Abridged Syllabus for Expos 20: Friendship (Subject to Change)

Visiting a Friend in a Waterside Pavilion @ Harvard Art Museums

What the Class Is About
Would a real friend help you hide a body? Is our tendency to see our friends under the best possible light an admirable act of kindness or a pernicious prejudice? What makes someone a friend in the first place? Philosophers since Aristotle (circa 384-322 B.C.E.) have been wrestling with these questions and in doing so, they have added crucial details, distinctions and depth to our understanding of friendship. In this class, we will join this conversation by considering key claims that philosophers have made about friendship. We begin our journey by studying Aristotle’s foundational question of what makes someone a friend. Next, we examine the bright side of friendship by considering a possible benefit of having friends—self-knowledge. Some philosophers like Aristotle argue that one distinctive benefit of having friends is that they give us precious self-knowledge; other philosophers like Nietzsche (1844-1900) doubt that self-knowledge is the good we unreflectively think it is and that even if it is, it is not what makes our friendships valuable. In the final unit of the course, we consider the dark side of friendship as we research contemporary issues about the dangers of friendship. Students will have the opportunity to choose their own cases as they attempt to answer whether friendship can be harmful.

Unit 1: The Foundations for Friendship
“A friend is another self.”—Aristotle

What We’ll Study
• Inspiration Text: Books 8 and 9 of Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics (PDFs will be provided)

What We’ll Do
To help you master the skills necessary for writing strong college essays, your first assignment targets your ability to read a text closely and to fashion an argument well. We read a text closely when we slow down and try to detect the nuances in the text, as opposed to when we skim the text quickly to gather its gist. We fashion an argument well when we support our thesis with appropriate evidence and embed this evidence in helpful analysis, as opposed to providing a laundry list of ideas that are loosely connected to one another and the paper’s thesis.

To harness these skills, your first assignment is limited to just one source and will center on an interpretive question about Aristotle’s views on friendship. The essay will be between 900 and
In class, we’ll learn what an interpretive question is, why they’re worth asking, as well as what kind of considerations can be adduced as evidence for a philosophy paper revolving around an interpretive question. We’ll also learn some basic argumentative strategies for addressing an interpretive question in philosophy and how, with some adjustments, these strategies can be successfully deployed in other disciplines as well.

**Unit 2: The Bright Side of Friendship**

“Ye see, there are friends, but it is error and deception regarding yourself that led them to you; and they must have learned how to keep silent in order to remain your friends.”—Friedrich Nietzsche

**What We’ll Study**

- *Inspiration Texts*: Selections from Aristotle’s *Magna Moralia*, Selections from Frederick Nietzsche’s *Human, All Too Human* (PDFs will be provided)

**What We’ll Do**

The second assignment builds on the close reading and argumentation skills that the first essay developed but puts more emphasis on argumentation skills. You’ll be asked to pick a side in the ongoing debate about the relation between friendship and self-knowledge and to defend your position. Unlike the first assignment, this assignment asks you to answer an analytical question, requires you to work with two given sources and will fall between 1400-1600 words.

To prepare you for this assignment, we’ll learn some basic argumentative strategies for responding to a question in philosophy and how, with some minor adjustments, these strategies can be fruitfully imported to other disciplines as well.

**Unit 3: The Dark Side of Friendship**

“A friend can hurt you in ways that even God cannot.”—Source Unknown

**What We’ll Study**

- *Inspiration Text*: Contemporary articles by philosophers of friendship (PDFs will be provided)

**What We’ll Do**

The third and final assignment is meant to solidify the skills targeted in previous units and to give you practice writing a research paper. We will therefore shift gears and put stress on a relatively new skill—finding your own sources and wisely incorporating those sources into your paper.

This last assignment will ask you to evaluate a controversial and contemporary claim about friendship. Unlike the previous assignments, this last assignment has two tracks from which you are to choose one. And unlike other assignments, it will be your responsibility to find four additional sources and ways to work them into your paper. Your research paper should be between 2300-2500 words.

Because this last assignment is the longest and most involved of all the assignments, we will spend most of our class time working on activities designed to keep you on track. For example, you will teach your inspiration text to the class in a short presentation and will participate in a writing workshop designed to give you peer feedback on your draft.