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Counsel

A Conversational Outworking of Friendship

A Dissertation Presented for the
Doctor of Philosophy
Degree

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Naomi Rinehold
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Abstract

Friends often express their friendship through conversation. When one friend helps another change for the better in a such a conversation, the friends are engaging in “counsel.” Counsel, though a common practice, is not well understood and is often done badly.

This dissertation explores the practice of counsel, arguing that it is grounded in friendship, aims at the good of one of the friends, and is characterized by an open-ended form of subjective communication. To do this, it puts forward a minimal conception of friendship and shows how each of its six aspects is necessary for both friendship and counsel. Then it addresses what counts as “changing for the better” and the problems of deference that can arise when friends don’t agree about what is good. Next, it explores the Kierkegaardian concept of subjective communication, considers how Socrates used it, and shows why this method is not only best-suited but necessary for counsel. Finally, it delineates the criteria for ideal counsel and illustrates these with two extended examples.

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Chapter One: Introduction

I entered the conversation confused, frustrated and unhappy. None of my plans were working out, and I couldn't figure out why or what to do about it. I emerged from the conversation enlightened and intent on a new approach to the problem. My afternoon with a friend had been transforming. Then I thought back on our talk and I realized: she hadn't actually given me any advice at all. She had listened and asked questions and told me anecdotes that didn't always seem to have any point. And somehow this did more for me than the hours I had already spent agonizing on my own or the very insightful advice I had received from a different friend. I was left wondering, "What *was* that?" The basic goal of this dissertation is to answer that question.

For lack of a better term, I am calling what my friend did "counsel." Counsel is a practice characterized by its end, means, and context. When one friend counsels another, she is aiming at the good of her friend. There may be other, intermediate ends, but the friend's good is always the ultimate aim. Counsel can use many forms of communication, but it is characterized by an open-ended, indirect kind that focuses on the people involved rather than the content of the discussion – what Kierkegaard calls "subjective communication." *Counsel is a conversational outworking of friendship which uses subjective communication to pursue the good of the friend being counseled.*

It isn't entirely clear into which branch of philosophy the study of counsel should fall. As a practice with a moral end, it is a proper object for ethics. As a possible step in deliberation, it could fall under action theory. As a way of coming to understand particular things, it belongs to epistemology. As an interpersonal, relational practice, it fits well with feminist philosophy. It can also contribute to character formation, education, the practice of philosophy, and the development of friendship. It is a complex human practice that defies easy categorization, and for this reason, I will be drawing from several fields of philosophy in this examination of it. But I will also be relying heavily on my own experience and on the experiences of others. In some ways, this is an analytic approach to a phenomenology of friendship, or at least, to one particular outworking of it.

Counsel is something we do often, but usually not very well. One reason for this is the technical difficulty of doing it well; another is the motivational difficulty of doing it with the right ends and attitudes. But the biggest roadblock in our practice of counsel may be that we aren't aware of it as its own, discrete thing. Friends, being what we are, instinctively practice it in fits and starts. We love our friends and respect their agency, so we try to "be there for them" in the right kind of way. We suggest instead of dictating and try to understand our friend's perspective before advancing our own. But we are hampered by the fact that we don't actually know what we are doing. We know what we want from it, more or less – to help our friend. And the nature of friendship itself gives us some idea about what means are out-of-bounds. But since we lack any theoretical framework, our practice is *ad hoc* and our efforts dissipated. The most pressing reason we have for understanding counsel is the great good to be gained by practicing it well and consistently.

Counsel

A typical instance of counsel is a medium-length conversation between two people on a relatively serious subject, but many instances of counsel are not typical. Some stretch out over days, while others are over in seconds. Some involve yelling or hardly speaking at all. In some, more than two friends participate. Sometimes counsel aims at an intellectual change, and other times its aims and methods are almost entirely emotional.

To get a feel for what counsel is, let's look at a brief example. The following is a synopsis of a conversation I had with a friend who was thinking about having children and trying to decide whether to talk to her husband about it.

Her: I'm already thirty-one. The clock is ticking: if I don't have kids soon, it'll be too late.

Me: Is the lost opportunity the issue? Or do you just really want kids?

Her: [*Explains at length how it's both, but mostly the latter.*]

Me: So what's stopping you?

Her: [*Indecision, and worries about inadequacy for motherhood.*]

Me: [*Tells a story about another friend who had zero experience with children, and*

then had a child with special needs, but who is a really great mom who dearly loves her daughter.]

Her: Yeah, I guess I could do that.

Me: *[Talks about the characteristics she already has which will make her a good mother and mentions that Rob (her husband) is also good parent material.]*

Her: *[Ignores the comment about Rob and expounds on things she imagines doing as a mother, proposing ways to keep her career on track at the same time.]*

Me: *[General affirmation of what she just said.]* Query: So why the indecision?

Her: Well, I can't exactly do this by myself.

Me: I suppose not. Have you talked to Rob about it yet?

Her: No.

Me: Why not?

Her: What if he doesn't want kids? *[Launches into a potential train of events which begins with Rob not wanting kids and ends in a messy divorce and single motherhood.]*

Me: That sounds pretty brutal – do you think it might happen?

Her: Well, no. But parts of it might, and I don't want us to be unhappy just because I wanted kids and he went along with it for my sake.

Me: *[Tells how my father generally doesn't like children but loves his own kids and was really awesome to us when we were growing up.]* Ends: And of course he's still crazy about my mom.

Her: Sure, but what if Rob is different?

Me: Well, you know him better than I do. You've already told me what your fears say about how he might react. What do your hopes say?

... and so on, until my friend had come to a decision. Making a decision is one kind of change at which counsel can aim, but not the only kind. So for our counsel to be successful, it wasn't necessary that my friend decide anything. It would have been enough if she had felt better about the situation or understood her desire for children better or any such internal change for the better. She only needed to attain some good that was relevant to her and her situation. At bottom, this is because friendship shapes

the aims of counsel. Generally speaking, we want good lives for our friends. We want them to be good people who live well and experience good things. Not all of these are appropriate aims for counsel, as we will see in chapter 3, but the goodwill we have toward our friends shapes the ends of counsel.

Likewise, both the context and aim of counsel shape its means, which is an open-ended form of subjective communication. The goods at which counsel aims are internal and have to be achieved by the person in whom they reside (the counselee). I cannot reach inside my friend and make him less insecure or cause him to understand something or make a decision for him. These are all parts of his own process of development – of self-transformation. What I can do is help him as he engages in this process by asking questions, making suggestions, telling stories, posing hypotheticals, etc. That is, I can help him through a particular kind of conversation. This kind of conversation, what I am calling open-ended subjective communication, is the characteristic means of counsel, mostly for two reasons. First, because it expresses the friendship out of which a person engages in counsel and second, because it is often the best and sometimes the only means by which the counselor can help his friend achieve the particular sorts of internal goods at which counsel aims. We often use other means like advice, exhortation, or commiseration to help our friends, but these methods are generally inferior to counsel in achieving certain kinds of changes. I discuss this in detail in chapter 4.

This is not to say that friends always engage in this sort of dialogue – friendship is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for counsel, and there are many situations in which other kinds of communication are more appropriate. Rather, when people are friends, and especially when they are close friends, they will naturally fall into subjective communication that aims at each other's good. Sometimes the good we aim at feels serious, as in the previous example, and other times it is almost indistinguishable from small talk.

Since counsel can range from relatively trivial conversations to deep discussions, let's look at a relatively unserious example. Consider Jill and Peter at work:

Jill: How's it going?

Peter: Fine, except my brother is in town.

Jill: Oh? Is that a bad thing?

Peter: Not usually, but I really don't have to time to entertain him right now.

Jill: No kidding – we have a huge project due at the end of the week.

Peter: Tell me about it.

Jill: Is he just inconsiderate, or what?

Peter: Nah. He's in college, and he doesn't get what it's like to have a job.

Jill: And some things you only learn through experience.

Peter: That's true. He just needs more time to grow up.

As a conversation, this is pretty low-key. Jill isn't giving advice, and Peter isn't doing any soul-searching. It's precisely the sort of conversation one might have and not think anything of it, one which could issue from reflexive politeness. If this is the case, then all that is being communicated is, "It is socially appropriate and convenient to make small talk with you about this unimportant matter."

But if Peter and Jill are friends, then there is probably something else going on. The banal greeting "How's it going?" transforms into a genuine inquiry that communicates "Your wellbeing is important to me." The ensuing exchange becomes the pursuit of a particular good for Peter – his relationship with his brother. Peter enters the conversation frustrated but ends it both more reconciled to his situation and more understanding of his brother. Such a change in perspective – what Kierkegaard calls "appropriation" – is a hallmark of counsel. One could also speak of it in terms of what Linda Zagzebski calls "understanding," which "involves the grasp of part/whole relations."¹ *Appropriation* not only takes in something new, but situates it correctly within what the counselee already knows. Peter's state at the end of the conversation is characteristic of understanding in another way as well: while his new information *can* be expressed propositionally, it is likely that he has not actually put it in that form. This too, is typical of counsel: that we come to understand something before we can/do articulate it, as I argue in chapter 4.

¹ Zagzebski, 2001. p 242

Each of the foregoing examples illustrates not only the practice itself but also the three aspects of counsel: its context, friendship; its aim, the good of one of the friends; and its means, a particular sort of conversation. One might wonder, however, whether the practice I am describing really needs all three of those elements in every instance and, more specifically, whether friendship is really a necessary condition. After all, therapists make a living helping people change for the better, but they are not their patients' friends. And I can chat with a stranger on the bus in a way that both is subjective and aims at her good. What reason do we have, then, to think that counsel is grounded in friendship?

Why counsel comes from friendship

I am contending that counsel is grounded in and expressive of friendship, and that friendship is the only context for counsel. I'd like to take a moment here to explain why I think this is the case. It is not because only friends can aim at the good of others or engage in subjective communication. It's not uncommon to work toward of the good of strangers, whether it be by supporting a charity or by posting a helpful video to YouTube. Nor is open-ended subjective communication the exclusive domain of friends. We can use it as a weapon against people we dislike (though this is difficult²) or as a pastime with people about whom we do not much care (as Jill and Peter might have been doing were they not friends). Rather, counsel must arise from friendship for the same sort of reason that mushrooms grow from mycelium. If they grew on blueberry bushes, they wouldn't be mushrooms. To put it less metaphorically, I am describing a practice, instances of which I have seen arising from and expressing friendships. This is an empirical claim and as such is open to counter-claims based in other observations.

It would be easy to raise a counter-claim by bringing up therapists or casual acquaintances and saying, "I've seen lots of people do what you're describing, and they weren't friends." I'd like to address this objection on the front end of this dissertation in two ways. First, such an objection may be based on richer understanding of friendship

² One way this could happen would be if your interlocutor was already self-destructive, so that giving him freedom or control in the conversation encouraged him to self-destruct more quickly. The stories you told and things you suggested could also push him toward a bad end while not actually being manipulation.

than the minimal one I'm working with. And second, we are prone to describe a practice in terms of the actions taken and ignore other components. This perspective is often useful, but it is a mistake to think we have thereby sufficiently described a practice.

Friendship is a word that describes a rather extensive continuum of relationships. We have acquaintances and classmates and colleagues and partners and soulmates, any of which we may sometimes describe as "friends." These relationships range from minimal to intimate, and along other descriptive axes as well. At what point on this relational continuum any given person draws a line and says, "Here's where friendship starts," is a matter of some variety. Different philosophical models of friendship likewise draw the line in different places and on different axes or sets of axes. The conception of friendship I'm working with here is minimal, in that the threshold for a relationship to count as friendship is as pared-down as possible. This minimal conception of friendship only requires very low levels of six elements: acquaintance, affection, commitment, goodwill, respect, and trust. In another way, my conception of friendship is maximal, in that it includes as many kinds of relationships as contain all six of those elements. One implication of this conception is that there is an extensive range in how "close" or "good" a relationship can be and still count as friendship.

Going back to the related possible objection (that counsel need not be grounded in friendship), it may be that the objector does not consider the relationship he sees to be a friendship, where, using the conception described above, I would. So when he says, "I've seen people do what you're describing, and they weren't friends," he is right insofar as he is using his own metric to define friendship. And, after all, what other metric would he use? That's a question I hope to answer persuasively in chapter 2.

Alternately, the objector may be thinking that a practice is constituted entirely by the actions taken in the course of that practice. Doctors practice medicine, for example, whenever they do particular things, such as examining their patients and diagnosing their ailments. The same would be true of people who bake, knit, experiment, write, and so on. But this is a rather impoverished perspective which, while common and sometimes useful, has the tendency to obscure as much as it illuminates. Take for example two people who ski. One is a dilettante who skis as a form of social engagement. She treats it the same way she treats tennis, book clubs, and concert attendance. For

her, these activities are basically interchangeable. The other is a true amateur: she loves skiing itself and skis for the joy of it. She skis whenever she can and arranges the rest of her life around it. In skiing, these two women perform the same actions; the mechanics of skiing, the equipment, etc., are practically identical. But, I would contend, they are not engaged in the same practice. In fact, the most important parts of their practices are obscured by focusing on the mechanics and accoutrements of skiing, even though skiing is what they are both *doing*. So instead of defining a practice solely by the actions taken in the course of that practice, we ought to also consider the reasons for which someone engages in a practice and their aims in doing so.³

In the same way, two people may be “doing what I’m describing” – one person helping another by means of subjective communication – and not thereby be engaging in counsel. This is because the practice is not primarily characterized by the actions taken during the course of counsel, but by the relationship out of which the practice grows and, secondarily, by a commitment to pursue a particular kind of the good in the other person. Further, counsel is in principle a reciprocal practice – I’m not sure whether it’s even possible to counsel someone who will not counsel you in return, should the need and opportunity arise. Counsel, then, is a practice that expresses friendship by pursuing the good of one of the friends using a subjective mode of communication. The priority is in that order because, in this particular practice, each subsequent aspect of it grows out of and is shaped by the previous aspect.

Ideal and imperfect counsel

Counsel is a widespread practice and an old one. We can see it by paying attention to the conversations of friends, as I did in the first example, or by looking at older conversations, like the Socratic dialogues. Socrates asked questions, made provocative assertions, told strange stories, and generally led his interlocutors toward

³ The aims of a practice are often among the reasons for engaging in it but need not always be. A person can treat a practice as instrumental to further ends and not be motivated by the internal aims of the practice, as when the guy in the produce department is motivated by his paycheck rather than by a desire for well-arranged vegetables. Alternately, people often have reasons for engaging in a practice which are neither ends internal to the practice nor the practitioner’s ends in doing it. For instance, our dilettante may have taken up skiing because her mother skis or because she lives near a resort or because she is athletic.

truths which they did not always reach: the dialogues often end in *aporia*. His use of such indirect communication, coupled with goal of helping his interlocutors, makes it possible that he was engaging in counsel, at least sometimes. But whether ancient or contemporary, the practice of counsel is a human practice and so an imperfect one.

Perfect counsel, flawless and ideal, would instantiate each of its three elements perfectly. That is, it would arise from a perfect friendship, aim at and achieve exactly the right good, and utilize precisely the right words, gestures, tone, etc. to do so. Any of these three taken alone seems unlikely to exist in the real world, but a practice that combines them? Impossible. Because counsel is a human practice, I take its ideal to be at least in principle attainable by humans. So rather than needing to arise from perfect friendship, it expresses *good* friendship. Instead of aiming at one, precisely correct good, it aims at a good which is both *real* and *relevant*. And our communication does not need to be perfect, only *adept*. But even with these less stringent criteria, we rarely engage in ideal counsel.

In practice, counsel is imperfect. We do not always even counsel *well*, and our counseling can go wrong in a number of ways. A counselor can have the wrong sort of attitude toward his counselee, or he can be inept at the method. Moreover, it is very easy to make mistakes of deference when friends disagree on a moral principle. Counsel requires that we respect both goodness itself and the moral judgment of our friend, and this balance is often hard to achieve. But counsel can function incomplete: it can do real good in the absence of deep friendship or skilled communication or great understanding. We often offer one another incomplete counsel – we are not such paragons as to routinely engage in the ideal. But ideal counsel is still something to reach for and approximate. After all, ideal counsel is constituted by the love and commitment of true friendship, the respect and creativity of subjective communication, and the Socratic yearning that every one of us become wise and good. Who among us wouldn't want to be a part of that?

The roadmap

In this dissertation I began by introducing the practice of counsel (here in Chapter 1). Next, I consider the context of counsel – friendship, which I take to be the

most fundamental of its three defining features (context, end, and means). Concurrently, I develop a minimal conception of friendship that can be expressed in counsel (Chapter 2). Then, I look at the aim of counsel, which is to help the counselee change for the better in particular ways, and consider how moral disagreement complicates the pursuit of this end (Chapter 3). In the following chapter, I explore the method of counsel – the subjective mode of communication – using Kierkegaard’s concept of subjective communication and Socrates’ example of dialectical practice. In this section, I also address the nature of testimony and advice in order to show what distinguishes them from counsel (chapter 4). Finally, I posit criteria for ideal counsel, describe what constitutes counsel that meets that criteria, and offer two examples of ideal counsel (chapter 5).

Chapter Two: Friendship

How the friendship relation grounds counsel

After hearing me describe counsel, one person remarked, “Oh, it’s just being a good friend!” While I might protest the “just,” I can’t help but like this characterization. Counseling *is* being a good friend, given the right circumstances. It’s “just” being a good friend in that (again, given the right circumstances) it is an activity that fully expresses friendship. Counsel puts into action the most central aspects of friendship in service of the most central ends of friendship. So, put another way, it really “just is” being a good friend. But people can be friends without counseling one another, so there must be more to counsel than friendship. Counsel is, then, a practice distinguishable from friendship which nevertheless arises, and must arise, from it.

This chapter explores the relationship between friendship and counsel. It begins by surveying part of the philosophical literature on friendship which may be useful for a discussion of counsel. I then propose a minimal conception of friendship that comports with both the commonalities in that literature and a more generally held understanding of friendship. Such friendship is composed of six relational elements: acquaintance, affection, commitment, goodwill, respect and trust. I argue that for people to engage in counsel, they need to be in a relationship with minimal levels of all six elements. That is, they need to be friends, if only minimally. Generally speaking, higher levels of each element conduces to both better friendship and better counsel, but the elements must also be in balance with one another for the relationship to be healthy. Finally, I argue that while friendship is necessary for counsel, it is not actually sufficient to produce it.

