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■ Recibido / Received
29 de marzo de 2021

■ Aceptado / Accepted
7 de julio de 2021

How Friendship Works in Higher Education: Inclusive Friendship, Mimetic Theory, and the Liberal Arts

Cómo funciona la amistad en la educación superior: amistad inclusiva, teoría mimética y artes liberales

If knowledge is socially constructed, what kind of relationship enables us to construct knowledge well? Friendship is the time-honored answer. An analysis of the value of friendship through Girard's mimetic theory, in dialogue with the social sciences and with literary examples drawn from Dante, Tolkien, and Rowling, argues that institutions of higher education should emphasize the development of capacities for friendship through the shared pursuit of learning that is central to liberal arts education.

KEY WORDS: mimetic theory, friendship, liberal arts, education.

Si el conocimiento se construye socialmente, ¿qué tipo de relación nos permite construir bien el conocimiento? La amistad es la respuesta tradicional. El análisis del valor de la amistad a través de la teoría mimética de Girard, en diálogo con las ciencias sociales y con ejemplos literarios extraídos de Dante, Tolkien y Rowling, señala que las instituciones de educación superior deben enfatizar el desarrollo de las capacidades para la amistad a través de la búsqueda compartida de aprendizaje que es fundamental para la educación en artes liberales.

PALABRAS CLAVE: teoría mimética, amistad, artes liberales, educación.

«Over the past two decades, considerable evidence has emerged», writes the evolutionary psychologist Robin Dunbar, «to suggest that the most important factor influencing our happiness, mental well-being, physical health, and even mortality risk, not to mention the morbidity and mortality of our children, is the size and quality of our friendship circles» (Dunbar, 2018, p. 32). Articles in the popular press reflect «a surge of scientific interest in the nature, structure and evolution of friendship» (Angier, 2018). The effects of social media have prompted questions about what Facebook «friending», and other technologically mediated relations,

have to do with real friendship. Other social changes have also shifted attention to friendship, such as the erosion of biological family that has led some to seek «forged families» instead (Brooks, 2020) and the forced social distance of the COVID-19 pandemic. In his October 2020 encyclical, *Fratelli tutti*, Pope Francis diagnoses a long list of social and spiritual ills, at levels from intimate to international, before turning to «fraternity and social friendship» as remedy.

Meanwhile, institutions of higher education, responding to a host of pressures, are scrambling to refocus their mission, make a better case for their product, and rethink their strategies. An emphasis on friendship may not be the obvious path toward achieving measurable outcomes for individual students. Yet the richly relational view of personhood continuing to emerge across the human sciences emphasizes that the goals of education, such as knowledge, competencies, and character, are acquired in relationships. Educators have started to recognize the value of things like peer-to-peer learning, classroom community, and a good cohort, but this is a bare beginning. What matters most for who we become, for individual success and the success of our communities, may be our capacity to build certain kinds of relationships. The time-honored word for the relational ideal that education should aim for—a key aspect of its mission and one of its crucial strategies—is friendship.

«No one», writes Aristotle, «would choose to live without friends». He continues, «Friendship seems also to hold cities together, and lawgivers to care more about it than justice» (Aristotle, 2000, 1155a). Ethan Lieb's argument that the American legal system should pay more attention to friendship underlines both how neglected it has become in the public sphere and how important it remains to both individual flourishing and the common good (Lieb, 2011). Friendship resists the excesses of, on one hand, individualism and, on the other, being submerged in a group mentality. It lives out the relational way of thinking about humans that Marcia Pally has called separability-amid-situatedness (Pally, 2016). For Aristotle, complete friendship practices and perfects all of the virtues, and his discussion of it adds one more: love, the virtue of true friends. Yet there is a tension between the intimacy and exclusivity of friendship and the universal obligation of citizenship. Friendship oriented around the pursuit of knowledge—what we must imagine powered Plato's Academy and Aristotle's Lyceum—renders this tension a productive one because learning and discovery happen best with both close partnership and constant openness to new perspectives.

Friendship nurtures qualities that are crucial for knowing truth. Likewise, communities of learning provide fertile ground for cultivating the ways of friendship. In order to integrate traditional thinking about friendship's promise and challenges with more recent perspectives on friendship and knowledge, I will turn to the mimetic theory of René Girard. Mimetic theory's radically relational view of personhood sharpens the importance of individual, free agency exerted with and for others. It underlines the importance—for discovery, for happiness, for successful citizenship—of what I will call the inclusive friendships of learning that higher education ought to foster. While mimetic theory is known mostly for its analysis of human violence as driven by unconscious mimetic tendencies, I will suggest that friendship harnesses the same tendencies, but toward harmony rather than rivalry. Good education in general depends on turning competitive motivations toward more cooperative ends. Higher education, in particular, can cultivate the conversion of rivalry into friendship as a more conscious goal through the shared pursuit of learning that is fundamental to the tradition of the liberal arts.



To make inclusive friendships of learning a more explicit goal would enhance everything else colleges aim to do. In particular, it would help meet the urgent challenges of finding truth in a «post-truth» era and building diversity and inclusion in a time of polarization. Literature, my own academic discipline, can play in an important part, and I will use examples from influential stories by Dante, J. R. R. Tolkien, and J. K. Rowling. More, perhaps, than a set of principles and practices, the kind of friendship I have in mind requires being able to imagine oneself and others as part of a certain kind of story.

1. FRIENDSHIP AND KNOWLEDGE

The relational view of humanity that is basic to the social sciences is still only beginning to penetrate the individualism that pervades the humanities and Western culture at large, perhaps above all when it comes to thinking about how we come to reliable knowledge. Recent work on both friendship and cognition points to the strong connections between them. Various avenues of social science research have highlighted the importance of knowledge and communication for friendship. Robin Dunbar, known for Dunbar's number, the cognitive limit to how many social relationships one can maintain—about 150, as found in the sizes of groups from Neolithic farming villages to online communities—has extended this work to closer circles where the greater cognitive load, along with the demands of time, impose a smaller limit. Closer relationships require higher-order cognitive skills like mentalizing, simulating in your own mind the perspectives of others, which includes what they are mentalizing. These higher-order skills might be seen behind the «core pattern» found in anthropological studies of friendship across a range of societies, which show that the qualities distinguishing friendship from other relations include such things as mutual aid and informality of communication (Hruschka, 2010, p. 75). Friendship places high demands on the most distinctively human kinds of knowledge, what sets us apart from other animals (and is not programmable into machines, at least in the foreseeable future).

