

# The Cognitive Demands of Friendship

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**Abstract:** What does friendship require of us cognitively? Recently, some philosophers have argued that friendship places demands on what we believe. Specifically, they argue, friendship demands that we have positive beliefs about our friends even when such beliefs go against the evidence. Call this the doxastic account of the cognitive demands of friendship. Defenders of the doxastic account are committed to making a surprising claim about epistemology: sometimes, our beliefs should be sensitive to things that don't bear on their truth. I consider both motivations and worries for the doxastic account before developing a new account: the attentional account. According to it, friendship places demands on how we direct our attention. I argue that the attentional account can accommodate the considerations that motivate the doxastic account and weather the worries that trouble it, all while avoiding its surprising epistemological commitments. Along the way, I question the assumption that the cognitive demands of friendship center on positivity, and argue that the attentional account can support a more robust picture of friendship that calls for significant amounts of impartial thinking.

**Key words:** friendship, norms of belief, epistemic partiality, epistemic rationality, attention

## 1. Introduction

Being a good friend is demanding. At the very least, friendship places demands on how we behave. But perhaps being a good friend demands more from us than merely *doing* right by our friends. Perhaps friendship also places demands on how we think.

What, exactly, might friendship demand of us cognitively? The most prominent account of the cognitive demands of friendship is the doxastic account. Its defenders argue that friendship places demands on belief.<sup>1</sup> Specifically, they argue that friendship demands that we have *positive* beliefs about our friends. Sarah Stroud, for example, says that good friends should have “if not a blindspot, at least less than perfect vision where [their] friends’ sins and flaws are concerned [so that] the good friend’s set of beliefs is necessarily out of kilter” [Stroud 2006: 513]. And Simon Keller says that good friends should have beliefs based on “considerations that have to do with the needs and interests of their friends, not with aiming at truth” [Keller 2004: 330].

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<sup>1</sup> I will focus on the doxastic account as articulated and defended by Keller [2004] and Stroud [2006], but Baker [1987], Hazlett [2013], Meiland [1980], and Keller [2018] advance similar views.

This entails a surprising conclusion about epistemology: sometimes, our beliefs should be sensitive to things that do not bear on their truth. Friendship tells us, the thought goes, to readily believe the good and doubt the bad about our friends even when the evidence for each is equally strong; to believe our friend's side of the story even when other sides are just as plausible; to believe the best of our friends even when the evidence supports something less flattering. For example, friendship might demand that I believe my friend is innocent even though the evidence tips in favor of guilt.

The doxastic account is controversial. It faces a number of worries, and many of us will be hesitant to accept its epistemological commitments. Even so, the doxastic account does seem to get something important right: we should think in certain ways about our friends. That is, friendship does issue cognitive demands even if they aren't doxastic. My primary goal here is to characterize these demands in a way that avoids the epistemological commitments and other worries that trouble the doxastic account while accounting for the considerations that motivate it. My secondary goal is to question the assumption that the cognitive demands of friendship center on positivity.

Towards the primary goal, I argue for the attentional account. On the attentional account, friendship places demands – not on belief – but on attention. I argue that the attentional account can accommodate the assumption that friendship requires positive thinking<sup>2</sup> by telling us to direct our attention towards the good when it comes to our friends, and away from the bad. But because friendship does not require any beliefs on the attentional account, it is free of the surprising epistemological commitments entailed by the doxastic account and avoids related worries based on considerations about belief and its norms.

The attentional account has several additional advantages over the doxastic account because attention is more flexible than belief: it is much easier to redirect attention than it is to switch beliefs. The flexibility of attention enables the attentional account to accommodate another important idea, one that does not fit as comfortably with the doxastic account: friendship sometimes requires *impartial* thinking. This leads to my secondary goal: questioning the starting assumption that friendship demands

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<sup>2</sup> Throughout the paper, “positive thinking” is meant to be neutral between the doxastic and attentional account – it does not implicate belief and can be cashed out in terms of belief or attention.

mostly *positive* thinking. When we step back and look at the heart of friendship, I argue that impartial thinking plays a bigger role in the cognitive demands of friendship than initially assumed. If this is right, I conclude, we have even more reason to favor the attentional account over the doxastic account.

## 2 Friendship and Its Demands

Let's begin with a general picture of friendship and its demands. The intended subject here is *good* friendship – the type of friendship shared, for example, by Elizabeth Bennet and Charlotte Lucas, Frodo Baggins and Sam Gamgee, Leslie Knope and Ann Perkins, and Harry Potter and Hermione Granger. A person with whom we share a good friendship is someone we might categorize as a best friend.<sup>3</sup>

Almost all accounts of friendship involve some sort of mutual care component. We care for our friends *for their own sake*.<sup>4</sup> Caring for our friends involves having certain desires and values related to them: a desire for them to flourish and achieve their ends, for them to be healthy and happy, to engage in meaningful relationships and projects. But mutual caring, though necessary for friendship, isn't enough. As Aristotle noted, just because two people have good will for each other doesn't mean that they are friends.<sup>5</sup> Friendship requires something extra: satisfaction of the demands of friendship.

The list of demands might be thought to include a few fundamental demands and a lot of derivative ones. Fundamental demands are broad and universal, applying to friendships across the board: help your friends achieve their important ends and promote your friends' welfare. Derivative demands, on the other hand, are more specific and may vary across cultures and individual friendships. They tell us either how to go about meeting the fundamental demands, or how to go about fostering in ourselves the desires and values involved in the mutual caring at the heart of friendship.

Some derivative demands are behavioral demands: lend a sympathetic ear to your friends when they need to talk, check on your friends when they are sick, acknowledge your friends' birthdays, and celebrate

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<sup>3</sup> There may be many types of friends – work friends, hobby friends, friends who are children – to which the following considerations don't apply.

<sup>4</sup> For discussions on mutual caring in friendship, see Annis [1987], Badhwar [1987], Whiting [1991], Cocking & Kennett [1998].

<sup>5</sup> *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1158a

your friends' accomplishments. Other derivative demands – I take it – are cognitive demands. They tell us how to think. Many have thought that friends ought to think positively about each another. So, when it comes to thinking about our friends, friendship might require positivity.

