Trust, Friendship, and Evidential Standards of Belief

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If someone were to tell you that your good friend shoplifted from the kindly and beloved old woman who owns the local convenience store, would you believe them? Perhaps you would hesitate. You might ask the informant, "Are you sure?" You might reconsider the trustworthiness of the informant. At the very least, you might withhold judgement until you had the chance to question your friend about their deeds and motivations. Now, would you go to such lengths to withhold judgement about a complete stranger? Many of us would have few qualms believing something noxious about someone we don't care about. However, the question is: Is this doxastic partiality epistemically justified?

The case of epistemic partiality in friendship poses a troubling challenge for allies of the evidentialist theory of doxastic justification. In "Epistemic Partiality in Friendship," Sarah Stroud observes that our conception of good friendship appears to require a general disposition to come to more generous and tolerant conclusions and beliefs about our friends than about strangers, particularly in situations where the evidence counts against them but is inconclusive.[1] As a result, we have a tendency to devote more time and energy to considering how prejudicial information about friends may be wrong or to reinterpreting the facts in a more favorable light. We may give more credence to conclusions favoring our friend or be less quick to judge them badly. Importantly, we seem to engage in these generous epistemic practices just because the subject of these beliefs is our friend. A stranger hearing the same accusations would more quickly come to hold a damaging belief about them.

Troublingly, this difference in our epistemic practices regarding our friends seems to violate evidentialist epistemic norms. After all, we end up forming a more favorable belief about our friend or withholding a belief about them for the *practical* reason that they are our friend. Moreover, this is not just an observation of psychological or empirical pattern. We generally feel that this practice is *normatively* correct. We do not hold strangers to the practice of being epistemically generous towards us, but we do expect our friends to be on our side. In other words, we seem to think that being a good friend *requires* that one is epistemically partial towards one's friends for the non-evidential reason that they are our friends. I will refer to this phenomenon as *the friendship dilemma*.

If Stroud is right about this observation, then evidentialists seem to be caught in a difficult explanatory position. Stroud does not take a definite position in her paper, but she seems at least partial to the explanation that we are epistemically generous towards our friends because friendship constitutively involves epistemic partiality in a way that is at odds with standard evidentialist ideals of epistemic rationality.[2]Then, does being a good friend require being irrational? If so, then do we uphold the standards of good friendship or evidentialist doxastic standards? Few would suggest that we give up the practice of friendship which is often considered a necessary part of a good life. The friendship dilemma Stroud presents in her paper strongly suggests that we abandon our standard evidentialist norms for forming and evaluating beliefs instead and be pragmatists, and accept that, in certain instances, practical considerations can be reasons for forming beliefs.[3] Evidentialists are not satisfied with this conclusion. Recent years have seen the emergence of several proposals for evidentialist solutions to the friendship dilemma. They assert that we are not required to violate evidentialist epistemic norms in order to be good friends.

My aim in this paper is to argue that Berislav Marusic's position about when trust is justified provides the best framework for understanding our generous epistemic attitudes in light of our values of good friendship and epistemic integrity. First, I will engage with three contenders for the evidentialist solution to the friendship dilemma: *pragmatic encroachment*, *permissivism*, and Goldberg's *value-reflecting reasons* explanation, which seek to justify epistemic partiality

1 Sarah Stroud, "Epistemic Partiality in Friendship," *Ethics* 116, no. 3 (April 2006): pp. 498-524.
2 Stroud, *ibid.* 518-522.
3 Pragmatists hold the view that there are at least some non-evidential reasons for belief; for example, a pragmatist may argue that "I believe my friend did not do it because I want to stay on good terms." can be epistemically justified while an evidentialist would always reject this justification for belief because it is not based on evidence that the friend really did not do it.

on epistemic grounds. Then, I will show how Marusic's conception of what is at stake in the friendship dilemma is the most appealing and appropriate perspective on why we have reason to have faith in our friends.

