LOVE AND RATIONALITY:
A FAITH-BASED ACCOUNT OF EPISTEMIC PARTIALITY IN FRIENDSHIP

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ABSTRACT

Much work has been done in contemporary epistemology to reconcile our epistemic ideals with our human need for healthy relationships with our loved ones. Ryan Preston-Roedder makes an attempt to resolve the tension between these two goals in his paper, "Three Varieties of Faith." However, his account lacks the clarity necessary to make a thoroughly convincing argument. In this paper, I expand on Preston-Roedder's ideas, distilling a novel account of epistemic partiality that allows us to maintain epistemic rationality without sacrificing elements of friendship that have a significant impact on our social and emotional well-being.

I. INTRODUCTION

In "Three Varieties of Faith," Ryan Preston-Roedder argues that faith—construed in a broad, non-religious sense—is crucial to flourishing and should be considered a virtue.[1] He maintains that a deeper understanding of three types of faith—faith in oneself, faith in our loved ones, and faith in humanity—can help us better grasp the meaning of a virtuous life and clarify the relationship between our epistemic and practical ideals.

This paper focuses on one of Preston-Roedder's three types of faith: faith in our loved ones. I aim to place this faith in the context of the literature on epistemic partiality in friendship. Preston-Roedder's analysis offers a unique perspective on our epistemic treatment of those close to us, allowing emotional components to play a more prominent role than many other philosophers have allowed. I believe that such a perspective could go a long way in explaining our intuitions about our epistemic behavior towards our friends, while simultaneously resolving some of the apparent tension between friendship and what has traditionally constituted a virtuous character.

Preston-Roedder's account, however, is currently too vague to accomplish this task. This paper seeks to buttress his argument by offering a clearer explanation of what faith might believably be, with the aim of showing how a faith-based account of epistemic partiality can offer a new and informative interpretation of friendship norms. In section II, I will explain the parts of Preston-Roedder's argument that pertain to faith in our loved ones. In section III, I will briefly sketch my design for what a stronger version of a faith-based account might look like. In section IV, I will discuss faith's place in the literature on epistemic partiality in friendship, showing how my account explains the motivation behind epistemic partiality and ultimately offers a better explanation of our epistemic treatment of our friends.

II. THREE VARIETIES OF FAITH

It is important to explicate the language of this paper. The epistemology of friendship considers questions regarding the belief-forming processes that we—consciously or not—employ when evaluating the behaviors and character of those close to us.[2] The terms "epistemic

1 Ryan Preston-Roedder, "Three Varieties of Faith," *Philosophical Topics* 46, no. 1 (2018): 176-177, 10.5840/philtopics201846110.

2 In this paper, I will be applying the language of the friendship literature to all close relationships. You may assume that when I discuss "epistemic partiality in friendship" or "epistemic treatment of one's friends," the same comments apply to situations involving one's family, significant other, etc.

treatment" and "doxastic practice" refer to those belief-forming processes. The primary question is whether we, as human agents, extend undue charity to our friends when evaluating them, i.e. whether we form favorable judgments about our friends' characters and conduct even when the evidence points us towards less savory conclusions.

This is known as "epistemic partiality." Ideally, we should not permit such biases to influence our judgment. It is epistemically irresponsible—irrational, even—to form judgments on the basis of anything but good reason and evidence. However, there are features of what is generally considered "good friendship" that seem to necessitate this kind of irrationality. At first glance, the willingness to believe in the goodness of our friend even against contrary evidence seems to be a virtue. Therein lies the issue at the heart of the friendship literature. Is it permissible to be a good friend when doing so directly contradicts our responsibility to be rational?

Faith comprises Preston-Roedder's contribution to this conversation. He argues that faith allows us to resolve the tension between friendship and rationality by giving emotional connections a role in the way we form judgments about ourselves and others. Whether or not he is successful will be explored below.

