



Friendship with the Ancients

ABSTRACT: *Friendship with the ancients is a set of imaginative exercises and engagements with the work of deceased authors that allows us to imagine them as friends. Authors from diverse cultures and times such as Mengzi, Niccolò Machiavelli, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Clare Carlisle have engaged in it. The aim of this article is to defend this practice, showing that friendship with the ancients is a species of philosophical friendship, which confers the unique benefits such friendships offer. It is conducive to epistemic virtue, notably the related virtues of epistemic humility and of relational understanding. When we cultivate friendship with the ancients, we are not learning facts about them, but aim at understanding their views in their full scope in a way that a relationship between friends allows.*

KEYWORDS: friendship, letting be, relational understanding

I “I sit with Shakespeare, and he winces not.”

I sit with Shakespeare, and he winces not. Across the color line I move arm and arm with Balzac and Dumas, where smiling men and welcoming women glide in gilded halls. From out of the caves of evening that swing between the strong-limbed Earth and the tracery of stars, I summon Aristotle and Aurelius and what soul I will, and they come all graciously with no scorn nor condescension. So, wed with Truth, I dwell above the Veil (Du Bois 1903: 109).

In *The Souls of Black Folk* W.E.B. Du Bois explores the possibility of cultivating philosophical friendships with deceased individuals, including Shakespeare, Aristotle, and Marcus Aurelius. The broader context of this imaginative exercise is an argument for colleges for Black men. Educating them would not only help achieve economic and political emancipation that a cadre of Black educated people (doctors, lawyers, etc.) would provide. For Du Bois, it was also crucial that Black people would be able to partake in that “loftier respect for the sovereign human soul that seeks to know itself and the world about it; that seeks a freedom for expansion and self-development” (Du Bois 1903: 108). What Du Bois is suggesting is that imagining oneself as on equal footing with great authors of the Western canon is both liberating and emancipatory. An imagined friendship provides a mode of achieving this.

Our biological lives are all too brief. As a result, we will never personally meet many of those authors whose work was deeply informative, even transformative to us. What if we could circumvent this limitation? As we will see in more detail below,



many other philosophers besides Du Bois, including Mengzi, Machiavelli, and Carlisle have toyed with the idea that we can cultivate and develop friendships with long-dead philosophers through a deep engagement with their works and imaginative exercises such as the ones Du Bois envisaged. I call this promise “friendship with the ancients.” For the purposes of this article, I adopt the following fairly loose working definition:

Friendship with the ancients: The set of creative practices and engagements with works of deceased authors that allows us to imagine them as friends and to enter into a parasocial relationship with them.

My main objective here is to defend the practice of friendship with the ancients. Guided by accounts developed in works such as the *Mengzi*, Machiavelli’s letters, and Carlisle’s new interpretation of Spinoza’s *Ethics*, I show that such friendships are worth pursuing. I view them through a virtue epistemological lens: philosophers who cultivate friendships with the ancients can thereby achieve the related virtues of epistemic humility and of relational understanding. Both virtues are fruitful, particularly if we consider the pitfalls of our lonely and prestige-driven profession with its focus on individual achievement and astuteness. Overall, I aim to show that friendship with the ancients can help us to cultivate aspects of philosophical practice that academic philosophy neglects, such as honest evaluation of ideas and taking them at their full value.

Section 2 characterizes friendship with the ancients as a species of philosophical friendship. I argue that friendship offers many epistemic benefits for philosophers which I put together under the term *epistemic partiality in friendship*.¹ Section 3 brings out the characteristic features of friendship with the ancients using accounts by Mengzi, Niccolò Machiavelli, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Clare Carlisle as case studies. I show how it allows for philosophical consolation, inspiration, time-transcendence, building continuity, and breaking social and other barriers. Section 4 considers two potential obstacles to being friends with the ancients. First, the problem of *one-sidedness*: the fact that these people are dead means they cannot reciprocate our warm feelings and benevolent attitudes. Second, the problem of *mere projection*: if we can project whatever we like on our dead philosophical friends, we have a shaky foundation for friendship that would not work in real life. While these present genuine risks, they can be overcome. The practice of friendship with the ancients can make us better philosophers, because it requires a deep, charitable, yet complete (or as complete as we are able to) engagement with the history of philosophy. It also helps us to think of alternative conceptions of philosophy as more collaborative and as a series of ongoing conversations, rather than the singular ideas of exceptional minds. By befriending the ancients, the relational idea of philosophy becomes open to us, even as we recognize that they have enduring and important ideas to convey to us.

¹ As we will see, I appropriate this term from recent social epistemological literature, but I use it in a somewhat different meaning.

2 Friendship with the Ancients as a Species of Philosophical Friendship

Taking Sophie-Grace Chappell's (2024) definition of friendship as "benevolent companionship over time," I regard philosophical friends as people with shared philosophical interests, who are benevolently disposed toward each other, and who enter into a long-term relationship with each other. This relationship involves, among others, contributing to one another's philosophical goals and developments. Unlike with living friends, the ancients are no longer among us, so this benevolent companionship needs to come about through some special action on the living friend's part, such as reading the works of the dead person in a certain way, or engaging in certain imaginative exercises, which we will consider in more detail in the next section.