1. The contenders

1.1 Pragmatic Encroachment

Pragmatic encroachment is a species of evidentialism which rejects linking justification to practical action as a mistake but grants that the standards of justification are affected by practical reasons even if evidence alone determines justification.

In "Friendship and Epistemic Norms," Jason Kawall advances an argument for pragmatic encroachment as a solution of the friendship dilemma.[4] I present a modified version of one of Kawall's examples that illustrate how pragmatic encroachment can justify epistemic partiality in friendship:

> **Claire at the Bakery.** Claire walks into a bakery with her friend (call her Anna) and asks for a cake. They ask the salesperson if there are any peanuts or apples in the cake. The employee says no to both. Anna is satisfied with this evidence and forms the justified belief that there are no peanuts and no apples in the cake. Claire also believes that there are no apples. However, Claire does not form the same belief about peanuts. Claire actually has a life-threatening allergy to peanuts. She continues to ask if the cake is made on the same equipment as peanut pastries, if the store has been good about quarantining peanuts in the past, and eventually asks for the manager of the store to come and verify the employee's peanut claim. Because of the dangerous threat of an allergic reaction, Claire demands more evidence beyond what rightly satisfied Anna to form her belief about peanuts in her cake.[5]

Observe the following: Claire withholds belief about peanuts when Anna does not. Claire asks for more evidence about peanuts than Anna does even though Anna's belief is already justified according to evidentialist epistemic norms. Claire also asks for justification specifically about peanuts and not apples. It is also likely that Claire would believe the employee if they said that there are peanuts in the cake. But why do we intuitively believe that Claire is justified in withholding belief and asking for more evidence before forming her belief that there are no peanuts in the cake? Because we recognize that her allergy places her in a situation where the cost of being wrong is extremely high and as such she is justified in asking for more evidence to minimize the chance of a terrible outcome.[6] We agree that, given Claire's situation, she is acting rationally.

Kawall argues that in friendship the same principle holds. He claims that there are extremely high costs in believing something ill of a good friend. One might undermine a great friendship through offense or lack of trust. So, we are justified in asking for more evidence. We have practical reasons to be cautious about forming beliefs about friends if the risk of harming the friendship is high.

In other words, Kawall proposes that the *standards of justified belief are set higher if the stakes are higher*. If a good friendship, which is key to our flourishing and our happiness, is on the line, then discrediting beliefs about them must meet a higher standard of evidence. So, epistemic partiality in friendship is actually a reflection of the fact that for friends, the stakes are higher, and more evidence is needed to form unfavorable beliefs about them. However, *the beliefs are still based on evidence alone*. If the pragmatic encroachment explanation succeeds, then there seems to be no conflict between our belief-forming practices and the evidentialist norms of belief justification.

1.2 Permissivism

In the same paper, Kawall proposes a second way to address the issue of epistemic partiality in friendship. Perhaps we could endorse an epistemic system which retains the usual evidentialist standards for justifying beliefs, but in circumstances of good friendship also allows us to be particularly careful about forming certain beliefs. This is the position of *doxastic permissivism*.[7]

Kawall points out that, overall, we have two epistemic goals: to gain true beliefs and avoid false beliefs. These

4 Jason Kawall, "Friendship and Epistemic Norms," *Philosophical Studies* 165 (2013): 349-370.
5 Kawall, *ibid*. 364.
6 Kawall, *ibid.* 366.
7 Kawall, *ibid*. 367-369.

goals can oppose each other since we should believe *everything* to gain the maximum number of true beliefs, and we should believe *nothing* to avoid the maximum number of false beliefs. These two goals must be balanced as we go about our epistemic activities. Kawall argues that practical reasons can influence the way we balance these two goals. So if we would have particularly bad outcomes from falsely believing badly of our friend, then we justifiably have reason to prioritize the second goal of avoiding false beliefs, thus we may be rightly less prone to form this troubling belief about our friend based on the evidence.[8]