Setup

“Friend” is a wonderfully ambiguous word. I might introduce one acquaintance to another with, “This is my friend so-and-so.” Or I might stipulate an emotional distance by saying, “She’s not really my *friend*.” There are best friends, boyfriends, fair-weather friends, and even frenemies. It is unsurprising, therefore, that the philosophical literature on friendship uses a variety of definitions for the term. Even very early works on friendship – I’m thinking of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* – recognize different

kinds of friendship. The current discussion tends to focus on “good” friendships and “close” friendships (analogous to Aristotle’s character friendships) with some discussion about whether or not these categories are mutually entailing. But the emphasis on these sorts of friendships can prejudice our understanding of friendship practices, like counsel, in ways that compromise accuracy. If I am right and only friends can engage in counsel, then I need a definition of friendship that is both plausible in itself and provides all the necessary conditions for the practice. To this end, I’ll look briefly at four current perspectives that contain useful elements and then describe what I take to be the six components of a conception of friendship minimally suited for counsel.

The best description of counsel I have encountered in recent philosophical writing comes from Rose Mary Volbrecht’s 1990 article “Friendship: Mutual apprenticeship in moral development.” She describes “unplanned, meandering” conversations, which include “mundane reflections” on many aspects of life.⁴ But she, as is evident from the title, takes these discussions to be significant because of their role in a person’s moral development. This is largely because she relies upon an Aristotelian model of friendship in which “mutual (moral) apprenticeship” figures prominently. Many philosophers, especially virtue theorists, take this approach.⁵ Some of them are concerned primarily with moral development and address friendship because they take it to be the best context for cultivating virtue. Others take “real” friendship to be inherently virtuous, so that any discussion of the two must be

⁴ Volbrecht, 1990. p 311. The full description reads as follows:

“We replay the events, the interactions, the moments of the day or of the past. We reflect on choices made, relationships engaged in or rejected, adjustments made to accommodate changes in relationships and circumstances. We wonder about the implications of all these interactions for our lives tomorrow, next month, or next year. We examine motives, intentions, and responses. We recount and rehash successes and failures, disappointments and surprises. These are the conversations of lunchrooms and lockerrooms, coffeeshops and bars, phone calls and letters.

“Much of this is unplanned, meandering, without conscious plan or goal. But it is, nonetheless, part of an ongoing process which occasionally becomes more focused. This may be by design when we seek out a friend to help us ‘sort out our lives’ or it may be by accident when a late night discussion becomes unexpectedly serious. At these times we try to sort out where our lives are going, what sort of persons we have become, what sort of progress we have made. Often we depend upon friends to help us. We are sometimes too close or too caught in the details and the effects of the immediate to see any unity in our lives or to see that our direction has shifted. This is why it is important to have friends who know our history, our commitments, our biases and blind spots, our tendencies to be too self-critical or too indifferent. It is important, as well, that we share a commitment to the ‘care of one another’s souls:’ that the shape of each of our characters matters to each of us.”

⁵ *e.g.* Hoyos-Valdés, 2017

inexorably linked. On this sort of view, the conversations Volbrecht describes will ultimately aim at the participants becoming more virtuous. But when I consider real-life instances of counsel, there seem to be some occasions on which not only was virtue not the target, but it was not even particularly considered (*e.g.* Jill and Peter’s conversation in chapter 1). If these instances arose from genuine friendship, as I argue they must, then the virtue-centric account of friendship cannot provide a context for every instance of counsel.

Other philosophers have pushed back against this conception of friendship as overly moralized or unrealistic. For instance, Dean Cocking and Jeanette Kennett argue that “efforts to locate the good of friendship wholly within the moral framework are misguided.”⁶ Even an account that includes generally accepted characteristics of close friendships, like mutual affection, concern for the other’s well-being, and a desire for shared experiences, is inadequate. In addition to these things, close friendships include what they call “mutual direction” and “mutual drawing.”⁷ The first refers to the way in which our choices, interests, and activities are shaped around and oriented toward our friends. We do things with and for our friends that we would not do otherwise, like attending a hockey game or reading a particular book. The second feature, “mutual drawing,” is the way in which friends mold each other’s self-conception. My understanding of my self is partly determined by my friend’s interpretation of me. I may not have seen myself as generous except that she sees me that way, and she might not have taken herself to be artistic, except that I have praised her creativity. My picture of her becomes part of *her* picture of herself, and *vice-versa*.

According to Cocking and Kennett, these two key features of close friendship are morally neutral: they may lead us in moral, immoral, or even amoral directions. Furthermore, they contend that these aspects must sometimes take precedence over moral considerations if a friendship is to endure. They describe a good friendship as one in which a friend is committed to her friend with more fidelity than she is to her own moral principles. “If I take my friend seriously, I shall at least sometimes be prepared to

⁶ Cocking and Kennett, 2000. p 279

⁷ Note that “drawing” here refers to making images, not to pulling something closer. (Cocking and Kennett, 2000. p 285)

act on her behalf, even where such action lacks support from my more general moral principles.”⁸ Daniel Koltanski agrees with this proposal and uses the saying “A friend will help you move, but a good friend will help you move a body” to illustrate the phenomenon. This sort of partiality is well-discussed, as many philosophers have argued against virtue-centric conceptions of friendship by saying that a good friendship can place demands on us that conflict with our moral or epistemological principles.⁹ If this is the case, then in counseling friends we will face problems of moral deference, which I discuss in the next chapter. There is also the question of the extent to which counsel can help the friend if it is not grounded in some kind of morality. Nevertheless, acknowledging morally neutral considerations in friendships leaves room for instances of counsel that eudaemonist accounts tend to exclude.

Responding to the criticism of such accounts, people like Alexis Elder argue that the nature of friendship itself requires certain specific virtues, such that a person without those virtues is simply incapable of being a good friend. Elder contends that good friends have both closeness, by which he means “sensitivity to friend’s subjective values and concerns as well as an inclination to take their subjective interests as reasons for action,” and concern for each other’s wellbeing.¹⁰ This concern for the other’s wellbeing, he says, is both a virtue itself and relies on a correct understanding of the good for its efficacy. Moreover, he points out that a friendship is not only the *relation*, but the *people* in the relationship. He likens friendship to an organism: it is important for its parts to be properly aligned and inter-responsive, but it is also important that the parts themselves be healthy. Unhealthy parts, properly related, still make an organism unhealthy. Bad people, even related by the closeness we find in friendship, will still have a defective friendship as a result. This seems right to me – the quality of the people will affect the quality of their relationship (and thus the quality of their counsel).

While Elder comes to a similar practical conclusion as those who imagine friendship under a virtue-centric account – that bad people can’t be good friends – he

⁸ Cocking and Kennett, 2000. p 283

⁹ Some examples include: Keller, “Friendship & Belief” (2004); Crawford, “Believing the best: on doxastic partiality in friendship” (forthcoming); Kawall, “Friendship and Epistemic Norms” (2013); and Koltanski, “A Good Friend will help you move a body” (2016).

¹⁰ Elder, 2014. p. 84

does so for different reasons. One of the differences relevant to the practice of counsel is the relationship between character and wellbeing. For a eudaemonist account, wellbeing is directly (though not always exclusively) dependent upon a virtuous character – all other things being equal, a more virtuous person just *is* better-off. One result is that promoting a friend’s wellbeing will include promoting their good character.¹¹ Elder takes a less direct route. First, shared values promote closeness. Since closeness is partly constitutive of friendship, promoting closeness is a reason *internal* to friendship for the friends to have shared values. But what if they share bad/erroneous values? Elder responds (second) that to the extent that good/correct values lead to wellbeing, good friends will have good values, since concern and promotion of a friend’s wellbeing is also constitutive of friendship. This gives us reason to think that “the best friendships to be in will be those in which the friends are both in agreement about what is good, and correct about what is good.”¹² Elder concludes from this that bad people – those who are wrong in their values – cannot do a good job promoting the objective wellbeing of their friends, regardless of how close they are, and thus “cannot participate in the best friendships.”¹³ One implication of this conclusion is that when good people engage in counsel, they are better able to achieve its aim (the good of the friend) than when bad people do. The more virtuous the friends, the better their chances.

Like these philosophers, I take the following to be components of friendship and, more specifically, of a minimal conception of friendship. First, closeness: Elder’s “sensitivity to friend’s subjective values and concerns as well as an inclination to take their subjective interests as reasons for action.” This includes the sort of respect that precludes unfriendly paternalism. Second, third and fourth, the list Cocking and Kennett take to be generally accepted characteristics of friendship: mutual affection, concern for the other’s well-being, and a desire for shared experiences. I also take from these sources the observation that some aspects of friendship may be ineliminable (mutual direction, for instance), but still not be necessary for a relationship to count as

¹¹ David Brink explores this point in “Eudemonism, Love and Friendship, and Political Community.” (Brink, 1999).

¹² Elder, 2014. p. 95

¹³ Elder, 2014. p. 98

friendship nor to contribute directly to counsel. The conception of friendship I put forward in the next section is grounded in what I take to be the common uses of the word, but also takes into consideration the philosophical analysis discussed above.

Aspects of friendship *necessary* for counsel (six elements)

A friendship is a complex relationship with many contingent characteristics and underlying conditions, but to be a friendship, all a relationship needs is to be characterized by combination of the following six elements: acquaintance, affection, commitment, goodwill, respect and trust. In friendships, these characteristics are interdependent in various ways, but they are also conceptually separable and, in other contexts, actually separate. Briefly, I take acquaintance to be mutual knowledge, usually obtained at least in part through experience. Affection is a positive emotional response to someone. Goodwill is both actively willing another person's good and also being ready to do so. Commitment extends goodwill into the future. Respect is treating the other person *as* a person. And trust is believing in the other person's goodwill. These are necessarily simplified characterizations, but it will be useful to have them in hand before embarking on a more detailed investigation. In looking at each of these elements, I want to demonstrate, first, that it reasonably belongs in a minimal conception of friendship, and second, that it is necessary for counsel. I then look more closely at the role each element plays in counsel. Subsequently, I argue that while a friendship containing these elements is not a *sufficient* condition for counsel, people in this kind of relationship are exceedingly *likely* to engage in counsel. On the other hand, whether one *should* engage in counsel at any given opportunity will largely depend on circumstances.

Acquaintance

By *Acquaintance*, I mean some unspecified level of mutual knowledge, usually obtained at least in part through experience. It is our familiarity with each other – with our habits, beliefs, circumstances, preferences, etc. People must, of course, be acquainted with one another to even begin a relationship, since you can't be friends with

someone with whom you've never come into contact.¹⁴ Some friends hit it off immediately and so start being friends with only minimal mutual knowledge. Others become friends¹⁵ after knowing each other for a long time. Differences in personality and circumstances affect how well any given person needs to know another in order to become friends. Someone moving to an unfamiliar place, for instance, may have reasons to make new friends on less information than someone already comfortably ensconced in several friendships would require. Someone shy or cautious may not make friends as quickly as she would if she were outgoing or impulsive. People may become friends on very short acquaintance if they learn something particularly important about each other right away – whether it be a passion for cello or RPGs or NASCAR, a devotion to a social cause, or religious conviction. Because of this variety, there is no one threshold level of acquaintance at which people universally become friends. For a minimal conception of friendship, there only need be *some* level of acquaintance. Nor is there any level of acquaintance *sufficient* for friendship: I may know my enemy very well indeed. In fact, none of the six elements described in this chapter is sufficient for friendship. Rather, a relationship that includes all of them will necessarily be a friendship, and no relationship without all six can be one.

Acquaintance is necessary for counsel, and closer acquaintance facilitates better counsel, other things being equal and given the context of friendship. People without any contact with each other cannot converse – that's the obvious and uninteresting reason that acquaintance is necessary for counsel. Perhaps more interestingly, counsel requires acquaintance because it uses a subjective mode of communication. Briefly, a person communicating subjectively not only takes the particularities of her interlocutor into account, she takes them to be of first concern. She customizes how she says things to fit the specific person she is speaking with rather than being content to address herself as if to a hypothetical everyman. Her goal is not so much that she convey her thoughts clearly, but that her interlocutor understand well; this concern focuses her efforts on the other person. Being able to communicate in this way requires that one

¹⁴ I hope that this is an uncontroversial point. I take it as given that people who literally don't know each other at all cannot be friends.

¹⁵ By "become friends" I mean that they have a relationship characterized by all six of the aforementioned elements.

know one's interlocutor. Other things being equal, the better I know someone, the more easily and successfully I can communicate subjectively with him – the better I can phrase things in ways that make it possible for him to consider them. This isn't a directly proportional relation, as other factors contribute to how well we communicate subjectively, but communicating this way *at all* requires some knowledge of the person as an individual. You cannot address a person in her particularity unless you have some idea of what those particularities are.

Beyond being needed for subjective communication, there's another, related aspect of counsel that requires acquaintance. The aim of counsel is to help the friend. If my friend needs to come to terms with her father's death, then I won't be much good as a counselor unless I know that he is dead. Indeed, I'll be rather limited until I know more about the situation, its background, her attitudes, etc. Further, the better idea I have of what will help her, as opposed to what tends to help people generally, the better I can counsel – again, other things being equal. I may know the stages of grief and the range of possible father-daughter relationships, but this does not tell me enough about my interlocutor to say the right things in the right way at the right time, etc., *to her*. Whether she had a close and loving relationship with her father or an abusive or estranged one will shape how I approach the subject. If his death was unexpected, it will help if I know how she responds to surprises. Of course, I can come to learn many of these things by asking, but there's a limit to this. In the throes of emotional turmoil, it's hard to give a relevantly complete and objective autobiographical sketch, even prompted by the most sensitive of interrogators. Time and emotional resources are limited and so is the possible development of trust, given those limits.

It may seem that acquaintance is sometimes *unnecessary* for counsel because counsel itself leads to better acquaintance. Suppose a you find someone crying on a bench on the street where you work. You stop and ask, "Are you alright?" and he tells you his troubles. Because you are a good listener, and insightful, you gather a great deal about him and his situation rather quickly. You ask the right questions and make the right comments to draw him out. It certainly seems that you are counseling, and if he emerges from the conversation better off than when he entered it, yours would be

counsel that achieved its end. At the start, you did not know him at all, yet you counseled, and the counsel itself brought about acquaintance.

There are two things to say in response to this. First, it's worth noting that since contact immediately established acquaintance, albeit minimally, acquaintance came before counsel. You see him and note particular things about him which lead you to speak. He looks up and does the same. So while counsel can deepen acquaintance, sometimes very rapidly, it always requires some level of acquaintance to even begin. Second, while it's true that counsel can better acquaint you with someone you've just met, this is not ideal, because starting counsel while only minimally acquainted with your interlocutor substantially limits how much help you can render. One reason for this is that you simply have farther to go, as if you started a trip to Miami from Seattle instead of from Atlanta. You have to cover a lot more metaphorical ground just to understand the person and the problem than you would if you already knew him well. To use a different metaphor, it's as if you are looking for the right piece of a puzzle to put in next, but you neither have the box top nor can you see most of the other pieces. The person you are trying to help needs something fairly specific (often there are several things that would work, but he does need one of *them*), but you have to gather a lot of information before you can do much to help him find it. If you ask enough of the right questions, you can find out that he needs a sky piece with three lobes and a pink tint, but if you were already acquainted with the puzzle, you would have known this a lot sooner.

A further difficulty with this example relates to a thesis of this chapter: that counsel is an expression of friendship. The man on the bench is not your friend, so is what you are doing really counsel? And if not, then what *are* you doing? There are two possibilities in cases like this one: either you are swiftly becoming friends, or you are engaging in something other than counsel. Given the right incentives, we can make friends (at least in the minimal sense) very quickly.¹⁶ The man on the bench needs a friend rather badly, so he's willing to take the risk that you will be one to him. He probably doesn't think about it in those terms, but by confiding in you he is opening

¹⁶ Such quickly-formed friendships may be unstable or may dissolve as rapidly as they begin. This does not preclude them from being genuine, however, so long as the relationship is characterized by the level of commitment requisite for the early stages of friendship. I'll have more to say about the role of commitment in friendship shortly.

himself up to at least a minimal sort of friendship. Gratitude for your help is a form of affection; self-revelation is a sign of trust; and the longer you talk to him, the better he knows you and the more he can believe that you respect him and are committed to his well-being for the relevant duration.¹⁷ So in a brief time, the two of you may have achieved all six relational elements necessary for friendship. Perhaps at the outset you were not counseling, but it need not take long for you to start. But what, then, were you doing at the beginning, before all six elements were in place? And what would you be doing if they never *did* emerge?

Helping a stranger with his process of self-transformation, if it doesn't come from friendship, is not counsel. Perhaps you see the conversation as something interesting to do and are not actually at all committed to the man's well-being. Or maybe you are doing "the right thing" but actively resent the man for taking your time and feel no affection for him. If any of the six elements is missing, then what you are doing may resemble counsel, but is not the same practice.

Another reason that being only minimally acquainted with your interlocutor limits how much you can help is that trust requires some kind of reciprocity.¹⁸ We are generally unwilling to let another person know us well unless they allow us to know them also. There are exceptions, of course; in situations of extreme emotion or need we may take risks we would otherwise shun – any port in a storm. So the crying man on the bench may, in extremity, confide things which he would otherwise withhold from a stranger. Alternately, we sometimes trust strangers with our secret selves precisely because we don't expect the relationship to continue after the conversation – it's worth the risk of being judged if we never have to see our judges again and don't particularly care about their opinion anyway. Similarly, we may trust professional counselors with extensive knowledge of ourselves because we believe that they are competent at their job and abide by a professional ethical code. Their professionalism is our guarantee of security. These kinds of trust, however, are highly conditional and non-reciprocal. They depend on the circumstances around the conversation(s) and need not depend the

¹⁷ "For the relevant duration" is an important caveat. What duration is relevant for friendship? Briefly, friendship requires commitment until the separation of the friends. I deal with this question more fully in the section on commitment.

¹⁸ I will deal with trust as an element of friendship later in the chapter.

particular person with whom you are talking, so that you may not actually be trusting your interlocutor so much as you are depending on your mutual circumstances. Further, you do not expect your interlocutor to return your trust with trust of their own.