Here are some paradigmatic cases of philosophical friendships where the parties are contemporaries: Huizi and Zhuangzi, Michel de Montaigne and Etienne de La Boétie, Elisabeth of Bohemia and René Descartes, David Hume and Adam Smith, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Isabelle Stengers and Bruno Latour. Take, for example, the Wartime Quartet composed of four influential female philosophers at the University of Oxford, Philippa Foot, Elizabeth Anscombe, Mary Midgley, and Iris Murdoch. Their friendships during their time as students in World War Two were the topic of two recent monographs, *Metaphysical Animals* (Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman 2022) and *The Women are Up to Something* (Lipscomb 2021). From both monographs, we get a picture of friendships that were philosophically productive and transformative. These friendships enabled these philosophers to think outside of the existing frameworks at male-dominated Oxford and fostered a deep mutual influence that did not erase philosophical disagreement between them, for example, Foot's Aristotelian and Murdoch's Platonist account of ethics. Jennifer Frey argues that these philosophical friendships afford a different mode of doing philosophy, a unique set of philosophical practices that she did not consider possible when she was an undergraduate, when philosophy was presented to her (as it is to many of us) as masculine, solitary, and competitive. Speaking of philosophical friendship, she says "At the root of their affection lay a common goal—a search for insight and answers to the questions that were troubling them, a struggle they undertook together over the course of their lives in a spirit of cooperation and mutual aid" (Frey 2022).

Accounts of philosophical friendship can prompt us to think about a peculiar epistemological feature of friendships, which authors following Sarah Stroud (2006) have termed *epistemic partiality in friendship*. Stroud's starting point is that the distinctive phenomenology, long-term engagement, and attitudes of friendship press us to adopt a set of unique doxastic practices that apply to our friends. These include believing them more readily than we would strangers or treating negative accounts about them with excessive scrutiny. Subsequent discussion on the relationship between friendship and epistemology has focused on whether this means we should lower the evidential bar when it comes to evaluating claims our friends make. Sandy Goldberg (2019: 2221) summarizes the debate as asking whether we should "violate the standards of epistemology." Arpaly and Brinkerhoff (2018:

37) gloss the central question of this debate as whether “friends have a doxastic duty to overestimate each other.”

Overestimation plays a role in the epistemic context of friendships. But to reduce it to this single issue risks flattening the richness and phenomenological character of engaging with friends, as compared to strangers, or people who are hostile toward us. Philosophical friendships show that reasoning with your friends indeed is subject to a distinctive set of norms and practices, but these do not merely amount to overestimating what your friends tell you. Good friends challenge and push each other too, often more vigorously and persistently than strangers would, because of the background of trust they share.

We can see such relational modes of understanding and knowing in Hanne De Jaegher’s (2021) terms of an existential overlap between *loving and knowing*. As she points out, we still do not adequately understand the cognitive mechanisms by which humans relate to and understand other living beings. Relational understanding clearly comes with a unique set of attitudes and skills that are not involved when we understand things we do not have a relationship with. As De Jaegher shows through several case studies (such as the care of patients with dementia, where we can continue to connect with them on a sophisticated emotional level even when they are no longer verbal), relational understanding allows for remarkable cognitive achievements.

A key virtue in learning to relate to others is *letting others be*. Drawing on an example of Kym Maclaren (2002), De Jaegher considers a horse trainer who trains a horse, never allowing it to freely roam or to relax. His efforts fail. The horse becomes more and more sullen; eventually it breaks down. To engage with a horse, you need to allow it space to be itself, to roam freely and just be a horse. You should not try to overdetermine it as you try to shape and influence it.² The example of the horse trainer applies a fortiori to friendships: friends should not try to dominate each other or seek to overdetermine each other, but let the other be. This is not a form of disengagement or lack of interest, but rather a going with the flow, born from a deep mutual interest and a realization that our friends remain, no matter how close we are, distinct individuals and beyond our control.

We can see how letting be philosophical friends plays out in the mutual respect, often even love, that arises in the context of philosophical disagreements. For example, William James and Josiah Royce had a long and friendly dispute on metaphysics, called the “battle of the absolute.” Royce was a proponent of absolute idealism, the monistic thought that everything can be metaphysically situated in a single all-encompassing consciousness. By contrast, James was a pragmatic pluralist who saw the world as a plurality of beings that we, as limited organisms, form partial pictures of. After helping to secure a position for Royce at Harvard, James engaged in fierce debate with his friend, publicly discussing on street

² This is a very Zhuangzian thought. In chapter 9, Zhuangzi (fl. 4th c. BCE) recounts the story of a horse trainer, Bo Le, who does not respect the nature of horses, which is “chomping the grass and drinking the waters, prancing and jumping over the terrain” but rather, he “proceeds to brand them, shave them, clip them, bridle them, fetter them with crupper and martingale, pen them in stable and stall—until about a quarter of the horses have dropped dead” (Ziporyn 2020: chapter 9, 81).

corners, in dining halls, and in lecture rooms (Genter 2002). The intensity of their relationship is aptly captured by what James (1920) wrote in a letter to Royce dated September 26, 1900, “I lead a parasitic life upon you, for my highest flight of ideality is to become your conqueror, and to go down into history as such, you and I rolled into one another’s arms and silent (or rather loquacious still) in one last death-grapple of an embrace.” In any other pair, the battle of the absolute might have spiraled into bitter enmity.

