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Does Friendship Require Us To Flout Epistemic Norms?

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Mirela Koleva BA

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ABSTRACT DEUTSCH

Verlangt Freundschaft von uns, gegen epistemische Normen zu verstoßen? Laut dem Epistemischen Partialismus in Bezug auf Freundschaft lautet die Antwort: ja. Man kann nicht gleichzeitig ein*e gute*r Freund*in und ein*e gute*r epistemische*r Akteur*in sein. Ich halte dieses Ergebnis für beunruhigend, weshalb ich in meiner Arbeit zeigen möchte, dass der Epistemische Partialismus falsch liegt. Ich beginne mit einem Überblick über die aktuelle Debatte und stelle zwei Positionen vor, die den Epistemischen Partialismus verteidigen, sowie zwei, die ihn ablehnen. Anschließend entwickle ich mein eigenes Argument gegen den Epistemischen Partialismus. Ich nenne es DAS EHRLICHKEITSARGUMENT, da es von der Beziehung der Tugend der Ehrlichkeit zur Wahrheit und ihrer Rolle in der Freundschaft ausgeht. Ehrlichkeit ist eine Voraussetzung für Freundschaft und zielt zentral auf die Wahrheit ab. Dies erfordert ein Bekenntnis zu epistemischen Normen. Ein solches Bekenntnis schließt es aus, gegen epistemische Normen zu verstoßen. Wenn Freundschaft also Ehrlichkeit verlangt, kann sie nicht gleichzeitig verlangen, gegen epistemische Normen zu verstoßen. Der Epistemische Partialismus liegt somit falsch. Abschließend setze ich mich mit möglichen Einwänden gegen mein Argument auseinander. Man könnte einwenden, dass wir in Konfliktfällen das Wohlergehen unserer Freunde der Ehrlichkeit vorziehen sollten, oder dass DAS EHRLICHKEITSARGUMENT zu anspruchsvoll und in manchen Fällen intuitiv unplausibel ist. Auf diese Einwände gehe ich der Reihe nach ein.

ABSTRACT ENGLISH

Does friendship require us to flout epistemic norms? According to Epistemic Partialism about friendship, the answer is yes. You cannot simultaneously be a good friend and a good epistemic agent. I think that this is a concerning outcome, which is why, in my thesis, I set out to show that Epistemic Partialism is wrong. I begin with an overview of the current debate, presenting two accounts in defense of Epistemic Partialism and two accounts against it. Then, I advance my own argument against Epistemic Partialism. I call it THE HONESTY ARGUMENT, because it proceeds from honesty's relation to truth and its role in friendship. Honesty is required for friendship, and it centrally aims at the truth. This requires a commitment to epistemic norms. Such a commitment precludes flouting epistemic norms. So, if friendship requires honesty, it cannot require you to flout Epistemic Norms. Epistemic Partialism is mistaken. Lastly, I consider possible objections to my argument. One might object that we should prefer our friends' well-being to honesty in cases where the two conflict, or that THE HONESTY ARGUMENT is too demanding and intuitively implausible in some cases. I respond to these objections in turn.

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§1. INTRODUCTION

According to Epistemic Partialism about friendship¹, “norms deriving from valuable relationships such as friendship sometimes demand things that conflict with epistemic demands on us” (Mason, 2020, p. 2439). Unlike Epistemic Partialists, I think that friendship does not require you to flout epistemic norms. You can be both a good friend and an epistemically responsible agent.

To argue for this, I take a closer look at the virtue of honesty and its relation to epistemic norms. I champion an objectivist account of honesty, according to which honesty constitutively aims at the truth (Dougherty, 2024, pp. 6-7). I then argue that aiming at the truth requires a commitment to epistemic norms, which, in turn is incompatible with flouting those norms. This puts the Epistemic Partialist in a difficult situation: either they need to bite the bullet and say that friendship does not require the virtue of honesty, or they need to admit that friendship does not require us to flout epistemic norms.

Why approach the question of Epistemic Partialism’s plausibility through the virtue of honesty? Honesty is a virtue we consider inseparable from our intuitive picture of a good friend. Despite this, surprisingly little has been written on honesty, and even less on the role of honesty in friendship.² I think it is time that this lacuna in the literature is filled, and this is precisely what I set out to do in this thesis.

I contribute to the debate on Epistemic Partialism by proposing and defending the following argument, which I call THE HONESTY ARGUMENT against Epistemic Partialism:

- P1. Friendship requires the virtue of honesty.
- P2. Honesty constitutively aims at the truth (Dougherty, 2024, pp. 2, 6-7).
- P3. So, friendship requires constitutively aiming at the truth. (From P1, P2)
- P4. Aiming at the truth requires a commitment to epistemic norms.
- P5. A commitment to epistemic norms is incompatible with systematically flouting epistemic norms.

¹From here on, when I write ‘Epistemic Partialism’, I mean ‘Epistemic Partialism about friendship’. The same goes for ‘Epistemic Partialists’ and ‘Epistemic Partialists about friendship’.

² See, for example, (Baier, 1990; Battaly, 2024; Dougherty, 2024; Miller, 2017, 2021a, 2022; Wilson, 2018).

P6. So, friendship does not require flouting epistemic norms. (From P3, P4, P5)

Before I present and explain THE HONESTY ARGUMENT in more detail, however, I have to set the stage for it and position it in the broader debate through a literature review. This is why I begin my paper by presenting two Epistemic Partialist accounts by Keller (2004) and Stroud (2006) in Section 2. Then, in Section 3, I engage with two accounts against Epistemic Partialism about friendship as proposed by Kawall (2013) and Mason (2024). It is in Section 4 that I present and explain THE HONESTY ARGUMENT premise by premise. Lastly, in Section 5, I consider several lines of critique against THE HONESTY ARGUMENT and respond to them.

§2. EPISTEMIC PARTIALISM ABOUT FRIENDSHIP

This section is dedicated to Epistemic Partialism about friendship and, more specifically, to Keller's (2004) and Stroud's (2008) accounts of Epistemic Partialism. Note, however, that my focus on these two accounts does not mean that THE HONESTY ARGUMENT only works against them. I aim to show that Epistemic Partialism is mistaken in general, not just on a particular account.

Epistemic Partialism suggests that there are some cases where the norms of friendship³ require you to flout epistemic norms. In other words, friendship sometimes requires you to form your beliefs about your friends differently than you would form beliefs about strangers, even in the face of the same evidence. To illustrate this idea, consider the following case:

PHILOSOPHY TALK. Your friend Anna is scheduled to give a philosophy talk at the local club 'Philosophy Café', a place you know for its rather amateurish philosophy. Until now, you were unaware that Anna is interested in philosophy. Based on your past experiences at this club, you have every reason to believe that most talks held there are mediocre. Still, Anna has asked you to come along for support. If some stranger were about to give the same talk under the same circumstances, you would confidently expect it to be a bad talk. But because it is Anna who is giving it—and because you are there as her friend—you ought not, before hearing her speak, hold that

³ I leave open the question of whether the norms of friendship are moral norms or some other kind of norms.

belief about her talk. Instead, you should form the belief that Anna's talk is going to be good, despite having evidence to the contrary.⁴

Cases such as PHILOSOPHY TALK aim at bringing out the intuition that friendship sometimes requires you to flout epistemic norms by, for example, forming beliefs that contradict the available evidence. In what follows, I look at how Keller (2004) and Stroud (2006) defend this intuition.

§2.1. Keller's Account

Keller's account (2004) starts from the observation that friends sometimes feel like they should form favorable beliefs about their friend regardless of the evidence (p. 331). Even though you know that the talks in 'Philosophy Café' are usually mediocre, your loyalty to Anna might make you feel as if you are betraying her if you believe that her talk will be just as mediocre as expected.

The explanation for this observation, Keller (2004) suggests, is that the norms of friendship sometimes clash with epistemic norms:

When good friends form beliefs about each other, they sometimes respond to considerations that have to do with the needs and interests of their friends, not with aiming at the truth, and that's part of what makes them good friends (p. 331).

In PHILOSOPHY TALK, your belief that Anna's talk is not *that* bad is not entirely truth-sensitive. You are not focused only on whether Anna's talk is *actually* good or not, for you are also trying to listen to her talk with empathy. However, according to Keller (2004),

[...] we are, in standard cases, under some normative pressure to have beliefs that are sensitive to considerations that bear upon their truth and falsity, and to respond to such considerations in reasonably consistent ways. To believe something is to take it to be true, and there is something odd going on when someone forms beliefs based on considerations that do not, even on the considered judgment of the person concerned, have anything to do with the belief's truth (p. 337).

This pressure to have truth-sensitive beliefs stems from the epistemic norm that says we should form beliefs that aim to correspond with reality. When you form beliefs with more than truth in mind, like in Philosophy Talk, you are flouting this epistemic norm.

⁴ Drawing on the poetry-reading case by Keller 2004 (pp. 331–332).