At the same time that such findings begin to enrich a sense of the importance of knowledge for friendship, other lines of research point to the reciprocal value of friendship for knowledge. An individualistic view of knowledge anchored in immediate perception of things has been common sense since at least the rise of Enlightenment thinkers such as Descartes and Locke. Yet Aristotle had observed that humans are the most imitative of animals and learn our earliest lessons that way (*Poetics* 1448b). Various developments in both the social sciences and the humanities have revived and deepened a relational understanding of knowledge. What distinguishes human knowledge from that of other animals is our ability to share perspectives that we communicate mostly through words. All of our knowledge is shaped by the language and other conventions of meaningful action that we learn by imitating our parents and other models, and through which we gain access to an immeasurably wider sphere of relations extending back in time and all the knowledge that makes up what we call culture.

At its post-structural extreme, seeing knowledge as a construct deepens the problem of situatedness and separability. If knowledge is completely determined by one's relational situation, it could seem like merely a cultural inheritance that precludes any access to objective truth that one could discover and answer for beyond one's tribe. On the other hand, how do we



cross the boundary of separability to know that the signs that label the world for me mean the same as what they mean to you? Are we cut off from each other in pure subjectivity? What kind of relations enable us, individually and freely, to appropriate knowledge that is not just true for me or for us, but true?

Answers to this question have to do with another basic relational tension: between cooperation and competition. The psychologist and primate researcher Michael Tomasello has developed a theory of human thinking based on the capacities for shared attention and shared intention that fundamentally distinguish humans from other primates. Upon this relational foundation are built language and other powerful means of cooperation that form culture. In the normal process of child development, the mental capacities that have resulted from human evolution emerge through stages that reflect the early development of our species and receive the cultural riches that our hyper-cooperativity have made possible. Objectivity emerges from the recognition of different perspectives and the ability to enter into another's perspective (Tomasello, 2019). Children develop through three stages of cultural learning that constitute the capacity for what Ann Cale Kruger (2011) calls communion: purely imitative learning, instructed learning, and the collaborative learning that children do with peers more than parents. While it may be motivated by competition, learning depends more fundamentally on cooperation and, increasingly at higher levels, requires managing tendencies toward competition that would interfere.

The relational basis of learning, also called social cognition, has deep, imitative roots. Developmental psychologist Andrew Meltzoff's breakthrough that newborns are already able to imitate others led to what he calls the «Like-Me» framework for social development. «Infant imitation», he writes, «serves as the starting state that supports learning and the genesis of new and dynamic forms of human cognition and sociality based on interpersonal interaction, including mutual-informing interaction between self and other» (Meltzoff, 2011, p. 70). Such developmental research correlates well with the discovery of mirror neurons, neurons that fire when a goal-directed action is observed, whether the action itself is then imitated or not. With this neurobiological underpinning, the intersubjectivity observed by Meltzoff can be seen as part of what Vittorio Gallese (2011) calls a shared manifold of embodied simulation and social identification —a «we-centric space» in which all cognition happens. Mirror neurons are constantly imitating everyone we perceive at a neurological level far below our awareness, and this is what enables us to understand what it is like to be that person and thus to see through their eyes, make sense of what they say, and enter into the uniquely human experiences of joint attention and communion. Higher order functions like mentalizing that are important to friendship are the fullest expression, one might say, of the most basic cognitive capacities that make us human.

These findings of cognitive science link up with the social accounts of knowledge offered by recent philosophers. The twentieth-century literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, for instance, affirms a dialogic view of truth that is already implicit in the literary form of the Socratic dialogue: «Truth is not born nor is it to be found inside the head of an individual person, it is born *between people* collectively searching for truth, in the process of their dialogic interaction» (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 110). Nurtured through social interaction —communion— our separable selves are able to enter into dialogue with each other for the sake of coming into a mutual understanding that we can each take individual responsibility for. Dialogue in this ideal sense brings social cognition to the highest level of awareness and intentionality.



Social accounts of knowledge also highlight its fallibility. Even when the participants in the dialogue bring with them everything they have learned, including the results of dialogues stretching back to Socrates and before, and cooperate optimally, their potential grasp of truth in an absolute sense is limited. The philosophical specialty of epistemology aims to be as precise and conscious as possible about the conditions for true knowledge. But epistemology is difficult, and since most of our knowing is tacit (in the influential account of the scientist and philosopher Michael Polanyi), a more practical question might be: What kind of relationships help us construct knowledge well and come nearer to the truth? Friendship is our ancient answer.

One further, anecdotal reference from the social sciences suggests the importance of friendship at the most advanced level of knowledge. Strategies for improved thinking have recently focused on overcoming cognitive bias, most prominently in *Thinking Fast and Slow* by Daniel Kahneman, the psychologist whose work in this area earned a Nobel prize in economics. Fast thinking follows the well-worn, tacit patterns that work fine most of the time but fail us in some important situations. Kahneman teaches various techniques for slow thinking, many involving statistics. The most powerful technique for overcoming cognitive bias, however, though less subject to laboratory analysis, may be talking to a friend. Kahneman introduces his book by writing about how his research depended entirely on collaboration with his friend Amos Tversky: «Until geographic separation made it too difficult to go on, Amos and I enjoyed the extraordinary good fortune of a shared mind that was superior to our individual minds and of a relationship that made our work fun as well as productive» (Kahneman, 2011, p. 10). His descriptions of how they worked together, woven into the findings that make up the book, are perhaps more valuable for good thinking than any of their particular results.

2. A MIMETIC APPROACH TO FRIENDSHIP

Mimetic theory ties together social science findings about our relational nature through the powerful idea that our desires are formed through unconscious imitation, what Girard called mimetic desire. The qualities of the relationships we form, and how these influence our ability to discover the truth about our world together, have everything to do with our mimetic tendencies and how we work with them.

