argue that at least some of characteristic epistemic intimacies of friendship can be understood as different plausible answers to the question: *who do you think you are?* Friends help us to answer this question in a variety of ways: by offering us new perspectives on whom we happen to be, as they encounter us; by offering us materials to reconstruct ourselves to become who we think we *might* be; and by giving us permission to even ask the question, in their responses to us as someone of interest and value who is worthy of their attention. Each of these may contribute to the recognizable *goods* of that friendship. Yet, as Munro’s short stories reveal, the tensions between them, recognizing who you are now versus setting out to become someone new, explains some characteristic risks and frailties of friendships — how they can wound us, and why they end.

2. Friends as Other Selves

I am not the first philosopher to discuss friendship in relation to “Differently.” Steven Burns does so in his 2006 Vienna Lecture Series on *Vices and Character in English-Canadian Literature*. Following his good example, this article starts where his lecture did: with the Ancients. Friendship posed a puzzle for Plato, and to a lesser extent, for Aristotle. One might suspect that a tendency to ask a question like “what is the good of friends?” goes a long way to explaining why some philosophers struggle to keep friends. Both ancient philosophers associate human perfection with virtuous, contemplative, self-sufficiency — though, famously, Aristotle is of two minds on the matter (Rorty, 1978). Virtuous self-sufficiency makes it difficult to explain how good people are genuine friends to one another — what they could possibly *need* from or

¹ “Differently” was first published in the *New Yorker* in 1989 and reprinted in *Open Secrets* (McClelland & Stewart, 1994) and again in *Selected Stories* (Vintage Books, 1997). “Who Do You Think You Are?” is the first story in a collection of the same name (Penguin, 1978).

find in one another that they don't already have. Anything truly good that the other could provide, the first would already have, given their virtuous self-sufficiency. (As a side note, both philosophers find it equally puzzling how bad people could be friends with one another — to my mind, a fairly egregious failure to understand the distinct rewards of sharing one's favourite vice with an enthusiastic co-conspirator.)

Much of Aristotle's solution to the puzzle of friendship between good people seems to rest on the idea that "the friend is another self" (Aristotle, 2000, 1170b5–7, p. 179). The good person will naturally value and appreciate — and will even need — choice-worthy good things, and the awareness of good things. Both the good friend and the good life that the good friend leads *are* good things, and thus the good person can consistently value and even need their good friends.

Except, of course, this idea of "another self" is a bit puzzling. One common interpretation is that our friends are like mirrors of our own selves.² If friendship rests on similarities of character — and if, as seems to be the case, very few of us are skilled at accurate and unbiased introspection — then we are more likely to learn ourselves better through observing and interacting with our friends, by looking into the mirrors they provide. Insofar as both self-knowledge and the opportunity to *learn* about one's self are valuable goods, so too is friendship.

This is only one of many distinct goods of friendship, of course, and perhaps not even the most significant one. As Burns himself says, in his Vienna lecture on the subject:

Friendship is an aspect of good character, a virtue or closely related to virtue Friendship involves wishing good to the other; this must be reciprocated, and it must be mutually intended. Complete friendship is between equals, and between people who are good; their friendship increases their understanding and encourages them to be active. They will want to spend time in each other's company. This friendship will produce an exchange of pleasure and an exchange of utility, but those are side issues. It is based on caring for the other person for his or her own sake. It involves trust. It will likely be long lasting. (Burns, 2006, p. 9)

Burns's picture is familiar and plausible, and the goods of friendship he identifies go well beyond the possibility of greater self-knowledge. Most of us value the sustained care offered by our friends, their well-wishes for us, their trust, and the pleasures of their company. But suppose we do take the friend-as-another-self to provide an epistemic good. There is still something strange about the idea that friendship increases self-understanding because our friends are *mirrors*. Mirrors reflect back our own image. But many of us (or at least me) would rather die alone than be friends with someone *exactly* like ourselves — what we celebrate in our friends is the strengths that they have and that we lack, ranging from their decisiveness in choosing a restaurant to their courage in running for public office. Good friends complement rather than replicate one another's distinct strengths: one of us will coax the other out of bed to go for a morning run together, and the second will remember to bring money for coffee as a reward. Further, part of what we gain from friendship is the worlds that open up to us through

² Hume remarks on this too, that "the minds of men are like mirrors to one another ..." (Hume, 2000, *Treatise* 2.2.5, p. 236).

our differences: reading new genres of fiction, learning to appreciate hockey and baseball — perhaps even listening to Wagner. If friends are mirrors, they are mirrors that provide fun-house distortions and reversals, and this is *part* of their good.