In some cases, cognitive demands interact in interesting ways with behavioral demands. In these cases, behaving in ways demanded by friendship would be problematic from the perspective of friendship if not accompanied by certain thoughts. Suppose that you have just landed your dream job. It's plausible that friendship demands that your best friend behave in certain ways in this situation – for example, by congratulating you and celebrating with you. But it seems problematic for your friend to publicly proclaim his delight while inwardly wishing that you hadn't gotten it, jealous that you are more successful career-wise. This would, according to [Crawford 2019: 1579], manifest “a bizarre split between a person's outward and inward commitments to [his] friend” that is in tension with being a good friend. Or, as Keller puts it, “you want a friend who's on your side, not one who's good at faking it” [Keller 2004: 335]. The point here is that partiality in outward behavior sometimes needs to be matched up partiality in inward thought in order to be truly characteristic of a good friend.

Meeting the demands of friendship – both behavioral and cognitive demands – is partly constitutive of friendship. That being said, we need not meet *all* of the demands of friendship in order to count as a good friend. I take it that there is some minimal threshold of friendship demands that we must meet in order to count as a good friend: we are a good friend only if we *generally* meet these demands. But there is a normative element here, as well. We *ought* to meet the demands of friendship.

There are different ways that the jump from the constitutive to normative claim can be made. It might be thought that having good friendships is a necessary component of a good life and we ought to do those things that are necessary for living a good life. Since meeting the demands of friendship is a necessary part of being a good friend and since being a good friend is, in turn, a necessary part of living a good life, we ought to meet the demands of friendship.<sup>6</sup> Or, instead, it might be thought that, when

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<sup>6</sup> Hints of this way of making the jump from the constitutive to the normative are found in Keller [2004] and especially Stroud [2006]; Crawford [2019: 1579] explicitly lays it out.

we become friends with someone, we effectively make a commitment to her to behave and think in the ways constitutive of good friendship. Because we ought to follow through with our commitments, we ought to act and think in the ways constitutive of good friendship.

To sum up: friends care for each other, which involves them having certain desires and values regarding one another. Over and above mutual caring, friends must meet the demands of friendship. Some of them are fundamental demands, others derivative. Of the derivative demands, some are behavioral and others are cognitive. But what, exactly, does friendship demand of us cognitively?

### 3 The Doxastic Account

Let's first consider the account of the cognitive demands of friendship that is already on offer. The doxastic account says that friendship gives rise to reasons for belief – specifically, reasons for us to have positive beliefs about our friends – and friendship demands that we take these reasons into account.<sup>7</sup> This involves both positive doxastic practices and outcomes. To have positive doxastic practices when it comes to our friends is to act in ways that put us in a good position to form positive beliefs about them: for example, by consulting some sources of information and ignoring others, seeking out strengths of our friends' work while overlooking weaknesses, and constructing rosy portraits of their character. To have positive doxastic outcomes when it comes to our friends is just to have those positive beliefs: our beliefs about our friends should favor them and cast them in a good light, inclining us to admire them and like them and spend time with them. On the doxastic account, friendship requires both positive doxastic practices and outcomes, but the outcomes are more central.

It's crucial to note that doxastic outcomes demanded by friendship on the doxastic account will not always be supported by the evidence.<sup>8</sup> On the doxastic account, friendship tells us that the beliefs about

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<sup>7</sup> At its core, the doxastic account says that friendship gives rise to reasons for belief which friends ought to take into account; but, as it's developed and discussed in the literature, the doxastic account is usually specified to say that these are reasons to have *positive* beliefs. The positivity-oriented version of the doxastic account is discussed clearly in Stroud [2006], Kwall [2013], Crawford [2019], and Arpaly and Brinkerhoff [2018]. Keller claims that friendship gives us reason to have beliefs that serve “the needs and interests of [our] friends” [Keller 2004: 330], but he focuses primarily on positive beliefs that serve this function. The assumption that friendship demands primarily *positive* thinking will be questioned below in section 6.

<sup>8</sup> See especially section VI of Keller [2004], section II of Stroud [2006], and section 5 of Keller [2018].

our friends that we naturally form during the course of our friendships should, generally, tilt positive, whether or not such positivity is supported by the evidence. Friendship, then, will sometimes require beliefs that go beyond, and even against, the evidence. This should be expected: after all, the reasons for belief flowing from friendship have to do with the needs and interests of our friends and the nature of friendship, while the reasons for belief flowing from evidence have to do with truth. It would be odd if they were always in sync.

So that's the doxastic account of the cognitive demands of friendship. Why think it's true? Perhaps for many, the assumption that friends ought to think positively about each other is intuitive. But for those who lack this intuition, or for those who wonder why "think positively" should be cashed out in terms of belief, the defenders of the doxastic account offer a number of arguments in its favor. Keller, for example, suggests that truth of the doxastic account is evidenced by familiar platitudes of friendship: "good friends believe in each other; they give each other the benefit of the doubt; they see each other in the best possible light" [Keller 2004: 330].

Another argument is that doxastic partiality is simply a natural extension of the partiality in action that friendship requires.<sup>9</sup> Just as we ought to act in ways that favor our friends, so, too, ought we believe in ways that favor them. Of course, the demands of friendship are constrained by reality. Friendship does not demand the unrealistic or overly taxing, in behavior or belief – as Stroud writes, "the good friend does not flatly believe the manifestly false, or refuse to believe the incontrovertible" [Stroud 2006: 516]. But friendship does demand some partiality in belief as well as action.

In addition to these arguments, defenders of the doxastic account lean on particular cases of friendship and intuitions regarding what a good friend would believe in those cases. These cases are worth considering carefully since they feature prominently in defenses of the doxastic account. Let's consider two of these cases, one from Stroud and one from Keller.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Hazlett [2014: 93] advances a version of this argument.

<sup>10</sup> Troubling Story is adapted from Stroud [2006: 504] and Poetry Reading is adapted from Keller [2004: 331-34].