Despite this, friends can benefit from forming sympathetic beliefs about each other. To argue for this, Keller (2004) offers an analogy with a coach–traineeship relationship (p. 339). If you are a trainee, you want your coach to teach you the skills needed, but you also want them to genuinely *believe* that you can achieve your goals. When your tennis coach corrects your serve, you do not want them to tell you that you will always be bad at tennis. Instead, you want them to see that although your serve needs work, you are trying your best and are on the right path to learning how to serve properly. This is because “associating with such a coach can make you more positive about your prospects, more likely to work hard and hence more likely to improve” (Keller, 2004, p. 339). Analogously,

[i]f you are friends with the people with whom you play in a lunchtime basketball league, with whom you regularly go running, with whom you are learning a foreign language, or whatever, then a significant part of your friendship may involve your playing for each other the role of a coach (Keller, 2004, p. 39).

Some other times, friendship might involve playing the role of a friendly philosopher who is set on finding the weakness of your argument:

You are probably unlikely to be convinced of my claim that there can be a distinctive good in having a friend who is inclined to believe certain things independently of the evidence, if what you are thinking of is a friendship between two competent, self-assured philosophers. In a philosophical colleague, there’s obvious reason to want someone whose belief-forming mechanisms, when she’s dealing with you and dealing with philosophy, aim unflinchingly at the truth (Keller, 2004, p. 339).

Because of this, Keller (2004) suggests that friends can play both roles: sometimes they are friendly philosophers, and sometimes they are friendly coaches (p. 339). This aligns with the idea that there is no requirement to always flout epistemic norms in favor of your friends, nor that you should flout epistemic norms for all of your friends (p. 334). Instead, Keller’s goal is to show that norms of friendship can sometimes require us to violate epistemic norms.

Note also that Keller (2004) does not argue that in all cases where friendship calls you to flout epistemic norms, you always end up with favorable beliefs about your friends. Despite the observation that friendship sometimes makes you feel as if you should form favorable beliefs about your friends, what ultimately matters is that you are sympathetic to them.

A good tennis coach who believes in your potential might still believe that you are clumsy; he just won’t believe that you are as clumsy as an impartial observer might. Applied to Philosophy Talk, this means that if Anna’s talk turns out to be a disaster, you, as a friend, are not obliged to think that it was great—you are just obliged to

“listen sympathetically” to it (Keller, 2004, p. 335). If you think the talk was that bad, you may have to tell Anna to quit philosophy.

So, put shortly, Keller’s argument (2004) is not that you should flout epistemic norms in a way that always leaves you with favorable beliefs about your friends. Instead, it is:

just that good friendship characteristically requires that you make a special effort—effort that you needn’t make with regard to just anyone—to see value in your friends’ projects before you decide (and say) that you think them misguided.” (Keller, 2004, pp. 334–335).

There are Epistemic Partialist accounts that take friendship to be much more demanding—and therefore, much more incompatible with epistemic norms. We are going to look at one such account in the next subsection.

§2.2. Stroud’s Account

According to Stroud (2006), friendship puts demands on what we feel, how our actions are motivated, how we form beliefs, and which beliefs we hold (p. 503). Stroud’s account begins from the observation that we are affectively and motivationally partial when it comes to our friends:

[w]e care more about what befalls our friends than about what happens to strangers, and we are more motivated to advance our friends’ interests than those of strangers. We seem even to have special responsibilities toward our friends which we don’t have toward strangers (Stroud, 2006, p. 498).

In addition to this *affective* and *motivational* partiality, friendship demands *epistemic* partiality, that is, partiality when forming beliefs about our friends (Stroud, 2006, p. 498). In what follows, I am going to explain why Stroud takes epistemic partiality to be necessary for friendship.

First, let us clarify what a good friend is. Stroud (2006) turns to our intuitions to tease out friendship’s demands:

if we find that we have a strong intuition that the good friend would (or would not) do or feel or believe *x*, then I shall say that friendship *involves* (not) doing or feeling or believing *x*; that this is part of, constitutive of, or a constitutive element or feature of friendship; or, finally, that this is a *demand* of friendship: something you owe your friend (pp. 501–2).

Take PHILOSOPHY TALK as an example and suppose that you have the strong intuition that, as a good friend to Anna, you should believe that her talk is not going to be mediocre. If you have this intuition, then the belief that Anna’s talk is not going to be mediocre is a *demand* of your friendship with her. Now, if Anna

were a stranger, the available evidence you have would be sufficient to justify your belief that her talk is going to be mediocre. However, because Anna is your friend, forming this belief *feels* wrong.

A good friend forms beliefs about their friends differently than they form beliefs about strangers (Stroud, 2006, pp. 504–505). To illustrate this claim, Stroud (2006) offers the following scenario:

Suppose [...] that a third party reports that your friend Sam recently slept with someone and then cruelly never returned any of that person's calls, knowingly breaking that person's heart. Importantly, [...] this story is not something which you know to be false. Rather, what is being presented to you is new information about your friend (p. 504).

How would a good friend form beliefs about Sam on Stroud's account (2006)? First, as Sam's good friend, you are going to *process* the information from the third party's report differently than you would if the report were about a stranger. The difference here would lie in the effort you put in "defeating or minimizing the impact of unfavorable data" (Stroud, 2006, p. 505). When it comes to damning news about Sam, you are more likely to seek a way to *discredit* the report by asking yourself questions about the interests and general trustworthiness of the third party. Second, you are more likely to come up with alternative explanations about Sam's behavior that paint him in a more favorable light. Perhaps Sam was right to avoid leading the person he slept with to believe there were chances for a relationship; perhaps the person did something that made Sam want to end things, etc.

With all these extra considerations, Stroud (2006) suggests, "we deploy a different or at least a heightened array of cognitive activities in response to unfavorable information which concerns our friends" (p. 506). So, when it comes to our friends, we adopt *differential epistemic practices*. When we consider these "distinctive doxastic practices which are characteristic of the good friend", we see that they amount to epistemic bias in favor of our friends (Stroud, 2006, p. 499).

Several clarifications are in order at this point. First, the distinctive doxastic practices characteristic of friendship do not require you to completely disregard the available evidence about Sam but rather to *interpret* it differently than you would if it were evidence about a stranger. Second—and relatedly—you are not required to completely deny the report about Sam (Stroud, 2006, p. 508). Instead, you are expected to shine a *different light* on it:

the bias of the good friend will normally take the form of casting what she sees or hears in a different light, shading it differently, placing it in a different optic, embedding it in a different overall portrait of her friend. Where our friends are concerned, in short, we become *spin doctors* (Stroud, 2006, p. 508, italics mine).

Being a ‘spin doctor’ for our friends is epistemically problematic. Spin doctors are not concerned with forming true beliefs but rather with offering a charitable interpretation of their friends’ actions. According to mainstream epistemological theories, however, this is incompatible with being an epistemically responsible agent (Stroud, 2006, pp. 512–514). So, a good friend is a bad epistemic agent.

One might suggest that you, as Sam’s friend, are epistemically justified in being slow to blame Sam. As his friend, you have more evidence about his good character than you have for a stranger’s. You know Sam so well that you know there must have been a good reason for Sam’s actions. This, of course, is not the case for a stranger. So, friendship does not inherently conflict with epistemic norms. You form beliefs about strangers differently than you do about your friends simply because you have more evidence about your friends.

Stroud (2006), however, rejects this suggestion. While it is true that you have different information about Sam than you do about strangers, the suggestion ignores that your partiality towards Sam is not exclusively motivated by evidence:

[t]he good friend tends to seize on factors that would discredit negative evidence, to fasten on possible hypotheses that present her friend in a more favorable light. She withholds belief in propositions amply warranted by the evidence at hand and which would be natural inferences for a disinterested observer to make (Stroud, 2006, p. 515).

So, while you do have different evidence about Sam than you do about a stranger, your differential treatment of Sam sometimes goes *against* the evidence and is therefore not epistemically warranted. This leads Stroud (2006) to conclude that “friendship constitutively involves belief-forming practices which are epistemically irrational or otherwise objectionable” (p. 500). Such partiality conflicts with “the standards of epistemic responsibility and justification held up by mainstream epistemological theories” (Stroud, 2006, p. 498).

In Section 2, I introduced Epistemic Partialism about friendship and took a closer look at two particular Epistemic Partialist accounts. According to Epistemic Partialists about friendship, the norms of friendship sometimes conflict with epistemic norms. If this is true, then friendship sometimes requires you to flout epistemic norms. In the next section, I briefly present two accounts against Epistemic Partialism before developing my own in Section 3.

§3. ACCOUNTS AGAINST EPISTEMIC PARTIALISM

Epistemic Partialism is far from uncontroversial. The idea that you cannot simultaneously be an epistemically responsible agent and a good friend—two roles which we typically strive to occupy—has struck philosophers as implausible (for example, Mason, 2020) or even “provocative” (Kawall, 2013, p. 349). Before advancing a novel argument against Epistemic Partialism in Section 4, I suggest we turn to two recent accounts against Epistemic Partialism, namely Kawall’s (2013) in Subsection 3.1. and Mason’s (2020) in Subsection 3.2..