According to Preston-Roedder, all three varieities of faith share a basic structure comprised of three core elements: cognitive, volitional, and emotional. The cognitive element involves the tendency people have to "even in the face of reasons for doubt, make certain favorable judgments" about the people they have faith in, and the volitional element involves one's personal investment in the truth of those judgments.[3] This is closely bound with the emotional element, which Preston-Roedder describes as "a form of courage" that arises from the inherent risks and vulnerability associated with having faith in someone (opening oneself up to betrayal, or being deceived by someone's character).[4]

Preston-Roedder argues that this concept of faith constitutes a virtue because of the important role it plays in allowing our relationships to flourish. He enumerates the three ways this is accomplished. First, faith in our loved ones strengthens the emotional bonds that hold relationships together. In good relationships people are "bound together by characteristic forms of love or concern" that "make us more apt to see what is admirable about [our loved ones], and seeing what is admirable, in turn, reinforces our concern."[5] Second, Preston-Roedder argues that faith has a subtle but direct influence on

3 Preston-Roedder, "Three Varieties," 176-177.

4 Preston-Roedder, "Three Varieties," 178.

5 Preston-Roedder, "Three Varieties," 185.

our loved ones' behaviors. In holding favorable beliefs about people, we set expectations for them to "live up to" those beliefs, prompting them to "adopt morally decent actions and attitudes, or to perform well in certain nonmoral respects."[6] Finally, Preston-Roedder says that faith counts as a virtue simply because it is "admirable in itself, quite apart from its result."[7] Having faith in someone involves standing in a kind of emotional solidarity with them, and failing to maintain faith in that person represents betrayal. Maintaining favorable beliefs about a person—even in the face of evidence against them—demonstrates loyalty, and that loyalty further strengthens the bonds between people.

Worries arise from this outline of faith, primarily because it is unclear what precisely faith is meant to be. Preston-Roedder describes it as the tendency to "view one's loved ones in a favorable light." But, it is unclear whether this means we should form favorable beliefs about our loved ones themselves or about their behaviors, and whether faith is not a doxastic practice at all but rather an emotional state or attitude. The former is suggested by the second description of faith's significance. It seems that if having faith in someone involves holding positive beliefs about them in a way that influences their behavior in accordance with those beliefs. Faith, then, is a belief-forming process. However, the first description characterizes faith as an emotional attitude. This entails a "form of love and concern" that both influences and is influenced by our beliefs, which is not itself a doxastic practice. The third description aligns more with this second interpretation; if faith's virtuous nature derives from its status as a kind of emotional solidarity, then it would seem that faith itself is an emotional attitude—one that has epistemic *consequences* but is not itself epistemic.

III. DEFINING FAITH

My favored interpretation characterizes faith as an emotional attitude rather than a doxastic practice, where "emotional attitude" refers simply to the feelings one entertains about someone else. In the case of friendship, our emotional attitude might be "love and concern," according to Preston-Roedder, perhaps supplemented with a kind of devotion, loyalty, or strong connection to our friend. As discussed above, this interpretation is permitted by the vagueness of Preston-Roedder's definition of faith. His definition deals extensively with faith's consequences, but has little to do with its actual character. We know that it involves seeing what is admirable in our loved ones, forming positive beliefs about them, and standing in emotional solidarity with them. We

6 Preston-Roedder, "Three Varieties," 185.
7 Preston-Roedder, "Three Varieties," 188.

know that it involves evaluating someone's behaviors charitably, but it does not involve being blind to evidence of wrongdoing on their part. But this is about the extent of our knowledge.

I now submit my interpretation of this phenomenon, which characterizes faith in our loved ones as an *emotional commitment with epistemic consequences*. On this account, faith is entirely comprised of emotional solidarity; it is a commitment to someone based on feelings of love and concern that only requires the individual to maintain a modestly favorable view of that person and act accordingly.