To clarify, Kawall is not taking a pragmatist position about beliefs. Instead, the permissivist position rejects *uniqueness*, the idea that there is only one doxastic attitude justified by any given body of evidence. Permissivists claim that there could be several equally justified conclusions that could emerge from different interpretations of the evidence. Kawall argues that your practical reasons of friendship favor avoiding false beliefs. This particular configuration of your goals leads you to interpret the evidence more conservatively and to require more justifying evidence before believing something bad about your friend. If the result is that you lack enough evidence on the conservative standard, you end up not forming the unwelcome belief. In other words, because you had a valid epistemic goal – avoid false belief – you did not have enough evidence to believe this damaging claim about your friend. You would not have to justify disbelief by relying on practical reasons. So, the doctrine of epistemic permissivism makes it such that we are not violating the norms of belief justification by practicing good friendship.

1.3 Practical reasons to believe

Sanford C. Goldberg, in his paper "Against epistemic partiality in friendship," offers a third way to avoid the friendship dilemma.[9] If you value some object or end V, says Goldberg, it means that you have reasons to act in ways that promote, protect, and preserve V. Goldberg calls these reasons *value-reflecting reasons* (VRR). Importantly, VRR can give us practical reasons to act. Furthermore, because we know that others, not just ourselves, have VRR, we can have epistemic reasons to think that others value V and have reasons to act in ways that promote, protect, and preserve V.[10]

One of the objects we deeply value is friendship, and so we have VRR which reflect the value we place on friendship. Here we turn to the friendship dilemma. Goldberg asks us to conceive of the model situation for understanding the dilemma slightly differently than we have so far in this paper. Consider this situation:

> **A Friend's Testimony**. Suppose that someone has already told you, A, something damaging about your good friend S. To use Stroud's example, suppose it is that he slept with and then abandoned some unassuming, trusting woman.[11] When you confront your friend S about this issue, he denies that he did this.

Goldberg wants us to imagine this friend's denial as his testimony to us, friend to friend. In this context "I did not do this" can be construed as "I promise I did not do this. Believe me." This is an invitation from him, to us, to trust him, as friends.

Now Goldberg invokes the VRR which friendship yields in order to justify our unusual epistemic norms of belief formation about our friends. If this is a good friendship, where both parties value the friendship, we expect that both A and S have practical VRR to preserve the friendship. S has reason to tell the truth because being caught lying would damage the friendship. A has reasons to respond to this invitation of trust accordingly or risk damaging the relationship. Specifically, A has reasons not to be in the situation where A does not trust S but S is telling the truth. This would be most damaging to the thing A values. Furthermore, the friends are aware that each has these VRR. So, S has epistemic reasons to believe that A will act to preserve the friendship and trust S, thus S, who values the friendship, has reason to act in a trustworthy manner, which translates into a claim on A to believe S. A has epistemic reasons to believe that S has practical reasons to act to preserve the friendship and tell the truth, again strengthening the epistemic reasons A has to believe S. All in all, both parties should know that A should be wary about disbelieving S. Note it is not that A has practical reasons to *believe* S. A has

8 Kawall, *ibid.* 368.
9 Sanford C. Goldberg, "Against Epistemic Partiality in Friendship: Value-reflecting Reasons," *Philosophical Studies* 176 (2019).
10 Goldberg, *ibid.* 2228-2230.
11 Stroud, *ibid.* 504.

practical reasons to *preserve the friendship*. Mutual knowledge of these practical reasons gives A epistemic reason (evidence) to believe S. Goldberg's argument avoids the pragmatist conclusion by appealing to practical reasons as a source of *factual* evidence. Goldberg's hypothesis is that this mutual possession of VRR and the resulting knowledge of each other's VRR just are the pressure to be epistemically partial to one's friends.