Section 3 plays a twofold role in my thesis. Besides offering some insights into the current state of research, it offers an overview of two distinct ways of arguing against Epistemic Partialism that attack it on different levels. While Kawall (2013) shows that some of the argumentation Epistemic Partialism relies on is flawed, Mason (2020) holds that Epistemic Partialism rests on a false assumption. For my argument in Section 4, I am ultimately going to go with the second approach, and I am going to explain my decision. Now, let us turn to the accounts.

§3.1. *Kawall Against Epistemic Partialism*

Kawall’s (2013) account against Epistemic Partialism comes in two parts. The account begins by drawing out and rejecting five lines of argumentation from Keller’s (2004) and Stroud’s (2006) work. This is followed by an explanation of why the demands of friendship can be accommodated within epistemic norms. In my analysis of Kawall’s account, I am going to explain both.

Let me begin with the five lines⁵ of Keller’s (2004) and Stroud’s (2006) argumentation as discussed by Kawall (2013, pp. 353–354):

- i) Having biased beliefs about your friends makes friendship more enjoyable, helps boost your friends’ confidence, and is encouraging.
- ii) The demands of friendship also cover belief-formation processes.
- iii) Friendships are at least partially based on self.
- iv) Friendships that require bias are no worse than friendships that do not.

⁵ This is, of course, not to say that there aren’t any further lines of argumentation in Keller (2004) and Stroud (2006).

- v) We are not impartial observers when it comes to our friends.

There are two main objections that Kawall (2013) raises against Keller (2004) and Stroud (2006). The first one is that they go from descriptive to normative. Even if we do things that benefit us and our friends, it doesn't mean they're necessary for friendship. In other words, our common practices when it comes to friendship do not constitute norms of friendship. So, even if we are, *in practice*, often biased about our friends, it does not follow that friendship *requires* us to be biased about our friends.

I will not individually address Kawall's argumentation (2013) against i) – iv) because doing so is unnecessary to support the point made above. Instead, I would like to briefly give an example with i). Even if it were true, in practice, that friendships are more enjoyable if you are biased about your friends, this does not yet mean that you *should* be biased about your friends (Kawall, 2013, p. 355). In fact, friendships could greatly benefit not from bias, but from *knowledge*:

We can help each other to improve, to recognize our strengths and weaknesses, and so on through our knowledge of each other. Friends might be more satisfied (and less frustrated or disappointed) if they view each other in a biased light, but they could also lose out on other valuable aspects of friendship, including the potential to gain self-knowledge and to improve themselves. It is far from clear that friendships would require, as a norm, that we be biased in our beliefs about our friends—there would be significant trade-offs at stake (Kawall, 2013, p. 355, italics in the original).

I will revisit the significance of knowledge in friendships when I present Mason's (2020) account in §3.2..

The second objection raised by Kawall (2013) has to do with how Epistemic Partialists use empirical data. According to Kawall, Epistemic Partialists sometimes rely on flawed empirical evidence to support their claims—like in i)—and they also sometimes make false empirical claims—like in iv) (2013, pp. 354, 361).

Let us start with i). With it, Epistemic Partialists want to show that being biased about your friends, that is, having positive illusions about them, is empirically proven as beneficial. So, the idea goes, you *should* have positive illusions about your friends. Kawall (2013), however, holds that the surveys on which i) is based are methodologically flawed and do not accurately report on positive illusions at all. Instead, they report on the difference between self-assessment and assessment by friends (Kawall, 2013, p. 355). To show that this could be a problem, Kawall (2013) invites us to consider the following case:

[...] if we were to rate highly the abilities and potentials of a talented woman whose confidence had been undermined by an abusive spouse, our assessment would be understood as a positive illusion insofar as it is a more positive assessment than she would give herself (p. 355).

It is clearly wrong to hold that we have a positive illusion about this woman just because of her low self-confidence. Positive illusions should not be measured against one's self-assessment. If so, it is not our *positive illusion* about the talented woman that is encouraging and confidence-boosting. It is our (more or less) *accurate assessment* of her abilities and potentials. So, i) is based on the wrong kind of empirical evidence (Kawall, 2013, p. 355).⁶

Claim iv) is an example of a false claim made by Epistemic Partialists (Kawall, 2013, p. 361). According to it, friendships that require bias are just as good as unbiased friendships. Kawall, however, holds that a friendship that is based or dependent on biased beliefs cannot be equal to a friendship that without positive bias. To this end, Kawall (2013) writes:

a friendship grounded in epistemically-skewed positive beliefs seems vulnerable (as when the truth about a friend can no longer be overlooked), brings a strong risk of overestimating potentials (which can lead to various harms or frustration), and seems to fail to satisfy—at least in part—the common preference to love and be loved based on actual traits and actions, not simply superimposed illusions. (p. 361).

Kawall's (2013) objection that biased friendships differ from unbiased friendships is very intuitively compelling. We want friends who see us and love us as we are, not because of the illusions they have about us. If so, a biased friendship is *flawed* in comparison to a friendship based on an appreciation our friends as they are (Kawall, 2013, p. 359).

So far, I have explained the two main objections Kawall (2013) raises against the five main lines of Epistemic Partialist argumentation: i) that it is too quick to turn observations into normative statements, and ii) that its observations are often empirically unfounded. Next, I am going to briefly explain why Kawall (2013) thinks that the norms of friendship can be compatible with epistemic norms.

⁶ This does not yet mean that positive illusions about our friends do not exist at all (Kawall, 2013, p. 355), but this is not relevant for the point Kawall is making—and the point I am making. What is important here is that the empirical evidence used by Epistemic Partialists to turn i) into a normative claim is flawed, which weakens their case.

Although Kawall (2013) makes a case against Epistemic Partialism, this does not yet mean that we should be *completely* unbiased when it comes to our close friends:

Reasonable optimism about our friends: A slight bias on behalf of our friends is, *ceteris paribus*, permissible according to the norms of friendship. However, this modest bias falls within the bounds of standard epistemic norms; there is no fundamental clash between the two sets of norms (Kawall, 2013, p. 364, italics in the original).

‘Reasonable optimism about our friends’ is plausible. On one side, it acknowledges our common practices in friendship, which plausibly involve treating our friends differently than we treat strangers. On the other side, it does not say we must be biased toward friends or that this bias should be so deep that it violates epistemic norms.

If Kawall can show that the moderate bias required by friendship does not conflict with epistemic norms, then Epistemic Partialism is wrong. So, let me briefly sketch out how Kawall (2013) argues for this.

Kawall (2013) begins from the observation that friends tend to require more evidence to form a negative belief about their friends than they would need to form a belief about a stranger (pp. 364–65). There are two possible explanations for this that do not involve an inherent clash with epistemic norms.

The first explanation proceeds from *pragmatic encroachment*, and specifically *subject-sensitive invariantism* (SSI). According to SSI, as the stakes for holding a belief increase, you require more evidence to deem that belief justified or to classify it as knowledge. Considering that the stakes of forming negative beliefs about your friends are typically higher than the stakes of forming negative beliefs about strangers, friendship is one of the cases where SSI applies (Kawall, 2013, pp. 364–66). So, on SSI, you would require more evidence to form a negative belief about your friend than about a stranger. This explains, then, why we tend to be slower to blame our friends than we are to blame strangers. To bring out this intuition, consider the following example:

DATE. An acquaintance tells you that your friend Roy invited his coworker, Pamela, to take her on a date. However, Roy never showed up. Later that

evening, Pamela saw on Roy's Instagram story that he was watching football with friends.⁷

As Roy's friend, you would not take the above evidence to readily justify the belief that Roy is unreliable and disrespectful. Instead, you would look for additional evidence. This does not mean that you engage in an epistemically problematic practice. Consider a case that does not have to do with friendship and that seems perfectly epistemically rational:

RESTAURANT. Anna is very allergic to all mushrooms. Sam simply does not like their taste. When going to a Chinese restaurant, Sam forms a justified belief that his chosen meal has no mushrooms just by reading the description in the menu. However, Anna checks the menu, then she asks the waiter, and, finally, she asks the waiter to go and ask the chef about the ingredients of her meal. It is only after conducting this thorough inquiry that she forms the justified belief that there are no mushrooms in her meal.⁸

In RESTAURANT, Anna requires more evidence than Sam to justify the belief that the meal has no mushrooms. However, asking for more evidence does not mean Anna is more epistemically irrational than Sam. Instead, we would say that, given the high stakes in her situation, Anna is epistemically rational.

Now, Kawall holds that DATE and RESTAURANT are analogous (2013, p. 365). In both cases, you and Anna are being epistemically rational when you require more evidence to justify your beliefs in high-stakes situations. So, SSI is one possible explanation about why we tend to be slower to form negative beliefs about our friends, and it is an explanation that does not involve epistemic irrationality.

There is a second explanation that does not rely on adopting SSI. The explanation is simply that:

while we might demand greater epistemic justification than we usually do when considering negative claims about our friends, this is epistemically acceptable so long as our belief-forming practices still satisfy standard epistemic standards for acquiring knowledge, while not being so skeptical as to refuse to believe when the evidence reaches some very high degree (Kawall, 2013, p. 368).