In most circumstances, we expect reciprocity in kind. We trust people with knowledge of ourselves when they do likewise. Moreover, we trust people more when this knowledge comes over time and by way of direct experience. In most cases, then, we cannot become sufficiently well-acquainted with a person in a short period of time such that we can use counsel to address their current needs well. So while counsel is possible on minimal acquaintance, better acquaintance makes it easier to give better counsel.

Affection

As I use it here, *Affection* is a positive emotional response to another person. It is often triggered by something specific – a kind word, a meaningful look, a thoughtful action – though it need not be. Our affection for some people is an underlying attitude that can surface easily. Usually, when two people are friends their default emotional response to one another is affection. I am not here concerned about the precise metaphysical nature of this response – whether it is purely affective or requires volition, whether it is mental or physical or both, whether its object is the person himself or a characteristic of the person or a particular action he performs, etc. So long as it is a positive emotional response linked – directly or indirectly – to another person, it counts as affection for my purposes. I take it to be uncontroversial that some sort of affection is an aspect of friendship,¹⁹ and thus that a minimal conception of friendship will necessarily include affection.²⁰

Though any kind of affection is enough for a minimal sort of friendship when combined with the other five aspects, not all affection is of equal value to friendship.

¹⁹ With the possible exception of people who have particular, atypical emotional responses. It seems possible that such people might be friends, even friends who could engage in counsel, if this condition did not prevent them from having the other five elements. It would, however, require that their friends accept the resulting asymmetry of affections.

²⁰ Even in a good friendship, I take affection to be an *affective* response – something felt. This is not to be confused with richer concepts like *care*. Most friendships exhibit some level of mutual care, but as I understand it, care is a combination of affection and goodwill, and not either alone (more on goodwill in a few pages).

Having a positive aesthetic response to someone's appearance, for example, is of limited use, especially after we get to know them and discover their other attributes. Or consider the devoted fan of a celebrity. Their positive emotional response to that person may be enough to begin a friendship, but if they meet the celebrity and continue to display a high degree of falling-over-themselves enthusiasm, this may be off-putting to the celebrity and may actually prevent the fan from coming to know the *person* about whom they are fanatical. Most more developed friendships will be characterized by affection for the person as a whole or for some essential aspect(s) of the person.

Affection is also necessary for counsel. Curiously, this is not because the counselor needs to feel a certain way in order to counsel, but because the one being counseled needs to believe that the counselor feels that way. There is a great deal to say about both these claims, but let us start with the latter.

The "counselee" needs to believe that the counselor feels affection for him in order for their conversation to be counsel. One reason for this is that we simply do not trust people with our vulnerabilities whom we take to have negative, or even neutral, attitudes toward us. And such trust is, as I will argue later on, necessary for counsel. We may, of course, reveal those vulnerabilities if there are sufficient reasons for doing so, but this does not amount to the right kind of trust. For instance, suppose that I am terrified of the dark and ashamed of it. I would not usually admit this to anyone, but if circumstances force me to choose between sitting in the dark for hours and telling someone who dislikes me that I'm afraid, I may choose the latter as the lesser of two evils. This will not be because I trust her, but because I believe that whatever her response will be, enduring it will be better than sitting in the dark. Other things being equal, however, we do not give people who dislike us the opportunity to hurt us, because we believe that they will. We also don't generally give this opportunity to those whose feelings are neutral toward us. I would speculate that this is because we find it hard to believe that anyone who sees us as an individual person (a necessary prerequisite for respect) could remain entirely neutral toward us, and we do not trust anyone who does not see us as persons not to wrong us if it is advantageous to them. Or it may be because we think that seeing a weakness will make them like us less, and since they started out with neutral feelings toward us, this would make them actively dislike us. Since counsel

involves revealing some sort of vulnerability, even if it's only something minor like indecision or unsettledness, we won't be counseled by someone unless we believe they have at least a modicum of affection for us.

Another reason we need to believe that the counselor feels affection for us in order to engage in counsel is the close relationship between affection and two other aspects of friendship: goodwill and commitment. Basically, we find it hard to believe that someone who doesn't like us²¹ can consistently want our well-being over the long haul. I'll deal with goodwill and commitment in their own sections, but for now let me say that we allow ourselves to be counseled – to answer personal questions honestly, to expose our internal processes to another – because we believe that the other person has our best interests at heart and will continue to do so for the relevant length of time. And we take affection as an indicator of these attitudes. Unless we believe in that affection, we won't engage in counsel.

I said earlier that counsel requires affection because the one being counseled needs to believe that the counselor feels that way, not because the counselor needs to feel a certain way in order to counsel. This may seem to imply that affection itself isn't needed, only the appearance of it, but this is not quite right. In practice, the counselor must in fact feel affection toward the counselee.²² There may be someone, somewhere who has the discipline (or something) to maintain goodwill and commitment toward a person for whom they have no affection, while simultaneously acting in such a way that this person believes they *do* actually feel that affection, but I don't think they could keep it up for long. Now, if you think that such a person cannot possibly exist and are already convinced that goodwill and/or commitment require affection, then you can skip the next couple of paragraphs. For those of you who think that such a prodigy could exist,

²¹ In this section, I will use "like" as synonymous with "has affection for." This is not meant to connote feelings of unmixt positivity toward the person, but only that there is at least *some* positive emotional response. For example, I may find my cousin's charm endearing while reacting negatively to everything else about him. I would express this by saying, "I like him, but..."

²² Most people, I think, assume that friendship includes mutual (and not just one-sided) affection. Aristotle, on the other hand, seems skeptical about the connection between anything so passive as affection and friendship. He contrasts it with "loving," which is the active condition that motivates goodwill and constitutes the characteristic activity of friendship. (See *Nicomachean Ethics* Book VII, chapter 5: 1157b30, and also in chapter 8: 1159a35.)

however, I need to argue further, since I am claiming that affection itself, and not merely the appearance thereof, is necessary for counsel.

A person can do something very like counsel with someone for whom they have no affection, but this state of affairs cannot last long. Either the would-be counselor will come to like the person with whom she is conversing, which may turn the conversation into counsel, or she will find that the reasons for her dislike make not only counsel, but also anything much *like* counsel, impossible. It is generally accepted that doing someone a good turn makes you more positively disposed toward them. Having a counsel-like conversation with someone you dislike is doing her a good turn, and so could generate affection in you toward her. This affection may not outweigh your dislike, but it need not. Mixed feelings can make counsel difficult and unlikely, but they do not preclude it the way a complete absence of affection would. After all, we have mixed feelings about most people, including our friends, so if we could not counsel in the absence of perfect affection, we might never counsel at all. In addition, since counsel involves coming to know a person better, and since every person has qualities which can elicit affection from others, the more you come to know the person with whom you are conversing, the more likely you are to find and respond to one or more of these qualities. Thus, the act of counsel itself tends to generate affection. Finally, anyone who has genuine goodwill toward another is predisposed to feel affection for them. I won't speculate here about the reasons for this; suffice to say that this phenomenon pushes an indifferent would-be counselor toward affection.

On the other hand, if in coming to know the other person better, you find no reasons to like her (and thus, continue to feel no affection for her), the things that you *do* find will probably convince you to give her up as a lost cause. This may seem extreme, but consider how uniformly bad (at least from your perspective) a person would have to be for you dislike her entirely. Or, if your overwhelming dislike is based on a narrow range of things which crowd out any positive responses to the person's other attributes, consider how very bad those factors would have to seem for them to so monopolize your response to the person. Would such a person even benefit from counsel? If you are right about her character, then probably not. And even if you are wrong, she is unlikely to benefit from *your* counsel, at least, since 1) it will be difficult to

continue masking your increasing dislike for her and 2) if you believe counsel will not benefit her, you will probably not continue to attempt it, since helping a friend is the aim of counsel. So while affection does not seem to be *immediately* necessary for counsel, it must arise at some point or counsel will break off for lack of it.

Since affection is necessary for counsel, it is tempting to think that – as with acquaintance – more is better. But this is not always the case. While too little affection can make us indifferent, too much affection can lead to self-deception. Too little affection deprives us of an important motivation for counsel, among other things, and too much affection can hinder us from doing counsel well, since it may impair our accurate knowledge of the other person.

Affection's primary role in counsel is auxiliary – it gives us a psychologically convincing reason to value another's well-being and to remain committed to that person in the face of difficulty. It predisposes us to counsel, when the need arises. So, while a minimal amount of affection can make counsel possible, a higher degree of it makes counsel likely.²³ From the perspective of optimizing counsel, the best level of affection is that which motivates a friend to offer good counsel whenever it is needed. The "good" here is an important qualifier.

Strong affection can warp counsel if it interferes with our ability to know the other person accurately. Generally speaking, when we like people, we want to believe the best about them and we tend to focus on their better qualities. If liking them leads us to believe falsehoods, it interferes with the acquaintance requirement for counsel. In contrast, some have argued that friendship actually *requires* some level of self-deception about our friends, that "sometimes, the norms of friendship clash with epistemic norms."²⁴ That is, friendship gives us reasons to believe better things about our friends than we would about non-friends, given the same evidence. Lindsay Crawford calls this "doxastic partiality," and argues that friendship itself gives us reasons to reject it.²⁵

²³ As always, I'll add the caveat "all things being equal." People can be disposed to counsel for other reasons, which may lead them to counsel despite a level of affection which would otherwise be insufficient to motivate. I may, for example, offer counsel to a friend's partner for my friend's sake, even though I have little affection for the partner. Alternately, I may counsel someone whose decisions affect a large number of people, out of concern for them rather than out of any affection for her.

²⁴ Keller, 2004. p 330

²⁵ Crawford, forthcoming.

Jason Kawall splits the difference, arguing that while we shouldn't automatically believe the best about our friends, we are permitted to "demand greater epistemic justification" before accepting negative claims about them.²⁶ I tend to agree with Kawall, at least when it comes to describing a conception of friendship which is a suitable context for counsel. Our affection should lead us to hope for the best, but not to automatically believe the best, or even to aim our focus at positive characteristics if it compromises a true understanding of our friends. It may be the case that we should hope for the best from all people, and not just our friends, but even if this is so, it is still easier to hope for it when we feel affection than when we don't (again, other things being equal). This hope, however, should not be taken as justification for self-deception.

Let's look at an example. Suppose I have a friend I like very much: we never fight, and just thinking about her makes me happy. One day, she brings up her relationship with her brother, whom she loves but can't seem to get along with. Their interactions always degenerate into insults or tense silence. In their last conversation, she tells me, he called her arrogant and shallow. I immediately come to her defense – she's confident, not arrogant, and fun-loving, not shallow. He just doesn't understand what kind of person she is and shouldn't say such unkind things. (The nerve!) As it happens, my friend is vain in a way that doesn't even register with me, but that grates badly on more serious-minded people... like her brother. But my affection blinds me to this. It need not have done so, but I allowed my partiality to distort my perception of her. This distorted perspective denies me the knowledge I need to help her reconcile with her brother. I may still counsel her and help her by doing so, but my self-deception will probably prevent me from getting to the heart of the matter, where she most needs me.

Goodwill

Goodwill – willing someone's good – is probably the most obvious element necessary for friendship. After all, someone who has ill will toward you probably counts as an enemy, and someone who wills nothing in relation to you is too indifferent to be a

²⁶ Kawall, 2013. p 31. I don't mean to imply that Kawall is arguing against Crawford, only that he makes a different case than she does, and that his conclusion is particularly relevant to describing the role of affection in counsel.

friend. For the purposes of this discussion, I am taking goodwill to be a volitional state with attendant emotions, rather than a primarily emotional one. This is, in part, to make a clear distinction between it and affection and to emphasize the active nature of goodwill. In practice, goodwill and affection are usually found together – the active and passive sides to the same attitudinal coin. But they do come apart. Just as we can feel affection toward someone we intend to wrong (there are some scary fictional villains who do this rather theatrically), we can will and pursue the good of people we actively dislike (see footnote 19 for examples). I am also taking goodwill to include the unconscious or latent state which, when triggered, gives rise to consciously willing someone’s good. This is not because I think these states are identical, but because the differences between them are not important to their role in friendship and counsel. We will the good of our friends when there is something specific to will about – a promotion, healing, the relationship with a brother – and we are always *ready* to will some specific good when it comes up. I take both to be goodwill.²⁷

Counsel is impossible without goodwill because the aim of counsel is to help a friend change for the better, and changing for the better includes the attainment of some good. Therefore, to engage in counsel is to will the good of a friend and then to pursue it through a particular sort of conversation. This makes the role of goodwill in counsel relatively simple: it defines the aim of the practice. A conversation without this goal, regardless of how closely its methods resemble counsel, is a different kind of thing. One may, for instance, use counsel-like conversation to “help” someone appropriate the conclusion that all other people exist solely for her benefit – or some other false, evil, or foolish conclusion – but I do not consider this counsel.²⁸

²⁷ For a slightly different conception of goodwill and its place in friendship, see Book IX of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, especially chapter 5 (1166b30), where he contends that “it is impossible for those who have not become goodwilled to be friends” (1167a7).

²⁸ If you take the method, rather than the goal or context to be the primary, defining aspect of counsel, you may consider this sort of thing to be “evil counsel” or something along those lines. I certainly don’t mind other people taking this perspective. It will, however, give you a different conception of counsel than the one I’m describing here. The reason I don’t take the method to be primary is that I am describing a particular practice which is rooted in friendship and pursues particular sorts of goods. To oversimplify, since goodwill is integral to friendship, counsel cannot be without it. See Chapter 1 for a more detailed explanation.

The centrality of goodwill to counsel raises two related problems: paternalism and deference. When I will someone's good in a particular situation, this often means that I will some more-or-less specific good for them. Maybe my friend is sad and I will that he be happier. Am I right to choose that good? What if he disagrees and wants to wallow a while instead? If I say, "I know better than he does what his good is, so I'll make sure the conversation goes that way," I may have fallen into paternalism. On the other hand, if I think, "I'll just go along with what he wants, even though I think he's mistaken," I may be deferring to him when I should not. Alternately, if he gives in to my choice of the good simply because it's *my* choice, he may be the one deferring wrongly. The final answer to both these problems, I think, is mutual respect. What exactly this entails and how it works is the subject of chapter 3. For now, however, let us consider respect as an element of friendship.

Respect

Respect, in this context, is the appropriate base attitude of one person toward another. In respecting someone, I acknowledge that she is as significant to herself as I am to myself,²⁹ and that we both stand on equal footing in relation to others (personal commitments aside). Further, I take her perspective on things to be as sincerely held as mine, at least until she proves otherwise. I take on attitudes and make decisions in light of this understanding. There are other aspects of respect, but 1) there is disagreement about what they are and 2) they do not contribute significantly to the role of respect in counsel.³⁰

Minimally, respect is necessary for friendship because friendship is a relation between persons. If I do not acknowledge another as a person, I cannot be his friend. I may, of course, be a selfish sort of friend who only shows respect when it is convenient. I

²⁹ This is independent of how she views herself. That someone does not see herself as significant in the context of her own life does not obviate the fact that she is. Respect also requires the "as I am to myself" qualification. Someone who holds others in high esteem but does not recognize her own significance is not exhibiting respect but something like homage, which is *not* the appropriate base attitude of one person toward another.

³⁰ Some theories rely on the objective value of persons, or something similar, to ground respect. I won't take a position here about this claim. Let me say instead that I think "equal footing in relation to others" is sufficient to do the same work in this context.

think this is compatible with a minimal conception of friendship, though it would be hard to make the case that a *good* friend would be consistently selfish in this way. Perhaps you know someone who treats you well in private but ignores you in the presence of people he wants to impress. You might have some good conversations when no one “important” is around, but it would be hard to think of such a man as a *good* friend.

Counsel requires respect because its subjective mode of communication would be impossible without it. This form of communication, which I’ll deal with at length in chapter 4, takes as its end one interlocutor’s *appropriation* of some new proposition or attitude. It does not require that the counselor decide what this proposition will be, or even that she direct her interlocutor toward any particular proposition or attitude. It focuses instead on the *way* in which her interlocutor comes to the new perspective: appropriation.³¹

By “appropriation,” I mean both accepting something as true and situating it within one’s preexisting web of beliefs, as well as having arrived at this state by steps which were likewise appropriational. For instance, suppose I am considering my relationship with my daughter. I review our interactions and my attitudes, draw some inferences, and come to the conclusion that my pride is ruining the relationship. Suppose further that I see how this relates to other aspects of my understanding of the world – my other character traits, personal history and other relationships; my daughter’s self-concept; the prevailing social norms in my community; etc. At that point, I will have appropriated the proposition that my pride is ruining my relationship with

³¹ I owe these terms and concepts to Kierkegaard’s *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* but do not claim any special ability to interpret that text. Kierkegaard wrote very roundaboutly, and looking for precise definitions and explanations in his works misses the point of his method and style. Consider the following sentence: “Suppose someone wanted to communicate that the truth is not the truth but that the way is the truth, that is, that the truth is only in the becoming, in the process of appropriation, that consequently there is no result.” (KW VII.60) Here, Kierkegaard is summarizing a (perhaps inherently puzzling) position which he has been talking around for several pages, but he puts it into the mouth of someone who subsequently tries to communicate it directly – which he takes to be a self-contradictory mistake. Add to this the consideration that Kierkegaard self-consciously wrote from different perspectives, and you have quite the exegetical knot to unwind.

For my purposes in this dissertation, I am adopting my own understanding of certain Kierkegaardian concepts, particularly *appropriation*, *objective/subjective communication*, and *indirect/direct communication*. Chapter 4 deals with *appropriation* and related concepts in more detail, since they are integral to the means or method of counsel.

my daughter. Now suppose that this knowledge has brought with it a new attitude or set of attitudes toward myself and toward my daughter, and that further reflection reaffirms this change. I may now have appropriated these attitudes as well. If I go through this transformative process with the help of a friend, then I have probably been engaged in counsel (as has my friend).

To counsel is to help another person with his own process of self-transformation through appropriation. A counselor does not impose her own way of thinking on her friend, but serves as an external aid to what might otherwise be an internal dialogue. This method assumes the attitudes which make up respect. It takes my friend's subjective inner life as given and as playing a similar role for him as mine does for me. This understanding allows me to join him in his process through conversation. Put another way, I can join my friend in his subjectivity because I recognize that we are both persons in the relevant sense – because I respect him. So respect undergirds the mode of communication which counsel uses (and must use).