That is not to say that good friends are nothing alike. They likely share at least some core values and ways of perceiving the world — I would find it very difficult to be friends with a cat- and child-hating misogynist, for example — as well as patterns and habits of living, based on shared history, conversations, self-disclosures, and so on. Shared values and habits are part of why we trust them so intimately.

Laurence Thomas (1993, 2012, 2013) describes the fundamental bond of friendship in terms of “self-disclosing trust.” Thomas does not take self-disclosing trust to be the only important aspect of the bond of friendship, as he also discusses caring and reciprocal affection. But it is distinctive of friends in ways that distinguish friendship from familial and romantic love. The two elements here — “trust” and “self-disclosure” — reinforce each other. We have to first trust our friends in order to disclose ourselves to them, and we continue to build that trust through the repeated intimacies of self-disclosures. Each grows, little by little. I don’t think friend disclosures are always explicit secrets, either. They also include the sheer vulnerability of being seen over time, in a variety of moods and situations — including not at our best. I may tell my friend about a past trauma, or I may let them see me on a camping trip, on a bad day, having a stressful phone call. Our families of origin may have seen much of this (sometimes *too* much to make good sense of who we are now — their memories of our past selves cover our present realities), but our friends are likely the first people with whom we choose to share ourselves in this way, the first we choose explicitly to trust with such disclosures. We trust that we will be safe in our friends’ company even after we make them, that the disclosures will not be used against us, and, further, that we will be seen *as we are* (if not as we might like to be seen). We trust that our friends will be both capable and disposed to understand us, and willing to make coherent sense of us — often more sense that we can make of ourselves. After a while, a good friend may be better placed to explain something about me — an overreaction, a pattern of behaviour, my romantic type — than I am myself.

This is, I take it, an *epistemic intimacy* of friendship: the exclusivity of what is known about us by our friends, what we know about them in turn, and the unique perspective we have as friendly knowers. Thomas compares the epistemic richness of friendship to learning a language (Thomas, 2013, p. 35). Self-reflection is like practicing a foreign language in a classroom — no matter how honest and painstaking we are in our efforts, we will not become fluent, as it were. Learning about ourselves from friends is like conversing with native speakers — encounters that take us through digressions and surprising twists that bring with them sudden insights. In this way, the epistemic intimacy of friendship is less like a mirror, and more like a new interpretation of who we — and they — are. Indeed, this explains why most of us benefit from having more than one friend — we get multiple readings of the text!

Zena Hitz’s reading of Aristotle gives our friends a more active, even constitutive role, as “second selves.” Our friends don’t just interpret who we are for us; they collaborate in helping us become who we are now and in guiding who we continue to become. The shared activities of significant friendship include “discussion and

thought” — as Aristotle says, “For this is what living together for human beings seems to mean, and not as for cattle, grazing in the same place” (1170b14, as cited in Hitz, 2011, p. 13). In discussing what matters, in reflecting on our histories and choices, our friends collaborate in shaping who we become — maybe by reminding us of an old forgotten hobby, encouraging us in a new passion, agreeing to come along as we try something new. Indeed, a good friend may introduce us to a favourite short-story writer, a favourite city, good red wine, even a lifelong professional vocation. Friends may well be other selves, and they not only reveal but also constitute our own successive selves.

The chosen rather than determined nature of friendship, as well as its epistemic and constitutive potential, helps to explain why friendship — at least, when understood as a bond between mutually respectful equals not defined by kin or capital — is deeply political. Mary Wollstonecraft wrote that “the most holy band of society is friendship” (Wollstonecraft, 2014, p. 56). As feminist philosophers from Wollstonecraft to Marilyn Friedman (1993) have recognized, there is something deeply feminist about valuing friendships: relationships that are equal, autonomous, and chosen, unlike the complicated bonds of family relationships, which historically (and, far too often, presently) have not been equal, autonomous, or chosen for many women. Friendship has always had a central role in queer culture, too, where chosen networks of friendship as a kind of kinship have flourished without the social enforcement of the nuclear family structure — and in the face of familial rejection. It is politically subversive to centre one’s life around these kinds of friendships: relationships that do not fit easily into capitalist metrics; are unrecognized by the state; cannot be listed on tax forms; do not necessarily shape stable households; etc. Friendships have fewer strictly enforced social norms than romantic relationships and fewer expectations than familial ones; in this way, friendships are also a source of relational freedom for many people. This is true of friendships generally, but it is especially true of friendships between women in heteronormative patriarchal contexts that encourage women to see one another as rivals rather than resources.