So, according to Goldberg, when can an epistemic agent disbelieve a friend? Only when the evidence conflicts with and negates the VRR, e.g. when the evidence firmly argues that the friend is not telling the truth. Here, Goldberg extends his argument to account for why A could be justified in collecting more evidence and further scrutinizing the evidence A already has. In fact, Goldberg wants to argue that the pressure generated by this interaction are VRR – practical reasons that justify gathering evidence, above and beyond the normal amount of evidence. Note that, according to Goldberg, A is justified in *forming the belief* on epistemic grounds, and A is justified in *seeking more evidence* on practical grounds.[12] This explanation further bolsters the idea that refraining from believing something bad of a friend when the evidence is inconclusive is epistemically justified without resorting to pragmatism.

Goldberg provides examples where we seek more evidence or reconsider our evidence when we already have enough evidence that could normally justify belief.[13] For example, if a physician believes she has the knowledge to treat a patient, but the American Academy of Pediatrics requires that she read the new research on the treatment, then she has practical reasons to find more evidence for her belief about the right treatment even though she already has enough experiential evidence to support a belief about the right treatment. Similarly, if X tells Y that p but Y is still doubtful, then if X promises to find out more about p for Y, X has practical reasons to find more evidence and to review whether p after finding the evidence. The only difference between these cases and the friendship dilemma, Goldberg argues, is that in the latter case our practical reasons regarding evidence are VRR generated automatically by the strength of the friendship itself rather than an external source. Furthermore, the impulse to look over our evidence again is especially prompted by friendship. Friendship gives more reason to confirm that we did not err in making judgements from the evidence. We do not have to see it as an attempt to spin the evidence in a dishonest manner, Goldberg says. We want to live up to epistemic standards when we know that our friendship may be seriously hurt by any mistake.

Goldberg provides several arguments against Kawall's proposed solutions from pragmatic encroachment and epistemic permissivism.[14] His problem with the other solutions is that they are highly contentious positions amongst epistemic theorists; if possible, it would be better for the evidentialist position to account for the friendship dilemma without relying on the validity of controversial positions. Furthermore, Goldberg also believes that his account is more resilient and has more explanatory force than the other two proposals. He claims that his theory offers a unified account of the pressure of partiality in friendship as it relates it to similar pressure we encounter in other situations, which further grounds his explanation.

1.4 Challenge to Goldberg's argument

Although I would argue that Goldberg's solution to the friendship dilemma is stronger and less contentious than either of Kawall's, I still think that there are some serious oversights in his account. First, Goldberg needs to show that friends in real life, in the position of S and A, would have to consider their valuing of their friendship as the key factor that inclines them to come to their beliefs about their friends in a systematically different way from the way they come to their beliefs about strangers. The importance that this consideration holds in Goldberg's argument ought to be reflected somehow in our deliberation; according to Goldberg's position, we would expect that we would be strongly guided by our VRR in these situations, whether consciously or unconsciously. However, when I am questioned about why I believe my friend, it seems more likely that the thought which generates pressure to be partial is a *moral* one: "I *ought* to believe him because he is my friend." The fact of the matter is that, because you are good friends, you *owe it to your friend* to question a disparaging claim about them more than you owe it to a stranger. Period. The predominance of this essential moral motivation in our

12 *Ibid*., 2230-2231.
13 *Ibid*. 2230-2231.
14 *Ibid*., 2235-2238.

friendships casts doubt on the legitimacy of Goldberg's VRR as the key source generating the pressure of the friendship dilemma.

My overall problem with Goldberg's account is that it loses sight of the essential struggle in the friendship dilemma. Goldberg's proposal succeeds as an evidentialist defense because he is able to reframe the situation so that the reasons for partiality in friendship are no longer moral, but epistemically calculated. This gives Goldberg room to relocate the epistemic action away from the belief itself and onto the practical actions of collecting and examining more evidence. But the force of the friendship dilemma is that we experience a moral tendency toward belief spawned by our practices of good friendship. The best, most honest response to the friendship dilemma would be an approach that does not make us lose sight of our moral interest in what we owe to our friends.