There are many moving parts here, so allow me to fill in this sketch. To illustrate what I mean by faith as an "emotional commitment," let us borrow one of Preston-Roedder's examples. Imagine that Eric attends his friend Rebecca's first poetry reading. Eric and Rebecca are close; Eric knows his friend well and feels love and concern for her, along with a kind of loyalty and devotion that makes him more willing to address her needs and well-being than those of a stranger. Eric has never heard Rebecca's poetry before, but as her friend he has faith in her. What does this entail? Preston-Roedder says that Eric's faith disposes him to "listen to [Rebecca's] performance with a sympathetic ear" and makes him "sensitive to merits…that other, more disinterested members of the audience are likely to overlook."[8] At first glance, these look like deliberate efforts on Eric's part to form positive beliefs about Rebecca's performance, but it is not clear that this is the case. Before I explain why, however, more background information is required.

In the literature on epistemic partiality in friendship, it is accepted that friends are—in virtue of the feelings of love and devotion they entertain for one another—expected to support each other. This could involve encouraging each other in achieving their goals, offering emotional support in times of stress, or siding with them when their character is called into question. I accept this assumption on my faith-based account of partiality, but I would like to hedge it with a few additions.

First, I assume that "friends supporting one another" means friends support one another both outwardly through their actions, and internally through their feelings. This clarifies motivation. If our friends acted on motives other than their love for us, we might be less inclined to call them our friends. Sarah Stroud illustrates this nicely, pointing out that "I am not really your friend…if I hang out with you only because your mother pays me to."[9] We can extend this

8 Preston-Roedder, "Three Varieties," 184.
9 Sarah Stroud, "Epistemic Partiality in Friendship," *Ethics* 116, no. 3 (2006): 501, 10.1086/500337.

requirement and assume that, with respect to our loved ones in general, support should be both internal and external in nature.

Bearing this in mind, however, it is important to recognize that support for our loved ones need not always manifest in positive beliefs or behaviors. Jason Kawall argues this at length, pointing out that while we do hope that our friends will support us, we also rely on them for honesty. "We do not desire just any positive belief on the part of our friends," he says, "rather, we hope to have earned [it]."[10] Nomy Arpaly and Anna Brinkerhoff make a similar point, presenting the example of a drug addict struggling to quit. The addict seeks friends who manifest their support with "a healthy dose of suspicion" and accompanying tough love behaviors, because this kind of support is more likely to help them quit than a rosier, more "positive" variety.[11] Drawing from these discussions, we can conclude that "positive support" can actually be detrimental to a relationship, while "honest support" can strengthen a relationship even when it involves forming negative beliefs about someone.

Analogously, a faith-based account does not demand the emotional commitment required of friendship to be infallible. Eric's commitment to Rebecca—and consequently his faith in her—is grounded in his feelings of love for her, but the positive feelings resulting from that love need not be continuous in order for Eric's faith to remain. To understand my faith-based account, we must make a clear disctinction between this underlying commitment and other superficial feelings. Friendships are complicated and are subject to external influence. I would argue that it is a sign of a strong friendship—rather than a deteriorating one—if friends are able to temporarily feel negative emotions about each other (frustration, jealousy, etc.) without materially damaging the underlying sense of love and loyalty that serves as the basis for their friendship.

Bearing all this in mind, let us return and see how my concept of faith functions in the poetry example. On my account, Eric's faith in Rebecca is a manifestation of his enduring love for her, and this influences his epistemic practices by motivating him to try and see the good in the performance, to pay close attention, and to reflect thoughtfully on the work. Note that Eric is in no way required to form positive beliefs about the performance. His commitment requires him to, as Preston-Roedder puts it, view Rebecca "in a favorable

10 Jason Kawall, "Friendship and Epistemic Norms," *Philosophical Studies* 165 (2013): 358-59, 10.1007/s11098-012-9953-0.