The term «mimetic», rather than «imitative», draws attention to our lack of awareness of the imitative basis of our desires. We have appetites and needs like other animals, but humans uniquely, and unavoidably, choose how to meet these needs, and pick up many other desires besides, by imitating the desires we see in others. This likely begins on a deep, neurological level with our mirror neurons firing when we see any other goal-directed action. Even though we usually do not imitate the action itself, we have registered the action as the sign of a desire. We are awash in mimetic desires in every social situation. Moreover, signs of desire are highly available to mediated transmission, as advertisers and social media influencers are well aware.

The view that desire is mimetic conflicts with our sense of ourselves as individuals, and especially with modern, Western individualism. Taking ownership of one's desires and thoughts is part of healthy psychological development, but a view of authentic selfhood centered on the originality of individual desire has become a sort of idol in almost every movement of modern culture (Oughourlian, 2016). We see our desires as our own, the core of our unique selfhood.



Individualism about desire is part of the «buffered self» that, according to philosopher Charles Taylor (2007), characterizes secular modernity. But since the separable individual only emerges through networks of interaction, individuality should be seen more as an achievement than a given, one that is actually aided by recognizing our situatedness in webs of contagious desire. Mimetic theory fits developmental psychology's understanding that freedom follows from being able to refrain from acting on every desire. To be a good friend and to reason well both require some degree of mastery of our mimetic nature: «ability to inhibit prepotent responses» (Dunbar, 2018, pp. 41-2) and various aspects of «executive regulation» (Tomasello, 2019). If desire and cognition are both as relational as social science shows, we might better see ourselves as «interdividuals», a term Girard and his collaborators coined in their landmark book, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World* (1987).

Girard, a literary theorist whose work crossed over into anthropology, focused on the implications of mimesis for understanding violence. Mimetic desire leads to rivalry, both for tangible things like a piece of pie and for intangibles like status. And rivalry, according to Girard, is the primary driver of envy, resentment, hatred, and violence throughout human history. Further, rivalry is as contagious as desire itself. Girard's second major thesis holds that, when mimetic rivalry escalates to the point of pitting everyone against everyone and threatening a whole group, the crisis is typically resolved through uniting, mimetically, against a single victim. We call this scapegoating when we see that the persecution is not deserved, but it only has its full effect when the persecuting crowd is blind to what it is doing and really blames the victim, when the persecutors see themselves as defeating evil, not just reestablishing their own unanimity at someone's expense. Calling this the single-victim mechanism captures, again, the lack of consciousness.

Mimetic desire itself, as Girard acknowledged, is fundamentally good because it gives us the capacity for freedom. It is a necessary condition for choosing our models rather than merely following our instincts and impulses (Girard 1996, pp. 62-65). Traditional thinking about friendship, especially in connection with learning, is a prime resource for fleshing out the positive potential of mimesis. What Nicholas A. Christakis calls the «social suite» that makes a good society possible, including familial love, friendship, cooperation, and social learning and teaching, could be said to have a largely mimetic basis. Christakis defines friendship in this context in a minimal way that is found also, and beautifully, among higher mammals such as primates, elephants, and cetaceans: «a typically volitional, long-term relationship, ordinarily between unrelated individuals, that involves mutual affection and support, possibly asymmetric, especially in times of need» (Christakis, 2019, p. 242). Yet friendship also names one of our most demanding and satisfying ideals, the fruit of our highest virtues, which encompasses both rare, intimate, preferential communion and a universal ethical commitment. What makes our basic capacities for friendship, shared with some animals, able to extend also to its greatest fulfillments has to do with the same mimetic capacities that also make friendship so difficult to develop and so prone to missing its mark and settling for something tainted by alienation and rivalry.

Mimetic theory integrates received wisdom about friendship around three themes especially relevant to the college context: pursuing knowledge together, embracing the otherness of the friend, and including the others we are most tempted to exclude. These three themes correspond to three main components of mimetic theory as well as three risks of mimetic rivalry. First, because knowledge is infinite, desire for it can transcend rivalry and feed the positive mimesis



that is the core of friendship, even though knowledge can also be an object of rivalry. Second, love of the other for their own sake, in all of their otherness, requires detachment from rivalrous desires and enables learning, even though intimacy can involve an excess of imitation that undermines individual freedom. Third, friendship's capacity to include a third, especially one vulnerable to exclusion, reverses the scapegoating pattern and lies at the foundation of academic disciplines and democratic hopes, even though friendship has its own inevitable temptations to exclusivity. Friendship requires a constant dance between similarity and difference, the particular and the universal, like-mindedness and inclusion, which also makes learning communities work and, in turn, makes them a good place to practice friendship. The arts, in particular, offer the most powerful avenue for understanding and imagining friendship and its enemies, as I will suggest by illustrations drawn from Dante, Tolkien, and Rowling, whose use of fantasy affords vivid extremes.

2.1. *Desiring knowledge together*

The most popular classical definition of friendship in the Middle Ages (taken, out of context, from the Roman historian Sallust's account of the conspirator Cataline) identifies it with desire: «willing and not willing the same things» (McGuire, 1988, p. xxxvi). Girard, in his analysis of Shakespeare's play *The Two Gentleman of Verona*, where friends become rivals through mimetic desire for the same woman, offers a further distillation: «Friendship is this perpetual coincidence of two desires» (Girard, 1991, p. 10). While childhood friendship is our purest experience of innocence, friendship, as it grows, is always haunted by the potential for rivalry. «The only way to escape from the mimetic double bind», Girard writes, «the only radical solution, would be for both friends to renounce all possessive desire once and for all» (Girard, 1991, pp. 323, 15). Yet, while desire for knowledge can become as possessive as any other, it is also uniquely conducive to growing friendship in the face of the threat of rivalry.