1.5 The issue with accepting pragmatism

So, if all three options for avoiding widespread revisionism of norms of epistemic justification fail, then how can we justify believing a friend because we want to or we ought to? It seems that we're stuck endorsing a pragmatist view. Stroud argues that the epistemic demands friendship makes of us conflict with our evidentialist epistemic ideals. If we are asked why we can be more generous to our friend and we respond that it is because he is my friend, Stroud claims that this is evidentially ungrounded. The mere fact he is your friend does not mean that he can't act badly or have flaws. To apply a generous slant is to selectively, without evidence, overlook these flaws, and believe that the slant is justified, again without evidence. This results in "imperviousness to new evidence [and] a slowness to update [our] beliefs in the light of new data."[15] If we are ignoring evidence in a systematically partial way, then we are not conforming to evidentialism. The implication of Stroud's argument is pragmatism.[16]

However, pragmatism is a particularly contentious position. It requires us to reject our evidentialist epistemological norms. This would draw us back into the conflict between good friendship and epistemic integrity. In the following section, I examine a new theory that could give us a satisfactory resolution of the friendship dilemma without becoming enmeshed in the evidentialist-pragmatist issue. It succeeds because it faces the challenge of moral expectations in friendship head-on.

2. Marusic's position is the best response to the friendship dilemma

2.1 Preliminaries

Berislav Marusic's book, *Evidence and Agency*, contains a chapter which tackles this question: how can we rationally justify being epistemically partial to someone? Marusic wishes to defend the rationality of doxastic partiality.[17] Marusic enters this discussion by asking us to consider the following scenario:

> **The Unfaithful Lover.** Your significant other has been unfaithful to you in a way which has betrayed you and broken your trust. Suppose he comes up to you to repent. He offers a reasonable argument for why it will not happen again and promises that he will be faithful to you from now on. He is sincerely offering his commitment to you, and it is up to you to accept his commitment, against the evidence.[18]

There are several differences between "An Unfaithful Lover" and "A Friend's Testimony" which I would like to address. First, the stakes are higher in "An Unfaithful Lover" since this is an issue concerning your partner and the claim in question concerns your relationship with one another. In "An Unfaithful Lover" you also *know* that the evidence is against your lover. In "A Friend's Testimony" you were agnostic about the validity of the claim against your friend. This makes it appear even more epistemically shady to trust your loved one. Overall, because the stakes and the circumstances are even more dramatic

15 Stroud, *ibid.* 514.
16 We may respond that, in knowing our friend better than a stranger, we are evidentially justified in our tenaciousness. This may be true in certain circumstances, but we can point to many instances where one is charitable to one's friend even though the evidence favors the unfavorable conclusion. Also, how can we trust that the knowledge we have accumulated about our friend gives us evidence in favor of our friend? If we are epistemically partial, then our entire body of beliefs about our friend is likely to be slanted as well. This counterargument does not hold.
17 Bersilav Marusic. *Evidence and Agency: Norms of Belief for Promising and Resolving*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.
18 Marusic, *ibid.* 175-176.

in “An Unfaithful Lover,” if we can justify partiality in this case, we ought to be able to use the solution to justify partiality in the friendship dilemma.

Another difference between this scenario and “A Friend’s Testimony” is that your loved one has made a promise to you about the future while in “A Friend’s Testimony” the friend is asserting a claim about what has already happened. This difference should not matter because in both scenarios the dilemma is the same: is it justified to form a belief from the claim of your loved one in a way which seems to disregard evidential doxastic norms? Finally, in the “The Unfaithful Lover” scenario you are forming a favorable belief about your partner from their testimony while in the “A Friend’s Testimony” scenario you avoid forming an unfavorable belief about your friend from their testimony. This difference also should not matter. In either case, you are forming a belief on their testimony because the loved one requests it of you.