As we can gather from an extensive empirical literature (reviewed in Mercier and Sperber 2017), reasoning works better in social contexts. When we argue against opponents, or people we cannot assume will be well disposed toward us, we tend to become more epistemically vigilant (Sperber et al. 2010). But while the literature on epistemic vigilance has been dominated by concerns about deceptive manipulation, the risk of being deceived is not uniform (Sterelny 2012). Children learn from parents and other caregivers in ways that, under other circumstances, might seem *unsafe* forms of testimony (Goldberg 2005). The fact that they do this routinely shows there are epistemically safer spaces, nurturing environments where we can aspire to learn more than in those spaces where we can’t afford to let our guard down, lest we be deceived or cornered.

The trust between long-term friends means we can slacken some of the epistemic vigilance mechanisms, but this does not necessarily mean we are violating epistemic standards. Rather, we may be showing sensitivity to different epistemic environments. Some baseline level of trust is woven into the fabric of our social realm. A society where lying, deception, and mistrust reign cannot function properly (Williams 2002). Being on high alert about potential deception prevents us from realizing important goods such as testimonial learning or improving ourselves following criticism from others. For this reason, Neil Levy (2022) argues that even in more epistemically hostile contexts, such as social media, it may be worthwhile to adopt a trusting attitude.

The (at least *prima facie* justified) background assumption of heightened trust not only helps us to learn more from our friends, but also to reason better with them. We’re not merely biased to believe our philosophical friends; we also take their criticisms more seriously. We value criticisms of friends more, because we know such criticisms aren’t motivated by ulterior motives such as trying to get the better of us. We reasonably expect that our friends have our best interests at heart and that their objections are aimed at helping us see more truth, or to improve some lacunae in our reasoning. When we reason with our friends, we are not as afraid to lose face as with strangers or opponents. This freedom of fear of reputational damage makes it easier to change our minds. In an adversarial context, this looks like admitting defeat, but it is possible in the context of friendship because of its long-term character and the trust one places in one’s friends.

I discern two important and related epistemic virtues that philosophical friendships help us to cultivate: *epistemic humility* and *relational understanding*. I see epistemic humility, following Laura Callahan’s (2022; 2024) analysis, as liberation from a distracting focus on the self, particularly from concerns of how we are perceived. When we philosophize in an adversarial context, we are often concerned with how intellectually astute we seem. Such a focus on the self can be

epistemically vicious and can express itself either in pride or in excessive self-doubt. As Callahan writes,

We can be distracted by *our intellectual activities themselves, as they reflect on our egos*. How well *am* I reasoning, as I write this section? How perspicuous is this characterization, and what does that say about me as a philosopher? What will the referees say, and how might this paper end up looking on my CV? Such thoughts and concerns are disruptive, intrusive. Much as buzzing flies or the remembrance of a forgotten chore can interrupt and divert our intellectual energies, causing us to switch the very questions that we ask or tasks we undertake, our intellectual egos—roughly, our intellectual self-conceptions construed in a context of assessment—can distract us by interrupting and rechanneling our thinking (Callahan 2024: 322, emphasis in original).

Callahan sees intellectual humility as a virtue for everyone (including epistemically oppressed and marginalized people), which she conceptualizes as being not distracted by intrusive thoughts about the self. When we reason, we should be primarily focused on the objects we reason about, the arguments, the broader context in which they are situated, not on how it makes us look. Since philosophical friendships help us to pull away from status-related concerns, they can be conducive to epistemic virtue. The heightened trust between friends creates an epistemically benign environment where we can learn more from our friends, be more honest with ourselves, and less driven by reputational concerns, particularly damage to reputation for not appearing as philosophically clever as we would hope. It also provides a remedy to vicious intellectual pride.

In Callahan's view, a viciously proud person is less capable of listening charitably to others, less open to the ideas of others, and is foremost concerned with receiving credit for ideas as theirs. But you owe it to your friends to listen to them charitably and to be open to their ideas. This is a crucial aspect of epistemic partiality in friendship, maybe even more crucial than the lowering of epistemic standards that has been a focus in the recent literature. Particular features of the philosophy profession, such as lower levels of collaboration than in other academic disciplines (such as in the form of co-authoring or shared labs), as well as a deep concern for prestige (in venues, academic employment, graduate school) make us vulnerable to distracting thoughts about our egos.³ Such thoughts can be mitigated by cultivating philosophical friendships, both with the living and the deceased, as I will show in the next sections.

An additional, and related, benefit of philosophical friendship is relational understanding. We do not become friends in the abstract. Crucially, we become friends with *someone*, who has their own viewpoint and engagement with the world. Friendship relations entail both approach (in viewpoints, ideas, sharing physical space) and separation (maintaining your own identity, having some personal space).

³ For a review on the many ways in which the philosophy profession is concerned with prestige, see De Cruz (2018).

This opens up a unique mode of understanding that comes about as a direct result of the dynamics of the relationship.

3 Distinctive Features of Friendship with the Ancients

In this section, I look at friendship with the ancients through an examination of autobiographical accounts by Machiavelli, Du Bois, Mengzi, and Carlisle. Since the exemplars I am drawing on are autobiographical, I trust (much in the spirit of this article) that these authors are capturing something of the practices they are engaging in.