**Troubling Story** Ted goes to a bar after work with some of his coworkers and overhears a third party tell a troubling story about his friend, Emma. According to the third party – who is in the same Russian Literature class as Emma – Emma is constantly speaking over other students and interrupting the professor. Ted is hearing this story about Emma for the first time, and doesn't know whether it's true or false. The storyteller clearly disapproves of Emma. She has formed an unfavorable opinion about not only her troubling behavior (*how rude!*) but also her overall character (*what a jerk!*).

**Poetry Reading** Rebecca is scheduled to read her poetry at a local coffee shop. Rebecca is nervous but determined to go through with the reading because she knows that a literary critic whom she wants to impress will be in attendance. She invites her friend Eric to the reading. Eric is surprised at the invite – he hadn't known that Rebecca writes poetry, and isn't familiar with her work – but happily agrees to come. As it happens, Eric has heard poetry read at this same coffee shop numerous times, and it's almost always mediocre – almost everything that he has had heard read there isn't of the caliber to impress a literary critic. He suspects that the curator of the readings simply has poor taste in poetry.

Defenders of the doxastic account can say something similar about both cases. In order to be a good friend, they might say, Ted and Eric would each meet certain demands of friendship. Ted would cast Emma in a good light and stand up for her in public. Eric would support Rebecca and aim to see special value in her projects. In order to meet these demands – at least in a sincere way that doesn't result in the 'bizarre split' discussed above – Ted and Eric must have certain beliefs about their friends. In fact, if they believe as friendship requires, their beliefs would be systemically different from those of someone who is listening to the same story or poem as a detached observer. They must assess the same data differently, drawing different inferences and conclusions.

For example, consider what Stroud [2006: 506-9] says about Troubling Story. She suggests that Ted would be more confident in more charitable (and perhaps less obvious) interpretations of Emma's reported behavior and less confident in less charitable interpretations. He might believe, say, that her behavior arises from passion about Russian literature as opposed to rudeness. If he can't find a way to put a positive spin on her behavior, and is forced to admit that Emma acted rudely, Ted might instead "relegate [his] attribution of a character flaw...to an obscure corner of [his] portrait of her." For example, Ted might believe that Emma's rudeness in class is an uncharacteristic fluke, like when a die-hard sports fan who is usually cool tempered becomes uncharacteristically aggressive while watching games.

Now consider what Keller [2004: 332-3] says about Poetry Reading. Keller concedes that Eric would likely have accurate beliefs about the caliber of Rebecca's poetry if it's especially good or especially bad.

But, he says, there are versions of the case – when the quality falls somewhere between the two extremes – in which Eric would believe that Rebecca’s poetry made a good impression on the literary critic, even if he would have concluded differently had the same poem been read by a stranger. In these middle-of-the-road cases, in order to be a supportive friend, Eric would believe that Rebecca’s poetry is likely to have impressed the literary critic even though the evidence tips in favor of its being unimpressive.

Keller also argues that, as a good friend, Eric would have certain beliefs *before* he hears the poetry. In order to try and see value in projects that are important to his friend, Eric must either believe that Rebecca’s poetry will likely be good, or, at worst, suspend judgment on the matter. Eric mustn’t believe, Keller says, that Rebecca’s poetry will be mediocre and unlikely to impress the literary agent before he even hears it – even though he has lots of evidence that any poetry read at this particular coffee shop is going to be mediocre and, we’re assuming, little evidence about Rebecca or her work to suggest that she is likely to be an exception.

Troubling Story and Poetry Reading seem to lend support to the doxastic account to the extent that it seems that friendship requires the Ted and Eric to have positive beliefs and some of those beliefs (in at least some versions of the cases) are not supported by the evidence. Friendship requires Ted to have beliefs that enable him to cast Emma in a good light and defend her publicly with sincerity, and friendship requires Eric to have beliefs that enable him to sincerely support Rebecca and see value in her projects – even if the details of these cases are filled out so that such beliefs are sunnier than Ted’s or Eric’s evidence permits.

## 4 Against the Doxastic Account

Now that we have considered some motivations for the doxastic account, let’s turn to some worries that trouble it.

### 4.a Worry One: Friendship vs. Epistemic Rationality

The first worry is that the doxastic account poses an uncomfortable tension between friendship and epistemic rationality: friendship tells us to base our beliefs on some things that don’t bear on their truth

while epistemic rationality tells us the opposite.<sup>11</sup> In the cases above, Ted and Eric may seem to be better friends by believing against the evidence. But drawing a general principle from these particular verdicts leaves the defender of the doxastic account with an uncomfortable claim: at least in some cases, and perhaps in general, the epistemically rational friend is a worse friend.

To bring this worry into focus, it's helpful here to consider a case from Arpaly and Schroeder [2014: 219] of a parent who worries excessively about her child. They point out that such excessive worry is often an indicator that the parent is caring enough about her child, not too much. Even so, it's just an indicator: we shouldn't criticize a parent who is a moderate worrier as long as she cares enough, and we shouldn't urge her to worry more. It seems to me that something similar holds for friendship: irrationally positive beliefs often indicate that a friend is caring enough about his friend, not too much. Just as parental care can naturally give rise to excessive worry, so, too, the mutual caring between friends can naturally give rise to positively-tilted irrationality. Even so, irrationally positive beliefs about our friends are just an indicator of such caring – caring does not always yield irrationality – and what matters here is care, not irrationality. So we shouldn't criticize the perfectly epistemically rational friend as a bad friend and we shouldn't urge him toward epistemic irrationality, so long as he cares enough. But, on the doxastic account, we must.

#### **4.b Worry Two: Ought Implies Can**

A second worry involves the assumption that ought implies can: on the doxastic account, friendship produces obligations to have certain beliefs even though we lack the type of control over belief that may be necessary for such obligations. This raises the question: why think that satisfying the demands of friendship is under our voluntary control? For an answer, it'll be helpful to look at morality.

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<sup>11</sup> At least, this is what epistemic rationality tells us according to standard theories of epistemic rationality which say that it's determined only by evidential considerations. That said, in her discussion of the doxastic account, Stroud [2006] considers non-standard theories of epistemic rationality that make room for non-evidential considerations like those arising from friendship. According to these theories, counterevidential beliefs required by friendship aren't necessarily epistemically irrational. See Rinard [2017, 2019] for the development of one such theory.