Plato and Aristotle, perhaps spotting the danger that results from shared desire, each cite an adage that defines friendship by mutual generosity instead, «Friends have all things in common». Philosophy itself is the highest common object of desire, and Sherwood Belangia suggests that they both recognize the need for «mutual mediation» in the pursuit of wisdom—so that the etymology of the word should be understood as friendship «not so much of wisdom as *for* wisdom» (Belangia, 2010, p. 207). For Aristotle, complete friendship, rather than friendship merely for the sake of utility or pleasure, requires seeking above all each other's well-being, that is, choosing as your object of desire your friend's welfare. In their recent book *Big Friendship: How We Keep Each Other Close*, Aminatou Sow and Ann Friedman echo Aristotle with what they call «shine theory»: «I don't shine if you don't shine». Complete friendship, as Aristotle notes, must therefore be mutual. Mimetic theory would add that true friends are each other's models, imitating each other's desire for the welfare of the other.

There is an anticipation of the Golden Rule here. Jesus, after instituting the sacrament that Christians have since ancient times called Communion, radicalizes classical conceptions of friendship, or perhaps just its universal experience, when he says to his disciples in the Gospel of John, «No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends». His next words, however, link friendship to knowledge: «I do not call you servants any longer, because



the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything I have learned from the Father» (John 15:13, 15, NRSV). Friendship always involves self-disclosure, but the knowledge Jesus refers to is potentially limitless, what the Gospels elsewhere call the mysteries of the kingdom of God. Along with other components of friendship, such as mutual affection or common values, shared pursuit of knowledge overcomes the gravitational pull toward rivalry.

C. S. Lewis draws an image from Cicero's *On Friendship* to describe the particular kind of love we call friendship and its connection to shared learning: «Lovers are normally face to face, absorbed in each other; friends, side by side, absorbed in some common interest» (Lewis, 1960a, p. 91). Cicero's treatise was standard fare in Western education for nearly two millennia (it was the set text for first-year Latin where I teach when it became a college in 1865). It is composed as a conversation in which the main speaker, Laelius, draws lessons from his friendship with his recently deceased fellow statesman Scipio. This is how Laelius describes their friendship: «He and I stood side by side in our concern for affairs of state and for personal matters; we shared a citizen's home and a soldier's tent; we shared the one element indispensable to friendship, a complete agreement in aims, ambitions, and attitudes». The advice he goes on to give, especially on rivalry as the chief obstacle to friendship, has lost little of its relevance. And he ends with this: «What should I say, too, of our perennial enthusiasm for study and learning? This is how we spent all our time when we were out of the public eye» (Cicero, 1991, p. 116). Shared pursuit of learning seems at once the least practical and most preferable aspect of their friendship. It could be written off as merely a shared personal preference and the province of the elite. Yet in Cicero's extraordinarily high ideal of friendship, which counts Laelius and Scipio among only a handful of true friends in all of Roman history, the love of learning together seems to be a sort of pinnacle and perhaps one that orients and enables its success.

As Dante the fictional pilgrim and his guide, Virgil, are on their way up the mountain of Purgatory, Virgil explains that one of the basic causes of the sins the souls there are recovering from is desire for finite objects, a zero-sum game that puts people in competition and leads to envy, as opposed to enjoyment of the infinite, which only grows as it is shared by more people—an economy driven by the mutual mirroring of love (*Purgatorio* 15.49-75). *Paradiso* demonstrates this economy most strongly among the circles of scholars who appear in the sphere of the sun. Here Dante explains, through the voice of Thomas Aquinas, the unending delight of knowledge as an endlessly sharable object of desire, and the scholars manifest it in their dance of reconciliation in the face of ultimate mystery (10.76-93). Throughout Dante's poem, readers gain the experience of ever-growing desire as we puzzle our way, in the company of fellow readers, toward greater vision. Dante befriends his readers in the search for saving knowledge much as his fictional guides, both Virgil and Beatrice, befriend his fictional self.

Great literary texts insist on being contemplated, but anything can be an object of contemplative rather than acquisitive attention and thus become an occasion of friendship rather than rivalry. The peaceableness of Tolkien's hobbits follows from delighting in simple, sharable things. As the dying dwarf king Thorin Oakenshield, wishing to «part in friendship» from Bilbo Baggins, puts it: «If more of us valued food and cheer and song above hoarded gold, it would be a merrier world» (Tolkien, 1937, chapter 18). Yet the friendship between Frodo and Sam, and Merry and Pippin too, deepens through their interest in adventure beyond the Shire,



and especially in elves. The place where they find contentment most of all is Rivendell, home of Elrond Half-elven, greatest of lore-masters. When Frodo and his companions get there in *The Lord of the Rings*, he finds that it is, «as Bilbo had long ago reported, “a perfect house, whether you like food or sleep or story-telling or singing, or just sitting and thinking best, or a pleasant mixture of them all”» (Tolkien, 1954-55, book 2, chapter 1). Elves represent, for Tolkien, knowledge used for enchantment, for communion, rather than for the kind of magic—or technology—that seeks to dominate.

Of course knowledge can be pursued in rivalry rather than in friendship, a contrast shown most clearly in Tolkien's two wizards, Saruman and Gandalf. Saruman has been seduced into rivalry with Sauron for the ring of power. He accumulates knowledge useful for gaining power over others and disregards anything else, like hobbits or ents. As the chief ent, Treebeard, says of Saruman's corrupted state, «He has a mind of metal and wheels». Pursuit of technological power has reduced him to being like his machines. There is a warning here against taking our models of intelligence from the products of our own artifice rather than embracing the relational and ultimately loving nature of truly human intelligence. Even, and perhaps especially, in communities devoted to learning, the desire for knowledge can become possessive, caught up in rivalries for status, power, and reputation.

Gandalf, on the other hand, out of his care for all the creatures of Middle Earth, is continually interested in learning more about each of them, including those curious hobbits. He shares their delight in pipe-weed, becomes friends with some, and learns to see more in them than they see in each other. Of course, since he is a wizard he has vast resources of knowledge. Yet in the scene that most draws attention to his knowledge, when he stands before the magically locked gates of Moria reviewing every spell of opening «in all the tongues of Elves or Men or Orcs», the solution turns out to be simple: speak «friend» (in Elvish) and enter. A few pages earlier he had begged the elf Legolas and the dwarf Gimli to be friends. The skills of friendship are indeed Gandalf's greatest power: non-rivalrous attention, reconciliation, and, above all, imagining peaceful futures and inviting others to join him as partners in realizing them.