In the context of counsel, respect for the other person extends in some ways to respect for the conversation itself. When I am working through my process of self-transformation, some of the things I consider will eventually become part of me, and my process itself both expresses a way of being which is particular to me and has the potential to effect transformations of its own. So when my friend helps me out through counsel, the conversation has the potential to actually become part of me, the counselee. As such, his respect for me entails a respect for my process and the form it takes in counsel. Practically speaking, this attitude in the counselor manifests as unwillingness to take over the process any more than he would take over his friend. He will, instead, recognize the counselee's role in the conversation as primary and his own as auxiliary.

Respect may also serve other functions in counsel. It may ground the empathy which can motivate counsel, and it doubtless shapes goodwill in important ways. It may not be strictly necessary that respect play these roles, as their ends can also be achieved by other means, but respect surely makes counsel easier in a variety of ways. For instance, goodwill or affection may be sufficient to motivate counsel, but recognition that another person's struggles are like our own can do the job as well or sometimes better. Or consider how easily goodwill without respect can become paternalism. It may

not necessarily do so – I may be too overawed by my friend to be paternalistic, but respect is the only sure defense against paternalism, and may be the only one that is also good in its own right.

Commitment

Commitment is a future-oriented volitional attitude. To be committed is to will that my present attitude toward something continue into the future. In the context of friendship, this means that I will that my present goodwill toward a person continue into the future until there is a good reason to discontinue it. Commitment is also a disposition to sometimes act on one's goodwill. Some such commitments are explicit (*e.g.* marriage), but most are expected implicitly, based on their context (*e.g.* parents to their children). Friendship is usually in the latter category. We have already seen that friendship requires goodwill; to say that it also requires commitment is to stretch this goodwill into the future, not as a prediction, but as a sort of active decision or promise.

Commitment is necessary for friendship because friendships are temporally extended, forward-looking relationships. If you meet someone at a bar and have a good time there for an hour or two, then go home without ever seeing or expecting to see that person again, no one would call that a friendship. Even if I really liked the person and had goodwill toward him for that hour or two and respected him and got to know him a bit – that is, even if we met all the other requirements for friendship – we would probably not be friends. Why not? Not so much because the relationship was too short, though that's part of it, but because we had no expectation of continuing the relationship in the future. In some special circumstances two people can be friends for two hours and then stop, but this is fairly unusual. Generally, we take friendships to be relatively long-term.

More importantly, we take friendships to be future-oriented. It is no accident that children whose families move frequently often disengage from their friends when the time to relocate approaches.³² Alternately, when we move as adults, or even when circumstances change our opportunities to see one another, we tend to drift away from

³² As I saw for myself in the transient international community of Buenos Aires, Argentina, 2001-2008.

old friends and form new attachments. This is, at least in part, because we expect friends to be in our lives in the future. Note the difference in meaning between, “She was my friend in college,” and “She is my friend from college.” The first puts the friendship in the past and implies no expectation of future contact. The second puts it in the present and implies that I have either kept up the friendship or expect to take it up again in the future. To phrase it in a more Aristotelian way, we are friends with people with whom we not only share a life, but with whom we expect to continue sharing it.³³

Counsel requires commitment because it is just as temporally extended and forward-looking as friendship and because commitment engenders trust. Counsel is an exercise in hope – hope being the reasonable expectation of some good in the future. Since the aim of counsel is some future good for the counselee, and since we don’t usually embark on entirely hopeless projects (that is, projects from which we are convinced no good will come), when we engage in counsel, we are looking to the future with hope. Moreover, we are acting with the goal of fulfilling that hope. This is true both short and long term. In the short term, we expect some good to come out of one particular conversation, and we embark on that conversation to bring about that good. In the long term, we are disposed to enter such conversations because of our commitment to our friend. There is a fine distinction to be made here. In a friendship, each instance of counsel is an installment in an ongoing practice; each conversation concludes with the possibility of being resumed at some later time. The good that comes from any given instance may be small or incomplete, but this is not a cause for despair, since no instance is final. Contrast this with an interaction without commitment. I can engage in subjective communication that looks a lot like counsel with the guy I met at the bar for an hour, but that conversation will be self-contained where counsel would be extended, or at least be open to being extended. My involvement ends when the conversation ends, and this shapes the conversation itself.

³³ See Book VII, chapter 5 of *Nicomachean Ethics* for Aristotle’s take on the necessity of a shared life for friendship, especially “nothing is so characteristic of friends as living together” (1157b19). And also in Book IX, chapter 9, where he states, “Living together and sharing conversation and thinking... would seem to be what living together means in the case of human beings, not feeding in the same place like fattened cattle” (1170b14).

But what about the man on the bench – didn't you counsel him without any kind of long-term commitment? And what about friendships that are coming to an end because of impending separation – does this lack of a future nullify the friendship? These are special cases best addressed by the stipulation that commitment extends goodwill into the future *until* there is a good reason to discontinue it. I think that the only good reason to discontinue one's commitment to a friend is a separation of some kind. This could be a literal separation resulting from a geographical move or change of lifestyle or – more finally – death. Or it could be an emotional/psychological separation that renders continued friendship untenable. In either case, the relevant duration for commitment is until the separation actually occurs, not until we realize that it will occur. If your friend is near death, you do not take this as a reason to stop being her friend. Rather, it motivates you to be a *better* friend for the time she has left.³⁴ Or if your friend is moving to another city, you help him pack the moving van; you don't cut ties preemptively. In this sort of case, we foresee an end to an established friendship and remain committed for the relevant duration – until the friendship is ended by separation.³⁵ This pattern also holds for nascent friendships.

It is possible, though unusual, to form a new friendship while knowing that separation is immanent. It seems to me that an indication of having done so is that, were you to discover that the separation was in fact only temporary, you would continue the friendship. Suppose you discover tomorrow that the man on the bench has just moved in next door. Are you willing to pick up where you left off? From your current perspective, was your previous conversation the beginning of something and not just a discrete incident? If so, then you might have been friends – if only in a very minimal, attenuated sense – even though you didn't expect it to last long. If not, then you

³⁴ This motivation may not be sufficient to make you act, and you may have reasons to desert your friend as well (*e.g.* emotional self-protection). As Shakespeare points out, it takes a friend who really loves you to stick with you when you are dying (see his sonnet "That time of year thou mayest in me behold").

³⁵ Of course, many kinds of separation are not final, and so the friendship – and thus commitment – may continue in a modified form (*e.g.* keeping in touch via social media after a geographical separation). In this section, however, I mean only to refer to separations which actually do end friendships. Aristotle considers the case of childhood friends who grow apart to illustrate one way a friendship may dissolve naturally absent physical separation (1156b, especially around line 30).

probably weren't friends, and what you did probably wasn't counsel.³⁶ Since the relevant duration for commitment in friendship is *until separation*, a relationship with any future at all has the potential to be a friendship. We don't usually form such short-term friendships on purpose for many reasons, both good and bad, but not because we *cannot* form them. So it is possible that you were sufficiently committed to the man on the bench to become friends and so engage in counsel, despite the brevity of your relationship.

Trust

In an interpersonal context, I take *Trust* to be the belief that the other person will not intentionally hurt or wrong you (or otherwise betray your belief in his goodwill toward you), the attitudes which follow from this belief, and the willingness to act based upon that belief. Trust is rarely an all-or-nothing sort of thing: we trust some people more than others, and few (if any) completely. One reason friendship requires some level of mutual trust is that trust is a proper response to goodwill. For goodwill to be mutual, as it must be in a friendship, it is not enough that each person wills the good of the other. In addition, each must accept her friend's goodwill. This acceptance is the minimal level of trust necessary for friendship. It seems clear that different people require different levels or kinds of goodwill before they will trust, and that some people have to trust or be trusted more than others to become friends. I don't mean to get into that spectrum here. Suffice it to say, every friendship requires some level of trust.

Trust usually arises from the recognition of the other elements in a friend. That is, when we perceive that someone respects and likes us, knows us and wants us to do well, and plans to maintain these attitudes long-term, the reasonable and natural reaction is to trust that person in certain ways. At the least, we trust their motivation. To the extent that we see our friend as wise, we also trust their judgment about matters that concern us.³⁷ This attitude is a precondition for counsel. If the person I am trying to counsel believes that I will hurt or betray him, he is unlikely to take up his side of the

³⁶ Or, counterfactually, if while talking you were under the impression that separation need not occur, would you have been willing to continue the relationship after the conversation was over?

³⁷ More about wisdom in chapter 5: Ideal Counsel.

conversation. Or, if he does, he will probably treat me as the enemy. This kind of conversation can sometimes result in a good outcome, but it won't be counsel. Such a conversation may, however, open a way for trust to develop and so serve as a bridge from combat to counsel.

Suppose you decide to volunteer as a mentor for "troubled youth" and start up a conversation with one of them. She, understandably, does not trust you. Most adults she knows have either hurt her or at least not helped her in a way that she recognizes as proceeding from goodwill. You, on the other hand, are positively overflowing with goodwill toward her. Until this asymmetry is resolved, your conversation will be combat, not counsel.³⁸ For this reason, your initial aim in conversation should be to establish some level of trust, not to begin counseling (though what you would do to achieve these ends may be similar). If she does come to trust you enough to let you in on her process of self-transformation – if the aforementioned asymmetry is sufficiently resolved – then counsel can begin. Without this level of trust, counsel is impossible, since counseling is (at least in part) participation in another person's process of self-transformation.

Taken together, these six elements make up the individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for a friendship that can (but may not) be expressed in counsel.³⁹ While a friendship that is only minimally characterized by these elements can produce counsel, the friends in this sort of relationship are not very likely to exercise this capacity. It seems to me that only extreme circumstances could compel someone to take the risk that counsel often entails with a friend they only minimally know, like, or trust (etc.). Good friends, on the other hand, slip into counsel pretty easily, since the risks are low and the potential benefits desirable. A good friendship is characterized not only by a significant level of all six elements, but also by a balance among them. Just as an imbalance between good will and respect can produce paternalism, so other

³⁸ A quick caveat: some people have a combative style of conversation. That is not what I'm talking about here. A combative style of counsel can be likened to a sparring match – you trade real blows, but both people are aiming at good, not harm. By contrast, you don't usually spar with your enemy, since he may take the opportunity to do you real damage.

³⁹ These elements may further rely on other conditions (*e.g.* shared experience), making those preconditions also necessary, but I am not concerned with those here.

imbalances among the elements can undermine counsel and even the friendship itself. Trust without sufficient acquaintance can produce an unhealthy deference; affection without enough commitment can lead to sporadic neglect. But, given balance among the them, the more a relationship is characterized by the aforementioned elements of friendship, the better that friendship becomes, and the more likely it is to express itself in counsel.⁴⁰

There are no *sufficient* friendship conditions for counsel

Having set out the necessary conditions for a friendship conducive to counsel, it seems reasonable to investigate what conditions are sufficient for it. I had hoped to make the claim that people who are friends in even the minimal sense I have described would inevitably practice counsel at some point. But I have come to believe not only that this claim is too strong but that there are *no* conditions of friendship which make counsel inevitable, though there are conditions which make it *nearly* so. (That is, these conditions concern probability rather than necessity.) Of course, friends may not counsel well or consistently, but the nature of their relationship makes the practice itself highly probable. I take this to be fairly well evidenced in the previous section. What I need to show, then, is that while better friendships make counsel more likely, no friendship makes it inevitable – that while friendship is necessary for counsel, counsel is neither a necessary condition for friendship nor a necessary outcome of any particular friendship.

It seems to me that the way to demonstrate this claim is by looking at reasons that counsel might not happen, despite a level of friendship which might otherwise make it seem inevitable. To this end, let us examine for plausibility the following possibilities: an otherwise good friendship in which counsel never happens because 1) the subjective need for it never arises, 2) some conflicting trait or attitude in one of the friends prevents it, 3) one or both friends are incapable of the method of counsel, 4) one or both of the friends do not engage in self-transformation, or 5) some mental disability or psychological condition prevents it.

⁴⁰ I discuss good friendships at length in the final chapter.

First possible reason

Counsel never happens because the need for it never arises. The first things to look at here are what constitutes a need for counsel and what circumstances produce this need. Then, we can ask whether anyone either 1) lives a life in which these circumstances never arise or 2) does not feel a need for counsel in the face of such circumstances. A further possibility to consider is that a particular friendship may not result in counsel because each friend may get counsel from a different friendship, and so not need it from one another (that is, the need for counsel arises in each friend, but no need arises for counsel in the friendship between them).

We need counsel when working through our own process alone isn't getting us the results we want. Counsel can also happen if my friend thinks that I could use the help. I'm using "need" somewhat loosely here and taking it to mean a subjective perception of one's own state, rather than only an objective description of necessity. Almost any set of circumstances can produce a subjective need for counsel. Anyone with a decision to make may feel the need. Confusion, emotional upheaval, a difficult situation, or just changes in life can make us feel it. Basically, the human condition is rife with reasons to want counsel, so a lack of the right circumstances cannot be what prevents the need for it from arising. This does not, however, take into consideration the possibility of unusual personalities.

There may be people who are so self-contained that they never feel the need for the kind of help that counsel offers. They simply do not externalize their transformational process, or at least no circumstances have yet been sufficient to make them do so. It is not usual for someone in even a minimal friendship to maintain this attitude, but it is not impossible. One person I discussed this with tells me that he has a close friend with whom he spends a great deal of time, but with whom he never engages in counsel. Their friendship centers around shared activity, as do their conversations; their close acquaintance, therefore, arises from non-verbal experience of each other rather than from spoken conversation. The friend may very well never externalize transformational process through counsel at all. If this is the case, then he is a good example of someone who doesn't engage in counsel but nevertheless engages with his friends in other forms of genuine intimacy and interaction.

Alternately, a person could be so self-satisfied or complacent that she doesn't feel the need for transformation. This also seems unlikely as a permanent state but, again, not impossible. Imagine someone who, unlike the previous example, readily engages in conversation and freely shares her personal problems/victories with her close friends. Imagine further that one of her friends tries to counsel her about one of the difficulties she's having, only to discover that the prospective counselee isn't actually interested in transformation – she just wants another person to affirm what she already feels about herself.⁴¹ Because of this, or another attitude, some people may reject counsel because, rather than not externalizing their process, they simply are not engaged in a process to externalize. Perhaps you have been on the counselor's end of one of these frustrating conversations; I certainly have. I cannot think of any one person in my own experience, however, with whom I have *only* had failed attempts at counsel. That is, even those who consistently refuse to participate do not *always* refuse to do so. But the existence of such a person is nevertheless not outside the realm of possibility.⁴²

Now another possibility: two good friends might never engage in counsel because they're getting/giving it elsewhere. If my best friend and my mom give me all the help I need, then why would I want counsel from anyone else, even another close friend? There are two things to say to this: first, that having “enough” counsel does not preclude us from wanting more, but that, second, some people may nevertheless limit doing counsel to a subset of their good friends.

The idea that having “enough” counsel precludes wanting more could rest upon one or more of at least three faulty assumptions: that we don't sometimes need second opinions, that we only feel a subjective need for counsel when we have an objective need for it, and that we will not respond to other friends' need for counsel. Even after talking to my mom and best friend, I may still want another source of help. This could be because I think my usual sources of counsel are too close to me to be objective, or for

⁴¹ One caveat: if getting a friend's affirmation aids in a self-transformation based on or constituted by the appropriation of some new understanding, then such affirmation could be a part of counsel. If, however, it only makes her feel good, then it neither aims at nor achieves the goal of counsel.

⁴² One might also ask whether such a person could even *be* a good friend. In reality, most people with this attitude would probably also be sufficiently self-centered as to preclude good friendship, but we can imagine someone who is both satisfied with herself and concerned for others. The self-satisfaction might be a sort of blind spot in her understanding of herself rather than a pernicious attitude toward others.

some other reason. And even if they have actually given me exactly the counsel I need, I may not feel satisfied with it, and my subjective perception is what will drive my action here. Finally, even if all my subjective need for counsel is met by one friend, I may have other friends who feel a need for *my* counsel. Since counsel is an expression of friendship, it is very likely that I will at least sometimes respond to my friends' need by engaging them in counsel.

This only shows, however, that getting counsel from one person doesn't prevent me from needing to get it from or give it to others. It does not demonstrate that I *will* get it from any particular other friend. So I could easily have a good friendship that does not express itself in counsel, even if most of my friendships do. Thus, even a good friendship may not produce counsel.

Second possible reason

Counsel never happens because some conflicting trait or attitude in one of the friends prevents it. We have already seen two traits that might preclude counsel: being exceptionally self-contained or self-satisfied. One might think that traits like shyness or stubbornness could also prevent it, but this may not be the case in an ideal friendship because of the element of trust. Even a very shy person may open up to someone whose goodwill he trusts well enough, and even an unreasonably stubborn person may accept counsel with someone whose judgment she trusts. Attitudes like impatience or levity (in either party) might make counsel difficult, since an impatient person may not be willing to put in the time/work necessary for counsel and a frivolous one may not take the need for transformation seriously enough. Again, while these attitudes may sometimes prevent counsel, it seems unlikely that they would always do so. If this section enumerated all traits that inhibit counsel, I think we would find the same pattern: they sometimes, but not always, preclude counsel. I may be missing something, but I cannot imagine a trait or attitude compatible with friendship which would necessarily prevent counsel.

Third possible reason

Counsel never happens, because one or both friends are incapable of the method of counsel. It is true that the method of counsel can be difficult, and that doing it well is *very* difficult indeed. But doing counsel *at all* is not particularly hard, at least not methodologically. Given the right attitude, anyone with minimal conversational skills can give and receive counsel. Indeed, a small child can counsel an adult, and even do it well, in a minimal sort of way. Once, a friend of mine was venting about some trouble her teenage daughter was causing, and a kindergartener who was also present asked her, very matter-of-factly, “But you still love her, right?” I’m not sure the child wasn’t just parroting something his parents had said, but he loved both my friend and her daughter, and he didn’t want them to be unhappy. He was their friend in at least the minimal sense, and he expressed that friendship through conversation. It helped my friend in her process by giving her perspective, not only reminding her of what she really valued but also demonstrating that its value was obvious even to a six-year-old.