It's widely accepted that having a moral demand to  $\varphi$  requires having the ability to  $\varphi$  – at least when it comes to morality, 'ought implies can.' Historically, there have been two main motivations behind ought implies can when it comes to morality [Howard-Snyder 2013]. The first is that moral obligations are action-guiding: a moral demand to  $\varphi$  is supposed to guide us to  $\varphi$ . But a moral obligation cannot be action guiding if we don't have the ability to fulfill it. The second motivation is that moral obligations are tied up with blameworthiness: we are *prima facie* blameworthy for failing to satisfy a moral obligation. But surely we're not blameworthy for not doing something that we didn't have the ability to do.

The considerations motivating ought implies can when it comes to morality seem to hold when it comes to friendship. First, it seems that the demands of friendship are supposed to guide us: they tell us how to go about being a good friend. It would be odd, then, for friendship to demand us to  $\varphi$  if we generally lack the ability to  $\varphi$ . Second, it seems that failing to satisfy a demand of friendship makes us blameworthy for being – or, at least, acting like – a bad friend. And it would be odd if we were for blameworthy from the perspective of friendship for failing to  $\varphi$  when we generally lack the ability to  $\varphi$ .

Supposing that obligations of friendship are relevantly similar to moral obligations in this way, then 'ought implies can' is in tension with the fact that we generally do not have direct voluntary control over our beliefs about our friends. In other words, we cannot typically believe at will the things that friendship demands on the doxastic account.<sup>12</sup> This gives us to our second worry: on the doxastic account, the cognitive 'oughts' of friendship – namely, to have positive doxastic outcomes – are 'oughts' that we cannot typically satisfy.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Doxastic involuntarists and voluntarists alike can accept this as fact. Doxastic involuntarists argue that there are no cases in which we have direct voluntary control over our beliefs. Doxastic voluntarists argue that we have direct control over our beliefs in just *some* cases, and so they may agree that, typically, we don't

<sup>13</sup> Importantly, the claim that, because of a lack doxastic control, there are no oughts of friendship on belief is consistent with the claim that, despite a lack of doxastic control, there are *epistemic* oughts on belief. Feldman [2000, 2001], for example, argues that, given the nature of belief, epistemic oughts are special and do not imply can, even if other types of oughts do. Whether or not there are epistemic oughts on belief does not bear on whether there are oughts of friendship on belief.

#### 4.c Worry Three: Impartial Thinking

The third and final worry is perhaps the most troubling for the doxastic account. It arises from an idea that even defenders of the doxastic account accept: sometimes, good friends should think impartially about one another.<sup>14</sup> As we've seen, the doxastic account is built around the assumption that we should think *positively* of our friends. Defenders of the doxastic account have said that friendship tells us to put a positive spin on our friends, to think well of them, to believe the good things and doubt the bad. But, there seem to be many reasons that flow from friendship to have a clear, untinted picture of our friends' character, warts and all – at least some times and in some cases.

Very generally, there is something desirable about a friend who is aware that, say, her friend is pessimistic, or nit-picky, but loves him anyway, and still wants to be his friend. And there is something deeply undesirable about a friend who needs to be sheltered from the fact that her friend is a workaholic in order to find him loveable, or a friend who, upon realizing that her friend is less intelligent than she once thought, is less inclined to be his friend. As Susan Wolf writes, “the best love...sees the beloved...clearly and fully, ‘as she really is,’ a love that sees the beloved’s faults and weaknesses as well as her virtues and strengths, and loves unreservedly nonetheless” [Wolf 2014: 380].<sup>15</sup>

In addition, there are plenty of specific reasons friends have to think impartially about each other. Perhaps friends should help each other become the best versions of themselves that they can be – and we need to know of our friends' flaws in order to help them overcome them. And perhaps, as Arpaly and Brinkerhoff [2018: 43] point out, being a good friend involves giving good advice – and giving good advice often requires that we have a full picture of the person whom we're advising. For example, I might need to recognize that my friend is terribly disorganized in order to advise against her opening a small business. Finally, perhaps friendship demands that we prevent our friends from committing moral errors – something which would require us to know of their vices. You might need to know of your

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<sup>14</sup> Keller [2004: 334] discusses impartial thinking in friendship.

<sup>15</sup> A similar point is made in Kawall [2013: 357-8].

friend's impatience, for example, in order to talk her down from lashing out at an overwhelmed server when the food is taking too long.

These considerations suggest that friendship calls for impartial thinking in addition to positive thinking. This where the doxastic account starts to falter. On the doxastic account, this would mean that friendship sometimes requires rational beliefs about the very things that, most of the time, friendship requires (sometimes irrationally) positive beliefs. So a good friend, on the doxastic account, must switch up her beliefs depending on the case – in one case believing that her friend is lazy and the next believing that he isn't lazy but merely laid-back; in one case believing that her friend will get into her dream law school and the next believing that the odds are against her; in one case believing that her friend's paintings are exceptional and the next believing that they are rather ordinary. Or else, a good friend, on the doxastic account, must hold grossly inconsistent beliefs – believing, for example, that her friend is lazy and while also believing that he's not lazy. Either way, if friendship requires both positive thinking and impartial thinking, then, on the doxastic account, friendship in effect requires unsustainable doxastic gymnastics – doxastic switcheroos or gross inconsistencies. Such gymnastics is not only psychologically infeasible to sustain, but also, if sustained, would foster doxastic instability that would prevent the good friend's beliefs from effectively guiding her actions and grounding her grasp on reality.<sup>16</sup>

## 5 The Attentional Account

Perhaps none of these three worries is decisive against the doxastic account, and not everyone will find each worry troubling.<sup>17</sup> But, especially when considered together, they mount a significant case against

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<sup>16</sup> But can't the doxastic account avoid this worry by saying that friendship requires positive beliefs about some things and rational beliefs about other things? I don't think so, as this would clash with important considerations underlying the doxastic account. To see why, suppose along with Keller that our beliefs about our friends should be sensitive to their respective needs and interests. While it may be that a friend's needs and interests are such that we should have positive beliefs about some things but not others, it is just as plausible that we should have positive beliefs about some things some of the time and impartial beliefs about those same things at other times. This will be discussed further in section 7.