3. Georgia and Maya

All of which brings me to “Differently” by Alice Munro (1997). Just as Burns does in his 2006 lecture, I take this to be a story about the friendship between two women, each married to men. Their names are Georgia and Maya. Of course, “Differently” is also the story of Georgia’s extramarital affair with Miles (and, in the background, Maya’s own multiple extramarital affairs), Maya’s role in the abrupt end to Georgia’s affair, the subsequent end to Georgia’s marriage, and Georgia’s ultimate decision to live “differently.” Still, like Burns, I am convinced “the careful reader will agree that the main event happens not to Georgia but to her friendship with Maya” (Burns, 2006, p. 2). Indeed, the events of the timeline are as follows: Maya and Georgia become good friends; Maya betrays Georgia; Georgia refuses to speak to Maya again — despite all of Maya’s efforts at repair; Georgia moves away, and that’s that. Sometime later, Georgia learns that Maya has died and, about a year after that, she returns to Victoria to visit Maya’s widower. “Differently” tells the story of that visit, and of Georgia’s reminiscences of Maya.

According to Munro, “Georgia and Maya became friends on two levels. On the first level, they were friends as wives; on the second as themselves” (Munro, 1997, p. 507). They have shared activities — going for lunch and pretending to be outrageous characters — and “when they weren’t playing these games, they talked in a headlong fashion about their lives, childhoods, problems, husbands” (Munro, 1997, p. 508). I think it is safe to say that Georgia and Maya’s friendship is one of “self-disclosing trust.” They become *good* friends through their “headlong” disclosures — perhaps a little haphazardly. For example, the night they first meet, Maya confesses to Georgia that she has been having an affair with another dinner guest, thinking — falsely — that Georgia had already guessed at Maya’s secret romance. “[Y]ou’re very smart ... or I’m very obvious. What do you think of him?” (Munro, 1997, p. 509). Georgia is pleased and flattered, and a little bit intoxicated by Maya. The reader quickly grasps that Maya is both exotic and alluring to Georgia, who is more serious and less worldly.³ The reader is encouraged to suppose that, subsequently, Georgia herself starts to have an extramarital affair in part *because* of Maya, whether because Maya has merely opened up this horizon of possibility, or because an affair is Maya’s solution to their shared problem of “the innocence of [their] husbands — the hearty, decent, firm, contented innocence. That is a wearying and finally discouraging thing” (Munro, 1997, p. 509). Or, perhaps — as I suspect — Georgia does so in order to be just a little bit *like* Maya, to allow Maya to play a larger role in the collaborative project of being Georgia.

So, Georgia, who is married, has an affair with Miles, who is himself married, and Maya becomes Georgia’s confidante as the romance unfurls. Georgia’s and Maya’s affairs are now something else they share, a series of trusted intimate disclosures that make them vulnerable to one another; after all, their respective husbands cannot find out. Then, things between Georgia and Miles turn sour and — we never learn exactly why — he goes to Maya to talk about it. She sleeps with him. Georgia breaks it off entirely with both Miles and Maya. Maya responds by being casually anxious, then she tries to laugh it off, then she is contrite, defensive, heartbroken, and desperate for repair with Georgia. She eventually gives up.

Alice Munro’s stories are often hard to read. As Burns writes, they have “a sharp, even savage, surprise that cuts through the story, and changes things,” and, he reflects, it would be easy “to read this story as centring on the shattering of a friendship.” Burns himself does not read the story this way, claiming instead that the “the story has at its core a testament to how much of their friendship endured over many years of alienation and separation” (Burns, 2006, p. 2). There is textual evidence for Burns’s reading. Maya only ceases contact out of respect for Georgia’s wishes, and the story of “Differently,” as Munro tells it, is the story of Georgia’s return to Victoria, where she had lived during her friendship with Maya — in many ways, her return to Maya. Indeed, were it not for a letter from a mutual acquaintance, Georgia “would still have been thinking that someday she might write to Maya, that there might come a time when their friendship could be mended” (Munro, 1997, p. 504).

³ For example, Georgia loves her bookstore job, and she wants to protect it from Maya’s delight in making everything frivolous and mockable.