But what about someone who does not *have* minimal conversational skills? This is tricky. It seems to me that some of the people in this category will not be capable of even minimal friendship either. For instance, consider someone whose inability to converse arises from a mental disorder that also impairs the ability to understand other humans as persons. Someone who cannot see others as persons will not be able to achieve the minimal level of respect necessary for friendship. But since I do not expect people incapable of friendship to counsel (or even capable people who have managed to avoid friendship anyway), this is not the group of people relevant to this discussion. Rather, we need to look for people who, despite an inability to converse, are nevertheless friends. This is even trickier. What counts as conversation? Are words necessary, or can someone counsel through body language? Certainly any non-verbal language (ASL, to take an obvious example) can be used for conversation, and thus counsel. What about folded arms and lifted eyebrows? It seems to me that any friend who can interact in a way that is meaningful to both parties in the interaction has the

ability to converse, even if minimally. The question remaining is whether such minimal conversation⁴³ is sufficient for counsel; it seems clear to me that the answer must be yes.

Reliance on body language may restrict the practice of counsel, but it cannot prevent it. Imagine that you are visiting a friend in the hospital who has his jaw wired shut. You ask how he's doing, and he rolls his eyes. You respond with an it-could-be-worse speech, and he flips you off (or maybe *your* friend would do something more genteel?). You ask what has him so down and rattle off possibilities until he gives you a meaningful look, and you know you've named the problem. Can you see how this could be the beginning of a conversation in which you were counseling him? Alternately, suppose you come into his hospital room full of false cheer because you are miserable and don't want to bring him down too. He, being your friend, picks up on this bit of mendacity and frowns, etc., until you admit to the deception. He gives you an expectant look, and you start talking... and again, counsel ensues. So words are not necessary to give or receive counsel, only communication, even very restricted communication.

But what about two friends, neither of whom can speak? Imagine you and your friend *both* have your jaws wired shut (what have the two of you been up to?) and are in adjacent hospital beds. You see your friend start crying, but since you can't say anything, you reach over and squeeze his arm. This would probably not be counsel, though it could contribute to counsel if it were part of the right kind of ongoing interaction or series of interactions. On the other hand, if your friend needs a change of perspective which the comfort or solidarity you offer can help him achieve, then your interaction has all the hallmarks of counsel except the use of words. If we take conversation to require words (as the common definition generally does), and counsel to be conversation (as I do), then your interaction will not qualify as counsel on the basis of method alone. If, on the other hand, we allow that conversation does not strictly require words or that I am wrong to restrict counsel to conversation – perhaps I should expand the definition to include all communication – then your interaction could be counsel. I tend to think that

⁴³ Communication through body language need not be minimal. People who know each other well may communicate complex ideas this way, and some people are particularly adept at conveying meaning with gesture. It seems unavoidable, however, that many abstractions, complicated ideas, and narratives can be very difficult, if not impossible, to communicate this way. To the extent that such things are useful in counsel, the exclusive reliance on body language will limit its practice.

conversation need not always require words, but I am not opposed in principle to expanding the definition of counsel to include any sort of communication. In any case, I will proceed on the understanding that conversation is mutual communication, with or without words.⁴⁴

So, any friends who can communicate are capable of counsel. This still leaves us with a final category: friends who cannot communicate at all. By definition, such people cannot counsel, since counsel is, among other things, a kind of communication. But does that mean that there are some friends who cannot counsel? No. Rather, a complete inability to communicate precludes friendship. If this seems implausible to you, remember that I am using “communication” here in an extremely broad manner. In the usual course of things, humans communicate well before they are capable of friendship (think of smiling babies). Consider also that some of the elements of friendship rely on communication – acquaintance and trust in particular. The upshot is: any friend is capable to use the method counsel, because being a friend already requires communication skills sufficient for engaging in counsel.

Fourth possible reason

Counsel never happens, because one or both of the friends do not engage in self-transformation. Perhaps I am overly optimistic about human nature, but this possibility seems pretty absurd to me. Everyone changes, and at least sometimes they do it on purpose. I do not think anyone abstains entirely from trying to direct their own development.⁴⁵ To be more precise, anyone with enough sense of self to be capable of friendship will not entirely neglect the development of that self. Here I must invite you, gentle reader, to provide plausible counterexamples, as I cannot come up with any.

⁴⁴ You may note that both of these examples refer to temporary conditions which are lacunae in a usually conversation-capable relationship. But what about friends who not only cannot currently use words, but never could? If they could therefore not communicate, then they fall into the category discussed in the next paragraph and cannot counsel. If, however, they could communicate without language (including sign, writing, etc.), then they would be capable of counsel, though whatever limitations this situation placed upon their ability to communicate would affect how *well* they could go about it. Of course, if this condition were extended, they might develop their own language, using whatever media they had in common, and so become fully capable better and more complex counsel.

⁴⁵ Of course, self-transformation can be good or bad. People rationalize themselves into morally untenable attitudes all the time. (So much for my optimism.)

Fifth possible reason

Counsel never happens, because some mental disability or psychological condition prevents it. Disabilities that inhibit conversation came up earlier, so here I'd like to consider those which might restrict the content of that communication. This category of disabilities includes any involuntary condition except ignorance that prevents a friend from talking about particular things which would otherwise be appropriate to discuss. These topics might be unavailable to him because of psychological trauma or because of developmental issues. In extreme cases, which are those most relevant to this section, entire modes of thought (*e.g.* thinking in hypotheticals) may be off the table. In very extreme cases, a condition may actually prevent a person from forming the sort of friendships described in this chapter. I do not mean to address this latter kind of case, since I am presupposing friendship for the purposes of this section. But I would like to acknowledge that sometimes the best relationship a person can have will not be the sort of friendship that can express itself in counsel.⁴⁶ So long as a disability or trauma does not prevent a person from forming a friendship (or from communicating), it cannot prevent that person from engaging in counsel.

The upshot of all this is that 1) anyone who has the capacity to be a friend also has the capacity to counsel, though people have varying degrees of aptitude for it, and 2) no set of friends, not even the very best one, will necessarily express their friendship through counsel, though the better the friendship is the more likely they are to do so, because no set of friendship-making features in a relationship will guarantee that those friends engage in counsel.

⁴⁶ It would be interesting to know how closely the inability to form friendships that can be expressed in counsel is tied to psychological trauma and/or particular mental disabilities. It seems to me that people will always try to have at least one friend. Very rarely do external circumstances prevent a minimal friendship – that would require something like total isolation. Even with circumstances in which there are no reasonable candidates for friendship, we still try (think Stockholm syndrome). What will prevent someone from forming a friendship when there *are* reasonable candidates available? Some internal condition that makes it impossible to achieve one of the elements of a minimal friendship. A trauma that makes trust impossible or a condition which forestalls affection might do it. The question I would like answered is whether anything aside from these things can keep a person from forming a friendship.

Conclusion

Friendship, then, is the necessary context for counsel, and counsel is a conversational expression of friendship. Any friends may counsel, and better friendships express themselves in better counsel, other things being equal. Each of the six elements of friendship contribute to this, but good counsel (and good friendship) also requires a balance among those elements. Anyone who has the capacity for friendship also has the capacity for counsel, but no friendship, no matter how excellent, will necessarily produce counsel.

Friends engage in counsel when one of them needs help with her process of self-transformation which conversation, and when that help can be rendered through conversation. The aim of her process is a change for the better, and this is also the aim of counsel, which is the topic of the next chapter.

Chapter Three: Change for the Better & Moral Disagreement

The good of the counselee is the aim of counsel

This chapter is concerned with the aim of counsel, which is to help⁴⁷ a friend who is in the process of self-transformation. Counsel specifically aims at a change for the better in that friend and, ultimately, at their good. There are many varying conceptions of the good, but since counsel takes place under the guise of the good, we can use any of these conceptions in our practice of it. As a result, I will spend very little time on the nature of the good itself and devote most of it instead to a particular kind of problem that arises when the friends disagree about what that good is, especially when that good is of a moral nature: deference. Should one friend defer to the other's judgment if they cannot agree? If so, who should defer to whom, and on what grounds? Or should we try to avoid deference altogether, considering the problems that seem to accompany the practice?⁴⁸ As it happens, subjective communication – the characteristic method of counsel – is particularly well-suited for avoiding deference on the part of the counselee, though it can deepen the potential problem of a counselor's deference to her counselee. Further, both the aim of counsel and its context give the friends involved reasons to avoid deference, and the nature of friendship itself provides criteria for judging when deference is appropriate.

The aim of counsel arises from the nature of friendship. Friendship is the most fundamental of counsel's three defining features because it shapes the other two.⁴⁹ One aspect of friendship in particular, goodwill, gives counsel its aim – the good of the friend – and respect constrains its primary means to a subjective mode of communication. The aim of counsel is its next most fundamental feature for much the same reason: the goal of helping a friend is best achieved, in conversation at least, through subjective

⁴⁷ I am using "help" to mean more than "facilitate" here. For my purposes, "help" means something like "to assist in the betterment of." It is not neutral with regard to the good of the counselee but aims at a perceived good (though, as we shall see, the two friends involved may perceive different things to be the relevant good).

⁴⁸ These include problems of autonomy, understanding, and authentic interaction, each of which I address in the Moral Disagreement section of this chapter.

⁴⁹ The three features in order of fundamentality being 1) friendship, the context of counsel, 2) a change for the better, the aim of counsel, and 3) subjective communication, the means of counsel. For a discussion of why I order them thus, see the introductory chapter.

communication. In contrast, the fact that one is using a particular form of conversation does not direct the interlocutors toward any particular kind of end. So the end of counsel shapes its means more than vice-versa.

Changing for the better: the aim of counsel

Many things are good, and counsel can aim at quite a few of them. The practice itself, however, does put some limitations on what can count as its aim. First, for a good to be appropriate to counsel, it must both aim at some immediate change for the better and aid in the counselee's long-term process of self-transformation. Second, it must be a good internal to the counselee, though this internal good can also be an intermediate end which forwards a further, external goal. Third, counsel sometimes aims at an undetermined good. Indeed, the friends involved in counsel often have to identify and discuss the problem before it is even possible to determine the kind of good at which they should aim. Fourth, the good in view need not be particularly weighty to merit being the aim of counsel. Since counsel is an interpersonal practice, it is up to the interlocutors to decide whether any potential change is worth a round of counsel.

Every instance of counsel has two nested aims. The proximate aim is a change for the better to be reached by the end of the conversation, and the ultimate aim is to further the counselee's long-term process of self-transformation. So if a friend tells you, "I'm tired of always losing my temper about stupid things," a proximate goal of the ensuing conversation may be that he identify the roots of his anger, or that he admit it to be a problem he can do something about, or that he resolve to "count to ten." Ultimately, this instance of counsel aims to integrate into the counselee whatever proximate good may be attained such that it contributes to his long-term personal development – that he not be so irascible. For any given issue or situation that counsel can address, there will likely be multiple candidates for the proximate goal: some, all, or none of which may be achieved during the course of a single conversation. Out of goodwill toward her friend, a counselor desires that their counsel achieve some proximate good(s). Because she is committed to her friend, she engages him in multiple conversations over an extended period of time, pursuing (even if not consciously) the ultimate goal of his long-term self-transformation. Regardless of what the interlocutors take the goals of their

conversation to be, if they are doing counsel then their counsel will aim at both 1) some immediate change for the better in the counselee and 2) furthering the counselee's long-term process of self-transformation.

Because there are many good things in life, there are also many ways a person can change for the better – physically, emotionally, intellectually, morally, etc. Not every kind of improvement is an appropriate aim for counsel, however, but only those internal to and in some way constitutive of the counselee. For instance, a counselee might be re-examining his religious education with the intellectual aim of knowing whether or not God is indeed omnipotent. Or he might aim at the emotional good which could come from reconciling his parents' love for him with certain unloving behaviors they adopted from a religious tradition. Or his goal may be to make a decision upon which he will later act. In each of these cases, *counsel* aims at an internal change of oneself for the better, but the *counselee* may also aim at further goods – for instance, a more comfortable affective state or the goods associated with a proposed action.

The changes at which counsel aims are changes to the self, not merely changes of condition. As friends, we often cheer one another up with humor or sympathy or whatever seems appropriate. Like counsel, this activity is a conversational outworking of friendship, but unlike counsel, it aims at a change of emotional state – from sad to happy, for instance. By contrast, counsel aims a change of self. Such a change requires new understanding and/or appropriation. This could be the understanding of something new, like the moment you realize that your parents are just people and shouldn't be held to divine standards. Alternately, it could be a new or better understanding of something already known, as when it finally sinks in that no one cares what your college GPA was. The best counsel aims at the full appropriation of some knowledge, as when knowing your own fallibility actually changes your attitude about your beliefs, or when you finally situate the death of a friend within your overall understanding of life. Sometimes, attaining these goods affects our emotional state, though not always in the way we might hope. (“The truth will set you free, but first it will make you miserable.”⁵⁰) Similarly,

⁵⁰ An abridgement of John 8:32, attributed to President James Garfield, among others.

sometimes attaining these goods affects other sorts of conditions: social, physical, etc. These external, non-constitutive goods are not the aims of counsel.

Like the counselee, however, the *counselor* can aim at goods that are external to his friend, though these aims are always paired with related internal goods. For example, suppose someone is trying to decide what changes she is going to make in her lifestyle in order to help her ailing mother. Her ultimate aim (which can also be the counselor's ultimate aim, though it need not be) is her mother's good, which is external to her. This aim cannot be achieved solely through counsel, since it requires that the daughter act on her decision (among other things), and such action is not a part of counsel. Arriving at such a decision, however, *is* an appropriate aim for counsel, as it is a beneficial change in the daughter which conversation with a friend could help her reach. So while a *counselor* can aim at goods which are not part of her friend's self-transformation, her *counsel* only aims at goods which *are* in that category.

Liminal cases in which the friends are aiming at goods of the body count as external goods for the purposes of counsel. Suppose my friend is trying to decide what exercise regimen to adopt, and that her ultimate aim is health. Achieving this aim requires that she not only come to a good decision, but that she also act upon that decision effectively. More generally, the aims of counsel are limited by the conversational nature of the practice, while a counselor's aims in giving counsel are limited by the nature of the friendship. In this way, the goals of counsel are often intermediate ends on the path to some further aim not reachable by counsel alone. My friend might, for example, get guidance and encouragement from a personal trainer in implementing her decision, but while this person does help her pursue health, he does not thereby engage in counsel.

Counsel can also aim at some undetermined good. Many times, neither friend knows exactly what the counselee needs, though they often have a general idea. Counsel frequently includes an exploration of a problem, as well as the search for a solution. For instance, suppose my brother is coming to visit me and I'm unhappy about it. This is a state that 1) I don't want to be in and 2) probably indicates some underlying problem, so I try to work out how to identify the problem and make a change that addresses my unhappiness. I bring it up with a friend. At this point, neither of us even knows what the

underlying problem is – why *am* I unhappy about my brother’s visit? – let alone what the solution will be. It’s fair to say that we know one change we want: that I not be unhappy. But to achieve this, we further want to uncover and resolve the underlying problem. This further pursuit is an appropriate activity for counsel. We may not know what form that resolution will take until we actually find it. I may need to change an attitude toward my brother or toward people visiting me more generally. If I’m unhappy because I feel guilty that my brother always visits me and not *vice-versa*, I may have to decide to visit him on occasion. Or I may discover that while my brother’s visit correlates with my unhappiness, it doesn’t cause it, so some solution unrelated to my brother is called for. Or there may be good reasons for me to be unhappy with my brother’s visit, and what I need is to come to terms with my unhappiness in the light of these reasons. So while we had one outcome in mind at the beginning of the conversation – my happiness – we had not yet determined what good we could pursue via counsel to cause or constitute that happiness. Most cases of counsel begin with some identifiable problem and the desire for a beneficial change. Sometimes we know at the outset what that change will be, even if only generally (*e.g.* I need to forgive my mother), and sometimes we only know that we want the problem solved.⁵¹

Sometimes the goods at which counsel aims do not look much like *changes*. For instance, counsel can aim at things that seem more like maintenance or self-construction than change. Let’s take a case of maintenance first. Suppose you felt your confidence start to erode under a new colleague’s cutting sarcasm. You might look for ways to keep your level of confidence where it was – where you think it should be. This may look more like staying the same than like change, but it demands the sort of personal growth and more settled appropriation of things you already know which are themselves changes. When the current picks up, you have to swim more strongly against

⁵¹ This cooperative quest corresponds nicely with David Wiggins’ characterization of practical deliberation. Practical deliberation is not limited to means-ends reasoning, he argues, but begins with a search for the “best specification” of an end. He writes: “I shall characteristically have an extremely vague description of something I want – a good life, a satisfying profession, an interesting holiday, an amusing evening – and the problem is not to see what will be causally efficacious in bringing this about, but to see what really qualifies as an adequate and practically realizable specification of what would satisfy this want.” (Wiggins, 1976. p 38) Likewise, friends engaged in counsel often begin with a vague sense of what might be needed and work toward a something more specific.

it just to stay in the same place. In the same way, circumstances can force a choice between changing in order not to lose ground and losing ground by staying the same. Similarly, self-construction is a sort of change – not from one developed state to another, but from a less developed state to a more developed one. This is especially prominent in the young. A father can engage his son in counsel in hopes that it will help him come to respect his sister, not because his son has been disrespectful, but because having a consistent attitude of respect for his sister is better than having not particular settled attitude.⁵² In this case, the aim of counsel is still a change for the better, but that change is one of development or self-construction.

The aims of counsel need not be particularly serious or important – counsel is a no-job-is-too-small sort of proposition. Terms like “self-transformation” may seem to imply serious character-building or deep introspection, but the goods appropriate to counsel are not limited to such things. Rather, any change for the better within a person can be an aim of counsel and count as self-transformation, even if it seems trivial. Just *being* a good of this sort lends it sufficient gravity. For example, if a co-worker’s off-hand remark has made me a little self-conscious about my laugh, counsel can help me regain my equanimity by giving me perspective. This change in attitude is a good thing, but hardly a serious matter. Yet it is an appropriate aim for counsel.