3.1 Entering “the Ancient Courts of Ancient Men”

In a letter to the diplomat Francesco Vettori dated December 10, 1513, Machiavelli provides a detailed account of how friendship with the ancients allowed him to compose *The Prince* ([1532] 1988), his most influential work. First, we need a very brief sketch of Niccolò Machiavelli’s (1469–1527) political career and its abrupt end in 1512 to help us contextualize this letter. In 1494, King Charles VIII of France invaded Italy with 25,000 forces. As he was virtually unopposed, he subdued the city state Firenze easily. The Medici, who until that point had held Firenze in a forceful economic and political grip, went into exile and a power vacuum arose. Firenze fell briefly under theocratic rule under the ascetic Dominican friar Savonarola. After Savonarola was executed in 1498, Gonfaloniere Piero Soderini became the head of state of the Florentine Republic. That same year Machiavelli (only twenty-nine at the time) applied for and won appointments to two prominent offices: second chancellor of the Republic and secretary to the foreign policy committee (diplomatic and military affairs), the *Dieci di balia*.

Machiavelli was no mere bureaucrat, but actively shaped public policy and regulations. He helped create a stable leadership and forged diplomatic relations with the Holy Roman Empire (Germany) and France. The picture we get from Machiavelli’s letters and activities during this period is of a self-confident workaholic with tireless energy, involved in several ventures, both domestic and diplomatic (Najemy 1993). However, in 1512 the Medici regained control of the city with military backing from Pope Julius II and Spanish mercenaries. Soon thereafter, Machiavelli’s fortune took a bad turn, and he was imprisoned and tortured. He did not confess to conspiring against the Medici (the charge against him), so he was subsequently released and allowed to live on his farm estate where he worked alongside land laborers, caught birds, played games with his neighbors, and had meals with his family. In the evenings, he would read the classics and imagine himself in the presence of their authors.

In his letter to his friend Vettori, Machiavelli offers an account of his friendship with the ancients, in this oft-quoted passage:

On the coming of evening, I return to my house and enter my study; and at the door I take off the day’s clothing, covered with mud and dust, and put on garments regal and courtly; and reclathed appropriately, I enter

the ancient courts of ancient men, where, received by them with affection (*entro nelle antiche corti degli antiqui huomini, dove, da loro ricevuto amorevolmente*), I feed on that food which only is mine and which I was born for, where I am not ashamed to speak with them and to ask them the reason for their actions; and they in their kindness answer me (*et domandarli della ragione delle loro actioni; et quelli per loro humanità mi rispondono*); and for four hours of time I do not feel boredom, I forget every trouble, I do not dread poverty, I am not frightened by death; entirely I give myself over to them ... I have noted everything in their conversation which has profited me, and have composed a little work *On Princedoms*, where I go as deeply as I can into considerations on this subject, debating what a princedom is, of what kinds they are, how they are gained, how they are kept, why they are lost (Machiavelli [1513] 1961: 142).

This little book became *The Prince*, a slender volume of extraordinary significance. Machiavelli suggests that his imaginative exercises with the ancients served as a kind of *consolatio*, a well-established philosophical practice of deriving consolation or succor through philosophy. His dialogues with the ancients provide a refuge from the world. As Zena Hitz (2020: chapter 1) remarks, “the world” is filled with marvels, but our concrete experience of being in it is often reduced to the less pleasant aspects of its social and political dimensions. Seeking refuge in our inner, mental life through creative engagement with literature allows us to at least temporarily experience a separation from our social and political agendas, ingrained habits, and reputational concerns. In his friendship with the ancients, Machiavelli is able to overcome his sense of shame (at having lost his public office) and his fear of death and poverty. His negative focus on the self and his precipitous loss of prestige, influence, and power is mitigated. Friendship with the ancients helped him to lose the debilitating sense of shame he felt after his imprisonment, torture, and banishment, instead focusing his energies on statecraft, and helping him put his political talents at work in the theoretical realm. *The Prince* breaks with earlier political philosophy in important respects, but it also draws on antique thought. Machiavelli recovers the “forgotten realism” of the ancients (Major 2007: 172). Deep engagement with the ancients as friends allowed Machiavelli to read them with fresh eyes, and to rediscover valuable aspects of their political thought that had been neglected.

We can see this clearly foregrounded in his letter (above) where he asks the ancients for their reasons, and they answer him kindly (*per loro humanità*), having first already received him affectionately (*ricevuto amorevolmente*). This imaginative exercise is similar to interviewing characters, which writers who are plotting their novels often do.⁴

⁴ This practice is well established and discussed in many writing guides, for example, Weiland’s (2010) *Outlining your novel*, chapter 7. Interviewing one’s characters both deepens one’s emotional stakes for them (and hence the reader’s too) and helps the author to find out things about their characters they did not know before they began.

This example shows how friendship with the ancients helps readers to overcome a constraint of written text, which was pointed out by Socrates in the *Phaedrus*:

You know, Phaedrus, writing shares a strange feature with painting. The offsprings of painting stand there as if they are alive, but if anyone asks them anything, they remain most solemnly silent. The same is true of written words. You'd think they were speaking as if they had some understanding, but if you question anything that has been said because you want to learn more, it continues to signify just that very same thing forever (Plato [ca. 370 BCE] 1995: 275D).

By interrogating the ancients as if they were fictional characters, we can get new ideas from them. Nevertheless, the texts one deeply engages with pose some constraints on what their answers might be. They are thus neither like solemn silent paintings nor like characters we make up.

