

## Friendship – A way to more Ethical Communities

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‘Where we are in the world’ can be influenced by many considerations. The space that we occupy by ourselves, and with others, can be affected by relationships that are either voluntary or involuntary, private or public, fulfilling or oppressive. How does *friendship*, then, as one particular type of relationship, promote experiences of goodness, or challenge experiences of harm, in the communities in which we live? By undertaking such an exploration, we are not only engaging in ethical reflection, but, in fact, we are considering the possibility that *friendship* is an important concept by which to envision more ethical communities.

While *friendship* can be experienced within the public arena to enhance citizenship and respect, *friendship* within the private or domestic arena enhances notions of acceptance, and is nurturing. As a significant relationship between two or more persons, *friendship* embraces care, affection, intimacy, closeness, companionship and trust. *Friendship* is intentional and voluntary; it is a relationship of choice, whereby each participant makes discriminatory decisions based on the desire to be in a particular relationship with one person and not another. Such decisions may be prompted by the sharing of common experiences, expressions, thoughts, values or goals; or for other reasons of attraction that are not easily identified by, or apparent to, those outside of the *friendship*. Therefore, expressions of mutuality, respect, and faithfulness are important and necessary components of friendship. In such a relationship, interdependence is experienced between the parties, rejecting negative evaluations or processes of devaluing between participants. Also rejected are negative patterns of power within relationships, represented by such aspects as paternalism, competitiveness, exploitation, and authoritarianism.

*Friendship*, then, is an informal type of relationship that can span different time periods from short-term to long-term, and is enriched by deeper and more enduring commitment. Significantly, *friendship*, expressed in the private arena, has the capacity to transcend or subvert traditional orderings of exclusion that some people experience in the public arena. *Friendship* is a relationship that is not necessarily bound by roles, conventions or categorisations that typically dominate other types of relationships within these public contexts (although this is not to deny that *friendship* can be a part of such contexts).

Although *friendship* is a type of relationship that implicitly promotes wellbeing for its participants, it is not without challenges. Because of the nature of *friendship*, it is subject to constraints such as the lack of opportunities to access friends, a lack of shared understandings of the significance of the relationship, or restrictions placed upon commitments of purpose and time. The voluntary nature of *friendship* embraces freedom that can not only enrich commitment, but also accommodate the choice to sever the relationship. *Friendship* suffers greatly when betrayal is experienced, but it can also be profoundly forgiving and understanding.

Whilst some people ignore the role of *friendship* as an ethically significant relationship, others highlight its moral worth because of its ability to promote moral excellence. Within the intimacy of *friendship*, the privilege of 'moral witnessing' occurs. By sharing another's stories and lived experience of his or her world, participants in a friendship share joys and celebrate goodness. In a similar way, each is well-placed to witness and respond to another's experiences of harm, suffering, vulnerability, oppression or abuse. Such responses can be made at both personal and structural levels through support, advocacy, resistance and change.

Caring and just relationships that consider the wellbeing of another are not only integral to the sustenance of *friendship* but also represent an important framework by which to promote a more ethically decent community. Therefore, the significance of close friendships is not only that they are at the heart of where we are in the world, but, indeed, they continually impact upon the type of world we live in.