“Differently” opens with instructions from Georgia’s creative writing instructor (and current lover) about how to tell a story: “Think, he told her. What is the important thing? What do you want us to pay attention to? Think” (Munro, 1997, p. 498). It is clear, in the telling, both that Munro is directing the reader toward Maya and Georgia, and that Maya and Georgia remain directed toward one another, in some crucial way, even after they stop speaking.

But whether we can plausibly speak of their friendship enduring after the break, I want to return to the break itself — and what it meant for Maya and Georgia’s friendship, their knowledge of one another, and of themselves. It is easy to see that Maya has done Georgia wrong; she has slept with her boyfriend. But does Georgia do Maya wrong — or rather, is Georgia being fair when she decides this act is a *betrayal* of their friendship, one that warrants its end? Is Maya right to be hurt by the fall-out? “*I know I was weak and putrid.*” She writes, “*But can’t we put this behind us now?*” (Munro, 1997, p. 519). Was repair impossible, as Georgia seemed to think; or did she simply refuse it?

This question is not merely rhetorical. I share Burns’s conviction that, despite the red herring of Maya’s sexual betrayal, ultimately “Maya was consistent, and a good friend. Georgia was the one who betrayed the friendship” (Burns, 2006, p. 13). After all, Georgia already knew that she and Maya see such things differently. Georgia had already declared her love to Miles (and immediately regretted it), while Maya — who was in love once — now views most of her sexual relationships merely as “exercise.” Georgia is also the only reason Miles even knows who Maya is — itself a minor betrayal of Maya, by Georgia: “she had offered wild Maya up for his entertainment, or to point out what a novice at this game she herself was — a relatively chaste prize” (Munro, 1997, p. 516). Georgia knows this gossip to be a betrayal, which is why she answers “I don’t know” when Maya asks “How did he even know my name?” (Munro, 1997, p. 516). Georgia has consciously played on their differences, in her telling, styling herself against and in contrast to her vivacious friend.

While Maya’s sex with Miles may have been a savage surprise for the reader, I don’t know that it was — or at least that it should have been — for Georgia. In a very real sense, she already knew Maya was capable of this. More than that, their entire friendship, and Georgia’s enthusiasm for and pursuit of that friendship, happens *because* Maya is the kind of person who is capable of this. It is precisely those qualities of Maya that Georgia most admires and is drawn to that led to her actions. The basis of their friendship is Georgia’s *understanding* this aspect of Maya, something that maybe few people in Maya’s life do — or few people are trusted to do. Or at least, this is what Maya has every reason to think. But the reader knows that her trust is based on a mistake, a minor deception by Georgia, from the night they met. Maya casually references her affair — “you’re very smart ... or I’m very obvious. What do you think of him?” (Munro, 1997, p. 509) — and credits Georgia with having insight and experiences that would allow her to recognize a secret fling and discuss it casually. Georgia’s response only confirms Maya’s mistaken impression. “I know,” said Georgia, who up until that moment hadn’t known, for sure” (Munro, 1997, p. 509). Georgia takes pains to hide this misunderstanding, feeling “pleased with [her] answer, which didn’t show how flattered she felt by the

disclosure, or how heady she found this conversation” (Munro, 1997, p. 509). From the beginning, while Georgia may know Maya *as she is*, Maya knows Georgia *as she wants to be*, and thus — maybe inadvertently — she plays a constitutive role in Georgia becoming something closer to the version Maya sees. When Georgia rejects Maya and walks away from her, she is also walking away from the self she constructed with Maya’s help.

Burns also draws our attention to this initial discrepancy in their apprehension of one another’s selves:

All these qualities made Maya quite different from Georgia, except that Georgia, too, aspired to a splendid assertion of quality. It seems that she immediately wanted to be more like Maya. That was the first basis of their friendship. (Burns, 2006, p. 5)

Aristotle claims that a complete friendship will only break up if one of the friends changes in some radical way. Did one of our friends change? Did Maya for instance suddenly turn disloyal? I am inclined to say that Maya remained exactly what she was from the start. (Burns, 2006, p. 6)