Du Bois's account of friendship with the ancients with which this article began offers a similar motivation and picture. Like Machiavelli, Du Bois feels welcome, secure, and does not fear social censure while with his philosophical friends ("they come all graciously with no scorn nor condescension"). He is able to move "across the color line" (Du Bois 1903: 109). Also in *Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois introduces the related concepts of double consciousness and the Veil. Double consciousness is the peculiar experience of seeing yourself both through your eyes and the eyes of others, in particular, the negative perception of Black Americans through the eyes of white Americans. Du Bois thought of double consciousness as a special insight, a "second sight." But at the same time, it is difficult and stifling to be "two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body" and of having to measure oneself "by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (Du Bois 1903: 3). Du Bois hoped that double consciousness could be united in a single consciousness that preserved aspects of both identities. For this, the Veil of Color (Du Bois 1903: 202) should be lifted: this is an enduring shroud that separates Black and white Americans and that prevents white Americans from properly perceiving their Black fellow Americans (Bright 2022).

By imagining European illustrious authors such as Shakespeare as not racist ("he winces not"), but as gracious and equal conversation partners, Du Bois was able to imaginatively put himself with them on the same footing. Ridding himself of social censure, he could aspire to those lofty heights of self-development he argued Black people should have access to in the form of higher education. Indeed, Du Bois says explicitly that imagining himself arm in arm with Balzac helps him to "dwell above the Veil" (Du Bois 1903: 109).

3.2 Ascending to the Ancients

Mengzi (孟子), who lived in the fourth century BCE during the tumultuous Warring States Period (476–221 BCE), offers an early account of friendship with the ancients:

Mengzi said to his disciple Wan Zhang, "If you are one of the finest nobles in a village, then befriend the other fine nobles of that village. If

you are one of the finest nobles in a state, then befriend the other fine nobles of that state. If you are one of the finest nobles in the world, then befriend the other fine nobles of the world. If befriending the other fine nobles of the world is still not enough, then ascend to examine the ancients. Recite their Odes and read their Documents. But can you do this without understanding what sort of people they were? Because of this, you must examine their era. This is how friendship ascends” (Van Norden 2008: 141, 5B8–9).

Mengzi was a Confucian (Ruist) philosopher who held political office in the state of Qi (2B6–7). He helped to regulate taxation and other forms of policy, and he was also involved in Qi’s invasion of the state of Yan. In the Warring States period, smaller states that were weakened (in Yan’s case due to a succession crisis) were often invaded and annexed by more powerful states. Though Mengzi did advise it was possible and legitimate to invade Yan, he was horrified at the killing of civilians and other unscrupulous actions Qi’s ruler used to accomplish his aims (cf. 1B10, 1B11, 2B8, and 2B9). Seeing that his ruler did not listen to him, Mengzi resigned (2B10–13). He was unable to obtain another advisory position; the eponymous work *Mengzi* frequently expresses disappointment with this fact (Van Norden 2019).

In this context, we can read Mengzi’s exhortation to ascend to the ancients. Doing this would allow philosophers such as himself who could not find suitable conversation partners to nevertheless have some epistemic companions. Bryan Van Norden (2008: 141) reads the passage quoted above in virtue ethical terms, “Genuine friendship is based on shared virtue (5B3 and 5B7.4), so the friendship of the Virtuous extends outward to more and more people, including the Virtuous of ancient times.” Mengzi can be situated in the exemplarist ethics of the Ru, who encouraged scholars to understand and emulate exemplars of the past. The ancients Mengzi referred to were the sages and rulers of old, the *sheng ren* 聖人 (sage people) and *sheng wang* 聖王 (sage rulers), founders and kings of the Zhou dynasty, including King Wu, King Wen, and the Duke of Zhou. They were credited with the invention of customs and institutions, and agricultural, governmental, and political innovations. Warring States philosophers, including Mengzi, Xunzi, and Mozi referred often to the sages and attempted to legitimize their own philosophical positions through them. The ancients were a reference point and a golden standard. What they taught and practiced was the Way (*dao* 道) to organize society, and their classic texts preserved the Way. Moreover, Mengzi and the other Ru believed that the sages had a special quality, *de* 德 (which can be translated as virtue, moral charisma, or power), which instantly makes people well disposed toward them and supportive of them (Hutton 2016: Introduction). Learning about these exemplars and their lives helps us to cultivate virtue (Olberding 2008). However, in encouraging *friendship* and not only admiration and emulation, Mengzi goes beyond the Ruist tradition.

If the argument I am developing here is on the right track, we can read 5B9 in virtue epistemological terms. The term Mengzi uses for the ancients is *gu zhi ren* 古之人, with *gu* meaning both ancient and classic (people or authors). He recommends we *you shang lun gu zhi ren* 又尚論古之人. We ascend (*shang*), a term that means to rise,

both metaphorically and literally, and examine (*lun*), the ancients. The term *lun* means to critique, which means broadly to weigh both strengths and weaknesses. In 7B37, Mengzi ridicules the village worthies, who can quote the ancients but who fail to cultivate virtue, because they have not put in the work to truly try to understand them.