Indeed, in this context, it is somewhat misleading to categorize a good as either important or not, since importance is better understood as a continuum of how much something warrants our attention than as a characteristic something either has or does not have. It may be that every good has *some* importance, since importance is a kind of value, and value is a kind of good. So while things can be more or less important to me in relation to each other, no good is completely unimportant. Many goods, however, may not warrant our attention in a given situation. When someone says “That’s not important,” in the context of counsel, he probably means either “That’s not as important as other goods and so need not be taken into consideration,” or, “That doesn’t belong in the current discussion, even though it’s a good I take to be very important.” For instance, the good of knowing how to treat a pet well should take a back seat to knowing

⁵² See page 88 for a longer version of this example.

how to treat a child well, given a discussion about household relationships. And the good of knowing one's avocation may not warrant attention in a discussion that centers around how to feel about a bad break-up. Moreover, whatever may be the case objectively speaking, a good's relative importance within the context of counsel is a subjective measure. Both friends will have ideas about what goods matter more and which should be pursued, and it is their perspectives that will inform counsel, regardless of what is objectively important. Because they are friends, they will take each other's perspective on what is important into consideration, which will in turn make their communication more subjective.

Being wrong about what is relatively important, as well as other ways of being wrong about what is good, can undermine counsel's aim but cannot prevent its practice. If my friend and I both think that how she treats her dog is more important than how she treats her son, we can still engage in counsel, but it may result change for the worse rather than for the better. More blatantly, if we agree that hating people who disagree with us is a good thing, then we may counsel one another about whom to hate and how to express that hatred. In either case, the resulting change will be a change for the worse, not for the better. So if both friends are wrong about the good, counsel is unlikely to achieve its end, while if both are right about it (or at least sufficiently right about it), counsel has a good chance to succeed. Of course, if only one of us is wrong about what is good, then we have a different sort of problem: moral disagreement.

Moral disagreement

Moral disagreement in counsel can arise whenever the friends involved disagree about the good. This can happen when they don't see eye-to-eye about whether some particular thing is good at all, or it can be a disagreement about what goods are more important than others, or it can have to do with what goods warrant attention in a given situation. Such disagreements neither prevent friends from engaging in counsel nor preclude counsel from attaining its aim, but they do complicate the process and can raise problems of deference.

Moral disagreement need not only happen when one person is right about the good while the other is wrong. It's easy for two people to be wrong in different ways, and

even possible for them to both be right and still disagree. Suppose my friend values her dogs over her children, while I think that children should be indulged in their every whim. We will disagree about the proper attitude toward kids, and we will both be wrong. Alternately, we can agree that children need a balance of freedom and structure in their lives (and let's stipulate that we are generally correct in our understanding of this) but prioritize these differently. So we are both right about the goods, but we disagree about how to balance them. There are several possible explanations for this. First, one of us could be wrong about which is more important. Second, we could both be wrong to prioritize one over the other, as they may be equally important or even incomparable values. Third, we could be thinking about different aspects of the situation under discussion, such that she is right to prioritize freedom and I am also right to prioritize structure. Suppose, for instance, that we are talking about how her son plays with other kids in the neighborhood. She wants him to grow more independent and so does not want direct adult supervision. I, on the other hand, am concerned for his safety and therefore want some kind of oversight. Of course, she wants him to be safe and I want him to become independent; we even agree that these are of equal importance (assume for this example that we are right about this). But when we talk, we initially see different values as warranting attention in the situation, and so we disagree. In this sort of case, initial disagreement sometimes disappears if we each become convinced that both values warrant attention, though we may continue to disagree about which value deserves priority. Moral disagreement need not be resolved, however, for counsel to be successful.

Counsel sometimes attains its end in the face of unresolved moral disagreement. Suppose you have a friend who is looking for a job that uses his degree in chemical engineering. He has several offers and is wondering how to decide which to accept. As you talk about it, it becomes clear that the job he likes best is morally unacceptable to you: he felt comfortable with the people he met there, and the job would entail extensive opportunities for research, but the company's products are not environmentally friendly. He is not worried about this latter consideration, but you see it as a deal-breaker. At the end of the conversation, he has decided to take the job despite your qualms. If he has actually changed for the better through your counsel, even though it

was not the change you had in mind, then counsel has achieved its aim. But if his decision ends up changing him for the worse rather than helping him because he was morally mistaken, then the aim of counsel was frustrated.⁵³ Here again, it's important to distinguish the aim of counsel from the desires of the counselor.

Moral disagreement also creates problems for counsel by putting pressure on the interlocutors' friendship. From the counselor's perspective, it generates a conflict between two aspects of friendship: goodwill toward the friend and respect for the friend as a moral agent. Should the counselor encourage his friend to go against her own moral judgment for the sake of what he takes to be her actual good, or should he defer to her (possibly) faulty judgment out of respect for her agency? From the counselee's perspective, the conflict is twofold. The first conflict is between two visions of the good: hers and her friend's. The second conflict is between her own self-regard and respect for her friend's opinion. Both produce the same practical question: should she defer to her friend's judgment or stick with her own? The friends' choices may also have further ramifications for their friendship. If the counselor consistently pushes his own judgment and the counselee consistently defers, their relationship may be thrown out of balance, becoming more paternalistic than friendly. Alternately, if the counselee always discounts her friend's moral judgments,⁵⁴ he may stop presenting them, so that she loses a significant good of friendship – access to another perspective. Moral disagreement in counsel, then, both is a conflict between two visions of the good and also creates tension between a counselor's goodwill toward her friend and her respect for her. This tension is at the center of the problem of moral deference.

Moral deference: the problem of asymmetry

Moral deference is accepting another person's judgment about some moral claim rather than relying on one's own. This can also take the form of accepting advice, in

⁵³ Note that the culmination of counsel would be decision itself, as well as any attendant attitude shifts – results of his action are outside the realm of counsel since they do not comprise self-transformation.

⁵⁴ Sometimes this discounting of another's perspective is simply a result of apathy, but often it emerges from a lack of respect characteristic of paternalism. In this latter case, the counselee is working through her process but every time her counselor suggests something, her response is something like, "Yes, dear. It's nice that you think that, but if you'll just watch me walk through my process here, you'll be the one learning things."

which one both defers to another's judgment about what is right and also defers about the practical implications of that moral judgment. In the context of counsel, moral deference allows the friends to bypass what otherwise might be a lengthy moral discussion, sometimes by bracketing one's own views for the sake of the argument and sometimes by trusting the other person's judgment. More broadly, moral deference can be a wise acknowledgement of one's limitations or a blameworthy abnegation of one's responsibilities as a moral agent. The question is not so much whether one ought *ever* to defer on moral issues, but when and on what grounds to do so. Perhaps less gripping is the question of whether we ought ever to defer in other axiological areas. For instance, should I accept that Mutemath is a great band because my musicologist friend Jordan raves about it, even though it doesn't do anything for me? Or when should I defer on prudential questions (as when we ask for the best route to someone's house)? While they may be less pressing, deference on any value judgment can present problems of asymmetry. In what follows, I focus on moral questions both because they usually present the most difficult versions of the problems and because we don't feel the conflict as strongly (if at all) in aesthetic and prudential cases. We are usually content to leave aesthetic judgments to the individual as a matter of taste, and the stakes of purely prudential judgments are generally not high enough to merit much concern if we get them wrong. So while there are problems with deferring on any value judgment, moral deference is particularly troublesome.

Questions of moral deference are often addressed by comparing it with non-moral deference. For instance, believing someone's testimony about the breed of their dog seems like a reasonable thing to do, while accepting someone else's judgment that you should cheat on your spouse does not. The fact that people are generally OK with the former but suspicious of the latter is called the Problem of Asymmetry.⁵⁵ While I am not concerned here with solving this particular puzzle, others' attempts to do so can shed light on questions relevant to counsel: how deference affects the practice of counsel and whether counsel can avoid the suspicious aspects of deference.

⁵⁵ See (Howell, 2012) for an overview of asymmetry theories, as well as his own critique, and David Enoch's "A Defense of Moral Deference" (Enoch, 2014) and (Koltonski, 2016) for a couple more positive takes.

Philosophers who have examined the problem of asymmetry have identified three basic issues which bear on the practice of counsel: whether it violates autonomy, whether it bypasses understanding, and whether it undermines authentic interaction.⁵⁶ Each of these issues has implications for both the person deferring and the one being deferred to (when there is such a person), though the latter is not always obvious and has often not been the focus of discussion. The current literature on moral deference deals mostly with locating and explaining these issues, laying a rich groundwork for those of us who would like to explore their practical implications. My aim here is to show that while practices similar to counsel (*e.g.* advice) are often subject to the downsides of moral deference – even when done well – competent counsel largely avoids these problems. To this end, I address each problem by first explaining the relevant worry and then giving a brief overview of what philosophers have to say about it. Next, I consider how these particular problems can affect counsel and explore the ways by which the nature of good counsel (specifically, its context, aims, and means) can help us avoid these problems.

The problem of autonomy

Does moral deference compromise autonomy? This is the most complex of the three asymmetry questions and bears upon counsel in several ways, so addressing autonomy will take up the bulk of the remainder of the chapter. The question comes up regularly in the debate, and people usually answer in the negative, since we are free to defer or not. Others, however, think that this response misses the point of the worry, and that the real issue is whether deference prevents self-legislation and/or outsources moral deliberation. These perspectives usually consider circumstances in which the deferrer is uncertain about a moral issue. Some philosophers conclude that in the face of moral uncertainty, deference is sometimes the best way to avoid wrongdoing, and that this should take precedence over concerns about autonomy. One philosopher goes so far

⁵⁶ The first two of these problems are much more widely dealt with (see footnote 51) than the third, which may be exclusively addressed by Knut Olav Skarsaune (Skarsaune 2016).

as to argue that we ought sometimes defer to a friend in the face of moral *disagreement* as well.⁵⁷

The problem of autonomy arises from the intuition that by deferring on a moral issue, a person somehow abdicates his position as a moral agent. Consider the following possibility: suppose there was an app for making moral decisions – you input the situation and it spits out “the right thing to do.” Would using such a program undermine your autonomy? Robert J. Howell, who proposed this thought experiment, thinks that it would not.⁵⁸ He admits that by deferring to “Google Morals”⁵⁹ or some other moral advisor one might be “illicitly dependent” on them, but argues that this dependence does not deprive the agent of his autonomy. Rather, the agent exercises his autonomy by freely choosing to defer.⁶⁰

You might think that Howell’s answer misses the point. Sure, a deferring person acts freely, but that doesn’t really address the worry. It may be that an unnoticed ambiguity is at work here, since “autonomy” can refer to either freedom of action or some form of self-legislation. Deference could be a problem for the latter but not the former. But while it may be that the issue is simply mislabeled, pointing this out does not address the underlying problem. So what is the problem with Google Morals? Howell answers from the perspective of virtue ethics, and thereby shifts the focus of the problem from the decision procedure to the decision-maker. Briefly, he argues that decisions made out of deference do not express the person’s character, and so do not reflect moral goodness even when correct.

On the other hand, David Enoch thinks that the worry is about outsourcing not agency but moral deliberation.⁶¹ There seems to be something wrong with letting someone else do your moral reasoning for you – isn’t that *your* responsibility? Enoch believes that even this worry is overblown. Ideally, we would all do our own deliberation every time we needed to make a moral judgment or a corresponding decision. But in the

⁵⁷ Koltonski, 2016.

⁵⁸ Howell, 2014. p 389

⁵⁹ “Google Morals” is similar to Elijah Millgram’s “Super-Talmud,” which Millgram worries will “undercut” the “unity of our agency,” in moral and non-moral decisions alike. (Milgram, 1997. p 71)

⁶⁰ Howell, 2014. p 400

⁶¹ Enoch, 2014. p 250

absence of ideal conditions, we make do with the best option possible in a given situation.⁶² He argues that deference is the best option – and therefore justified – in cases of moral uncertainty when deferring decreases our chances of wronging others.⁶³ So while there is a downside to outsourcing moral deliberation, such deference is still sometimes the right choice.

Up to this point, I have only considered cases in which people defer as a solution to moral uncertainty, and if Enoch is right, this response is sometimes justified. The question remains, however, whether deference is ever justified in cases of moral *disagreement*. That is, are you ever justified in doing something you take to be morally wrong out of deference to another person? My own first instinct is to answer with an emphatic, “No!” but the question may call for a more nuanced answer. Daniel Koltonski argues that when friends ask us to defer to them, our duties of friendship may outweigh other moral considerations.

Koltonski’s argument rests on a novel interpretation of an otherwise unremarkable premise: that we ought to treat our friends as fellow agents. In this case, the relevant aspect of being an agent is having one’s own ends, and treating someone as an agent is to properly respect those ends. Further, caring for our friends as agents includes sharing and promoting the ends they have adopted for themselves. Sometimes, the joint pursuit of these ends presents no moral difficulty, but other times the friends may disagree about how to proceed. Koltonski argues that “the decision ought to be left to the friend whose end it is,” even when this requires the other friend to act against her own moral convictions. So, to use his example, “a good friend will help you move a body” even when she believes your judgment about doing so is wrong, and even when she is correct in that belief.

Counsel and autonomy

Counsel, by its very nature, supports the friends’ autonomy. Counsel is an expression of friendship, and friends respect one another – specifically, they respect one another’s autonomy. Moreover, counsel’s mode of communication is predicated on

⁶² Enoch, 2014. p 247

⁶³ Enoch, 2014. p 231

respect for the other as a subject, and to be a subject is (in part) to be an autonomous moral agent. This does not, however, automatically make every instance of counsel perfectly support the interlocutors' autonomy. People are imperfect friends who engage in counsel imperfectly. So each friend *as friend*, both counselor and counselee, has the responsibility of safeguarding both her own and her friend's autonomy. This looks different from the two perspectives, and we will start out with how things look from the counselee's point of view before turning to the counselor. There, we will look carefully at the different ways a counselor can deal with moral disagreement while maintaining respect for her friend.

The counselee's perspective

A counselee's moral commitments both shape and are shaped by his process of self-transformation. In the former case, a change may consist in the practical application of an already-held belief. For instance, I may resolve to forgive my neighbors for their nosiness out of a more general conviction about forgiveness. My attitude toward my neighbors changes, but my moral commitments remain the same. In the latter case, when my process of self-transformation shapes my moral commitments, my moral commitments themselves change. Perhaps my previous reticence to forgive my neighbors arose from a faulty moral principle – I thought that the only people I needed to forgive were people whom I liked. In this instance, my moral convictions (and perhaps also my attitude toward my neighbors, though this is not guaranteed) changed. When a counselee gets help from a friend in making either kind of change, he will often have the opportunity to defer to that friend. While there are good reasons to defer in the short-term, given the right circumstances, a counselee often values his autonomy highly enough to try to avoid moral deference altogether.⁶⁴

⁶⁴ This corresponds to Aristotle's comparison between arts and virtues in *NE* 2.4. We can produce something "literate" by following the advice of someone who knows about such things, but we cannot be virtuous this way. One only acts virtuously, he says, if one does virtuous things "first of all knowingly, and next having chosen them and having chosen them for their own sake, and third, being in a stable condition." So while a counselee might defer in the short-term for the sake of an outcome (the character of the action), he has good reasons to resist deference in the long-term, instead prioritizing an autonomy that in some ways resembles Aristotle's description of virtuous action. (*NE* 2.4 1105a20-35)

Given that the problem of autonomy ought to be taken seriously, a counselee needs to have good reasons for deferring, if in fact deferring is ever the right thing to do. One such reason might be to have a better chance of avoiding wrongdoing, as Enoch argues. In the context of self-transformation, “wrongdoing” could also include changing for the worse, rather than for the better. If, for example, I genuinely don’t know whether I ought to distance myself emotionally from an aunt who dislikes me or seek reconciliation, I may get guidance from a friend who is particularly insightful about this sort of thing.⁶⁵ By Enoch’s lights, the fact that my friend has a better chance of being right than I do is enough to justify deference. It seems to me, however, that this calculation of probabilities does not let me off the hook. Rather, there are at least two other questions I should ask before deferring. First, have I exhausted my own moral deliberation on the issue? And second, have I exhausted my friend(s)’ counsel, given constraints of time and opportunity? Because we are communicating subjectively, this entails not only listening to my friend, but trying to understand her perspective and appropriate it into my own (regardless of whether I end up agreeing with her). If I have thought carefully on my own and availed myself fully of my friends’ help and *still* don’t know what to decide, then I have done due diligence as far as my autonomy is concerned and may be justified in deferring. But this is not the end of the story.

The counselee needs to safeguard his autonomy, even if he decides to defer. One way to do this is to revisit the decision periodically. In this, the diachronic nature of friendship, and thus of counsel, is a significant advantage. For instance, if I choose to defer about my attitude toward my aunt, this need not be a once-and-for-all sort of decision. Suppose I had to decide quickly because knew I would see my aunt at Thanksgiving (which was less than a week away) and would have to interact with her. I took my friend’s advice (I deferred) and tried to reconcile with her. Whether things went well or not, I can reevaluate my decision in the light of the outcome, and so re-establish

⁶⁵ You may have noticed that the line between moral testimony and advice gets blurred on a regular basis in this discussion. This is meant to reflect a way we actually give moral testimony. Many times, we package the practical implications of a moral judgment *with* that moral judgment in the form of advice. The examples here illustrate this tendency. Of course, one may give either testimony or advice independently, but even this is somewhat illusory. Often, advice is implied by testimony (“Stealing is wrong” generally implies “Don’t steal”), and testimony can be inferred from advice (I can infer that you think holding a grudge is bad when you advise, “You should forgive him”).

myself as the moral deliberator, reclaiming my autonomy (to the extent that I had surrendered it by deferring). Further, I can debrief with my friend and either ratify or abridge my earlier thinking.

The counselee's goal, with regard to deference and the problem of autonomy, is to both make the best decision possible and to make that decision her own. Counsel aids in the former because it aims at the counselee's good and in the latter by its use of appropriation. Usually, we can achieve these things without deferring. But even when time constraints or deliberative dead-ends make temporary deference the best choice, the counselee is still responsible for her long-term self-transformation. Fortunately, we usually have time to revisit the question on which we deferred and so reassert our autonomy by continuing our moral deliberation until we reach a conclusion that is truly ours.

The counselor's perspective

A counselor's moral commitments affect her counsel – both in what possibilities she entertains or endorses, and in her unspoken attitudes toward them. This raises such questions as 1) how much these moral commitments affect the content of her counsel, 2) what forms this influence takes, and 3) to what extent she and her interlocutor are aware of it. Once a counselor's practice has been adequately described along these lines, there remain a number of normative questions. Is this influence a good thing? What is the right relationship between the counselor's moral commitments and her friend's autonomy?⁶⁶ What is the right attitude for each party to take toward the possibility of deference?