From Maya’s perspective, Georgia is “another self” in Thomas’s interpretive sense. She may not be quite *like* Maya — with Georgia’s romanticism about affairs, and her bookstore job that makes Maya “amused and envious” — but Georgia understands Maya, Georgia gets her, and Maya loves Georgia for it. She sees Georgia as being on the same page in some fundamental way. But, for Georgia, Maya is “another self” more in Hitz’s active, collaborative, “helper,” sense. Maya holds the promise of another self that Georgia isn’t quite yet, but she thinks perhaps she could be. Maya opens up new horizons and offers Georgia a taste of new freedoms — and that’s only possible because they *do* see the other as she is to some extent, and they *do* have some things (at least, their husbands) in common. Yet, by initially misunderstanding Georgia, Maya offers her the chance to become the person Maya has mistakenly taken her for; their friendship is a chance for Georgia to live “*differently*.” At first, this collaboration is heady and intoxicating: lunches; shared games and intimacies; an ally at boring dinners; and then, the adventure of an affair.

But, the reader learns, Georgia has already begun to sour on her new experimental self by the time Maya sleeps with Miles. While she is waiting to find out what has happened, Georgia finds herself weighing the grief of a lost affair against the death of her children: “she would not have bartered away an hour of her children’s lives to have had the phone ring at ten o’clock last night, to have heard Maya say, ‘Georgia, he’s desperate. He’s sorry; he loves you very much’” (Munro, 1997, p. 517). Tellingly, when Maya comes over the next day to apologize, Georgia’s strategy is to ignore her and clean the kitchen around her, noting as she scrapes grease from the tiles, that “she had let things get into a bad way” (Munro, 1997, p. 518). If we wash men right out of our hair, perhaps we wash friends right out of our kitchens.

After breaking with Miles and Maya, Georgia ends her marriage and moves away, realizing that the self she was before their friendship *and* the self she had become for its duration are inaccessible to her: “she dreaded, now, a life like Maya’s. She dreaded

just as much a life like her own before this happened. She could not but destroy” (Munro, 1997, p. 521). Munro reminds us, a few lines later, that “people make momentous shifts, but not the changes they imagine” (Munro, 1997, p. 521).

I don’t know if it’s possible to settle which is a better reading of the text: Burns’s optimism about Georgia and Maya’s friendship and its enduring significance in both of their lives or my sense that this friendship ended, that Georgia had to leave it behind. The fact that it can haunt her can be read either as evidence of its endurance (in dormancy) or of its demise. Whether the break was partial or final, “Differently” points to a crucial tension between the different roles that friends can play for us and our self-understanding — a tension that is one of the *risks* of friendship, and the reason that some friendships do not last. We know our friends intimately, and they know us, and this is one of the most valuable aspects of our relationships with them — a source of trust, familiarity, intimacy, and security. But we also trust our friends to shape us to some extent, both by reflecting back what they see in us and creating a feedback loop, but also by letting us try out new parts of ourselves, allowing us to explore the worlds they introduce to us, by being other than the self we are to our family, or at work, or before we met them.

Friends help us to answer the question “who do you think you are?” in its straightforward sense, by assisting us in making sense of ourselves. But they also help us push *past* the question in its *scolding* connotation — “just who do you think you are? Trying to be someone you’re not, eh?” — taking us *from* safety, security, familiarity, and intimacy. In this sense, they give us the courage to answer it, rather than the evidence. Friends invite us to answer the question of who we think we are in both an epistemological sense — providing us with a new perspective, and a perhaps a better answer — and in a constructive sense. They hold out tools for becoming the person we think we could be. The question of who we think we are gets at both the intimacy of self-understanding and the audacity of self-becoming. That friendship plays a role in both highlights its centrality to a meaningful life — and it means that sometimes, we run away from friends for the same reasons that we run toward them. This can be a gradual end, or it can be an abrupt break, as it was for Maya and Georgia. The epistemic and self-constructive elements of friendship can mutually feed and support each other, or they can become incompatible, if we can no longer bear to be known as the self a friend helped us to become.

4. Rose and Ralph

This question, “who do you think you are?” defines not only Georgia and Maya’s friendship, but Alice Munro’s writing more generally. It is also the title of another of her short stories. The friendship in this story is — in some ways — *less* than the friendship in “Differently,” both less developed and given less airtime by the protagonist and author. Yet, it highlights another aspect of friendship overlooked by many.