In Mengzi, like in Machiavelli and in Du Bois, we see an account of relational understanding. Mengzi is not engaging with the ancients in an abstract manner—he seeks to understand what kind of people they were. Even for friendships with the living, the mechanisms through which we achieve such understanding remain poorly understood. How we might achieve this with people who lived centuries before us and with whom relationship is necessarily parasocial is even more mysterious. Reading about the lives of ancients provides us with *testimonial encounters*: we indirectly “meet” them in these narratives (Kidd 2018). Perhaps we are even able to gain second-personal knowledge of writers of ancient texts, or of the characters discussed in ancient texts, by reading these works (Stump 2010). While this possibility is alluring, it isn’t necessary for us to obtain genuine second-personal knowledge to ascend to the ancients in their lustrous halls or to admire their *de*. It is entirely possible that the Zhou Dynasty sages Mengzi discusses did not in fact have the virtues he and other Warring States philosophers ascribed to them. Moreover, as anyone who has met a philosopher they had only read before can testify, one’s perception of a person through their works and how they comport themselves in real life can be very different (as a philosopher friend once advised me, “never meet your heroes.”)

I think an intimate personal understanding can arise purely textually, without us having genuine second-personal knowledge of the authors of these texts. When we engage with their written works in the way that friendship requires, we achieve a form of relational understanding. We develop the virtue of *letting others be*, which helps us to figure out authorial intent. As Popova and Cuffari (2018) observe, a text is an artifact. We can choose to close the book or stop reading. At the same time, it is not like a coffee machine which has limited affordances (such as turning it on or off, putting ground coffee or water into it). Rather, the relationship between a reader and a text is subtle and dynamic: the reader anticipates and can be surprised or dismayed by what the text does, and interpret it in various ways. To engage these texts skillfully, we must, as Mengzi put it, examine the era of their authors, to understand what kind of people they were. We should not use the ancients as sock puppets that we can ventriloquize at will to say what we ourselves believe. We must seek to understand what *they* believed. Mengzi already starts out with an attitude of admiration and respect for the sage kings, much like we admire and respect our living friends. This mode of understanding is not neutral, but epistemically partial in the way friendship affords. We must not treat them as objects to suit our own rhetorical ends.

3.3 The Intimacy of Shared Intuition

In her new reading of Spinoza’s *Ethics* ([1677] 1985), Clare Carlisle (2021) examines how shared reading can help us to gain an intuitive understanding of texts that are far

removed from us in time and cultural context. She argues that if we become (imaginatively) part of Spinoza's circle of friends, this helps us understand his work on an intuitive level which cannot be entirely reduced to propositional attitudes. She fleshes this out by drawing on Spinoza's philosophy of mind: in his view, there are three types of cognition. The first kind constitutes normal cognitive processes of sense perception, recollection, and imagination; it is the source of inadequate ideas and of our passions. The second is reason, which proceeds by explicit steps. The third is *scientia intuitiva*, intuitive knowledge, which Spinoza deems the most superior of the three. Although the *Ethics* proceeds in a geometric order, with definitions, axioms, and propositions, Spinoza's ultimate aim for the reader is to come to an intuitive knowledge of God, which amounts to understanding yourself (or, differently put, your mind understanding itself) and everything else as a mode of this one substance. To be able to achieve this, and thereby to gain a love of God, is the highest good human beings can aspire to and the highest form of self-realization (see e.g., *Ethics* 4p28s). The proofs throughout the *Ethics* prepare the reader for this insight, but the final step of realizing this monistic truth, as Kristin Primus (2022) points out, must occur intuitively.

By becoming part of his circle of friends in an imaginative way (as I outline below), Carlisle envisages we can have a new intuitive grasp of the overall shape of the *Ethics*, engage in Spinoza's third type of cognition, and thereby realize his aim for the reader.

The friendships in Spinoza's lifetime present something of a paradox, which biographers have struggled with (see e.g., Gullan-Whur 2000; Israel 2023). Spinoza seems to have been a withdrawn person, not always easy to deal with. Nevertheless, he had a circle of friends and admirers who went to great lengths to try to help him, for instance, in publishing his works, and who even offered him stipends or to make him his heir (in the case of Simon de Vries), offers which Spinoza declined or only accepted sparingly. In contrast to other early moderns, Spinoza wrote relatively few letters. Only 48 survive, a meager offering considering the hundreds written by Descartes and the thousands by Leibniz. He practically never started correspondence, instead replying to letters sent to him by others, such as van Blijenbergh and Boxel, who were eager to learn his opinion on various matters (Israel 2023: 5). Nevertheless, as Carlisle emphasizes, the letters by his friends are exceptionally warm and often express a desire for physical proximity, deeming closeness by correspondence as second best.

For example, Henry Oldenburg ([1661] 1985: 163), secretary of the Royal Society of London, in a letter to Spinoza from London, August 16/26, 1661, writes that "I found it so difficult to tear myself away from your side, that now that I am back in England I hasten to reunite myself with you, so far as is possible, even if it is only by correspondence." And Simon de Vries pens what Spinoza biographer Margaret Gullan-Whur (2000) characterizes as a jealous outburst,

The distance between us keeps us apart for so long. Fortunate, indeed, most Fortunate, is your companion, Casearius, who lives under the same roof with you, and can talk to you about the most important matters at breakfast, at dinner, and on your walks. But though our bodies are

separated from one another by such a distance, nevertheless you have very often been present in my mind, especially when I meditate on your writings and hold them in my hands (de Vries [1663] 1985: 190).

