

Abridged Syllabus for Friendship (Subject to Change)



Lakshmana Removes a Thorn from Rama's Foot @ Harvard Art Museums

What the Class Is About

Would a real friend help you hide a body? Is our natural tendency to look at our friends under the best possible light an admirable act of kindness or a pernicious form of partiality? 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 philosophical conversation.

Our journey begins with the foundational question of what makes someone a friend. To this end, we will study Aristotle's influential discussion of friendship in books 8 and 9 of his *Nicomachean Ethics*. We'll explore the three different kinds of friendship that Aristotle recognizes, as well as his famous remarks that a friend is another self and that friends are one soul living in two bodies. We then visit early modern England to investigate the bright side of friendship. We will consider Mary Astell's (circa 1666-1731) claim that friendships can solve social problems and promote social justice. As Astell would have it, friendship is a way for the women of her community to combat the sexism that was pervasive in her day. Our journey ends by looking at the darker side of friendship. Some philosophers have argued that friendship is a villain responsible for various social ills. For example, consider our habit of giving our friends a privileged place in our newsfeeds. Some believe that this habit boxes us into echo chambers that prevent us from getting at the truth and being open-minded.

Please read on if you'd like to hear more about the course's three units.

Unit 1: The Foundations for Friendship

“The Greeks...were the first, and so far the last, to whom the friend has appeared a problem worth solving.”—Nietzsche

What We’ll Study

- *Context Text:* [The BBC’s In Our Time: Friendship](#) (just click on the link and then listen to the conversation).
- *Inspiration Text:* Books 8 and 9 of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* (you’ll have to buy [this book](#))
ISBN-13: 978-1624661174
ISBN-10: 1624661173
- *Nuance Text:* John Cooper’s “Aristotle on the Forms of Friendship” (provided as a PDF on Canvas)
- *Writing Text:* Selections from Harold Evans’s *Do I Make Myself Clear?* (provided as PDFs on Canvas)

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 1000 words. 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.

Though this unit is primarily focused on improving your close reading and argumentation skills, we’ll also do a bit of work on your presentation skills.

Unit 2: The Bright Side of Friendship

“Were the world better, there would be more friendship, and were there more friendship, we should have a better world.”—Mary Astell

What We’ll Study

- *Context Text:* [The BBC’s In Our Time: Mary Astell](#) (just click on the link and then listen to the conversation)
- *Inspiration Text:* Selections from Astell’s *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* (you’ll have to buy [this book](#))
ISBN-13: 978-1551113067
ISBN-10: 9781551113067

- *Opposition Text*: Montaigne’s “On Friendship” (provided as a PDF on the Canvas site)
- *Opposition Text*: Cocker and Kennett’s “Friendship and Moral Danger” (provided as a PDF on the Canvas site)
- *Writing Text*: Selections from Harold Evans’s *Do I Make Myself Clear?* (provided as PDFs on Canvas)

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 morality 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 1700-2000 words.

To prepare you for this assignment, we’ll learn what an analytical question is, why they’re worth asking and the kinds of considerations that can be adduced as evidence in a philosophy paper centered on an analytical question. We’ll also learn some basic argumentative strategies for responding to an analytical 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 regard for the requester would often make one yield readily to a request, without waiting for arguments to reason one into it.”—Jane Austen

What We’ll Study

- *Inspiration Text*: either Simon Keller’s “Friendship and Belief” or David Christensen’s “Epistemology of Disagreement: The Good News” (provided as PDFs on the Canvas site)
- *Inspiration Text*: An episode of *Friends* or *Living Single* (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 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 and belief. 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 judiciously work them into your paper. Your research paper should be between 2700-3000 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.