<sup>17</sup> With regard to the first worry, some may simply be unbothered by a tension between friendship and epistemic rationality, or, even if bothered, argue that we should accept that there is a tension. With regard to the second worry, some may argue that we do have the relevant sort of voluntary control over our beliefs – see, for, example Shah [2002] and Steup [2016]. Others may deny that even *moral* oughts imply can – see, for example, King [2019].

it and, at least, give us reason to pause and look for alternative accounts of the cognitive demands of friendship. I want to suggest such an alternative account that is inspired by a move made in the literature on modesty.

Much of the contemporary discussion on modesty centers on the idea that modesty is a virtue of ignorance, a view advanced by Julia Driver. According to Driver [1989], to be modest is to underestimate or be ignorant of one's own good qualities. To illustrate, imagine Jimi Hendrix saying, "Oh, I'm alright at playing the guitar." Driver would say that Hendrix is modest only if he is ignorant of the extent of his musical talent. Some philosophers – uncomfortable with a view that roots a virtue in ignorance – offer alternative views on which modesty allows (and, some, necessitates) that the modest person have rational beliefs about his own good qualities.<sup>18</sup> Bommarito [2013] argues that the debate about what beliefs modesty forbids or permits is all misguided. Modesty isn't about having or lacking any sort of belief, ignorant or rational, he argues: rather, it's about certain patterns of conscious attention. Specifically, he argues that modesty requires that we direct our attention away from our good qualities and their value, and toward external factors that aided in their development [Bommarito 2013: 103].

A move similar to the one Bommarito makes in the literature on modesty can be made here, giving us the attentional account of the cognitive demands of friendship: friendship demands that we attend in certain ways to our friends, not that we have certain beliefs about them.

Before fleshing out the attentional account, a few notes about attention itself are in order. For our purposes, we can use Bommarito's definition of attention as "a focusing or directing of the conscious mind towards an object" [Bommarito 2018: 129]. As Bommarito goes on to note, attending is a multifaceted cognitive phenomenon that involves both passive and active aspects; our focus, however, is on the active dimension of attention that's captured by the concept of *directing* attention. There are many different modes of active attention: we can attend to something by dwelling on it, bringing it to mind, contemplating it, entertaining it, acknowledging it, and observing it, among other things.

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<sup>18</sup> For a sample of these alternatives to Driver's view, see Statman [1992], Maes [2004], Raterman [2006] and Brennan [2007].

Now let's turn back to the attentional account. The considerations that motivate the doxastic account can be accommodated by the attentional account, starting with the assumption that we ought to think positively about our friends. On the attentional account, we can think positively our friends not by having positive beliefs about them but by, generally, directing attention towards the positive things: towards the good and away from the bad, towards the things about them that make us smile, towards their successes and virtues, and away from their failures and vices.<sup>19</sup>

In addition to accommodating this assumption, the attentional account can also accommodate the particular motivating cases considered earlier.<sup>20</sup> In *Troubling Story*, Ted might attend to interpretations of Emma's alleged behavior that are different and more charitable than the one assumed by the storyteller, and he might attend to Emma's positive traits that could explain or outweigh it. By speaking outwardly what is privately on his mind, Ted sticks up for Emma publicly without causing a 'bizarre split' between his inward and outward orientation towards her. In *Poetry Reading*, before the reading, and in order to make an effort to see value in Rebecca's projects, Eric might direct his attention toward the power of poetry, towards Rebecca's bravery in doing something nerve-wracking, and towards her characteristics – creativity and quirkiness, say – that incline him to believe that she may write good poetry, after all. As he approaches her afterwards with an encouraging word – “Good job, Beck!” – Eric might keep in mind the admirable parts of the poem and ignore the forced rhymes and the cheesy metaphor in stanza five. Like Ted, Eric supports Rebecca while avoiding the 'bizarre split' between his inward and outward orientations towards her because his public praise reflects his private ruminations on what is praiseworthy.

It might be noticed that the attention patterns demanded by friendship on the attentional account resemble the doxastic practices of the doxastic account, which involved attending to certain sources of

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<sup>19</sup> To illustrate this point farther, consider that optimists and pessimists can have the same beliefs about something – the key difference between them is that optimists attend predominantly to the positive side of things while pessimists attend predominantly to the negative.

<sup>20</sup> For the sake of brevity, I will not explore what the attentional can say about each of the arguments motivating the doxastic account that were considered in section 3; I will note, though, that it seems to me that those arguments work just as well, if not better, when “positive beliefs” is replaced with “positive attention.”

evidence, interpretations, and possibilities. In light of this, it's important to emphasize the differences between the two accounts. The biggest difference is that, on the doxastic account, but not the attentional account, friendship requires doxastic outcomes as well as certain attention patterns. Another big difference is that the attention patterns prescribed by friendship on the attentional account are not properly characterized as doxastic practice since they are not means to doxastic outcomes, but valuable themselves from the perspective of friendship.

It's also important to emphasize that directing our attention in the ways characteristic of being a good friend on the attentional account isn't, by itself, good from the perspective of friendship. If they are to reflect well on us as a friend, such attention patterns must manifest certain desires and values. Namely, they must manifest the desires and values involved in mutual caring: a desire for our friends to flourish and achieve their ends, for them to be healthy and happy, and to engage in meaningful relationships and projects.<sup>21</sup> If Ted directs his attention toward charitable interpretations of Emma's behavior just because it would feel awkward to admit that his friend acted rudely, then Ted's pattern of attention doesn't reflect well on him as a friend. If, instead, he attends to such interpretations because he values Emma's welfare and wants to defend her reputation, then Ted's attention is good from the perspective of friendship.

This point highlights an important aspect of friendship and its demands: meeting a demand of friendship is good from the perspective of friendship only if it manifests the desires and values at the heart of friendship. We want our friends to meet the demands of friendship, not because of ulterior motives and not because meeting them coincidentally lines up with what they were going to do anyway. We want our friends to meet the demands of friendship *because they care about us*: it's part of what being a good friend is.

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<sup>21</sup> See Bommarito [2013: 103] for a similar point about modesty and Bommarito [2018: 132-45] for an expanded discussion about virtuous and vicious attention.