In the Harry Potter books, Voldemort and Dumbledore present a similar contrast of wizards. Voldemort, incapable of friendship, treats everyone as a rival and seeks only the sort of knowledge that will help him dominate others and achieve what he thinks is endless life. He can't anticipate the greater power that will defeat him because inability to love has closed him off from a whole world of understanding and imagination.

Dumbledore's wisdom, on the other hand, is closely tied to what might best be called his friendliness, which includes compassion, humor, and finally his willingness to sacrifice himself. Friendship is what he exhorts the members of Hogwarts to rely on in the face of danger and is perhaps his chief goal for the school. In both Dumbledore and Gandalf we see a connection between wisdom and what Tolkien calls «pity», which involves empathy, mercy, and the ability to see life from another's perspective. Dumbledore's Pensieve, a magical device through which he and Harry are able to observe someone's memories, represents not so much the wizarding world's alternative to Muggle technologies for storing information, but rather the ability to enter contemplatively and sympathetically into a person's story.

The Pensieve as a narrative device also stands for writing as the means by which friendships can include the wealth of inherited learning. The distance opened by writing between author and reader allows those who read together to stand side by side before the world opened by



the text (Ricoeur, 1991). Reading together draws on and deepens the capacity to know and include otherness that is essential to friendship.

2.2. Knowing the other as other

One of the traditional expressions of peak friendship is sharing one soul in two bodies (see the aphorism attributed to Aristotle by Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, V.20, echoed by Augustine in *Confessions*, IV.vi.11). Yet this ideal of intimacy also has a dark side when similarity, and desire for it, preclude the otherness of the friend. Mimetic theory leads to an insight that should be less surprising than it is: violence comes from similarity of desire more than from differences. Even when conflict seems to come from difference, there is usually a common desire behind it, whether for possessions, prestige, or something else not easily shared. Violence in turn tends to increase similarity. Mimetic rivals become more alike in their desire for what they are fighting over, for winning the fight, and ultimately for the fullness of being they perceive in the other. To themselves they seem more and more different, even as each insists on the originality of their own desire and on whatever differences would seem to justify their victory, but the differences are superficial. Acquisitive, rivalrous mimetic desire leads to deepening blindness about oneself, others, and the groups each belongs to.

Desire for shareable goods and commitment to the well-being of the other resist overt violence, but friendship is liable to a subtler pull toward assimilation and rivalry. As friends draw closer together, they become more like siblings and, at the same time, enemies. Brothers, especially twins, are the most dangerous rivals and also the topic of traditional explorations of rivalry, as Girard has shown. Friendship requires a certain distance, the cultivation of difference as well as similarity. Thus my friend must also become my opponent and potential enemy. As William Blake puts it in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, «Opposition is true Friendship» (Blake, 1975, p. xxv; quoted in Barfield, 1928, dedication to C. S. Lewis). This is one of what Jacques Derrida (2005) calls the enigmas of friendship. Maintaining the perfect distance or achieving the perfect combination of similarity and difference are impossible, but the impossibility, the dance around an unachievable ideal, can have the value of making it desirable, keeping that desire fresh, and leading beyond possessiveness.

In her profound pages on friendship, Simone Weil stresses the danger of domination that follows from wanting one's friend to be identical to oneself. She calls it a miracle of grace when one can know and accept the otherness of the other and the necessary distance between oneself and one's friend. The positive mimesis of friendship rests on the contemplative attention that Weil (1973, pp. 204-8) emphasized as a form of love. Likewise, shared pursuit of knowledge remains infinite, delightful, and truthful as long as we are also continually learning to see through each other's eyes, and thus practicing knowledge of the other as other, rather than insisting that my friend see things the way I see them.

Education is a privileged place for learning the art of friendly opposition and competition. Classical authors emphasize a friend's willingness to be frank rather than a flatterer, the kind of confrontation required to uphold one another in virtue (Konstan, 1997). The kind of disagreement necessary to learning has lower stakes yet requires appreciating a healthy polarity between similarity and difference and welcoming the otherness of the other.



We all learn to think through friendly conversation. How much of thinking is a matter of sustaining conversation with absent others in our heads? And how much of learning to think better is expanding the range of absent interlocutors whose voices we can simulate in our own minds?

The souls in Dante's *Inferno* are so stripped of personality by their addictions to finite pleasures, to violence, and to patterns of lying and betrayal that they are almost indistinguishable. They exist in the perfect rivalry, both similarity and difference, of sin. Dante's images of their sufferings alternate between the utter stasis of alienation and the decay of personality in domination, and sometimes combine both, as with Ugolino forever eating the head of Ruggieri. His encounter with his former teacher Brunetto Latini in canto 15 implies that even the quest for learning can be subordinated to finite, worldly goals like literary immortality and pervert the potential friendship of mentor and student into something more manipulative. *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*, on the other hand, show souls on the way toward fulfilled individuality in communion across the differences between them. The narrator and those he meets greet each other as strangers, even if they had been friends on earth, before renewing their friendship in conversation (Masciandaro, 2013). Friendship practices making room for the strangeness even of the familiar. It is almost impossible, at least for educated moderns, to conceive of a oneness with others in community that does not erase individuality, like a wave that breaks on the shore, loses its form, and becomes one with the ocean (see the final episode of the TV series «The Good Place», a worthy exploration of friendship and knowledge). In friendship, however, waves of thought and feeling discover each other and somehow merge without losing themselves, as in Dante's major image for communion across difference in paradise, musical harmony (see, e.g., *Paradiso* 10.139-48). Dante's whole poem offers a record of how his own journey toward paradise happened by continuing his conversations with all of the absent others who appear in its pages.