11 Nomy Arpaly and Anna Brinkerhoff, "Why Epistemic Partiality is Overrated," *Philosophical Topics* 46, no. 1 (2018): 45, 10.5840/philtopics20184613.

light," and to support her in her projects.[12] But as discussed above, this need not manifest in undue charity when it comes to Eric's doxastic treatment of her. Eric views Rebecca in a favorable light; he sees her as an adult capable of taking criticism, and respects her enough to give her criticism so she can improve. Thus, Eric's faith does not manifest itself in biased epistemic treatment—for example, ignoring evidence indicating that the performance was poor to form the belief that it was actually good—but in a deep emotional commitment which motivates him to support his friend in ways that realistically help her accomplish her goals.

IV. FAITH AND EPISTEMIC PARTIALITY

At first glance, faith seems to bear a strong resemblance to epistemic partiality. Indeed, Preston-Roedder's definition looks a great deal like it, echoing Stroud and Simon Keller's classic characterizations of epistemic partiality in friendship. For example, Stroud describes friendship as being "based on your friend's character and your esteem for his merits," and argues that consequently, "it is not surprising that we…massage our beliefs about our friend's character in a favorable direction."[13] Keller's account is similar, giving partiality a significant role in enabling our relationships to flourish. "What you believe about your friend," he says, "can help determine whether she lives a life that includes a valuable relationship with you," which contributes significantly to that person's well-being.[14]

Given these similarities, it is easy to see how one might read Preston-Roedder's account of faith and equate it to epistemic partiality. Preston-Roedder, however, insists that faith is a separate entity from partiality, which he views as just one of the "cognitive dispositions" that constitutes faith. Preston-Roedder also says that while Stroud and Keller thoroughly examine the cognitive elements of our epistemic treatment of our friends, they completely ignore the other two elements in their accounts and thereby exclude from their analyses the emotional aspects that are crucial to understanding our relationships with other people.[15]

My intuition here lies with Preston-Roedder. As I interpret it, faith is a purely emotional attitude that is quite distinct from partiality, which, like Preston-Roedder, I am inclined to classify as an epistemic consequence of faith. I think a faith-based account of our epistemic treatment of our loved ones has a great deal to contribute to the friendship

12 Preston-Roedder, "Three Varieties," 188.

13 Stroud, "Epistemic Partiality," 511.

14 Simon Keller, "Belief for Someone Else's Sake," Philosophical Topics 46, no. 1 (2018): 23.

15 Preston-Roedder, "Three Varieties," 190.

literature, because it allows us to evaluate our behaviors in both emotional and cognitive terms. Friendship, as Stroud says, is "an indispensable component of a good life."[16] It is also a fundamentally emotional thing, grounded in love for another person. Excluding the emotional component seems to leave a gap in a crucial part of one's analysis.

However, a faith-based account does more than simply make room for touchy-feelies. It can also explain the intuitive appeal of partiality theories while simultaneously avoiding some of their major pitfalls. The intuitive appeal of epistemic partiality in friendship stems both from what we *hope* our friends would do for us and what our friends *tend* to do for us. We hope that our friends will support us, encourage us in our projects, and take our side. And generally, we have a tendency to be more attentive and charitable in our evaluations of our friends than with strangers. Partiality theorists like Stroud and Keller recognize these intuitions and tendencies, but mistakenly interpret them as indicators that epistemic partiality is constitutive of friendship. Kawall draws out the dangers of this interpretation, pointing out that we do not just want support from our friends, we want *genuine* support. If your friends were to continuously form unwarranted positive beliefs about you, it would become "hard to take these evaluations seriously," and you might "begin to take the positive claims of your friend about you with a grain of salt."[17]

There is an apparent tension between Kawall's interpretation of these intuitions and Stroud and Keller's interpretation. But on a faith-based account, they can be cleanly explained as examples of the emotional element of faith at play. We hope our friends will support us because we expect that they feel for us those emotions which are constitutive of faith. Any partiality we exhibit towards our friends is an epistemic consequence of that faith, and not a necessary requirement of it. If our intuitions about the norms of friendship have simply been misidentified, then it is faith—not partiality—that is constitutive of friendship.