⁷This is a modified version of Stroud's example with Jim (2006, 504).

⁸This is a modified version of Kawall's bakery example (2013, 364–365).

This explanation can be traced back to *fallibilism* and to the idea that there are different degrees of justification for a particular belief that range from 0 (no justification) to 1 (certainty). On this account, it is epistemically acceptable to require slightly more justification for negative beliefs about our friends (say, 0.9) than about strangers (0.85), as long as we form negative beliefs about our friends with full justification (1) (Kawall, 2013, pp. 367–68).

It is time to sum up Kawall's (2013) account against Epistemic Partialism. Kawall begins by teasing out five main lines of Epistemic Partialist argumentation (i)–(iv)), focusing on Keller's (2004) and Stroud's (2006) work. Kawall then proceeds to criticize each line, with two reoccurring objections: that Epistemic Partialists are too quick to go from observations to normative statements and that the empirical claims they make are either outright false or at least misguided.

Kawall then proceeds to offer two explanations of the observation that we tend to be more epistemically cautious when forming beliefs about our friends than we are when forming beliefs about strangers: one based on pragmatic encroachment, and one based on fallibilism. Both explanations allow us to remain in the framework of the epistemically permissible, thus offering a compelling alternative to Epistemic Partialism that does not make us choose between epistemic responsibility and friendship.

While Kawall's account directly attacks Epistemic Partialist argumentation, in the next subsection, I am going to present an argument against Epistemic Partialism that attacks its very core.

§3.2. Mason's Murdochian Account

Mason's account against Epistemic Partialism (2020) takes a different approach than Kawall's (2013). Instead of engaging with specific lines of argumentation Epistemic Partialists put forth, Mason (2020) zooms in on a fundamental assumption of Epistemic Partialism and argues that it is mistaken.

The assumption in question is that epistemic goods are *independent* from friendship (Mason, 2020, p. 2440). To make this clearer, consider the following example:

MUSIC IDOL. Anna is a *terrible* singer but has a lifelong dream of auditioning for *Music Idol*. One day, she asks you if you think she should go to the auditions in your city.

In MUSIC IDOL, your justified true belief that Anna is a terrible singer is an *epistemic good*, but this belief is independent from your friendship with Anna. In fact, belief and friendship pull you in different directions: you can either be a supportive friend or an epistemically responsible agent with a justified true belief, but not both.

According to Mason, Epistemic Partialists *must* assume that friendship is incompatible with epistemic goods to argue that friendship is inherently incompatible with epistemic norms (2020, p. 2440). This assumption is necessary for Epistemic Partialism to work, because in its absence, Epistemic Partialists cannot argue that friendship sometimes requires you to flout epistemic norms. If epistemic goods are indistinct from friendship, how could they conflict like Epistemic Partialists say they do?

This is where Mason (2020) comes into play. Mason holds that friendship is *not* inherently distinct from epistemic goods. Drawing on Murdoch (1959, 1970), Mason argues that loving our friends involves *knowing* them, thus making friendship “an epistemically rich state” (2020, p. 2454). Since knowledge is both an epistemic good and constitutive of friendship, then epistemic goods are not distinct from friendship. If Mason is right, then Epistemic Partialism rests on a false assumption.

Masons’ MURDOCHIAN ARGUMENT (2020) can be summarized as follows:

- M1. Friendship involves love (p. 2440).
- M2. Love constitutively involves ‘knowledge of the other’ (p. 2440).
- M3. So, friendship involves ‘knowledge of the other’ (From M1, M2).
- M4. If friendship involves ‘knowledge of the other’, then Epistemic Partialism is mistaken (p. 2440).
- M5. So, Epistemic Partialism is mistaken (From M3, M4).

Mason (2020) explains that

[o]n the Murdochian account, the concerns that underlie the norms of friendship are at least in part epistemic concerns, thus ruling out the possibility of constitutive tension between the two kinds of demand. [...] [A] Murdochian view of friendship provides a novel way of rejecting epistemic partialism (p. 2440).

Two clarifications should be made at this point. First, a definition of what exactly ‘knowledge of the other’ involves is not necessary for the purposes of this thesis, nor is it crucial for Mason’s argument (2020). This is why, below, I am going to

make some very brief remarks on this point. Second, going into the details of Murdoch's work on friendship and love underpinning the MURDOCHIAN ARGUMENT is beyond the scope of this thesis. This is why I am only going to focus on how Mason defends the MURDOCHIAN ARGUMENT, and more specifically M1, M2, and M4.

I am going to start from M4. I have already implicitly discussed why M4 is true above but let me make it explicitly clear once again. Epistemic Partialism claims that epistemic norms are incompatible with the norms of friendship. For this idea to work, Epistemic Partialists must assume that epistemic goods such as knowledge are inherently distinct from friendship; otherwise, they cannot be incompatible. However, if it turns out that friendship constitutively involves epistemic goods in the form of knowing friends, then to be a good friend, you will have to be an epistemically responsible agent and obtain knowledge about your friends. So, there cannot be an inherent conflict between friendship and epistemic responsibility. That goes against the very definition of Epistemic Partialism. So far, so good, but M4 is only a conditional claim. For it to work, M1 and M2 have to be true.

The claim that friendship involves love is widely accepted. Of course, love does not require romantic interest in your friends. You might be familiar with the distinction between *eros*, *agape*, and *philia* often ascribed to Ancient Greek philosophers. On it, *eros* is the passionate love characteristic of romantic relationships, *agape* is the brotherly love characteristic of friendship, and *philia* is the affectionate love you have for pets, nature, etc. (Helm, 2021). On this distinction, the type of love discussed here is *agape* and not *philia*. Even if you oppose this distinction, it is clear that the love you have for your romantic partner differs from the love you have for your friends. Keeping this in mind, I think M1 can be readily granted. This is exactly what Mason (2020) does, calling M1 a "plausible assumption" (p. 2440).

Now all that is left for the success of Mason's MURDOCHIAN ARGUMENT is to show that M2 is true. To achieve this, it is necessary to demonstrate why love inherently includes knowing the person you love. On this point, Mason (2020) writes that:

On Murdoch's view, love is (or at least involves) knowledge of the individual, such that to fail to see the beloved truly is not only an epistemic failure but also a failure of love. On her view, insofar as one's knowledge of the other is lacking, so is one's love (p. 2440).

It goes beyond the scope of this thesis to argue why Murdoch's (1959, 1970) view of love is right, and I am not going to go into Mason's (2020) argumentation on that point. M2 is intuitively compelling even without referring to a particular

theory of love or friendship. Consider how much you know about those you love. From their small, peculiar habits to their biggest dreams and aspirations, you know your friends in an intimate way in which you do not know strangers or even acquaintances. Love often comes as you come to know a person, and it grows the more you come to know them.

However, this does not yet mean that knowledge of the other is related to friendship in some *fundamental* way. To show that this relationship is, in fact, fundamental, try to imagine two people who love each other without knowing much about each other. I think this idea is unintelligible. In most cases, you love someone *because* of the person they are, and for this to happen, you need to *know* what kind of person they are.⁹

Since M1 and M2 are true, M3 logically follows. Friendship involves knowledge of the other. I have already explained why M4 makes sense as a conditional, and, paired with M3, it leads to the conclusion that Epistemic Partialism is mistaken (M5). Mason's MURDOCHIAN ARGUMENT is sound.

With her MURDOCHIAN ARGUMENT, Mason (2020) makes a compelling case against Epistemic Partialism, attacking not a particular account or particular points of the account, but rather the very basis of Epistemic Partialism: the assumption that friendship is incompatible with epistemic goods.¹⁰

Time to sum this section up. In Section 3, I presented two ways in which you might approach rejecting Epistemic Partialism through exploring two accounts against Epistemic Partialism. On one hand, you could question arguments made by Epistemic Partialists—as Kawall (2013) does. On the other hand, as done by Mason (2020), you could attack one of the core assumptions of Epistemic Partialism, thus undermining the plausibility of the whole theory.

In what follows, I am going to take up the second approach and advance a novel argument against Epistemic Partialism which proceeds not from love, as Mason's MURDOCHIAN ARGUMENT (2020), but rather from *honesty*.

⁹ Of course, there are some cases where this idea does not apply to the same extent, for example when it comes to loving newborn babies and pets. I think knowledge still plays a role here (although to a lesser degree than with friends and/or romantic partners): the more you come to know your newborn baby or your pet, the more you love them. However, this observation is not a problem for the Murdochian Argument which is explicitly concerned with friendship.

¹⁰ Mason's (2020) account does not remain unchallenged. For example, Warman (2024) argues that "epistemic partiality may indeed limit what we know about our friends, but not in ways that diminish the quality of our love for them" (p. 372).