As Carlisle (2021: 34) remarks, Spinoza's friends recognized something of "deep, rare value...a connection to something which they also longed for—and they were eager to respond to this by offering something of themselves to him: attention, time, money." His friends went to extraordinary lengths, especially when they edited his posthumous works for an intensive period of several months. Given the radical contents of these works and the declining freedom of expression in the Dutch Republic, publishing and editing radical books was not without danger. By imagining herself as part of this circle of friends (though she admits the distance is great, "Spinoza in the Netherlands in the seventeenth century, myself in London in the twenty-first century," p. 43), Carlisle can share in that intellectual activity that a circle of friends affords:

[O]ne might argue that the different spatial-temporal conditions of these intellectual activities...are rendered so irrelevant by the immediacy of intuition that this is communion rather than repetition. And we form a community of readers, all of us, insofar as we understand the *Ethics*, sharing in the same reflexive intellectual activity—it is a great joy. Like Spinoza's very first readers, we do not encounter the *Ethics* alone: as we read and understand, maybe by very gradual degrees, we are participating together in understanding itself—participating, in other words, in the attribute of thought, in God's power of thinking (Carlisle 2021: 43–44).

To tease this out a bit further, sharing in a joint intellectual activity is being part of this circle of friends, and thus partaking and realizing through our actions this monistic truth. For Carlisle, the immediacy of intuition generates a genuinely communal experience as it breaks the barriers of culture, gender, class, and time. The engagement with a written text is dynamic, and as we have seen in the previous section, a reader must adapt to the writer. But the author also must anticipate and adapt to the reader, even if the reader may live centuries later (Popova and Cuffari 2018).

In writing, the author orders and selects thoughts. For instance, in the *Ethics* 2p12s, Spinoza writes, "Here, no doubt, my readers will come to a halt, and think of many things which will give them pause. For this reason, I ask them to continue on with me slowly, step by step, and to make no judgment on these matters until they have read through them all." There are many other points in the text where the ordering of the propositions, additions of Scholia, and Appendices, has been selected to maximize the rhetorical impact of the text and take away obstacles for the reader. This mutual adaptation (of author to contemporary and to future readers and of readers to historical author) makes dialogue possible. Of course, Spinoza could not foresee that the *Ethics* would still resonate with people so far in the future, with such differing cultural contexts, such as Carlisle in twenty-first century London. But other

voices can come in and challenge, clarify, and reinterpret the text, making the conversation extend through time, an extended circle of friends as Mengzi, Machiavelli, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Carlisle hold.

Placing ourselves imaginatively in a group of friends can be conducive to intellectual virtue. Worries about the relevance of our own contributions over time can dissipate if we see ourselves as participating in a series of ongoing philosophical conversations that stretch throughout the centuries and in which we have the privilege of taking part. Irene Bloom (1997: 21), for instance, conceives of Chinese philosophy in this way: “The history of Chinese thought has something of the character of a great conversation, carried on over time, with the most significant contributors continuing to be involved in the discussion long after their own natural lifetimes.” While this is a common way to characterize Chinese philosophy, we still see Western philosophy as punctuated with singular minds, a conception that is only slowly changing in our increased recognition of non-canonical figures (e.g., early modern women philosophers).

However, paradoxically, imagining oneself as part of a circle of friends of a canonical figure allows us to contribute to extended conversation and to set aside distracting thoughts of whether our work will still be relevant in years to come. Not everyone starts, ends, or changes the conversation, but we can all partake in weaving the interpretative tapestry of the *Ethics* or other historical works. Being part of that circle of friends and doing the patient work in this long-term conversation indicates that we, like Spinoza’s friends during his lifetime, can make a lasting impact in the multi-voiced conversation of philosophy as it stretches over the centuries. Such friendships can engender a transgenerational sense of community among philosophers.

4 The Possibilities and Pitfalls of Pretend Play

As we saw above, the philosophers who cultivate friendships with the ancients speak about imaginative exercises they undertake to achieve this: sitting with Shakespeare, strolling arm in arm with Balzac and Dumas, being part of Spinoza’s group of admirers and friends, earnestly editing and commenting on a work they realize is world-changing and hoping that it can see the light of day.

Such forms of blatant pretend play in philosophers, usually so cerebral, may strike us as odd. However, pretend play has an important role in the imaginative lives not only of children but also of adults. In children, the benefits of imaginary companions have been well established in a robust developmental psychological literature. These friends function as inner mentors, shaping identity, providing company, comforting and bolstering motivation, enriching children’s lives (Hoff 2004). Imaginary companions do not give immediate feedback or reciprocate the way real companions do, but they allow children to rehearse social situations in a safe environment and experiment with social emotions in a risk-free way. Thus, imaginary companions have a positive role in social development (Gleason 2017). This also aids creativity: children who have imaginary companions are better at telling rich narratives compared to children without (Trionfi and Reese 2009).

This literature examines beneficial effects on children, but what about adults? Neil Van Leeuwen (2023) has argued that pretend play fulfills a crucial role in adults in helping to sustain particular kinds of beliefs, including religious beliefs. If Van Leeuwen is right, then pretend play and imaginary companionship is far more pervasive in adulthood than we commonly think. Such imaginings come with risks as well, which are less salient in real friendships, notably confirmation bias (and maybe even sock puppeteering). As Tanya Luhrmann (2012) shows in her ethnography of Vineyard evangelicals, believers will frequently engage in pretend play, e.g., pouring a cup of coffee for a God who mostly happens to confirm ideas they already believe in.