This section will consider what possibilities are open to a counselor when she and her friend have a moral disagreement relevant to the course of counsel. I will focus on an extreme sort of case: when the counselor believes that the counselee will suffer extreme harm because he is about to act on what the counselor takes to be a moral mistake. Such harm could be either an internal evil, like a malformation of character, or

⁶⁶ I use "autonomy" in this section to mean something like "someone's status as a moral deliberator and agent," rather than the narrower sense of libertarian freedom used by people like Howell and Enoch. My aim in doing so is to keep my vocabulary consistent with that which is used in the literature on moral deference.

an external one, such as debilitating trauma or death. While the latter is not within the purview of counsel, it is certainly within the purview of friendship. So a counselor can be concerned that her counsel will not be enough to keep her friend from this sort of harm, and this concern may give her reasons to either continue, modify, or discontinue counsel in various ways. The counselor's options range from leaving the conversation entirely, to manipulation, to deference, to continuing with an entirely open-ended⁶⁷ kind of communication. Each of these options is sometimes appropriate, depending on the situation.

In cases of moral disagreement,⁶⁸ the basic conflict for the counselor is between respecting her friend as a moral agent and desiring to help her, sometimes in ways that go beyond aims possible for counsel. This conflict arises most obviously when the counselor judges her friend's underlying perspective to be self-destructive. For instance, suppose your friend wants to discuss her romantic relationships exclusively under the assumption that her whole happiness depends entirely on her partner. If she is closed to other possibilities, such that counsel has brought about no change, what are you to do? It does not seem to be in keeping with goodwill or affection to encourage her, even tacitly, toward the foreseeable psychological damage she will doubtless incur if she proceeds as she is inclined to. But refusing to continue the conversation unless she changes her tune does not respect her autonomy.

Here it may be useful to revisit the distinction between the aims of counsel and the aims of the people involved. Counsel itself only aims at internal changes for the better. So in this sort of situation, it would aim at a healthy attitude toward romantic relationships, a good understanding of the sources of happiness, or something similar. The counselor, on the other hand, is counseling both to attain this end and in pursuit of a further good for her friend. Specifically, she wants her friend to have good relationships which are not undermined by unrealistic expectations. Perhaps more specifically, she does not want her friend to experience the pain of a bad relationship

⁶⁷ By "entirely open-ended," I mean the sort of subjective communication in which the speaker does not advance any agenda of her own or attempt to steer the conversation in any way, but only asks questions or proposes hypotheticals to prompt her interlocutor's thinking.

⁶⁸ I am focusing on cases of moral disagreement rather than on cases of moral confusion because deference in the face of moral disagreement is a stronger threat to autonomy.

and of the eventual break-up. Sometimes moral disagreement focuses us on the internal problem – we don't want our friends to become worse people, and we believe that this is precisely what our friend is in the process of doing. Other times we feel pressure from imagining the results of that change. If a change for the worse makes a friend self-destructive, we may have sufficient reason to abandon counsel and engage in conversation or actions that traduce her autonomy. It is this latter sort of case that I want to investigate here.

Of course, violating a person's autonomy also wrongs them, which is why the conflict exists in the first place. It seems that in a case where the counselee is bent on self-harm, the counselor has four unpalatable choices: 1) abandon counsel for a more manipulative approach which may prevent the self-harm, 2) disengage entirely and wash her hands of the matter, 3) tacitly encourage her toward self-harm by continuing to offer open-ended counsel, or 4) explicitly defer to her judgment. The first option violates respect, the second undermines commitment, and third and fourth conflict with goodwill and affection.⁶⁹ I do not think that any of these options is always wrong, or even that any of them is always the least of four evils. Rather, each option – even manipulation – has its place, depending on the particulars of the situation. In addition, there are better and worse ways to take each option, and better and worse motivations for doing so. We can, however, identify some specific factors that should be considered as we decide which option to choose. Let us look at each of the following factors in the context of each possible option.

Factors:

1. Which leaves the door open for later counsel on this & other issues?
2. Which strengthens the friendship?
3. Which least wrongs or does the least harm to the counselee?
4. Which leaves room for (or best expresses) hope that harm will not in fact come about?

⁶⁹ Respect, commitment, goodwill and affection being four of six characteristics of friendship described in chapter 2.

Option 1: Abandon counsel and try manipulation

Manipulation or coercion should be a last resort against extreme, ruinous self-harm. Much of the hope in counsel is predicated on the assumption that we can survive our mistakes. We can be optimistic about giving counsel because even when the counselee chooses badly, he can recover and even ultimately benefit from the experience. While we might prefer that he come to the right attitude or decision as quickly and painlessly as possible, it is simply not realistic to expect this outcome all (or even most) of the time. When, therefore, the harm we foresee has the potential to destroy, instead of merely hurt, this undermines a precondition of counsel: the continued survival of our friend. Of course, there are forms of ruin that do not literally kill a person; I take ruin to be either a state from which there is no recovery or else a state from which most people would recover neither quickly nor easily.⁷⁰ So if a counselor foresees the ruin of his friend, he may take this as a reason to resort to coercion or manipulation instead of continuing with counsel.

Manipulation and coercion must be temporary, however, since such measures undermine friendship itself. If my friend is on the road to suicide and I refuse to leave her presence until she has a change of heart, this may save her life. Today. But it hardly offers a long-term solution. I cannot follow her about forever, and continued interference with her decisions shows serious disrespect for her status as a moral agent, never mind her privacy. Nevertheless, this sort of coercion may have a place as a stop-gap, emergency measure within the context of friendship. It is, however, a risk: coercion may break the bond of trust and so close the door to future counsel, if not to the future of the friendship itself.

Some relationships are a mix of friendship and something more hierarchical. The parent-child relationship, for instance, could be characterized as a friendship with highly asymmetrical responsibilities (as well as power). If things go well, the relationship will eventually become purely one of friendship (or, if you like, something more than or better than pure friendship). The coercion in the relationship is

⁷⁰ I came across this idea in an interview with Nassim Nicholas Taleb about his book *Skin in the Game* (2017). I have not been able to find this interview again, but Taleb's conception of ruin can be found in various places, including the book itself. Some examples of non-fatal ruin could be financial bankruptcy, psychological trauma, destruction of reputation, and permanent injury.

temporary, albeit longer-term than a non-hierarchical friendship could sustain. The main difference is that we do not treat some level of parent-to-child coercion as a stop-gap, emergency measure, but as a relatively normal part of family life. In both cases, however, hope makes us presume that this measure is only temporary.

Option 2: Disengage

We may also choose to disengage and leave the conversation entirely, though it seems to me that this decision is often self-serving. This is not to say that such a choice is inherently selfish, or even that being self-serving makes it a bad choice, only that it is rarely taken primarily for the sake of the friend. Occasionally, you might face a situation in which you can do your friend no good at all by remaining in dialogue with him, maybe even only exasperating him, so you exit stage left. More often, however, we choose to stop counsel because we have tried everything we can think of and are fed up with our friend's recalcitrance. "Fine!" we say, "Do the stupid thing! I'll be here when you inevitably crash and burn." This, I think, shows a natural limit to the commitment we make to another person when we become his friend. In finding this limit in a concrete way, we are not demonstrating a defect in the relationship, but merely reaching a reasonable boundary. Nevertheless, it is a move made in consideration of our own selves and out of self-respect, primarily, rather than out of consideration of our friend.

How we choose to disengage may also reveal our level of confidence in the friend's ability to advance without us. We can give up on him entirely as a lost cause, or we can step back in the hope that he will figure things out for himself. These two actions may look very similar to an observer, but the first demonstrates a willingness to abandon at least counsel and possibly the friendship itself, while the second merely acknowledges that my role in my friend's life has limits and that he is responsible for his own decisions.

The counselor exercises this option in the most useful way, perhaps, when she stops using open-ended communication, states her perspective straight-out and then bases her next step on her friend's reaction. This disengagement may or may not turn out to be temporary, but it at least *risks* a final end to the conversation. For instance, suppose your friend seems dead-set on belittling his brother for recent job-related

failures as a sort of belated revenge for childhood bullying. You think he shouldn't, but counsel has failed to inspire any change of attitude in your friend. So you say, "Look, I know you think that this is a reasonable attitude to take, but I can't get on board with it." You lay out your reasons and wait for his response.⁷¹ He says, "I guess I'm just not that good of a person," or "Easy for you to say, you *are* the older sibling," or "It will be worth it to see him squirm." Or perhaps he swallows hard, says, "You really think so? *****!" and reconsiders. In whichever case, he knows where you stand and can take that into consideration as he finalizes his decision. This may mean the end of the conversation, or it may be the basis of continuing counsel. In either case, it maintains a level of honesty that bolsters trust – and thus friendship – even if it ends in disagreement. There is no reason, in principle, not to tip your hand when counseling (though there may be contingent reasons).

Option 3: Continue counsel

On the other hand, my concern for my friend's well-being (or my less beneficent desire to be proven right) can motivate me to stay in an open-ended conversation until my friend sees things my way. Because of this concern, I might not want to initially risk complete honesty about my perspective – as it may be rejected – and instead continue with open-ended counsel, despite the fact that this may encourage my friend in his misguided (from my perspective) reasoning. Continuing in open-ended conversation is the most hopeful of the four options in at least three ways.

First, continuing in open-ended conversation reveals a hopeful attitude with regard to both the friend and the possibility of a good outcome. A person who continues in open-ended conversation usually does so because he believes that a good outcome is possible, that his friend also wants a good outcome, and that – despite his failure to do so thus far – the friend will eventually arrive at such an endpoint. Moreover, a continued engagement in counsel indicates a continuing commitment to the friendship. The counselor has not given up on his friend or on their relationship. Of course, abandoning

⁷¹ This is a departure from open-ended subjective communication, but if the departure is temporary, then counsel can continue anyway. As we shall see in chapter 4, counsel needs to be characterized by open-ended subjective communication overall, but not in every particular.

counsel does not necessarily mean abandoning the friendship, as we have already seen, but giving up on a friendship does mean giving up on counsel. So if a person continues in counsel, he is affirming his commitment to his friend and their friendship.

Second, the hope for a good outcome may be justified. Even if the counselee seems intractable in his wrongheadedness and the counselor can't imagine how to arrive at a good outcome, such an outcome may nevertheless be just around the corner. Even to the most insightful person with the best understanding of her friend, the workings of another person's mind remain largely opaque. We cannot know for certain what may change his mind or shift his perspective or even be sure that his perspective is as bad as we believe, so our inability to see a path forward does not mean that such a way does not exist. In this manner, someone who chooses to continue counsel is making a bet at uncertain odds. Similarly, the friend who abandons counsel but not friendship is wagering that the suspension of conversation is more likely to help his friend.

Third, even if the counselee persists in her mistake (from the counselor's point of view), continued exploration of its nature now may make it easier for her to recognize it as a mistake after she acts and to recover from its consequences later. Consider the woman who expects the "right" significant other to ensure her happiness. In the course of counsel, you may ask whether this is putting too much pressure on a potential partner – might this attitude tend to stress him out and thereby drive him from the relationship? Imagine she denies this and then enters into a relationship with her unrealistic expectations intact. If it turns out that you are right, and her partner begins to feel uncomfortable under the weight of her expectations, she may have a better chance of recognizing this because of your conversation. Or, if she doesn't notice or disregards this, and it leads to a break-up, she may be able to evaluate what went wrong more accurately because of your counsel and (hopefully) change her attitude. Recognizing this kind of possibility is another way you can hope for a good outcome, albeit a more distant one. Moreover, in doing so you show her the kind of respect that paternalism violates – you don't try to insulate her from the results of her own decisions.

And, of course, it may turn out that the counselor is mistaken about the relevant moral considerations and the counselee is right. If the counselor recognizes and

seriously accounts for this possibility, then continuing counsel is one way to acknowledge this.

Option 4: Defer to the counselee

Explicitly deferring to a counselee's judgment is often the most straight-forward way of respecting their autonomy.⁷² As Koltonski argues, the person whose ends are under discussion is ultimately responsible for making judgments concerning the pursuit of those ends, and friendship requires that we sometimes defer to those judgments. It is, however, very difficult to justify deferring to a judgment which we see leading to the destruction of a friend. It seems, then, that deference to the counselee is not a live option in very high-stakes cases. On the other hand, when something less than ruin is at risk, deference may be the most hopeful option to take. It may be, after all, that the counselee is right, and so a counselor's deference becomes agreement with the correct judgment. And if the counselee is wrong, then deference can also express hope that she learn from her mistake in judgment. For instance, suppose your friend is hanging on to anger about some specific injustice, and you think that this is ultimately a self-destructive attitude. Your friend disagrees, arguing that not only is his anger justified, but it motivates him to think and act in certain good ways. So you say, "OK, you may be right, and it's your call, so let's see how things go." Given that self-destruction doesn't look immanent, this is a reasonable way to finish an instance of counsel.

On the other hand, deferring to a counselee can feel like an abnegation of one's own autonomy. And, if taken to the lengths that Koltonski advocates, this may be right. If I choose to act against my own moral judgment to further my friend's ends, then surely this is a bad kind of deference, Koltonski's argument notwithstanding. But if I restrict my deference to a sort of bracketing of my own position for the sake of the argument, then I am probably not compromising my own moral responsibility. It may be that at some point in the conversation I will need to tell my friend what I actually

⁷² When a counselee defers to a counselor, he bases his decision on that person's judgment. When a counselor defers to a counselee, on the other hand, she only does so within the context of the conversation and for the sake of the argument, since it is not her decision under discussion. You might say that this is not really deference, but merely a temporary bracketing of one's own convictions. I have no strong opinion about this terminological distinction, so please feel free to use the nomenclature that suits you.

think, not necessarily for his sake, but to satisfy my own self-respect or integrity. But, unless I am also aiming to help my friend through this revelation (as discussed earlier), such an addition to the conversation would not be counsel.

Though counsel's primary way of avoiding the problems of deference is to avoid deference itself, this strategy is not always compatible with friendship. Sometimes our respect for our friends, which is an aspect of friendship that undergirds counsel, takes precedence over our concern for their well-being and requires that we defer to them. In many cases, however, the benefits of deference are not worth its downsides – whether it is the counselor who defers or the counselee.

The problem of understanding

Does moral deference deny us the right kind of epistemic relationship with moral truth? As an aspect of the asymmetry problem, this question assumes that we can be content with strictly propositional knowledge on many non-moral issues (*e.g.* that box jellyfish are poisonous), but that we need something more with regard to moral ones (*e.g.* that I should keep my promises). Some think that the “something more” needed here is “understanding,” though there is some disagreement about what precisely this entails.⁷³ Others think that the problem goes beyond understanding, that even if we could get understanding through moral deference, this would not put us in the right kind of relationship with moral truth.⁷⁴ And at least one philosopher argues that the problem of understanding isn't usually a reason not to defer.⁷⁵

There is a broader question of whether understanding can even be attained through testimony. The general consensus at this point seems to be that accepting testimony can give us knowledge directly, but can lead to understanding only indirectly, if at all. Kenneth Boyd explains, “understanding seems to require that you grasp some fact or information, or relationships between other facts or other information, and this is not something I can do for you.”⁷⁶ But once I have the relevant information, I can do

⁷³ Boyd, 2017. See page 3 for a brief overview of the position as presented by Linda Zagzebski (Zagaebski, 2008), Allison Hills (Hills, 2009), and Duncan Pritchard (Pritchard, 2010).

⁷⁴ Such as Robert Howell (Howell, 2014).

⁷⁵ David Enoch being that at least one (Enoch, 2014).

⁷⁶ Boyd, 2017. p 2.

the further work of “grasping” whatever is necessary for understanding. In practice, however, people often defer in order to avoid doing this work or because they have heretofore been unsuccessful at grasping the relevant information. So while deference to moral testimony (or moral advice) may not preclude understanding, neither does it on its own provide or even encourage it.

Others look at the problem of understanding and think the bulk of the debate over it misses the point. It doesn’t really matter whether deference only gives you propositional knowledge, or whether it allows you to “grasp” or “appreciate”⁷⁷ or properly situate it among your other beliefs. What troubles us about moral deference is not that it precludes understanding, but that the person deferring does not make the moral commitment his own in a different, more profound way – something that sounds very like appropriation.

Robert Howell, for instance, argues that the real problem with moral deference is that it cannot properly integrate a moral belief into the character of the deferrer. I can, for instance, know *that* it is good to be generous, *why* it is good to be generous, and even *how* to be generous without actually *being* generous. Why? According to Howell, it is because I am still not related to the relevant beliefs in the right way – they are not integrated with my other beliefs, attitudes and dispositions.⁷⁸ They are not yet a part of my moral character. Since he is working from a position within virtue ethics, he takes this lack of subjective integration to explain what is wrong with moral deference and also to underlie what others call the understanding problem.⁷⁹

David Enoch has a different take on the problem of understanding. He is more or less willing to concede that we cannot achieve understanding through moral deference; he does not, however, think that this constitutes an overriding reason not to defer.⁸⁰ A lack of understanding is one price you pay when you defer, but it is a price worth paying in some cases. You may remember that Enoch argues that we ought to defer when doing

⁷⁷ Allison Hills’ term.

⁷⁸ Howell, 2014. p 403. If this list (beliefs, attitudes and dispositions) is redundant, let me apologize here - I merely want to be thorough.

⁷⁹ One might object that Howell’s “subjective integration” is just a different way to talk about understanding, or perhaps wisdom. I am not here concerned with this quibble, though I am inclined to treat subjective integration as a particularly demanding conception of understanding.

⁸⁰ Enoch, 2014.

so makes us less likely to act wrongly, especially when acting thus would harm others. Isn't it more important that I not hurt someone than that I understand some moral principle?⁸¹ Of course, someone like Howell might very well answer that rhetorical question in the negative – improving my character *is* more important because that's the foundation of what it even means to be moral. But as we escalate the severity of the harm, this response becomes less tenable. Suppose, to use Enoch's example, that I am voting about whether my country goes to war. Suppose further that I have a decisive vote on the matter. Isn't it more important that I be right in this instance than that I understand, or even subjectively integrate, some moral principle? The upshot of Enoch's take on the understanding problem is that 1) it *is* a problem, but 2) it's not usually the deciding factor when we have to choose whether or not to defer, not even in the most morally important cases.