§4. THE HONESTY ARGUMENT

As already explained in the Introduction, my original contribution to the philosophical discussion of Epistemic Partialism consists in the advancement of THE HONESTY ARGUMENT to the conclusion that friendship does not require us to flout epistemic norms. If this conclusion is true—as I think it is—then Epistemic Partialism is mistaken.

The Honesty Argument goes as follows:

- P1. Friendship requires the virtue of honesty.
- P2. Honesty constitutively aims at the truth (Dougherty, 2024, pp. 2, 6–7).
- P3. So, friendship requires constitutively aiming at the truth. (From P1, P2)
- P4. Aiming at the truth requires a commitment to epistemic norms.
- P5. A commitment to epistemic norms is incompatible with systematically flouting epistemic norms.
- P6. So, friendship does not require flouting epistemic norms. (From P3, P4, P5)

In the rest of Section 4, I am going to present and explain each of the premises in more detail. Then, in §5, I am going to respond to some possible critique against THE HONESTY ARGUMENT.

§4.1. Premise 1

The first premise of my argument states that friendship requires the virtue of honesty. I think that this is hardly controversial even on a pre-theoretical level. Much like Stroud (2006), I hold our intuitions as a reliable source of information about the demands of friendship. Therefore, my argumentation for P1 goes as follows:

- A1. The demands of friendship are best discerned by our intuitions of what a good friend would do.
- A2. Our intuitions tell us that a good friend possesses the virtue of honesty.
- P1. So, friendship requires the virtue of honesty.

To illustrate this, consider the following example:

SITUATIONSHIP. Anna has been going out with Sam for a couple of weeks now. However, she can't quite tell whether there is something off about him. One day, Anna introduces you to Sam. Later, she asks you what you think of him. You find Sam weird and creepy.

What do you tell Anna? You have two choices. Either you tell her that Sam is weird and creepy, or you do not. If you do not, you could lie and say that Sam is a great guy, or you could sugarcoat the truth by saying that Sam is "certainly interesting" and "quite mysterious". To get to the right answer, you should ask yourself what a good friend would do in your situation.

There are inevitable further considerations about each course of action. One of them is that saying that Sam is creepy could hurt Anna. Another one is that Anna could get mad at you and stop talking to you. These are *prima facie* reasons to not tell Anna the truth. So, it might initially seem that a good friend would not tell Anna that Sam is creepy.

However, I suggest that you should set such considerations aside and ask yourself what you would want a good friend to tell you if you were in Anna's situation. Would you prefer that your friends tell you that the man you are dating is a creepy weirdo, or would you rather they say he is "certainly interesting" and "quite mysterious"? If you are anything like me, you would want your friend's honest, non-sugar-coated opinion.

If you are still not convinced that friendship intuitively demands honesty, consider Philosophy Talk from Section 2. Suppose that Anna's talk turns out to be mediocre. When she asks you what you think, you say it was good, and you suggest some minor corrections. Inspired by this, Anna applies to give the same talk at a conference and, by some fluke, gets a spot. At the conference, the harsh criticism of her talk brings Anna to tears. After the talk, she blames you for not telling her that her talk in 'Philosophy Café' was mediocre. If you were Anna, you'd want your friend to tell you your talk was mediocre rather than find out the hard way. What Situationship and Philosophy Talk aim to show is that friendship intuitively requires friends to be honest with each other. Since the demands of friendship can be best discerned by relying on our intuitions, this means that P1 is true: friendship requires the virtue of honesty.¹¹

¹¹ I defend P1 from objections in §5.

§4.2. Premise 2

The second premise of my argument draws on Dougherty's objectivist account of honesty (2024) to argue that honesty constitutively aims at the truth. To argue for Premise 2, I first present a subjectivist account of honesty advanced by Wilson (2018) and explain why it cannot adequately capture honesty (§4.2.1.). Then, I present Dougherty's account in more detail and explain why it is preferable to subjectivist accounts (§4.2.2).

§4.2.1. Subjectivist Accounts of Honesty

What is a *subjectivist* account of honesty? Subjectivist accounts of honesty center around the idea that honesty concerns how the agent sees things, not necessarily how things actually are (Dougherty, 2024, p. 1; see also Miller, 2017; 2020a; 2020b; 2021a; 2021b, and Wilson, 2018). Such accounts do not postulate a direct connection between honesty and truth, allowing you to be honest even if you tend to get things wrong.

One such account of honesty argues that honesty consists in “a deep motivation to avoid deception” (Wilson, 2018, p. 271). What does it mean to *avoid deception*? There are different types of deception. An agent might lie, or they might offer a “a partial and misleading picture of the truth” (Wilson, 2018, p. 272). This amounts to telling Anna that her date is *a super cool guy* or that he is *certainly interesting and quite mysterious*, respectively. In any case, deception is *intentional*, so not all cases of telling falsehoods are cases of deception.

What matters for honesty, according to Wilson (2018), is that you are deeply motivated to avoid deception. Wilson's central concern is, therefore, whether you genuinely believe what you say, not whether what you say is true. This means that you are not required to aim at expressing the truth, but rather to express your beliefs (which may not align with the truth).

For an example in which honesty and telling the truth come apart on Wilson's (2018) account, suppose that Anna's philosophy from PHILOSOPHY TALK is objectively bad. Additionally, assume that you are a poor philosopher, which means your ability to identify bad philosophy is somewhat flawed. In this case, telling Anna that her philosophy is good is compatible with honesty.

The second interesting question is what makes motivation *deep*. Wilson (2018) suggests that a deep motivation is not fleeting but *sufficiently persistent*: you are consistently motivated to avoid deceiving her (p. 272). Your motivation to avoid

deceiving Anna is also *strong*, or at least *strong enough* to prevent you from deceiving her. Lastly, your motivation to deceive Anna is *robust enough* to ensure that competing considerations—such as not wanting her to be mad at you—are not overridden. If the motivation to avoid deception were not *deep*, you would be only occasionally motivated not to deceive Anna, and even then, it would not always prevent you from deceiving her. On top of this, you would easily reconsider whether you should avoid deceiving Anna when faced with some additional considerations.

So, to briefly sum up, Wilson's (2018) subjectivist account of honesty holds that honesty requires a deep motivation to avoid deception, and avoiding deception does not yet entail telling the truth.

§4.2.2. Objectivist Accounts of Honesty

Contrary to subjectivist accounts of honesty, objectivist accounts postulate an important connection between honesty and the truth. In what follows, I adopt and defend an objectivist account by Dougherty (2024). According to this account, “a necessary part of being an honest act is that the performer of the act intends, in performing it, to be expressing the truth” (Dougherty, 2024, p. 2), not merely to be avoiding deception.

Why opt for an objectivist account? One reason is that we value honesty because it gives us access to some truths about the world (Dougherty, 2024, p. 5). Honesty would be far less important in our interpersonal practices if it did not centrally aim at providing us with truths. In cases of epistemic testimony, for example, we rely on our friends' honesty to learn truths about the world.

A second reason to pursue an objectivist account stems from our idea of what honesty is in the ideal case (Dougherty, 2024, p. 5). We can easily see that, in the ideal case, we necessarily imagine honesty as truth-oriented. In the ideal case of honesty in Philosophy Talk, for example, you do not tell Anna what you believe, but rather how it really is. Note, then, the difference between objectivism and subjectivism when it comes to ideal cases of honesty:

SUBJECTIVISM ABOUT HONESTY: In the ideal case, when you are honest, you say what you believe to be true.

OBJECTIVISM ABOUT HONESTY: In the ideal case, when you are honest, you say what is true.

SUBJECTIVISM ABOUT HONESTY is implausible because it fails to capture how we imagine ideal cases of honesty. According to Dougherty (2024), what is missing is a relation between honesty and the truth. This relation can be established by arguing that honesty constitutively aims at the truth. This aim is achieved in ideal cases of honesty (pp. 4–5).

What does it mean for honesty to *constitutively aim* at the truth? According to Dougherty (2024), “a necessary part of being an honest act is that the agent performing it intends, in performing it, to be expressing the truth” (p. 3). So, the *aim* is to express the truth, and this aim is *constitutive* because it is required if the act is to qualify as an honest act. By using the concept of *aiming*, Dougherty allows that you can have the intention to express the truth yet fail to do so. This helps us differentiate between cases of ideal and non-ideal honesty: ideal honesty always fulfills this aim, whereas non-ideal honesty does not. Because of this, Dougherty does not have to argue for the strong (and implausible) claim that truth is necessary or sufficient for honesty. Instead, Dougherty holds that “An assertion [...] can be honest without being true, and it can also be true without being honest.” (2024, p.1).

Subjectivists about honesty (Wilson, 2018; Miller, 2020) could object that honesty does not always aim at expressing truths but rather beliefs, so that the claim that honesty *constitutively aims* at the truth is false (Dougherty, 2024, pp. 3–4). However, Dougherty shows that even in cases where one might think that an honest act expresses just *beliefs*, it still expresses the truth, albeit in a more obscure way. For example, when I say that “I believe that Anna’s talk was good”, then I am not only intending to express a belief, but rather a *purported truth*. If I were not, then I would be engaging in *deception*. So, it seems that even when we intend to express our beliefs, we still end up intending to express purported truths.

