



## FRIENDSHIP IN KANTIAN ETHICS: REASON, MORAL DUTY AND THE POSSIBILITY OF FRIENDSHIP

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### RESEARCH ARTICLE



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#### Abstract

Friendship has traditionally been understood as an ethical relationship grounded in emotional intimacy, shared virtue, and mutual goodwill. Aristotle famously located friendship at the very center of ethical life, arguing that no one would choose to live without friends. Immanuel Kant, by contrast, is often interpreted as marginalizing friendship due to his rejection of sentiment-based morality and his emphasis on reason, duty, and moral law. This article challenges that interpretation by offering a systematic and detailed analysis of Kant's conception of friendship as articulated in *The Metaphysics of Morals* and the *Lectures on Ethics*. It argues that Kant does not deny the moral significance of friendship but reconceptualizes it as a rational and ethical ideal grounded in mutual respect, practical love, and moral duty. Through a comparative engagement with Aristotle's theory of friendship, this paper demonstrates that Kantian friendship, although austere and idealized, plays a crucial role in moral cultivation, self-knowledge, and the development of virtue within human social life. The article further examines Kant's insistence on reserve, equality, and prudence in friendship, defending these claims against common objections rooted in Aristotelian and sentimentalist traditions.

**Keywords:** *ASHA Friendship, Moral Duty, Aristotle, Virtue, Goodwill, Deontological Ethics*

#### Introduction

Friendship occupies a central place in moral philosophy, social theory, and everyday human experience. Philosophers from antiquity to the modern period have recognized friendship as a vital condition for ethical life, psychological well-being, and social cohesion. Among these thinkers, Aristotle remains the most influential, having devoted two full books of the *Nicomachean Ethics* to an elaborate analysis of friendship (*philia*), which he regarded as indispensable for human flourishing (*eudaimonia*).

Immanuel Kant, however, appears at first glance to stand at the opposite end of the philosophical spectrum. His moral philosophy is famously grounded in reason rather than emotion, duty rather than inclination, and universal moral law rather than particular attachments. As a result, Kant has often been accused of offering a cold, impersonal, and emotionally impoverished ethics that leaves little room for friendship. This perception has led many commentators to treat Kantian ethics as fundamentally incompatible with rich interpersonal relationships.

This article argues that such interpretations are incomplete and misleading. While Kant does reject sentiment as the foundation of morality, he does not deny the moral importance of friendship. On the contrary, Kant explicitly identifies friendship as a moral duty and describes it as the "most intimate union of love with respect."<sup>1</sup> His account of friendship, though less emotionally expressive than Aristotle's, is philosophically rigorous and ethically demanding. Kant reframes friendship as a rational moral ideal—one that serves as a practical guide for ethical life even if it cannot be perfectly realized in experience. (Kant)

The aim of this article is threefold. First, it offers a detailed reconstruction of Kant's theory of friendship within the broader framework of his moral philosophy. Second, it examines Kant's classification of friendship and his emphasis on equality, reserve, and moral prudence. Third, it provides a systematic comparison between Kant's and Aristotle's accounts, highlighting both their convergence and divergence. In doing so, the article demonstrates that Kantian friendship, far from being morally insignificant, plays a crucial role in moral cultivation and the practice of virtue.

#### Kant's Moral Philosophy and the Problem of Friendship

Kant's moral philosophy is grounded in the claim that morality is possible only for rational beings capable of acting according to principles. Unlike animals, human beings possess practical reason, which enables them to recognize and follow moral laws. Kant famously asserts that nothing can be conceived in the world which can be called good without qualification except a good will (Immanuel). He emphasizes "reason is what makes us capable of Morality begin with..."<sup>2</sup> Moral worth does not arise from the consequences of action or from emotional motivation, but from acting out of respect for the moral law.

This emphasis on rational duty appears, at first sight, to undermine the moral significance of friendship. Friendship is commonly understood as an emotionally rich relationship involving affection, intimacy, sympathy, and shared pleasure. If moral action must be abstracted from emotion, it seems unclear how friendship could possess moral value within Kant's framework.