## 6 Weathering the Worries: Developing the Attentional Account

As it stands, there are two competing views about what friendship demands of us cognitively: the doxastic account and the attentional account. The doxastic account entails a surprising claim about epistemology – that, sometimes, our beliefs should be based on things that don't bear on their truth – and also faces a number of other worries that pressure us to give it up. The attentional account says nothing about belief and so is free from the doxastic account's controversial epistemological commitments. I now want to consider how the attentional account fares in light of the other worries that trouble the doxastic account. I argue that these worries simply do not arise for the attentional account when it is spelled out.

### 6.a Weathering Worry One: Epistemic Rationality vs. Friendship

The first worry for the doxastic account is that it poses a tension between epistemic rationality and friendship. There is something uncomfortable about saying that an epistemically rational friend is a worse friend and it's an advantage of the attentional account that its defenders don't have to say that it is. On the attentional account, friendship doesn't require us to have certain beliefs, irrational or otherwise. It's true that, by directing our attention in the ways that friendship demands, we may be more susceptible to forming irrational beliefs. For example, by dwelling on the admirable parts of Rebecca's poetry, Eric is more likely to be irrationally highly confident that Rebecca's poetry made a favorable impression on the literary critic. But there's an important distinction between friendship demanding irrational beliefs and friendship demanding cognitive actions that might lead to irrational beliefs. On the attentional account, being a good friend might lead to epistemic irrationality but it doesn't require it. After all, it's possible to direct our attention in the way that friendship demands without being epistemically irrational: Eric can have rational beliefs about Rebecca's poetry even while dwelling on its good parts.

This feature of the attentional account – that, according to it, friendship may cause, but doesn't demand, irrationally positive beliefs – is one of its virtues. It's a fact that good friends tend to have irrationally positive beliefs about each other. But, as we've seen, there are problems with claiming along with the defenders of the doxastic account that friendship demands such beliefs. Nevertheless, they seem

to be more than merely incidental to friendship.<sup>22</sup> The attentional account helps us draw an interesting connection between irrationally positive beliefs and good friendship without making that problematic claim. Since attending in the ways characteristic of friendship can lead to such beliefs, we can say that – and explain why – irrationally positive beliefs indicate good friendship, just as a parent’s excessive worry indicates that she is a good parent. Even so, it’s just an indicator. We don’t have to criticize the epistemically rational friend as a worse friend on the attentional account.

Yet it may seem to some that this virtue of the attentional account is masking a vice: if satisfying the attentional demands of friendship can lead us to have biased beliefs or biased evidence about our friends, then the attentional account fails to elude worries about conflicting epistemic and friendship considerations. By directing our attention in the ways that friendship demands, the worry goes, we’re being epistemically irresponsible: we are acting in ways that increase the likelihood of irrational or otherwise epistemically bad beliefs.

This worry compels us to take a closer look at epistemic irresponsibility. If all actions which significantly increase the likelihood of epistemically bad beliefs are epistemically irresponsible, then the attentional account would require epistemic irresponsibility. But this account of epistemically irresponsible actions is too broad. To modify an example from Horowitz [2019], having low blood sugar makes it significantly more likely that I will form epistemically bad beliefs, but surely I don’t have an *epistemic* duty to eat a sandwich before reasoning, nor would it be *epistemically* irresponsible for me refuse to eat one. As Horowitz puts it, “Epistemology should not tell me to have a sandwich” [Horowitz 2019: 116]. It seems, then, that there is some constraint on which actions that increase the likelihood of epistemically bad beliefs count as *epistemically* irresponsible. It would take us too far afield to try and identify the correct constraint. The point is that whatever the correct constraint may be, it might categorize the actions required by friendship on the attentional account as *not* epistemically irresponsible, along with actions like skipping lunch.

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<sup>22</sup> See pp. 47-50 of Arpaly and Brinkerhoff [2018] for a discussion of the causal relationship between friendship and positive beliefs.

But suppose for the sake of argument that the correct constraint categorizes the actions demanded by friendship on the attentional account as epistemically irresponsible. Still, the attentional account weathers the first worry far better than the doxastic account. The worry is about an uncomfortable tension between epistemic rationality and friendship. The doxastic account implies that friendship demands (requires) epistemic irrationality. The attentional account does not have this implication. At most, under the assumption that the actions are epistemically irresponsible, the attentional account implies that friendship requires a relatively mild form of epistemic irresponsibility that may or may not lead to – and certainly does not guarantee – epistemically irrationality. In this case, there would be some tension between the domain of friendship and the domain of epistemology on the attentional account, but it's less stark, and thus, more plausible, than the tension on the doxastic account.

### **6.b Weathering Worry Two: Ought Implies Can**

Now for the second worry: on the doxastic account, there are 'oughts' of friendship that we cannot typically satisfy. The attentional account does not face the same worry if we typically have direct voluntary control over our attention. To have direct voluntary control over our attention is to have the ability to reliably direct our attention in the way we choose roughly when we choose it. Reflecting on familiar personal experiences reveals that we *do* often have significant voluntary control over our attention: a coffee shop patron can choose to dwell on the conversation at a neighboring table instead of her book; a tourist visiting the Grand Canyon can choose to focus on capturing a picture for social media instead of contemplating the beauty surrounding her; and Ted can choose to attend to Emma's endearing passion for Dostoyevsky instead of the allegation that she acted rudely. Even when our attention passively drifts, or a distraction grabs it, away from something we should be focusing on, we often have the power to turn it back if we choose.<sup>23</sup> At the very least, reflections like these suggest that

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<sup>23</sup> Attention that is passively grabbed by something external to the will is sometimes categorized as involuntary [Bommarito 2018: 130-1]. Importantly, though, attention that is involuntary in this sense is still under our direct voluntary control to the extent that we can turn it away from whatever has grabbed it. We lack direct voluntary control over our attention in these cases only when we lack the ability to turn our attention away or toward something in the way we choose – for example, in the cases of severe pain discussed below.

we have much more control over attention than belief. So, in sum: it seems that we are in a much better able to satisfy the cognitive ‘oughts’ of friendship on the attentional account than on the doxastic account.