More could be said about objectivist accounts of honesty, but this would go beyond the scope of my paper. Taking the discussion in §4.2. into account, however, I think that I have presented enough argumentation in support of P2, the claim that honesty constitutively aims at the truth. Therefore, I grant P2.

§4.3. Premise 3

Time to take stock of the work done so far in §4. In §4.1., I argued for the first premise of my argument: friendship requires honesty. I did so by appealing to our intuitive picture of a good friend. In §4.2., I presented the second premise of my

argument and argued that honesty constitutively aims at the truth. P2 comes from Dougherty (2024), who, unlike Wilson (2018), holds that a deep motivation to avoid deceiving others is not yet honesty.

So, from §4.1. and §4.2., we have two claims: that friendship requires the virtue of honesty (P1), and that honesty constitutively aims at the truth (P2). From this follows that friendship requires constitutively aiming at the truth. This is simultaneously the first conclusion and the third premise of my argument.

In §4.4. and §4.5., I am going to make the connection between honesty and epistemic norms, ultimately showing that Epistemic Partialism is mistaken. Stay tuned.

§4.4. Premise 4

P1 and P2 were concerned with how friendship relates to honesty and how honesty relates to truth. I then established a connection between friendship and truth in P3. I am now going to connect aiming at the truth with committing to epistemic norms. Commitment, in this case, is to be understood as *reliably adhering* to epistemic norms—by advancing P4.

According to P4, aiming at the truth requires a commitment to epistemic norms. P4 is the argument's key point because it connects honesty to epistemic norms. It is precisely through this link that I make my case against Epistemic Partialism: if good friends are honest, then they must be committed to epistemic norms; and if they are committed to epistemic norms, then friendship cannot require them to flout them.

Epistemic norms govern our knowledge acquisition and belief formation. What is the value of conforming to epistemic norms? Conforming to epistemic norms is instrumentally useful because it increases the likelihood that we have accurate representations of the world (Hannon & Woodard, forthcoming).¹² Since honesty constitutively aims at the truth, there are higher chances of achieving this aim if the honest agent adheres to epistemic norms.

Recall, again, the ideal case of honesty in Dougherty's (2024) account. Dougherty writes that, ideally, an honest act not only aims to express the truth but also

¹² As Hannon and Woodard (forthcoming) note, this does not yet mean that inaccurate representations of the world cannot be useful in *some* situations, for example in some schemata (think of the London Tube Map). Nonetheless, in the usual case, it is the *accurate* representations of the world that serve us the best.

manages to do so. So, the chances of an honest act's being *ideal* are significantly increased if epistemic norms are followed.

One epistemic norm is that you should form beliefs only upon sufficient evidence. If you believe that Anna's talk is going to be mediocre because of the evidence you have for this belief, you are more likely to have an accurate representation of the world than if you form this belief just based on the fact that Anna is your friend.

You might still be unsure about how the value of conforming to epistemic norms can lead to a *commitment* to uphold them. P2 states that honesty constitutively aims at the truth. Since achieving this aim makes for the ideal case of honesty, and since epistemic norms help you get at the truth, then an honest agent must necessarily be committed to epistemic norms. The idea of you having your acts aim at the truth but not being committed to epistemic norms is unintelligible. Therefore, Premise 4 is true.

§4.5. Premise 5

Above, I argued that aiming at the truth requires a commitment to epistemic norms. In the final premise of my argument, Premise 5, I argue that such a commitment is incompatible with systematically flouting epistemic norms. If Premise 5 is true, it explains the incompatibility of honesty and Epistemic Partialism.

I am going to argue for P5 by responding to one obvious critique point Epistemic Partialists could have against my argument. A critic could say that i) Epistemic Partialism about friendship does not require you to *systematically* flout epistemic norms, and ii) *occasional* flouting of epistemic norms is, in principle, compatible with a commitment to the flouted norm. Analogously, you can be committed to the norm of crossing the street only on green and still sometimes jaywalk when you have to get somewhere urgently; occasional jaywalking is, then, compatible with a general aim to cross at green.

At first glance, this worry seems plausible. After all, there are no perfect epistemic agents. Still, we cannot plausibly hold that there are no epistemic agents that are really committed to epistemic norms because of their occasional slip-ups. Note, however, that my argument allows for an occasional slip-up without its indicating a lack of commitment to epistemic norms. As P2 states, honesty *aims* at the truth; this is compatible with failing to achieve that aim in some cases. Truth is neither necessary nor sufficient for honesty (Dougherty, 2024, p. 1).

Importantly, Epistemic Partialism requires us to flout epistemic norms not only occasionally but rather *systematically*. This systematic flouting of epistemic norms is not compatible with being committed to them, just like you are not *committed* to crossing at green if you *systematically* jaywalk.

How does Epistemic Partialism require us to systematically flout epistemic norms? Recall the discussion in Section 2. Keller (2004) holds that good friends are required to put in extra effort into seeing the merits of their friends' pursuits. Similarly, Stroud (2006) suggests that we owe our friends differential epistemic treatment. On both accounts, you ought to form beliefs about Anna differently than about strangers. The fact that your belief-formation process is influenced by friendship constitutes a *systematic* violation of epistemic norms.

Epistemic Partialists do not have any vested interest in arguing that you could be committed to epistemic norms *despite* violating them. The core idea of Epistemic Partialism is that the norms of friendship are *incompatible* with epistemic norms. Arguing that you could flout epistemic norms while being committed to them would not bring the Epistemic Partialist anything, for it would show that you can be committed to epistemic norms even in cases where friendship requires you to flout them. So, an Epistemic Partialist would not deny Premise 5.

To argue that the commitment to epistemic norms is incompatible with *systematically* flouting them, I explained the difference between *occasional* and *systematic* flouting of epistemic norms. While the first is compatible with a general commitment to epistemic norms, the latter is not. Therefore, Premise 5 is true.

Now it is time to take stock of the argumentation I presented in defense of THE HONESTY ARGUMENT in Section 4. As its name suggests, THE HONESTY ARGUMENT proceeds from the idea that there is an inherent incompatibility between the Epistemic Partialists' idea that friendship requires us to flout epistemic norms and the intuitive idea that friendship requires the virtue of honesty.

Proceeding from the idea that friendship requires honesty (Premise 1), I argued that honesty constitutively aims at the truth (Dougherty, 2024) (Premise 2). This means that friendship constitutively aims at the truth (Premise 3). Next, I suggested that aiming at the truth requires a commitment to epistemic norms (Premise 4). Taking all of this argumentation into account, THE HONESTY ARGUMENT concludes that a commitment to epistemic norms is incompatible with systematically flouting them.

In the next section, I am going to consider several objections to THE HONESTY ARGUMENT.

§5. OBJECTIONS AGAINST THE HONESTY ARGUMENT

For some, THE HONESTY ARGUMENT may be a tough pill to swallow. We often find ourselves doing things for our friends that we would not do for strangers, so why should *believing* make an exception?

In this last section of my thesis, I consider possible critique to my argument. In §5.1., I clear up some small initial objections against THE HONESTY ARGUMENT. Then, in §5.2. and §5.3. respectively, I consider two more serious objections. The first objection draws on Keller (2018) to argue that, when it comes to friendship, we should not focus on honesty but rather on what we need from our friendships. THE HONESTY ARGUMENT works in an ideal world where everyone strives to be fully virtuous, but we plausibly prioritize other things beyond virtues. The second objection is based on a thought experiment. Could there be situations where THE HONESTY ARGUMENT delivers counterintuitive judgments about the status of our friendship? After presenting a thought experiment, I sketch an answer that explains how where THE HONESTY ARGUMENT can accommodate such cases.

§5.1. Initial Objections

Some concerns might arise when you first read this thesis, but they turn out not to be a problem for THE HONESTY ARGUMENT after all. In this subsection, I am going to briefly present them and explain why they are unfounded.

§5.1.1. The Objection from Being Mistaken

A worry you might have when you first encounter THE HONESTY ARGUMENT might be that it is unclear why friendship should require honesty if there is the possibility that your friends are wrong. The objection is that it's unreasonable to expect your friends to be honest when they can only give their opinion, not the truth. Perhaps Sam from SITUATIONSHIP is not actually creepy, and you are just mistaken about him, so why should friendship require you to tell Anna that he is creepy instead of telling her that he is *mysterious*?

This objection stems from subjectivist accounts of honesty, which hold that “honesty concerns the facts merely as the agent sees them – being honest concerns “getting things right” merely subjectively, rather than objectively.” (Dougherty, 2024, p. 1, drawing on Miller, 2020; 2021).

In contrast, Dougherty's objectivist account (2024) offers another way to think about honesty and its relation to truth. I have discussed Dougherty's account (2024) at length in §4.2.2., but I would like to highlight one particular point that Dougherty makes:

For though truth is neither necessary nor sufficient for honesty, to say that honesty implies truthfulness is to admit that honesty aims at the truth; and such an aim can have important consequences (p. 1).