However, this interpretation rests on a misunderstanding of Kant's position. Kant does not deny the existence or importance of emotions; rather, he denies that emotions can serve as reliable moral foundations. Feelings are contingent, unstable, and subjective, whereas moral principles must be universal and necessary. Kant's concern is not to eliminate emotion from human life, but to ensure that morality is not dependent upon it. (Badhwar)

Within this framework, Kant recognizes human beings as inherently social creatures. In the Lectures on Ethics, he explained that human beings are motivated by two fundamental impulses: self-love and the general love of humankind. While self-love is natural and inevitable, it lacks moral worth unless it is regulated by reason and subordinated to duty. Moral action requires individuals to consider others not merely as means to their own happiness but as ends in themselves. (Kant)<sup>iii</sup>

Friendship emerges within this moral landscape as a relationship structured by rational goodwill rather than mere inclination. Kant explicitly states that human beings have a duty of friendship, thereby affirming its moral significance. Friendship, for Kant, is not a spontaneous emotional bond but a cultivated ethical relationship grounded in practical reason.

### **Friendship as Moral Duty and Ideal**

Kant defines friendship as "the union of two persons through equal mutual love and respect"<sup>iv</sup> (Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*). This definition is crucial, as it captures the distinctive features of Kantian friendship. Unlike sentimental accounts, Kant's conception balances love with respect. Love, in this context, does not refer to emotional affection but to practical benevolence—the active commitment to promoting the happiness of another. Respect, by contrast, preserves moral distance and prevents domination or dependency.

For Kant, friendship is both a duty and an ideal. As a duty, it arises from the obligation to promote the happiness and moral well-being of others. Kant explicitly states that "the happiness of others also includes their moral well-being, and we have a duty, to promote this"<sup>v</sup> (Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*). He granted 'the happiness of others' is an end that is also a duty. Though friendship provides a concrete context in which this duty can be practiced consistently and meaningfully.

At the same time, Kant characterizes friendship as an 'idea of reason'. This means that friendship represents a normative ideal that cannot be fully realized in empirical life. Human beings are subject to conflicting inclinations, self-interest, and moral weakness, which prevent the perfect realization of mutual love and respect. Nevertheless, the idea of friendship serves an important regulative function by guiding moral conduct and shaping ethical aspirations. (Kant, *Lectures on Ethics*)

Friendship thus occupies a unique position in Kantian ethics. It is neither a mere inclination nor a purely abstract duty, but a lived moral practice that bridges the gap between rational principle and social life. Through friendship, individuals learn to balance self-love with concern for others, thereby approximating moral perfection.

### **Kant's Typology of Friendship**

Kant distinguishes three forms of friendship: friendship of need, friendship of taste, and friendship of disposition. This tripartite classification closely parallels Aristotle's division of friendship into friendships of utility, pleasure, and virtue, though Kant's emphasis and evaluation differ significantly.

#### **(i) Friendship of Need**

Friendship of need arises from mutual assistance in practical matters. Individuals support one another in fulfilling basic necessities and coping with life's difficulties. Kant acknowledges that such friendships often initiate social bonds, but he regards them as morally fragile. The primary danger lies in inequality. When one friend becomes a benefactor and the other a dependent, the relationship loses its reciprocal character and degenerates into a hierarchy.

Kant insists that genuine friendship must be grounded in equality. Excessive dependence undermines self-respect and mutual recognition, thereby destroying the moral foundation of friendship. For this reason, Kant warns against making demands upon friends or burdening them with one's personal troubles.

#### **(ii) Friendship of Taste**

Friendship of taste corresponds roughly to Aristotle's friendship of pleasure. Kant offers an original insight by arguing that such friendships often arise between individuals with differing skills, professions, or interests. Contrary to the common assumption that similarity sustains friendship, Kant suggests that difference fosters engagement and mutual enrichment. Individuals contribute what the other lacks, thereby sustaining interest and enjoyment.