2.2 Marusic’s Solution

Why is it rational to trust your wayward lover? Marusic claims that we ought to look at the lover’s testimony in a different way than we have. Evidentialist defenses struggle because they take as given that, in the friendship dilemma, the most salient point of contention is the quantity and nature of the facts, and how a belief is then formed based on those facts. The argument plays out in that framework. However, for Marusic, a promise is not just a statement of probability of a future outcome. A promise is a commitment to acting in a way that settles the future outcome So, when our lover offers us their word to be faithful to us, we are faced with a *choice* about whether to respect their commitment to this course of action. We ought not analyze this scenario as a case where we treat our interlocutor as an object and try to predict their actions. Marusic says that the friendship dilemma involves deeply personal matters of relationship having more to do with judgement and respect than calculation and prediction. Marusic’s argument moves us from the epistemic into the moral realm.

According to Marusic, when our lover sincerely tells us that *p*, they are answering the question of whether *p*. They are offering a conclusive answer about the future, making irrelevant other evidence which may speak predictively about the outcome. Because of this offer, and because we are in an intimate relationship with them, we feel a duty, a pressure, to accept their answer as ours. I understand Marusic’s claim to be that the relational context is the source of the pressure to be epistemically partial. But this is not just any pressure. We don't accept the other's word because of the evidence or because it benefits us to do so, or any other reason that would indicate that we accept this offer from a need to achieve an end; we do so because we have the choice to give up our control of evaluation to another person. We have reasons to *trust* our lover. In their offer of commitment, and in their answer to the question whether *p*, we have a reason to accept their offer, out of respect for and loyalty to them. It is a respect which has been built up over the course of this relationship. This explains why we appear partial to those with whom we have intimacy. Overall, I argue that r*espect and loyalty* are our reasons to trust our loved ones.

The strength of this argument, compared to Goldberg’s argument, is that it is sensitive to the second-person interaction between friends. When our friend asks us to think the best of them, they are addressing us in our capacity as agents, to choose to place our trust in them on the value of the relationship. When we decide to trust our friend and generously believe in their word, we also exercise our agency in responding to the normative force of good friendship. Goldberg’s explanation overlooks this critical interaction. Goldberg misses what is essentially at stake in the friendship dilemma in the first place because the key issue in the moment is not how much we value the friendship, but our loyalty to our friends. My explanation best reflects the activity we feel we are engaged in when we trust someone and believe the best of them.

Overall, my response to the friendship dilemma, although oblique, saves us from the zero-sum nature of the friendship dilemma. It proposes a solution that frames having faith in one’s friend differently, where the difference is not a matter of differing standards for forming beliefs so much as of giving those we have allegiances to the benefit of the doubt. Our standards for forming beliefs can stand, so friendship does not violate our commonsense epistemic standards for belief. Believing well of your friend is more a choice that reflects values than a cognitive process of forming a belief. This Marusic-inspired solution shows that the friendship dilemma does not result in a struggle between the values of good friendship and epistemic integrity.

Note that I am not claiming that in all situations we have a rigid moral obligation to believe our friends. Our deep respect for our friends and commitment to our friendship do not mean that we have to believe our friends about trivial matters, for example when they err and say that 2*3=5, or in situations when they are actively or maliciously attempting to deceive us. However, we do acknowledge that the capacity to be able trust someone on their word or to give them the benefit of the doubt in key situations, even when the factual evidence is against them, is key to any good and healthy friendship. That these situations exist shows that there is *some moral tendency* in friendships that is not present in our interactions outside of such relationships. In addition, I suspect that there is an analogous moral tendency in any of our relationships based on mutual respect and commitment, such as with a partner or family, although elaborating the details of extending this argument into different sorts of relationships is beyond the scope of this paper.

One may protest that this explanation is not enough to save our evidentialist convictions as the option of trust Marusic describes is independent of the issue of evidence. One will insist that trusting is inherently and essentially epistemic, and we cannot avoid evaluating it within the dichotomy of the evidentialist/pragmatist debate. This misunderstands my argument. Traditional evidentialists may balk at this intermingling of epistemic and moral boundaries, but this was to be expected; the problem of the friendship dilemma was caused inherently by such an intermingling, and it is apt that we should find such an intermingling in the solution.

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