In the wizard Saruman, Tolkien shows the corrupting effects of mimetic rivalry that begin subtly but lead finally to his unmaking. His study of the lore of rings is warped by desire for power and status that puts him at enmity with Gandalf, his fellows in the order of Maiar sent from the Undying Lands across the sea. Saruman becomes a double of Sauron, the lord of the rings, as signaled by the similarity of their names. Though Saruman, thinking that he seeks the One Ring for good rather than evil, sees himself as completely different from Sauron, he is self-deceived. Lowered at the end to rivalry with hobbits for control of the Shire, he finally decays to mere smoke dispersed in the wind. Like Sauron, he cannot see the wisdom of Gandalf's renunciation of the One Ring —those caught in rivalry cannot understand the otherness of a peaceful other. Gandalf, on the other hand, by rising above rivalry, is able to understand his opponents. Rowling paints a similar contrast between Dumbledore and Lord Voldemort, and Harry must learn to love his enemies, to oppose them without rivalry, in order to know what to do.

Elrond's knowledge, meanwhile, makes Rivendell a place of hospitality for all of the free peoples, the university of Middle Earth where they can know each other as other, in friendship. At the council of Elrond in *The Lord of the Rings*, representatives of men, elves, dwarves, and hobbits all share their stories. From Gandalf the others learn to see what he sees not only in Saruman but in the hobbits, including their capacity for friendship. Legolas and Gimli, both chosen for the fellowship of the Ring, will grow from mirror images of inherited suspicion, through battle against a common enemy, to the true friendship of appreciating each other in all their differences, finally becoming agents of reconciliation between their peoples. Through



Gimli's eyes Legolas can enjoy the glittering caverns of Helm's Deep, and through the eyes of Legolas Gimli can find beauty in Fangorn Forest. Each of the peoples of Middle Earth carries ancient ways of knowing fashioned by Tolkien's imagination into portals of the «communion with all living things» —across differences not just of race or species but of biological kingdom—that he sees at the heart of what he calls fairy-stories (Tolkien014, p. 36).

2.3. Including the excluded third

Including a third helps two find the healthy distance needed for both friendship and knowledge. But friendship, as Lewis points out, is necessarily exclusive because it is built around common interests and particular knowledge. «From the innocent and necessary act of excluding», he writes, «to the spirit of exclusiveness is an easy step; and thence to the degrading pleasure of exclusiveness» (Lewis, 1960a, p. 122). While exclusivity enables friends to go deeply into their shared interest, it also risks leaving errors unchallenged. And if their knowledge is to benefit anyone else, they will have to let outsiders in.

The temptation to exclusive friendship repeats on the smallest scale the solidarity-by-exclusion that is even more powerful in larger groups. Humanity's strongest experience of unanimity comes from excluding those we believe responsible for our problems. It is the major way humanity has contained its tendency toward escalating violence, from the first spontaneous stoning to sacrificial religion, vendettas, wars, and even the sanctioned violence of judicial and police systems. Girard sees the single-victim mechanism at the base of every social institution. Crucial to its function is the dehumanizing of its victims. Originally, this gave rise to mythologies that unconsciously concealed the very existence of human victims by turning them into monsters and gods, responsible both for causing crises and ending them. Few victims are truly innocent, but the accusations that drive organized violence project onto them stereotypes that have at best little basis in actual wrong. The manufacture of dehumanizing guilt continues in structures like white privilege and the fictions that accompany them, from half-baked statistics to full-blown conspiracy theories. We then build our common identity around stories —myths— that justify our innocence and require repetitions of violence.

The attraction between friends pulls against scapegoating in at least two ways. To quote Lewis again, friendship «is essentially between individuals; the moment two...are friends they have in some degree drawn apart from the herd» (Lewis, 1960a, p. 88). Friendship is a major way in which we learn to think for ourselves, to enter into an authentic individuality rather than a false selfhood based on an illusion of autonomy that conceals imitation and is liable to go along with those who cast stones. Second, friendship naturally grows by inclusion, at least up to a point. Lewis writes: «In each of my friends there is something only some other friend can fully bring out.... Now that Charles is dead, I shall never again see Ronald's reaction to a specifically Caroline joke. Far from having more of Ronald, having him "to myself" now that Charles is away, I have less of Ronald. Hence true friendship is the least jealous of loves» (Lewis, 1960a, p. 92). The friends Lewis refers to here are Charles Williams and John Ronald Reuel Tolkien, and we know that there were in fact some jealousies between them. Yet without the fellowship they called the Inklings, a remarkable example of vigorous intellectual friendship, *The Lord of the Rings* would not have come to be.



A three-way relationship is unstable, liable to decay into two against one. What can sustain a three-way dance? It is not coziness of affection that motivates the integration of the third so much as the adventure of understanding and loving each other in new ways and learning more about the things you share interests in. In the middle of a discourse about reconciliation, Jesus says, «For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them» (Mt. 18:20, NRSV). While this may refer to a requirement for witnesses in the Hebrew Scriptures, I see in it also an affirmation of friendship between two that implies the importance of always remaining open to a third. Pope Francis stresses openness to the other: «As couples or friends, we find that our hearts expand as we step out of ourselves and embrace others» (Francis, 2020, par. 89).

The third brings openness of mind as much as openness of heart. Indeed, Michel Serres argues that including the third is the foundation of disciplined knowledge. An object or body of knowledge can be a sort of third for two friends, but only another person can be an object who insists on their own subjectivity, that is, on their ultimate unknowability as an object and as a center of their own point of view. The third person introduces objectivity, what we call the third-person point of view, by resisting being objectified (Serres, 1997, pp. 46-8). For Derrida, the entrance of the third exacerbates the tension between friendship's special bond with this particular, unique other and its general, ethical obligation to any other. The field shaped by this tension opens the space of thought, and especially of «moral reason and political reason» (Derrida, 2005, p. 277).

Friendships that are open to integrating a third are the most productive engines of learning. Inclusiveness keeps dialogue between each two at an optimal distance, avoiding lazy conformity on the one hand and rivalry on the other. As the educational theorist Marie-Louis Martinez puts it, «In a true dialogue...the excluded third who is not addressed (the one who is habitually overlooked) ought to be able, actually or potentially, to speak in his or her turn» (Martinez, 1999, p. 74). It is especially important to include those most likely to be excluded and victimized, because they are the ones who can see what those within structures of power are blinded to.