The upshot of this conclusion is that many of the worries plaguing partiality theories dissolve under a faith-based account, most notably the worry that there is a conflict between the apparent norms of friendship and the norms of epistemic rationality. On a partiality-based account, it seems that the norms of friendship begin to require a kind of epistemic irrationality. After all, it is irrational—or at the very least, epistemically irresponsible—to form beliefs against or beyond the available evidence. If it is faith that is constitutive of friendship,

16 Stroud, "Partiality," 518.
17 Kawall, "Friendship," 359.

however, the pressure lifts slightly, because faith does not require epistemic partiality, as we saw in the case of Eric and Rebecca. On a faith-based account, Eric was not required to form irrationally positive beliefs about Rebecca's poetry. Rather, he was required to form *honest* beliefs about it; his commitment to Rebecca only required him to maintain an esteem and respect for her character, which motivated him to diligently form opinions about her work that would best help her achieve her goals.

Interpreted this way, faith offers itself as an alternative to epistemic partiality, and one that could go far towards resolving some of the tension between the virtues of good friendship and epistemic rationality. We will turn our attention to this particular conflict in the final section. The primary objection to Preston-Roedder's account was that faith was meant to be a virtue, yet it clashed with the virtue of epistemic rationality. Before I conclude I will say a few words about Preston-Roedder's response to this objection, and consider a reply of my own.

V. FAITH AS A VIRTUE

Preston-Roedder replies to the objection by noting that the conflict between these two ideals does not suggest that faith is not virtuous, but rather that "the ideal of being epistemically rational does not have absolute priority in determining the makeup of a virtuous person's character."[18] Due to our own "cognitive limitations," he argues, ideals of epistemic rationality will inevitably "conflict with the pursuit of aims that help make [life]…worthwhile," and therefore the solution is not to discard faith as virtuous, but rather to re-evaluate the primacy of epistemic rationality.[19] Keller and Stroud make similar concessions. Keller focuses on the cognitive limitations of human beings, arguing that we should simply accept the conflict between friendship and virtue. "What an imperfect person legitimately seeks in a friend," he says, "is not always the same as what a fully virtuous person seeks in a friend…good friendship, in this sense, need not be oriented to virtue."[20] Similarly, Stroud points out that in ethics, it is generally agreed that moral theories should "be compatible with leading a good life in an integrated way," and suggests that the conflict might suggest a re-evaluation of epistemic rationality, rather than identifying something flawed in the concept of friendship.[21]

My faith-based account offers a simpler response. As discussed above, faith is not necessarily incompatible with epistemic rationality

18 Preston-Roedder, "Three Varieties," 197.
19 Keller, "Someone Else's Sake," 29.
20 Keller, "Someone Else's Sake," 29.
21 Stroud, "Partiality," 521.

in the way partiality is; one can be epistemically rational while maintaining faith in their loved ones. In fact, faith might help a friendship get closer to the ideal virtuous relationship, one in which both parties attempt to be virtuous individually, and also encourage one another to improve. In the poetry case, it would seem that Eric is doing just that for Rebecca. In communicating his honest beliefs about her reading out of love and a desire to encourage her efforts, Eric is behaving virtuously with respect to his epistemic conduct and his friendship, with no conflict arising between the two.

VI. CONCLUSION

Despite the worries plaguing "Three Varieties of Faith," it presents a unique account of our epistemic treatment of our loved ones. It rings true with many of our intuitions in a way that traditional theories of epistemic partiality do not. Preston-Roedder argues that this chord is struck by the emotional component of faith, and I agree. By defining faith as an emotional phenomenon, I hope to have answered our intuitions and provided an outlet that does not force us to choose between love and rationality, the two virtues that are essential components of a life worth living.

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