“Who Do You Think You Are?” (Munro, 1978) tells the story of Rose’s friendship with Ralph Gillespie, the boy who sits behind her in school growing up. Their names are alphabetically close, so they are slotted near to each other. We are told that the two children “have something of a family similarity, not in looks but in habits or tendencies,” which “draws them together in helpful conspiracy” (Munro, 1978,

p. 246). They are constantly missing pens and pencils, negligent about homework, sloppy, a bit of a mess. “So, they did their best to help each other out” (Munro, 1978, p. 246), Munro tells us, and they “developed the comradeship of captives, of soldiers who have no heart for the campaign, wishing only to survive and avoid action” (Munro, 1978, p. 247). They play a kind of platonic footsie, “scuffling and pushing in friendly and private encounter, sometimes resting together a moment in tentative encouragement; this mutual kindness particularly helped them through those moments when people were being selected to do mathematics problems on the blackboard” (Munro, 1978, p. 247).

It’s never spelled out explicitly, but Rose and Ralph also share a gift for performance. Near the end of high school, Ralph is discovered to be a talented mimic of local town characters, which earns him social success. Rose “never quite got over a comradely sort of apprehension on his behalf ... another feeling as well, not envy but a shaky sort of longing” (Munro, 1978, p. 247). This longing to perform endures into adulthood, and Rose leaves her hometown and becomes a moderately successful actor. Ralph is not so lucky: he joins the Navy, is injured in an accident, and returns to their small town to live on his pension. By the time each embarked on their career, they didn’t speak; “they had never talked outside of school, never gone beyond the most formal recognition of each other, and it seemed they could not, now They knew each other’s necks and shoulders, heads, and feet, but were not able to confront each other as full-length presences” (Munro, 1978, p. 248).

Their paths don’t cross again until years later, when Rose is visiting her stepmother, Flo (the complicated antagonist of this particular Munro short story collection) in the town’s nursing home. Rose and Ralph find themselves at a table in conversation with other people and look at each other: “there was the same silent joke, the same conspiracy, comfort; the same, the same” (Munro, 1978, p. 253). Rose starts chatting with him — but it goes wrong. She can’t get it right. She wants to get past the surface, to connect in a deep and meaningful way, but she can’t.

At the same time, “when Rose remembered this unsatisfactory conversation, she seemed to recall a wave of kindness, of sympathy and forgiveness, though certainly no words of that kind had been spoken. That peculiar shame which she carried around with her seemed to have been eased” (Munro, 1978, p. 254). Rose’s shame mentioned here involves her success, her career as an actor, her having left the small town, nicely summarized by the rebuke first levelled by the English teacher she shared with Ralph, when Rose quickly memorized a poem instead of copying it out: “You can’t go thinking you are better than other people just because you can learn poems. *Who do you think you are?*” (Munro, 1978, p. 243). The teacher’s challenge expresses the question and the conflict at the heart of Munro’s collection. Rose doesn’t know who she is, in the straightforward epistemological sense, and she doesn’t know who she wants to become, in the constructive sense. She carries with her both the audacity — or courage, depending on your perspective — to try to find out and the shame at having tried. Munro’s collection also chronicles Rose’s relationship with her stepmother. So, then, why does the book end with Ralph? It’s not clear that Ralph’s friendship plays a pivotal role in either of the two senses I described above. Munro’s final lines are:

Rose didn't tell this to anybody, glad that there was one thing at least she wouldn't spoil by telling, though she knew it was lack of material as much as honourable restraint that kept her quiet. What could she say about herself and Ralph Gillespie, except that she felt his life, close, closer than the lives of men she'd loved, one slot over from her own? (Munro, 1978, p. 256)

5. Attending to Friends and Friendship

Throughout this article, I have emphasized the risks and vulnerabilities of being seen and known by others, even — maybe especially — by our friends. Ralph Gillespie reminds us that the experience is also a gift. Ralph's friendship with Rose has few words, a limited number of shared experiences, and little in common; he is an unlikely mirror. But Ralph pays *attention* to Rose — to her head and her feet, her neck and her shoulders, and to her needs and her gifts. Now, this may well be adolescent attraction but that's not all it was. Ralph saw Rose, he *attended* to her, and Rose feels forgiven by having been seen, offered an easing of shame and a better answer to the question of who she might be.

I have learned to deeply appreciate the ethical significance of attention — that being attentive is crucial to being a responsible ethical agent — from a number of remarkable philosophers, including both Burns and his former student, Warren Heiti. Both Burns and Heiti are scholars of another philosopher of attention, Simone Weil, who gave pride of place to friendship, which she thinks “consists of loving a human being as we should like to be able to love each soul in particular of all those who go to make up the human race” (Weil, 2009, p. 135). I end my remarks on friendship by suggesting that Ralph Gillespie and Weil each offer a dimension of *epistemic intimacy* that is overlooked in the mirror, interpreter, and helper understandings of Aristotle's “another self.” Our friends are those to whom we freely devote our attention, to whom we are able and choose to properly attend and devote ourselves, and whom we thus come to see as a full, other, self. And, since “a certain reciprocity is essential in friendship” (Weil, 2009, p. 134), our friends are those who attend to us, in turn, who see us as worthy of their full attention, in return.