And yet, friendship and learning will always move between poles of exclusion and inclusion. Research has found that the natural limit of conversation size is about four people, and this decreases by one when the conversation involves anticipating the thoughts of another, absent person. The reasons likely have to do with the cognitive demands of mentalizing (Krems, Wilkes, 2019). To enter deeply into thinking together, we must narrow the circle, but each circle must touch many others to stay alive.

Midway up the mountain of *Purgatorio*, Virgil and Dante the pilgrim are suddenly joined by a third whom they discover, in a poignant dialogue of recognition, to be the Roman poet Statius. They become a sort of roving salon as they journey further up and encounter other poets being made fit for paradise. These scenes allude to the story in Luke 24 of two disciples on the road to Emmaus, pilgrims joined by an unrecognized third who befriends them in conversation, but whom they do not recognize until their communion at table, when he reveals himself as at once intimately familiar and infinitely other, the risen Christ, and instantly vanishes, leaving them to hasten back to their friends in Jerusalem. Inclusion of the third, in each case, is the beginning of a new kind of community.

The fellowship of the Ring that sets out from Rivendell is set up to be diverse but succeeds by growing in friendship. Later, Frodo and Sam undergo their greatest trial when facing the necessity to integrate into their friendship a very troublesome third, Gollum, whom they must



trust and understand in order to succeed in their quest. Their merciful attention almost saves Gollum, and their successes and failures in the attempt helps deepen their friendship into, for me, the most moving in literature.

And here we come at last to Rowling's remarkable threesome, opponents and vanquishers of Lord Voldemort: Harry, Hermione, and Ron. Their friendships have ups and downs, but Harry's commitment to both of them never wavers, even when he gets stuck in rivalry with Ron or when one of them tries to pull him into solidarity over against the other. Strengthened each time they reconcile, their three-way friendship becomes the hub for integrating others—especially misfits like Luna, Neville, and Dobby the house elf—into a wonderfully inclusive fellowship that brings together a range of knowledge and other gifts essential to saving the peoples of the wizarding world. When the three are on their own in the final book, figuring out the horcruxes and the Deathly Hallows, it seems crucial, as Dumbledore foresaw, that they remain three. Not only does each bring ideas and good qualities, and not only do they each bring good qualities out of the others, but the less stable and more dynamic balance of the threesome also keeps them all more open to thinking in new ways.

Behind Harry and his friends is his mother Lily, whose self-sacrificial love seems to serve him as a kind of magic armor. Yet this power, as the stories he learns about her suggest, is also relational (Gidley, 2018). Lily is a model whom Harry and his friends imitate in many small ways through how they treat others. She is, crucially and conspicuously, compassionate toward outsiders. Harry, though he struggles with resentment, chooses likewise to resist rivalry and instead to enter sympathetically into the perspectives of others. His success, from being an outcast raised in the cupboard under the stairs, is largely a matter of growing into the example he discovers in his mother.

Dumbledore, the Hogwarts headmaster, clearly sees friendship as central to the school's success. The connection crystallizes in book 5 with Dumbledore's Army, the students who gather secretly to oppose Voldemort. By intention and invitation, the circle around the three friends expands further. With each other's support, they are able to take risks in learning defense against the dark arts while discovering themselves and each other more fully. The best learning happens through inclusive groups among friends.

3. FRIENDSHIP AND THE LIBERAL ARTS

Inclusive friendship is central to the origins and practice of all academic disciplines. We have to imagine that, quoting Lewis one more time, «Mathematics effectively began when a few Greek friends got together to talk about numbers and lines and angles» (Lewis, 1960a, p. 100). Egyptians and Babylonians used math for practical purposes like agriculture, but the Greeks developed a language and a set of ideas—a discipline—that could be pursued for its own sake and is still leading to unexpected discoveries and applications. As Michel Serres has argued, shared, disciplined, inquiry into the objects of the world for their own sake begins in the space of temporary peace of a social order established through Girard's single-victim mechanism and maintains itself by continuing to exclude incompatible perspectives (Serres, 1982, pp. 98-133). But the liberal arts disciplines are essentially structures for including new members in communities of learning.



The familiar understanding of what «liberal» means when attached to «arts» is that these are the areas of learning necessary for responsible freedom, an idea inherited from when the traditional list of the liberal arts took shape in the education of elite Roman citizens. But there is a deeper sense in which the liberal arts are those that require their own freedom to develop in whatever directions they might go (Lewis, 1960b, pp. 127-32). In this sense, the arts of word and number—the traditional trivium (grammar, rhetoric, logic) and quadrivium (arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, music)—are fundamental because they make up our two basic, universal systems of symbols, studied for their own sake and for their most universal applications. By now these have led to many disciplines and sub-disciplines that need academic freedom, precisely, in order to discover what can be discovered.

The freedom of the academic disciplines involves a productive tension between exclusivity and inclusivity. Every discipline draws a line around what counts as true within it. Or, in a more human sense, each discipline and sub-discipline is made up of a group of people who agree to use a special language that maximizes clarity and precision and to recognize as valid only the results arrived at by doing things in a certain way. At the same time, in order to pursue their discipline fully and freely, they make as explicit as possible how the discipline works so they can pass it on and invite people to join in. Interesting things happen when there is controversy about whether someone's innovation is good or their discovery valid, or when different disciplines look at the same thing in different ways. That is, disciplines must be somewhat exclusive in order to think at all, and yet they must be inclusive in order to remain vital. This sounds a lot like friendship. And behind every important advance in a discipline is, I suspect, some degree of actual friendship, like Kahneman and Tversky or Darwin and Henslowe, the mentor to whom Darwin pays generous tribute in his autobiography. The list is endless.