That said, there are some cases where we do not have voluntary control over our attention: we cannot turn our attention away from loud sounds or severe pain, for example. On the attentional account, if ought implies can, friends in these cases do not have an obligation to attend in the ways that friendship would require under normal circumstances. If Eric has a migraine during Rebecca’s poetry reading, for example, he does not have an obligation to attend to the poem’s admirable parts.<sup>24</sup> Importantly, though, if we typically do have voluntary control over our attention, these sorts of cases do not undermine the attentional account.

### **6.c Weathering Worry Three: Impartial Thinking**

The final worry is that the doxastic account can’t easily accommodate the idea that friendship requires both impartial thinking and positive thinking. The attentional account can. On the attentional account, to think positively about our friends is to direct attention toward the positive features of our friends and away from the negative: toward their virtues and away from their vices, toward the impressive features of their work, towards the possibility that they will succeed. To think impartially is to attend to whatever comes to mind – to whatever is salient or striking or simply there to be noticed – whether it be positive, neutral or negative:<sup>25</sup> toward our friends’ virtues when they are acting virtuously and toward their vices when they are acting viciously, toward the unimpressive features of their work as well as the impressive, toward the possibility that they will fail. If friendship requires some impartial thinking in addition to mostly positive thinking, then the attentional account entails that we ought to we direct our attention

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<sup>24</sup> In cases where directing our attention in the ways characteristic of friendship is merely challenging – rather than psychologically impossible or overly taxing – the obligation of friendship may still hold, but we may be less blameworthy from the perspective of friendship for failing to meet it than we normally would be. For example, if Eric has an attention disorder that makes it challenging for him to concentrate on Rebecca’s poetry, Eric may be less blameworthy from the perspective of friendship for failing to attend in the ways demanded by friendship than he would be if were neurotypical.

<sup>25</sup> I will not venture to account for what determines, with regard to our attention, which things are salient or striking or there to be noticed, though I imagine considerations about morality, prudence, and human psychology all have a say.

toward the positive most of the time and toward whatever is salient or striking or simply there some of the time.

The attentional account can handle such a requirement because attention, unlike belief, is largely flexible. Switching the focus of our attention from case to case is typically unproblematic, unlike the switching of beliefs. We can direct our attention away from the positive toward the negative and then back again in order to meet various attentional demands – in one case directing our attention toward our friend’s laziness and the next away for it; in one case attending to the possibility that our friend will get into her dream law school and the next attending to the equal possibility that she won’t; in one case dwelling on the impressive features of our friend’s painting and the next on its ordinariness.

## 7 Friendship and Positive Thinking

Interestingly, it seems that defenders of neither the doxastic nor attentional account can offer general or concise instructions on what to believe or how to direct attention, respectively, in order to be a good friend. But the assumption so far has been that – whether the cognitive demands of friendship are cashed out in terms of belief or attention – *positivity* is the common thread running through the variety of thoughts required by friendship. In other words, I have been assuming that friendship requires mostly positive thinking – even if it requires impartial thinking in some cases – and have argued that the attentional account can accommodate this assumption. But now I want to question this assumption, which is secondary goal of this paper. Specifically, I want to argue that friendship does require positive thinking to some extent, but not to the extent that has been assumed. When we step back and look at the heart of friendship, seeking an explanation of *why* we should think about our friends in certain ways and not others, friendship doesn’t seem to require constant positive thinking with a few exceptions. Rather, it seems to require a significant amount of impartial thinking as well as positive thinking. And if that’s right, I’ll argue, we have even more reason to favor the attentional account – reason that flows from the very heart of what it is to be a good friend.

So why might it be thought that friendship demands positive thinking in most cases? It's helpful, first, to remember the distinction between fundamental demands and derivative demands and note again that the cognitive demands of friendship are derivative: they tell us how to think in order to deepen our care for our friends, or to enable us to advance their welfare and help them to achieve their important ends. Let's just say that the cognitive demands of friendship tell us how to think about a friend *in order to promote the flourishing of the friendship* for short. The assumption that positive thinking is the sort of thinking primarily demanded by friendship, then, rests on the claim that positive thinking primarily has effects both on the friend who is doing the thinking (the subject of thought) and on the friend who is being thought of (the object of thought) that promote the flourishing of their friendship.

Let's start with the claim about positive thinking and the friend who is the subject of thought. We can look to Stroud for a defense of this claim: given that friendships are partly contingent on esteem for our friends, it is no surprise that friendship tells us to "massage our beliefs about our friend's character in a positive direction" since such positivity promotes esteem [Stroud 2006: 511]. Stroud is getting at something important about human psychology: positive thinking tends to foster attitudes in the subject of thought – esteem, affection, and loyalty, for example – that are good from the perspective of friendship. There is something to the idea that I am more likely to like and love my friend, for example, if my thoughts about him emphasize his virtues and deemphasize his vices. These attitudes are good for friends to have towards each other not only because they tend to strengthen the relevant sort of caring in the subject of thought but also because they can motivate the subject to take steps – and maybe even sacrificial leaps – to advance her friend's welfare and help him achieve his ends.

I agree that positive thinking about our friends does tend to foster these attitudes to some extent, and, to that extent, friendship requires positive thinking. But it also seems that, for many of us, positive thinking isn't the only sort of thinking that does this. If – for whatever reason – I want to increase my love and appreciation of my favorite book, yes, I'll read the best passages over and over again but I'll also reread the whole book. Perhaps for many friends, a balanced mix of positively thinking about how great my friends are and impartially thinking about how they *fully* are fosters the relevant attitudes best and to

the greatest degree. By “thinking about how they fully are,” I have in mind the sort of probing and clear-eyed thinking aimed at trying to understand, to see, to fully take in *all* of our friend – the whole, messy, beautiful, fascinating person: glaring vices as well as subtle virtues, weakness and the strengths that they belie, quirks and favorite flavors and deepest desires and how they all fit together.