Here, we are confronted with the related problems of one-sidedness and mere projection. The fact that the ancients cannot give us feedback raises the worry that we can project whatever views we have on these philosophers. While this presents a genuine risk, I do not think it is insurmountable. When we engage in pretend play to create imaginary friends, we know that we are doing so, a situation that is quite different from a one-sided yearning for someone who simply does not like us back, or a parasocial relationship with a living celebrity. Moreover, the ancients left us their writing and thus provide *some* constraints on what we project on them. Engaging thoughtfully with their work allows us to gain some relational understanding. I argued above that this does not require that we obtain genuine second-personal knowledge, but rather that we let the constraints of the texts guide our engagement in a way that Maclaren (2002) characterizes as *letting be*. We should not regard the ancients as mouthpieces for what we want to say and use them for our own philosophical ends. Rather, we should respect their unique viewpoints and ideas. For that we must, as Mengzi recommended, examine their era and find out what sort of people they were.

Epistemic partiality is important, because much as we feel our ancient friends love us (e.g., Machiavelli's ancient men in their ancient halls receive him with affection, feed him, and answer him kindly), we also love them in return. That partiality poses demands upon us as friends—for instance, a true friend does not twist her friend's words, a true friend will be maximally charitable, but will still call her friend to answer if he expresses bigoted ideas, makes poor life choices, or does not live up to his ideals. For example, the Italian humanist Francesco Petrarca (1304–1374) cultivated friendship with the ancients by writing letters to them. In a letter to Cicero dated June 16, 1345, he chides the Roman philosopher for getting involved in “so many vain and unprofitable quarrels” (Petrarca [1345] 2005: 317). Further, he takes Cicero to task for failing to live up to his own ideals:

I grieve at your destiny, my dear friend, I am filled with shame and distress at your shortcomings... what good is there in teaching others, what benefit is there in speaking constantly with the most magnificent words about the virtues, if at the same time you do not give heed to your own words? Oh, how much better it would have been, especially for a philosopher, to have grown old peacefully in the country, meditating, as you write somewhere, on that everlasting life and not on this transitory existence; how much better for you never to have held such offices, never

to have yearned for triumphs, never to have had any Catilines to inflate your ego (Petrarca [1345] 2005: 317–318).

He ends somewhat wistfully with “Farewell forever, my Cicero.” This is what it means to weigh both strengths and weaknesses of our deceased philosophical friends.

An additional benefit of friendship with the ancients is epistemic humility, understood as being free of distracting thoughts about the self, how philosophically astute we are, whether our ideas still matter in the long run, whether our work is worthwhile, and how other people perceive us in the profession. Academic philosophy is a lonely profession, and many philosophers find themselves intellectually and emotionally isolated, unable to make new connections after numerous moves,⁵ so the risk of solipsistic thoughts of self-aggrandizement or futility is considerable. But there is a more positive conception of being alone, namely solitude, which we can see as a kind of self-acquiescence where you are not negatively affected by lack of social connection (Gheaus 2022). Perhaps paradoxically, in solitude we can understand better how we are interconnected, and how we as philosophers are part of a larger conversation that stretches on over millennia in different cultures. Cultivating friendship with the ancients can help us make this grand and comforting vision of philosophy more concrete.

5 A Final Cautionary Note and Plea

Let me end with one final cautionary note, and perhaps also a plea. The relationship with living philosophers is uniquely valuable, and nothing of what I have said above should lead us to neglect our actual relationships in favor of parasocial ones. We can develop friendship with the ancients alongside true two-sided friendships. Indeed, we can use shared interests in a historical figure as a starting point of forming or enriching friendships among the living. For example, two people who work on the same historical author can learn from each other, adding new interpersonal and epistemic possibilities.⁶

Especially senior philosophers who have positions of influence have some obligation to foster a climate that makes friendships among the living possible. This includes strong norms against harassment, precisely because informal exchanges are such a vital part of engaging in philosophy, and a climate that is not free from such risks is detrimental, for philosophers in insecure contracts, women, gender minorities, and racialized and other minorities. It also includes creating low-key and plentiful opportunities to mingle, not only in expensive and exclusionary in-person conferences but in other, more accessible, formats.

⁵ The issue of loneliness among academic philosophers has been the topic of several conversations hosted on academic philosophy blogs *The Philosophers’ Cocoon* and *Daily Nous*, e.g., <https://philosopherscocoon.typepad.com/blog/2023/10/loneliness-in-academic-life.html>

⁶ I thank an anonymous reviewer for their thoughts along these lines.

Nevertheless, if my argument works, there is something valuable in addition to friendships with living philosophers: trying to become friends with the ancients, to become equals in their eyes, and to thereby cultivate epistemic virtues.

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Acknowledgments. Many thanks to Bryce Huebner, Hanne De Jaegher, Johan De Smedt, Nadia Hilliard, Jedidiah Hungbeme, and two anonymous reviewers for comments to earlier drafts of this paper. Thank you to Bryan Van Norden for help with the classical Chinese. I am also deeply indebted to my living philosophical friends for conversations throughout the years that helped to stimulate my thoughts in this direction.

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