In saying that "truth is neither necessary nor sufficient for honesty" (p. 1), Dougherty (2024) already indirectly responds to the critique above. The response is as follows: if honesty does not require truth, then you can be honest to Anna even if you are actually mistaken about Sam, as long as your goal is to tell Anna the truth. What is important is not that you *achieve* the truth, but rather that you *aim* at it. All ideal instances of honesty involve *true* beliefs (p. 1), but there are many non-ideal cases of honesty too.

The claim that you should not be required to be honest with your friends *just because* you can be mistaken about the world is a very strong one. The fact that we are not perfect epistemic agents should not deter us from *aiming* at the truth. Dougherty's (2024) account of honesty, which requires aiming at the truth rather than always achieving it, captures the importance of trying despite our epistemic fallibility.

§5.1.2. The Objection From Loyalty

Another worry one might have is that THE HONESTY ARGUMENT is sometimes incompatible with the virtue of *loyalty*.¹³ Margaret Gilbert (2024) writes that, "[l]ike love, loyalty may be blind—impervious—to important aspects of its object or its circumstances." (p. 68). In other words, loyalty sometimes involves epistemic bias. Such bias, however, is incompatible with honesty. This means that perhaps friendship does not require honesty, and P1 is false.

There are two reasons why this objection is not a problem for my argument. First, it misses an important nuance about who a good friend is required to be honest to. THE HONESTY ARGUMENT is centrally concerned with being honest to *your*

¹³ The idea that friendship requires you to be loyal to your friends is not uncontroversial. For a philosophical account in defense of loyalty as a virtue, see Milligan and Cobham (2024). For an account against loyalty as a virtue, see Keller (2007).

friends. If honesty constitutively aims at the truth, being honest to your friends is incompatible with being biased *about* them.

However, I make no claim about how being honest to others relates to friendship and loyalty to your friends. In any case, I would like to accommodate cases where loyalty to your friends justifies being dishonest to others. For example, being loyal to your Jewish friends justifies lying to the Gestapo. So, one reason why the virtues of loyalty and honesty might seem incompatible to us is that we are thinking of honesty that is directed at a third party, not at our friends. This is a type of honesty THE HONESTY ARGUMENT makes no claims about.

Secondly, what the objection above misses is that loyalty is not always a virtue. Think about all the Gestapo members who were blindly loyal to Hitler. There seems to be something wrong in saying that their loyalty was a virtue, considering how morally *wrong* it was to be loyal to Hitler. Now consider cases where loyalty is a virtue. I cannot imagine a case where being virtuously loyal to your friends justifies being *dishonest* to them. While loyalty is crucial in friendships, I think loyalty and honesty usually align, and being loyally virtuous rarely, if ever, justifies dishonesty. So, a second reason why it might seem that the virtues of honesty and loyalty are incompatible is that we sometimes *misidentify* loyalty as a virtue.

§5.2. The Objection from Unvirtuous Friendship

We value loyalty in friendship, and we also value our friends' well-being. Does honesty come at the price of well-being? In §5.2., I present an objection against THE HONESTY ARGUMENT, which stems from the idea that we ought to prefer our friends' well-being over honesty.

§5.2.1. Keller (2018) on Well-Being and Friendship

In his most recent work in defense of Epistemic Partialism, Keller (2018) argues that our friends' well-being sometimes gives us reasons to believe against the available evidence. If so, THE HONESTY ARGUMENT is wrong. Friendship does not constitutively aim at the truth.

Keller's (2018) starting point is that friends in real life are not perfect moral agents. He acknowledges that "[p]erfectly virtuous friends [...] will not have any need to hold beliefs for each other's sakes." (p. 27, italics mine). However, "among *real humans*, friendships take many different forms, perform many different functions, and manifest many different and often mutually incompatible goods" (p. 28, italics

mine). In real life, then, you sometimes have to form beliefs that go against the available evidence if they are formed for the sake of your friends.

For Keller (2018), “the function of friendship is to help us cope with the fact that we are not fully virtuous, and to serve needs that we have because we are not fully virtuous (p. 19). An analogy with palliative care clarifies this point:

Good friendship [...] can be like good palliative care. A healthy person does not need palliative care, and the point of palliative care is not to bring a patient to full health. Instead, its point is to make life bearable, maybe even rewarding and enjoyable, for those for whom full health is not an option (Keller, 2018, pp. 29–30).

Recall PHILOSOPHY TALK. Your beliefs about Anna's talk partially determine her well-being, giving you a reason to believe that the talk will not be mediocre—even if you have evidence to the contrary. When you believe that Anna's talk is not going to be mediocre, you are forming beliefs for Anna's good, and you are being a good friend to her. Keller's (2018) argument to this end can be summarized as follows:

- K1. You ought to care about improving Anna's well-being.
- K2. Your beliefs about Anna can influence her well-being.
- K3. You ought to form beliefs that improve Anna's well-being.

On their own, K1 and K2 are hardly controversial. It is plausible that you should care about the well-being of your friends and that your beliefs about your friends can influence their well-being. This well-being can be positively influenced by different beliefs at different times. Friends have changing needs:

As my friend, you might read my work in a charitable mood sometimes, and in a hard-headed and critical mood at other times, depending on what you perceive me most to need then. The preparedness to form beliefs for the sake of a friend can be recognized as an element of a good friendship (Keller, 2018, p. 28).

Suppose that Anna's talk from PHILOSOPHY TALK was objectively bad. According to Keller (2018), as a good friend, you need to recognize when Anna needs honesty and when she does not, and you ought to form your beliefs accordingly. If Anna needs your support, you ought to form the belief that her talk was not bad, even if you have evidence to the contrary. You cannot form beliefs that improve Anna's well-being while simultaneously being honest with her. This shows, according to Keller, that honesty is not a norm of friendship and is not always required for it. In contrast, caring for our friends' well-being is a norm of friendship and is always required. So, according to Keller, P1 of THE HONESTY ARGUMENT is false.

§5.2.2. Response to Keller (2018)

Keller's (2018) argument is misguided. Honesty is required for friendship, and P1 is true. To show this, I first argue that if honesty were not a norm of friendship, being dishonest to your friends would have no trade-offs. Since dishonesty comes at a price, honesty is a norm of friendship. Second, if honesty were not a norm of friendship but improving our friends' well-being were, then we would always need to prefer our friends' well-being over honesty. This, however, is implausible.

Let us begin with the trade-offs. Friendship is governed by many constitutive norms. In friendships between fully virtuous agents, these norms are always satisfied, so they do not clash, and there is no need to choose between them. However, in real friendships, norms can sometimes conflict. As a good friend, you have to choose which norms of friendship you satisfy and which ones you flout. This choice comes with trade-offs. Perhaps an analogy helps:

HOMework. You need to write your homework for both English and Math. Today, you only have time for one of the two. Whichever homework you write, you will get written up for not having homework for the other subject.

In the ideal case, you would have time to write your homework for both subjects. However, on this particular day, you need to choose between two pieces of required homework. The trade-off of writing your English homework is getting written up in Math, and the trade-off of writing your Math homework is getting written up in English. Were you not required to write your homework in Math, there would be no trade-offs in choosing to write the homework in English.

Just like you sometimes need to prioritize your English homework over your Math homework due to a lack of time, you sometimes need to prioritize other values in friendship over honesty. This does not yet mean that honesty is not required for friendship, but rather that you accept the trade-offs of choosing support over honesty.

The idea that there are trade-offs to being dishonest to your friends is hardly controversial. We should hope that dishonest friends at least feel bad about being dishonest. In contrast, there are no trade-offs to not doing something that is not a norm of friendship. For example, since yelling "Yerpadoodles!" every time your friend makes a good point is not required for friendship, there are no trade-offs if

you do not yell it. So, the trade-offs related to choosing another value of friendship over honesty indicate that honesty is, in fact, required for friendship.

Second, if honesty is not a norm of friendship but improving our friends' well-being is, then, whenever honesty and well-being conflict, we should prefer improving our friends' well-being over being honest to them—just like we should always choose not embarrassing our friends over yelling “Yerpadoodles!”. However, there seems to be something wrong with saying that our friends' well-being is *always* preferable to honesty. Consider the following examples where it is (hopefully) clear that we should prefer honesty over our friends' well-being:

MEDICAL PROCEDURE. Your friend Gareth is an objectively bad nursing student who thinks he is very skilled. One day he tells you that he feels ready to start putting in IVs.

CONFLICT. Anna shares that she is a Flat-Earther and that she got into an argument with Sam because he told her that the Earth is not flat.

In both cases, being honest with your friends can significantly harm their well-being. In the first case, Gareth is going to have an identity crisis; in the second case, Anna is going to have to come to terms with the fact that her whole image of the world is wrong (and that she embarrassed herself in front of Sam). Nonetheless, it seems that, as a good friend, you ought to tell Gareth and Anna the truth, for taking care of their well-being in this case would involve feeding their *delusions*. I am going to return to this point shortly.