Essential to the development of modern academic disciplines, and especially the rise of modern science, have been the communities within which friendship, or at least friendly communication, could flourish: medieval colleges and universities, early modern learned societies, and all the later schools and associations that have followed their models. Formalized interaction—whether oral, such as medieval disputations and members of early scientific associations gathering to watch experiments, or written, such as textbooks and academic journals—advances learning by advancing relationships among members. Like the disciplines themselves, their practices of communication resemble friendship in being both inclusive through formalization that can be easily imitated and exclusive in ruling out other ways of doing things. Vitality, again, comes from an active play of exclusion and inclusion, from trying to be most meaningful while being most open.

Learning to write has a special importance for the broadest goals of liberal education. To write well means addressing an absent audience, one that does not share your immediate context and may be quite diverse. It requires an effort of imagination, of anticipating and therefore simulating the thoughts of various possible others, that is similar to inclusive friendship. Even great scientists who seem to have worked largely in isolation—Galileo, Newton, Darwin, Einstein—participated in a larger community through writing. We have only glimpses of the real conversations that accompanied their discoveries, but we can read the simulated conversations that happened as they worked their ideas out most fully in the process of writing them. Every writer knows how much thinking happens while writing. For students, learning to write academically rather than just expressively imposes a discipline of form and



mental dialogue by which thought becomes communicable more fully and widely —just what inclusive friendship also needs.

On the other side of the page, reading completes this astonishing, both mimetic and imaginative ability to enter into the play of thought with another across distances of space and time. Academic reading in the disciplines of the liberal arts makes reading more challenging in order to achieve precision or scope or speculative leaps. Further, the books we read can become a third that we integrate into our conversations with each other. Or, as I think about my own teaching, it might be better to say that I bring into the classroom a relationship with books I have studied for a long time, or sometimes just met, and try to include students in the conversation I am having through reading. The classroom is a dance of pairs opening to include others, and the discussion leader's art is listening and responding to a student's thoughts so as to invite others in. Shared study of a common object, whether a book or anything else, also increases capacity for extending friendship across greater difference. At the horizon, as at the origin, is the inclusion of the divine Word made flesh (Serres, 1995, pp. 110-13).

Reading literature is like talking with a friend in that it takes you deep inside a perspective on the world, often by way of taking you into another world entirely. Because the fictional worlds of any art form, and especially of narrative, most fully engage what neuroscientist Gallese and others have called embodied simulation, they are «often more powerful than real life in evoking our emotional engagement and empathetic involvement» (V. Gallese, H. Wojciehowski, 2011, p. 18). In many of these worlds, we also get excellent models of what friendship can look like. How much have I become a better friend through my many trips to Middle Earth? It is impossible to overestimate the value of reading literature for building the compassion and imagination that enable us to enter into the perspective of other people. We go back and forth between books we love and friends we love, each deepening our engagement with the other and enabling us to stretch further outside our familiar circle.

Research on how friendships typically form underscores the potential for friendships of learning to address the urgent and perennial challenges of diversity and inclusion. Unsurprisingly, research has confirmed that birds of a feather flock together; friends tend to be similar to each other. But some kinds of similarity seem to matter more. Dunbar and his colleagues have identified a list of key dimensions that correlate with how inclined people are to become friends and how close they get: «language (or, better still, dialect), place of origin (i.e. where you grew up), educational history, hobbies/interests (including musical tastes), sense of humor, and worldview (moral views, religious views, political views)» (Dunbar, 2018, pp. 44-5). The more dimensions people have in common, the stronger their bond. And the dimensions seem to be interchangeable; any combination of a given number is as good as any other. Also notable is what the list does not include, such as ethnicity or workplace. All are acquired mainly in childhood, but for those that remain more pliable, college is pivotal: not just educational history, which, at this stage, becomes more a matter of choice; but also interests; moral, religious, and political views; and even sense of humor.

Indeed, perhaps college is such a natural place for friendship precisely because it is a learning community. These more pliable factors in favor of friendship correlate with what is helpful to have in place for people to learn well together: a shared basis of education, common interests that motivate a shared focus, and common views that provide starting assumptions. Even a shared sense of humor is important as a lubricant for easy, efficient, and enjoyable



communication, as is clear from Kahneman's description of his friendship with Tversky (2011, pp. 5-6). The arguments given here for the connection between friendship and knowledge could help explain why these dimensions of similarity are more important than others. In any case, whatever the causal relationships might be, these findings about similarities clarify not only why college is a good place for friendship across difference, but also how to make it work. Communities formed around a common enterprise of learning, especially the basics of the liberal arts disciplines as a gateway to other learning, enrich the soil for friendship. This is step number one, imitating each other's desire for knowledge. The next two steps, opening up to the difference of the other and the third, can then follow more readily, for the flourishing of both knowledge and friendship. Encountering otherness together builds friendship as friends learn to make room, to orient friendship around openness.

Further, these two steps, knowing the other as other and including the third, make diversity and inclusion more than an indifferent stand-off, hard to get beyond and easy to settle for. In the modern world, increasing concern for victims has broken down the strong, old solidarities maintained by exclusion, but this has left little to take their place other than universal regard for equal human rights (Girard, 2001, pp. 160-9, and Dumouchel, 2015). The result is a bland sort of globalization vulnerable to new kinds of ideological exclusions, for there is still no more stable and reliable way to a feeling of community than scapegoating. Truly inclusive community also builds on natural, mimetic capacities, but is less stable, more playful and improvisational, and benefits from being practiced as an art. Pope Francis emphasizes the need for «processes of encounter» (2020, par. 217, emphasis original). It no doubt happens best face to face, but it can also make creative use of any means of connection between individuals. It involves writing new, shared stories that lead not just to communion with our neighbors and fellow citizens of the world, but also to a productive peace with the places where we live. Colleges can form students for such communion and peace by intentionally pursuing friendships of learning, by cultivating the kind of dialogue that allows us to experience the otherness of our friends and ourselves, and by working to include in our friendships and communities of learning those who are most easily excluded.

What is the story in which laying down my life for you also serves a larger end that is abundantly good for both of us? What are these goods, and how do we serve them together? How can we come close enough, by choice and in full freedom, to be partners in creative thinking and action? What is that art? Friendship is one of its names, and we have only begun to understand it.

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