Now let’s consider the friend who is the object of positive thinking. It might be argued that positive thinking about our friends is the sort of thinking that tends to best promote their welfare and help them achieve their ends. This line of argument can be fleshed out by appealing to Keller’s comparison between the benefits of having positively-thinking friends and the benefits of having an encouraging coach. Thinking positively of our friends can motivate and embolden them, which “can make [them] more positive about their prospects, more likely to work hard and hence more likely to improve” [Keller 2004: 339]. Also, “it can...just make life more pleasant” [Keller 2004: 339]. In addition to inspiring them to do what it takes to achieve their ends, the argument might go, thinking positively of our friends can boost their confidence and make them happy, thus promoting their general welfare.

Even so, it’s not clear that positive thinking is *generally* the sort of thinking that best promotes our friends’ welfare and helps achieve their ends; this is largely a contingent matter that depends on circumstantial considerations as well as individual friends’ unique constellation of desires, goals, and personality traits. Different people will need different kinds of thinking from their friends, and the same person will need different kinds of thinking from their friends at different times. Perhaps some people may need their friends’ positive thinking to significantly outweigh impartial thinking, or even vice versa, but, plausibly, many of us will need significant amounts of both positive thinking and impartial thinking from our friends. Many of us will feel happy and heartened when our friends think positively of us some of the time but such positivity may seem disingenuous, cloying, or even patronizing if it’s not balanced out by impartial thinking. For example, I may need you to think impartially about my paper before I submit it to a journal in order to catch errors and then think positively about it after its rejected when I’m doubting that it’s good enough to submit somewhere else.

To sum up so far: the common thread running through the variety of beliefs, on the doxastic account, and the variety of attention patterns, on the attentional account, is that they promote the flourishing of the friendship by affecting the friend who is the subject of thought and the friend who is the object of thought in ways that are good from the perspective of friendship. But the kind of thinking that does this is not, by and large, positive. Thus, the common thread in question can't be simplified to *positivity*: impartial thinking plays a much bigger role in producing the relevant effects than has been assumed. It seems, then, that friendship demands significant amounts of both positive and impartial thinking. And if this is the case, we should favor the attentional account. To see why, we can appeal to points already made in the discussions above about the third worry.

Suppose that friendship requires, for example, equal amounts of positive and impartial thinking. On the doxastic account, this requirement would mean that, half of the time, friendship requires (sometimes irrational) positive beliefs about the very things that friendship requires rational beliefs about the other half of the time. As we've seen, the doxastic account falters when friendship requires just some cases of rational beliefs in addition to mostly positive beliefs. We end up with problematic doxastic switcheroos or gross doxastic inconsistencies. Problems for the doxastic account can only get worse if friendship requires significant amounts of both positive and impartial thinking.

But things look better on the attentional account. On the attentional account, this requirement would mean we would have to direct our attention toward the positive half the time and toward whatever is salient or striking or simply there to be noticed the other half. The attentional account can handle such a requirement because, as we've seen, attention is flexible: it's typically easy for us to shift our attention between the positive, negative, and neutral features of our friends. It's no less easy if friendship demands that we attend not mostly to the positive and occasionally to the negative and neutral, but equally to them all.

## 8 Good Friend: Bad Believer?

We have seen how the attentional account weathers the worries that trouble the doxastic account and how it can accommodate a picture of friendship that requires significant amounts of both positive and

impartial thinking. But there is more that can be said in favor of the attentional account. Let's conclude by considering a couple of features of friendship that dovetail especially well with the attentional account.

One feature of friendship that fits neatly within the attentional account is that friendships change over time: people become better and worse friends as life goes on. In many of these cases, as the nature of the friendship changes, friends think about each other differently even when their beliefs about each other remain constant. The attentional account can explain this: as a friendship fades over time, for example, the friends simply attend to each other less and differently from how they did before. Suppose that a friend of mine, a chef, moves across the country to open a restaurant, and I have lost touch with him. Even if I continue to believe that his cooking rivals that of Julia Child's, I attend to my former friend and his cooking less frequently and at a distance. The attentional account can also explain cases when beliefs change along with the friendship, even as the relevant evidence remains the same. When I was frequently eating my friend's food and encouraging his dream of opening a restaurant, my constant positively tilted attention towards his cooking cultivated my belief about its excellence; now that I attend infrequently to mere memories of my friend's cooking, its excellence isn't as salient and my belief about it devolves over time.

Another feature of friendship that the defender of the attentional account can capture nicely is what goes wrong in cases like the one mentioned earlier in which you land your dream job and, though your friend is outwardly congratulatory, he is inwardly jealous. Another relevant case might involve long-distance friends, one of whom always talks about himself during their regular phone catch-ups, and rarely asks about the other. In these cases, there is something problematic about the way that the friends at fault are thinking about the other, but the problem isn't rooted in their beliefs. Suppose your friend doesn't *believe* that it would have been better had you not landed the big job, even though he wished she didn't. And suppose the self-focused friend doesn't actually *believe* that the goings-on in his life are more important than the goings-on in his friend's life. The problem, instead, seems to be the ways these friends are directing their attention. The friends at fault are attending to themselves when it's appropriate to attend to their friend. What's more, the ways that these friends are directing their attention can easily

foster attitudes – jealousy, pride, self-centeredness – that are inimical to the flourishing of their friendships, which is why attending in these ways seems especially bad from the standpoint of friendship.

A final feature of friendship that the attentional account is well-positioned to capture is the harmonious relationship between various cognitive and behavioral demands of friendship. When we attend in the ways demanded by friendship on the attentional account, we often put ourselves in a better position to meet friendship's behavioral demands. If your friend dwells on his admiration of your professional success instead of his own jealousy, for example, he is more likely to celebrate your promotion in the ways characteristic of a good friend; and if the long-distance friend attends to the goings-on in his friend's life instead of keeping the focus on his own, he is more likely to support her in a time of need.

In sum: although the recent literature on what friendship requires of us cognitively has focused on beliefs, an attention-based account is better. The attentional account not only accommodates the considerations that motivate the doxastic account and avoids the surprising epistemological commitments and worries that trouble it, but it also affords us the cognitive flexibility that we need to promote the flourishing of our friendships in the ways that we think about our friends. In addition, it equips us with a realistic picture of how our outlook on our friends changes over time, of what goes wrong cognitively in cases where a friend is being selfish in thought, and of the relationship between cognitive and behavioral demands. It seems to me, then, that we don't have to choose between being good friends or good believers: we get to be both.

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