At this point, a critic of my argument could argue that we are not actually choosing honesty over well-being in MEDICAL PROCEDURE and CONFLICT, but rather choosing our friends' long-term well-being over their short-term well-being. If so, then MEDICAL PROCEDURE and CONFLICT are not counterexamples to Keller's (2018) argument.

This is actually not a problem for what I have said so far. I have been contrasting honesty with well-being in §5.2 because Keller (2018) does not see well-being as epistemic, and I wanted to respond to him on his terms. However, I do think that there is an epistemic aspect to well-being and that honesty plays an important role for it. So, choosing honesty *does* improve your friends' well-being.

The dependency between well-being and honesty is due to the major role that epistemic testimony plays in our lives. A big part of our knowledge is acquired

through the testimony of our parents, teachers, friends, colleagues, and so on. Were these people not honest to us, we would know very little about the world and could end up deluded. Think about people who drink bleach or Flat-Earthers. Both groups of people have obtained their purported ‘knowledge’ through testimony. These people have a majorly mistaken worldview, which is in no way conducive to their well-being. If testimony plays such a big role in knowledge formation, we should surely hope that our testimony-givers are honest with us.

Let me wrap up §5.2. In this subsection, I argued that honesty does not come at the price of well-being. I began by presenting Keller’s (2018) account, according to which caring about your friends’ well-being is required for friendship, but honesty is not. After presenting Keller’s argument, I argued that it is mistaken. I offered two lines of argumentation in defense of the idea that honesty is required for friendship. First, in cases where honesty and well-being come apart, dishonesty comes with trade-offs. This indicates that honesty is required even if we do not choose it over well-being. Second, if well-being were a norm of friendship but honesty were not, then we would always have to choose well-being over honesty. This, however, is intuitively implausible. Then, I argued that there is an epistemic aspect to well-being which honesty is central to, so that honesty and well-being are not as conflicting as Keller makes them out to be. Considering all of the above argumentation, I think that Keller’s (2018) account does not pose a problem for THE HONESTY ARGUMENT.

§5.3. A Thought Experiment

In the last subsection of my thesis, I would like to present and respond to a thought experiment that aims to show that THE HONESTY ARGUMENT is intuitively implausible. The thought experiment goes as follows:

CANCER. Anna’s friend, Sam, had late-stage cancer. Up until his death, Sam told Anna that he was confident that the treatments would work. After his passing, Anna found Sam’s diaries, in which he wrote that he had lost any hope of getting better and knew his time had come, and that he had kept this from Anna in order not to upset her.

CANCER raises the following question: how, if at all, can THE HONESTY ARGUMENT explain what happened in CANCER without saying that Sam was not a bad friend to Anna just because he was not honest to her? There are two options. Either Sam is a good friend, and the virtue of honesty is not required for friendship, or Sam is a

bad friend, and friendship requires the virtue of honesty. In the first case, THE HONESTY ARGUMENT is mistaken; in the second case, THE HONESTY ARGUMENT produces an undesirable outcome. In both cases, there seems to be something wrong with THE HONESTY ARGUMENT.

I argue that what Sam did was wrong because it violated one of the norms of friendship. However, I do not think that Sam's actions make him a bad friend, or at least not as bad of a friend so as to make The Honesty Argument implausible.

Sam's actions were wrong. In §5.2., I already argued that the core values of friendship can sometimes give rise to mutually exclusive commitments. I also showed that choosing another norm of friendship over honesty does not mean that friendship does not require honesty. Violating the norm of honesty in friendship is always wrong. This also applies to Cancer.

In CANCER, Sam had two conflicting commitments: to protect Anna's feelings and to be honest with her. He could not do both, so he ultimately decided to protect her feelings. The trade-offs of this choice are i) that Anna is going to feel betrayed if (or when) she finds out that Sam hid the truth from her, and ii) that Sam felt bad about lying to Anna. The context of CANCER, I think, somewhat explains why Sam chose Anna's feelings over honesty, but this does not mean that he did not do anything *wrong* by being dishonest.

Sam's friendship with Anna is flawed, as indicated by his dishonesty. In an ideal friendship, he would not be dishonest to her. This, of course, does not yet mean that he was a *bad* friend, but merely that he could have been a better friend if he were honest to Anna.

THE HONESTY ARGUMENT can accommodate Sam's dishonesty without necessarily leading to the conclusion that he was a *bad* friend. This is a plausible middle ground between painting Sam in an unfavorable light and painting him in a very favorable light. The critics of THE HONESTY ARGUMENT accuse me of doing the former and attempt to do the latter.

Why does the objection from CANCER might seem so plausible at first glance? One of the reasons for this is that it is emotionally laden. Were the situation more trivial, we would have no hesitation to say that Sam and Anna's friendship is flawed. To see that the fact that Sam died changes our intuitions, consider the following case which is significantly more trivial than CANCER:

HAPPY BIRTHDAY. Sam forgot to greet Anna's mother for her 50th birthday. The next day, Anna found his diary, and she read that Sam purposefully did not tell her because he knew she would get upset.

If Sam is alive when Anna finds his diary, there seems to be no excuse for his lack of honesty. It is clear that what he did was wrong, even if he protected Anna's feelings. Now, if Anna discovered the diary after Sam died, it seems to make us more favorable towards Sam. Being more favorable to Sam just because he died, is, of course, a mistake. Whether Sam is dead or alive should be irrelevant for how we judge his actions. So, if we try to distance ourselves from the question of whether Sam is dead or alive and give an example analogous to Cancer but more trivial, the objection from Cancer loses its pull.

When it comes to solving the conflict between the values of friendship in Cancer, the Epistemic Partialist's solution is unnecessarily strong. To say that honesty is not required for friendship just because it conflicts with other norms required for friendship is to shoot a fly with a bazooka. I do not want to completely remove the conflict between honesty and other core commitments of friendship. Instead, I argue that dishonesty, while always wrong, does not always make you a bad friend. This is a more moderate way to solve the problem in Cancer, and it avoids the very implausible claim that friendship mandates epistemic irrationality.

Let me briefly sum up. The objection from Cancer is an objection based on a thought experiment that is supposed to show either that P1 of The Honesty Argument is false or that The Honesty Argument is implausibly harsh in some cases. This critique is misguided. The proper response to Cancer based on The Honesty Argument is not to say that Sam was a very bad friend, but rather that he could have been a better friend if he were honest. Honesty is still required for friendship even in cases where it conflicts with other norms of friendship, as already argued in detail in §5.2.. This means that P1 can still be true even if you think that Sam had good reasons for choosing to protect Anna's feelings over telling her the truth. It is also important to point out that the objection from Cancer relies on the emotions of the reader to sway their intuitions. Once an analogous but less emotionally laden case is presented, the intuitions behind the objection from Cancer wane. So, the objection from Cancer is misguided.

§6. CONCLUSION

My research question in this thesis is ‘Does friendship require us to flout epistemic norms?’. Why even care? Well, Epistemic Partialism has real implications: if friendship is incompatible with epistemic norms, then you cannot simultaneously be a good friend and a good epistemic agent. This is a concerning outcome. This is why, in my thesis, I set out to show that Epistemic Partialists are wrong.

My argumentation proceeded in three main steps. I began by offering an overview of the existing literature on Epistemic Partialism. I introduced two central Epistemic Partialist accounts, Keller’s (2004) and Stroud’s (2006), and then I presented two accounts against Epistemic Partialism, Kawall’s (2013) and Mason’s (2020).

After presenting the current state of research, I advanced my own argument against Epistemic Partialism. I call it The Honesty Argument, because it proceeds from honesty’s relation to truth and also its role in friendship. Honesty, although a virtue commonly taken to be central for friendship and to be related to truth, has received surprisingly little attention in the debate on Epistemic Partialism.

I think that honesty is required for friendship, and that it also centrally aims at the truth. Having an aim at the truth requires a commitment to epistemic norms, the norms that govern our belief formation and knowledge acquisition. The idea that honesty constitutively aims at the truth but does not require a commitment to epistemic norms is unintelligible. Such a commitment clearly precludes flouting epistemic norms. So, if friendship requires honesty, then it cannot require you to flout Epistemic Norms. Epistemic Partialism is mistaken.

In the third and last step of my argumentation against Epistemic Partialism, I considered some possible critique to my argument and specifically to the idea that friendship requires honesty. The first two objections turned out to be misguided from the start. The first more significant objection to The Honesty Argument draws on Keller (2018) to suggest that we should prefer our friends’ well-being to honesty in cases where the two conflict, meaning that honesty is not always required for friendship. To this, I responded that friendship has many conflicting norms. While we might sometimes choose our friends’ well-being over honesty, it does not mean that honesty is not required for friendship. Part of what it is to be a good friend is to choose well between two conflicting norms. The last objection to The Honesty Argument argued that it is too demanding and intuitively

implausible in some cases. I explained that this objection rests on a misinterpretation of the judgement which THE HONESTY ARGUMENT delivers in these cases, as well as on skewed intuitions based on the context of the discussed examples.

Considering all of the above argumentation, I conclude that friendship does not require us to flout epistemic norms.

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