In some ways, the attentive quality of friendship is prior, or more basic, to either the constructive or the epistemic aspects I described earlier. We must presumably attend to someone — to, in some sense and to some degree, *devote* ourselves to them — before we can either know them or help to construct them. But to see the attentive as prior to these in the sense of *less* — that it involves “merely” looking — would be to mistake the achievement of being able to attend. Heiti remarks that “Weilian attention might be generally characterized as patient receptivity or responsivity” (Heiti, 2021, p. 74) — a composed openness to receive and respond to what the other might offer up. While visual metaphors are typically employed to illustrate this practice, Heiti and Weil also appeal to the act of listening well. A good listener “must have the humility to recognize his own epistemic limits” (Heiti, 2021, p. 75), to be able “to say to [the other]: ‘What are you going through?’” (Weil, 2009, p. 64) without presuming that one's own experience or empathy can furnish the answer.

The significance of attention might explain what goes wrong in Maya and Georgia's friendship. It's not clear that either was ever able to fully attend to the other *as she was*, as much as they loved and shared; Maya may have been operating under a misapprehension about Georgia, but Georgia saw Maya as *more* and *less* than she was, and so asked more of her and forgave less than Maya could handle. As Burns remarks, "they do not know each other as well as they thought they did. Suddenly each of them does not find her friend 'another herself'" (Burns, 2006, pp. 15–16). This is also what — despite the ephemeral quality of their connection — goes right with Ralph and Rose. When Rose seeks Ralph out so many years later, when he mysteriously eases her shame in "a wave of kindness, of sympathy and forgiveness" (Munro, 1978, p. 254), when she later reflects that she'd "felt his life, close, closer than the lives of men she'd loved, one slot over from her own?" (Burns, 2006, p. 256), she is experiencing the impact of having been seen, attended to, by someone "capable of attention" (Burns, 2006, p. 65), as Weil describes it, and whom — Rose is almost surprised to discover — she had attended to in turn. No wonder Rose is so protective of the connection, so careful not to spoil it in the "telling" (Weil, 2009, p. 256).

Munro and Weil both describe reciprocal, bilateral attention as the basis of friendship. But there is something equally lovely about deep friendships that emerge out of shared attention offered to a third object: a craft, a trade, a sports team, a fandom — or indeed, one's love of philosophy. These friendships may be slower to grow into Weil's reciprocal equal attention, since each friend first only sees the other in light of their shared interest — a fellow traveller of sorts. Additionally, many philosophical friendships begin between teacher and student, and must find their way tentatively and carefully to equality. Friendships of enthusiasm start out looking more like Aristotle's lesser cases: friendships of pleasure or utility. We are friends because we both like watching the Blue Jays or because I need a regular ride to choir practice. But, over time, such friendships offer their participants the opportunity to see the other as they are in themselves, and at the same time, in relation to another mutual beloved — the shared object of enthusiasm. Many philosophical friendships take this form, I believe. What begins as a mutual focus on a particular problem, puzzle, or text expands as each thinker delights in the insights and critiques of the other, and the attention of each expands to include the other *as* interlocutor, as both intellectual object and as second philosophical self. Over time, one may be able to anticipate the critiques of the other, to adopt their voice, and — ideally — to engage in a kind of joint intellectual improvisation that feels like shared creation. Reaching this kind of relationship is one of the great joys of the philosophical life.

It is also a joy I have been lucky enough to experience, and credit for this belongs entirely to Steven Burns. He has been my first and greatest philosophical friend and teacher, and I know him to be deeply kind and more capable of the ethical attention Weil describes than anyone I have ever met. He offered me my first logic puzzle at the age of seven, and he waited patiently for over a day as I returned with various ludicrous and highly concocted wrong answers. He first encouraged me to pursue philosophy, and he found every typo in my nearly 300-page dissertation. Only Steven could have persuaded me to enjoy watching baseball and hockey, and to give golf a second chance. We have run races together and written articles together and shared more cups of coffee

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