Nevertheless, friendship of taste remains morally limited, as it depends on contingent preferences that may change over time. When tastes diverge, such friendships often dissolve.

#### **(iii) Friendship of Disposition**

Friendship of disposition represents the highest form of friendship in Kant's framework. It is grounded in shared moral principles, mutual trust, and the willingness to assist one another in moral self-improvement. In such friendships, individuals confide in one another and correct each other's judgments.

However, Kant introduces a significant qualification: even in moral friendship, complete openness is neither possible nor desirable. Some degree of reserve is necessary to preserve self-respect and moral prudence. This insistence on reserve marks a decisive departure from Aristotelian openheartedness.

### **Reserve, Trust, and Moral Prudence**

Kant's claim that friends should not disclose all their secrets has been widely criticized as excessively cautious and emotionally impoverished. From an Aristotelian perspective, friendship requires openness, vulnerability, and emotional transparency. Kant, however, approaches the issue from a moral rather than psychological standpoint.

Kant's concern is that unrestricted self-disclosure may expose individuals to harm if friendships dissolve. A former friend who becomes an enemy may use confidential information maliciously. Kant therefore advises individuals to conduct themselves in friendship in such a way that it would cause them no harm if the friendship were to end. (Kant, *Lectures on Ethics*)

This emphasis on reserve does not imply distrust but moral foresight. Kant seeks to protect the dignity and autonomy of persons by preventing relationships of domination or exploitation. Moral friendship, in his view, requires intimacy regulated by reason rather than emotional abandon.

#### **Kant and Aristotle: Convergence and Divergence**

Kant and Aristotle share several important insights regarding friendship. Both philosophers recognize multiple forms of friendship and regard utility- and pleasure-based friendships as inferior. Both insist on equality as a necessary condition for perfect friendship. Moreover, both acknowledge the role of friendship in moral development.

However, their differences are equally significant. Aristotle situates friendship within a teleological framework centered on human flourishing and virtue. Friendship, for Aristotle, is an expression of shared virtue and emotional harmony. Kant, by contrast, grounds friendship in deontological principles of duty, respect, and rational goodwill.

Where Aristotle celebrates emotional intimacy and openheartedness, Kant emphasizes moral restraint and reserve. Aristotle views friendship as indispensable at all stages of life, while Kant observes that excessive luxury and self-preoccupation can diminish the capacity for genuine friendship.

Despite these differences, Kant's account should not be dismissed as morally deficient. Rather, it offers a complementary perspective that highlights the ethical discipline required to sustain friendship in a morally imperfect world.

#### **Universal Friendship and Moral Perfection**

In the final stage of his discussion, Kant introduces the idea of universal friendship, characterized by general goodwill toward all humanity. While such an attitude reflects a high degree of moral perfection, Kant insists that genuine friendship must remain particular. A person who claims to be a friend to all, Kant argues, has no particular friend.

Universal goodwill thus represents a moral aspiration rather than a substitute for particular friendships. Through specific relationships, individuals gradually expand their moral concern and cultivate broader ethical sensibilities. As Kant famously observes, "By friendship we cultivate virtue in little things."<sup>vi</sup> (Kant, Lectures on Ethics)

#### **Conclusion**

Kant's theory of friendship, though often neglected, constitutes a significant contribution to moral philosophy. By reconceptualizing friendship as a rational moral ideal grounded in duty, respect, and goodwill, Kant offers an ethically rigorous alternative to sentiment-based accounts. While his conception lacks the emotional richness of Aristotle's theory, it compensates with moral depth, prudence, and philosophical coherence.

Friendship, for Kant, is neither a mere inclination nor an optional social bond. It is a moral practice through which individuals cultivate virtue, refine judgment, and approximate moral perfection. In this sense, Kantian friendship remains deeply relevant to contemporary ethical discussions concerning trust, intimacy, and moral responsibility.

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