Counsel and understanding

Despite differences in interpretation of terms and priority in application, the general consensus is that the understanding problem (or something akin to it⁸²) is a real downside of accepting moral testimony. This can be a problem for counsel, since giving and receiving moral testimony can be a part of the practice.⁸³ Sometimes this testimony is direct and thus easy to identify and, if need be, avoid or ignore. At other times, we give and receive moral testimony indirectly, since our beliefs tend to shape the kinds of questions we ask and stories we tell. Deference to direct testimony will almost always run the risk of contributing to a lack of understanding, but the use of indirect testimony can sometimes have the opposite effect. Though understanding is not always the particular good at which counsel aims, it is often a side-effect of the means which counsel employs (subjective communication) and is sometimes itself a means to whatever change a given instance of counsel pursues.

Both direct and indirect moral testimony in the context of counsel can encourage deference and thereby undercut understanding. Of the two, direct testimony presents

⁸¹ This assumes, without much justification, either that we can know when, how, and how badly our actions will hurt others, or that we can accurately judge the relevant risks.

⁸² In this section, I am including Howell's "subjective integration" under "the problem of understanding."

⁸³ For a more detailed discussion of the roles of moral testimony and advice in counsel, see Chapter 4.

the more obvious difficulty. For example, suppose I'm trying to figure out why a particular co-worker (we'll call him Doug) drives me crazy and what to do about it. My friend tells me that I'm taking things too personally (a moral judgment about my attitudes), and I should just ignore Doug (a judgment about what I should do). This may or may not be accurate testimony and good advice, but on its own it does nothing to encourage me to reflect further. If I defer to her judgment, it may seem to me that the problem is solved and that I therefore need not think about it again. From here on out, I just ignore Doug without understanding why I should. On the other hand, I could ask her for the reasons behind her advice and bring up other ways of dealing with my situation. Limiting my responses to either deference to her advice or rejection of it creates a false dilemma. It is *my* process and *my* transformation, after all; I need not be a passive passenger on my own plane.

At this point it's important to note that my friend and I are both responsible for our own decisions, I for deferring (or not) and she for encouraging me to defer (or not). Ultimately, I'm responsible for my own self-transformation, so I cannot justly blame my friend for my lack of understanding. That said, if my friend knows that I have a propensity to defer unreflectively, then it is incumbent upon her to adjust her practice of counsel accordingly – not because she is responsible for my decision or for my understanding, but out of respect and affection for me as a friend. Similarly, my decision about whether to defer should be compatible with self-respect. Giving up self-respect in order to attain some other good will rarely, if ever, be a net gain.

We can also give moral testimony indirectly, and this can either undercut or enhance understanding, depending on how we go about it. Often, we do this unintentionally by only entertaining options or asking questions that reflect our own moral sensibilities. For example, when considering my problem with Doug, my friend may never bring up the possibility of talking to my boss about it, as she considers this option to be “tattling” and therefore wrong. She dismisses it out of hand, if it even occurs to her. She may tell a story about how she and her annoying brother-in-law had a heart-to-heart and now get along splendidly. Her choices about what to say push the conversation in a direction that aligns with her own beliefs, even if she never directly states them. The implicit moral testimony is “in your situation, tattling is bad and heart-

to-hearts are good.” She may be largely unaware of what she’s doing, but this doesn’t mitigate the effects. Indeed, the fact that she doesn’t realize she’s giving a particular sort of testimony means that she *can’t* mitigate the effects, at least not intentionally. Alternately, she may be well aware of her indirect moral testimony. If this is the case, then she can either use it to encourage understanding, and thus also discourage deference, or use it to manipulate me into making my decision based on *her* moral commitments. Of course, if she chooses the latter, she is no longer engaged in counsel, since manipulation has no place there.

On the other hand, my friend can use indirect moral testimony to encourage my understanding.⁸⁴ This approach may still not present options she considers wrong, but it can lead me to understand my friend’s perspective on the matter, which gives me a reasonable basis for accepting or rejecting it. Suppose again that my friend believes my best option is to change my attitude, such that I don’t “take things so personally” when it comes to Doug. This will, she thinks, give me peace of mind and may also help me attain a sufficiently objective perspective so as to identify and deal with the underlying problem – both of these being appropriate aims for counsel. But since she wants me to figure this out for myself, she presents pieces of evidence that she believes will eventually lead me to share her conclusions. She tells me anecdotes, quotes her grandmother, asks me questions about my own experiences and psychology, presents hypotheticals, speculates about Doug’s home life, and maybe drops hints about how these things might apply to my situation. I answer her questions, ponder the quotes, engage with the hypotheticals, sympathize with Doug’s possible motives, and try to integrate it all into my preexisting beliefs, attitudes, etc. I may or may not come to my friend’s preferred conclusion, but I will likely understand why she prefers it. This process avoids the problem of understanding by avoiding the possibility of deference or, at least, of deference to direct moral testimony. But there may be another form of deference at work here.

In focusing on her preferred conclusion, my friend may be setting me up for a subtler sort of deference which is also subject to the problem of understanding. By

⁸⁴ I go into more detail about the roles which indirect communication, including indirect moral testimony, can play in the methodology of counsel in the next chapter.

framing the discussion as she has, she has made it easy for me to defer to her judgment about which considerations (including moral considerations) are relevant to my decision and which conclusions are morally permissible. She has not presented me with reasonable alternatives or contrary evidence. To the extent that she does this intentionally, she is departing from the practice of counsel and flirting with paternalism and manipulation. This approach, I think, is quite common in situations where the counselor thinks she knows the “right answer.” She may realize that direct moral testimony will be ineffective and so argue for her answer indirectly instead. For all that she aims to help her friend, her methodology is not compatible with counsel. And while our motives distinguish manipulation from mischance, the result in any given instance of counsel is often the same for the counselee – unwitting deference.

Suppose, on the other hand, that my friend presents me with several reasonable options, but leaves others out because she judges them to be morally impermissible. For instance, she suggests neither the merits of murdering Doug nor the advantages of talking to my boss about him. She assumes that I agree with the moral judgments behind these omissions and so acts in good faith when she decides not to bring them up. In the case of murder, this is a reasonable assumption, but she may be wrong about my moral evaluation of “tattling.” For my part, it may have occurred to me during our conversation that I could talk to my boss about Doug’s obnoxiousness, but since my friend doesn’t bring it up, I let the idea go – surely she would have mentioned it if it were a live option. Or, if that possibility *didn’t* occur to me, I might defer in a more general way to my friend’s moral expertise: I expect her to bring up any morally salient considerations and morally permissible options which I haven’t thought of. That is part of why we are even having this conversation, after all – that her thinking supplement mine. In both cases, I have deferred to her (probably without her realizing it) in a subtle way that does not undermine the practice of counsel. Her omission and my deference are mistakes within our practice of counsel, not violations of the practice itself. One result of this subtle sort of deference is that I understand neither my friend’s perspective on “tattling” nor, counterfactually, what my own perspective would have been had we discussed the matter.

Generally speaking, the better our practice of counsel is, the less vulnerable it is to problems of deference and even to the bare possibility of deference. First, its method – subjective communication – invites the counselee to make his own judgments, rather than to accept those of his friend. Indeed, the friend need never even present those judgments, let alone lobby for their acceptance. The more adeptly we use subjective communication, the less space there is for deference.⁸⁵ Second, counsel is helping a friend in his process of self-transformation, and this process is largely one of coming to understanding. Sometimes the relevant change simply is a modification or expansion in one's understanding, and other times the transformation emerges from it. To use the current example, I may come to understand my own reactions toward a certain kind of person (represented by Doug in this case) through the conversation with my friend. This new understanding is a good change in me, and so is a proper aim for counsel. What I hope, however, is that this new understanding will be the basis for a new attitude toward Doug and a new kind of reaction to him. I'm hoping that my new understanding will restore my equanimity in his presence. In this way, understanding can itself be an aim of counsel, the means to a further end of counsel, and a part of the transformational process which counsel facilitates. It should be clear, therefore, that anything which hinders understanding (*e.g.* deference) is especially detrimental for counsel. So while deference has a tendency to undermine counsel, practicing counsel well can usually and for the most part either avoid deference or mitigate its effects.

The problem of authentic interaction

Does moral deference undermine our ability to interact authentically with other people? Knut Olav Skarsaune thinks so. He argues that consistent moral deference basically dehumanizes our actions, such that we cannot interact authentically with others. Imagine, he proposes, a world in which everyone defers to Google Morals. "It is in a relevant sense not possible to *interact* with *people* in this society, only officers of Google Morals."⁸⁶ Authentic interaction between people requires their interaction *as individual people*, not merely as representatives of some moral system.

⁸⁵ For more on subjective communication, see chapter 4.

⁸⁶ Skarsaune, 2016. p 7

Skarsaune's insight follows naturally from the problem of understanding. Authentic behavior, he says, is "both *guided by* and *expressive of* the agent's own understanding of the reasons in play."⁸⁷ Deference often results in a lack of understanding, which in turn leads to inauthentic interaction. Of course, there are many things downstream from a lack of understanding, so why focus on inauthentic interaction? The short answer is that authentic interaction is a value which sometimes supersedes the value of possibly avoiding wrongdoing, and increasing one's chances of avoiding wrongdoing has been proposed (by David Enoch) as a reason to defer on moral issues.

Skarsaune argues that we should care about authentic interaction for two reasons. First, since people's moral judgments are expressive of who we are, our actions let us come to know one another. When we act from deference, our actions do not reveal much about who we are or what we are like, and this undermines our ability to have authentic relationships with one another. Further, it is independently valuable to know how the people around us are disposed to prioritize different sorts of reasons for action, which knowledge is denied us when people defer. The second reason to care about authentic interaction is that without it "we would lose a certain kind of personal engagement with each other."⁸⁸ When people defer, they force us to interact with something other than *them*; in effect, we interact with their instructions or their advisor. These two values – knowledge about the people around us and the ability to engage with them on a personal level – may sometimes be more important than avoiding the risk of wrongdoing, even from the perspective of the object of that potential wrongdoing. In some cases, inauthentic interaction can be worse than the wrongdoing which deference would have avoided. If this is the case, then we have stronger reasons not to defer than Enoch considers, and therefore should not share his level of optimism about deference.

Taking the problem of authentic interaction seriously does not mean that we should automatically refuse to defer in every case, however. Skarsaune explains how we usually (and rightly) judge specific instances of deference using the competing values of avoiding wrong-doing and authentic interaction. We examine each case along two axes:

⁸⁷ Skarsaune, 2016. p 7

⁸⁸ Skarsaune, 2016. p 8

“the degree to which the relation between the parties is personal, and the gravity of the practical interests at stake.”⁸⁹

Two kinds of cases are easy to judge.⁹⁰ If the stakes are high and there is no personal relationship, we approve of deference if it lessens the risk of wrongdoing. For example, suppose we are in a scuffle and a police officer arrives. Let us stipulate that her odds of dealing with the situation fairly are better if she defers to “the book” than if she goes with her own judgment. Since we really don’t care about personal engagement with her, we would rather she defer to regulations and so minimize the risk of acting wrongly against us. Alternately, if the stakes are low (or even moderate) and we have a personal connection, we prioritize authenticity. We don’t want our friends to tell us things like, “Well, I was going to warn you about your new boyfriend, but according to the principle of utility...” We want them to tell us what they really think.

Mixed cases are harder. If we face a high-stakes decision in a personal relation, we are torn between two strong, conflicting values. If the stakes are low and the relation impersonal, we may not care enough to have much of an opinion either way, or we may choose the option (between being treated better and authentic interaction) which we value more, independent of the situation. The upshot, however, is that

“...our preferences tilt toward authenticity the more personal the relation and toward probability of right action the less personal the relation. They tilt towards authenticity when the practical stakes are low and towards probability of right action when they stakes are high.”⁹¹

In such a personal relationship as friendship, we usually opt for authenticity unless the stakes are very high indeed.

Counsel and authentic interaction

The problem of authentic interaction is especially relevant to counsel, since counsel is itself a form of authentic interaction, being both self-revelatory and sincere. If

⁸⁹ Skarsaune, 2016. p 9

⁹⁰ These are all adaptations of Skarsaune’s cases on pages 9-11.

⁹¹ Skarsaune, 2016. p 11

deference threatens authentic interaction, it must also thereby threaten counsel, though the seriousness of the threat depends on how much of an interaction is influenced by deference. When one person in a conversation defers to the other rather than to an external authority (as can happen in counsel), it further complicates the picture. Skarsaune argues that we usually base our choices about deferring during an interaction on two things: how personal the relationship is (between the interlocutors) and how high the practical stakes of the decision are. Since counsel takes place between friends, the personal nature of their relationship is a given, though how closely personal it is will vary. Friends will require relatively high stakes, therefore, before knowingly accepting deference as a part of counsel.

But how high do the practical stakes have to be in order to justify prioritizing the probability of right action over genuineness? This question is closely related to one I addressed in the Autonomy section, and I imagine the answer will be similar: when the stakes are ruinously high, then maybe the counselor should push for deference. But even then, the answer is not as clear as we might like, because authentic interaction – genuine and self-revelatory communication – is integral to the practice of counsel, as well as to close friendships.

To the extent that deference renders our interactions inauthentic, it also threatens our ability to counsel one another, since counsel is predicated on respecting each other as individuals and interacting as people. This might lead one to think that counsel cannot coexist with deference, or at least that deference must always undermine it by rendering interactions inauthentic. But most of our interactions are not based on deference, so the majority of our interactions need not be inauthentic, and even if some inauthenticity is unavoidable, it does not follow that this will destroy our ability to counsel. Counsel, after all, need not be executed perfectly to be effective or to count as counsel, and the counselor's aim is to help a friend, not to practice counsel perfectly.⁹²

The practice of counsel also introduces a complication into Skarsaune's picture. He envisions the effect of deference to a third party on the interaction between two

⁹² Counsel is the sort of practice in which doing it well, if made the exclusive aim, is a self-effacing end. That is, if someone's only goal is to counsel well, he cannot counsel at all, since counsel is partly defined by its end – the good of the friend.

people, but we need to consider also how one person's deference to another affects the authenticity of *their* interaction. In Skarsaune's case, one person defers to a moral authority and thereby wrongs his friend (and himself) by making their interaction inauthentic. In the case of counsel, the moral authority – the counselor – is also one of the people being wronged. Further, what if Howell is right, and interacting with someone who is deferring is like interacting with whatever or whoever they are deferring to?⁹³ If this is the case, then the counselor, in interacting with a counselee who is deferring to her, is interacting with a skewed version of herself. (I cannot help but think that this is *not* what Aristotle had in mind when he said that a friend is another self!) This severely undermines the possibility of counsel, since counsel's subjective mode of communication requires that we interact *as ourselves*, not as someone else, and certainly not as each other. Deferring to one's interlocutor is worse for counsel than deferring to a third party in another way as well. If one person is deferring to a third party, he is at least bringing a perspective to the conversation. If he defers to his interlocutor, he is placing the entire responsibility for presenting perspectives on her. Since one of the great benefits of counsel is exposure to another perspective, this further degrades the quality of counsel.

So if the counselor, in an effort to help his friend with moral guidance, presents herself as a moral authority (by giving moral testimony or advice), she actually sets them both up for inauthentic interaction. And the counselee, in an effort to do the right thing, may damage their relationship by deferring. It seems then, on grounds of inauthentic interaction alone, we have good reasons to avoid deference when we can.

To conclude

In this chapter, we have seen how friendship both shapes the ends of counsel and helps us address the problems of moral disagreement and deference that arise in pursuit of those ends. The next chapter will go into more detail about *how* we pursue those ends – the means by which we do counsel.

⁹³ Howell, 2014.

Counsel has a very broad aim: to help a friend with her process of self-transformation. This end arises in a particular context (friendship) from a particular sort of circumstance (one friend's need for a specific kind of change). The aim comes from the nature of friendship itself: we want our friends to be good people who live good lives, and we are disposed to act on this desire (goodwill). Friends don't always agree about what counts as good or what goods are relevant in any given situation (moral disagreement), and this both calls into question the appropriate aim of counsel and puts pressure on their friendship. One way to alleviate this pressure is for one of the friends to defer to the other, but this creates other problems (*i.e.* the subversion of autonomy, a lack of understanding, and inauthentic interaction). What is the proper balance between the counselee's trust in the goodwill and judgment of her friend and the counselor's respect for the counselee as a moral agent? In principle, the most basic solution to problems of deference is respect. But finding the proper way to show respect in the context of moral disagreement can be difficult.

What counsel needs, then, is a method that is consistent with friendship, well-suited for pursuing a particular sort of good in a friend, and characterized by the kind of respect which, along with other aspects of friendship, helps the friends avoid or solve problems of deference. The best method for achieving these criteria is an open-ended kind of subjective communication. In some cases, it is the *only* method that works. This kind of communication both rests on and reinforces mutual respect, which in turn bolsters autonomous decision-making and authentic interaction. Subjective communication also encourages understanding, since it aims at appropriation rather than mere assent. This will become clearer as we investigate the means of counsel – subjective communication – in the next chapter.

Chapter Four: Open-ended Subjective Communication

The characteristic means of counsel

Counsel is a practice characterized by particular attitudes in the participants and by an open-ended form of subjective communication. The previous two chapters dealt with the former; this chapter will address the latter.

The means or method we use in counsel, open-ended subjective communication, is necessary to the practice but is at the same time the least fundamental of its three characteristic components. It is necessary because it defines the *method* of counsel and distinguishes it from other practices, such as giving encouragement or advice. It is least fundamental because it is shaped by the other two components: friendship (the context of counsel) and helping the friend (its aim). Briefly, subjective communication is a way to express all the aspects of friendship – respect, affection, goodwill, acquaintance, commitment and trust – and at the same time to pursue good changes in the counselee.

The communication we use in counsel is at once subjective and open-ended. A conversation can be open-ended without being subjective, as when we shoot the breeze without being concerned with the particularly concerned about the person we're talking to, or when we jointly explore some idea without any particular end in mind. And a subjective communicator can convey some idea indirectly (this is the way Kierkegaard explains it), or she can leave the conversation largely open-ended (which is the manner of communication characteristic of counsel). In either case, she sees her interlocutor as an individual person, rather than as a receptacle for her communication. We will look at Kierkegaard's take on subjective communication first and then briefly consider Socratic dialogue as an example of it. Next, we'll address open-ended communication by situating it on a spectrum of increasingly indirect communication styles. Finally, the last section looks at the six aspects of friendship to see how they both give us reasons to communicate subjectively and can guide us in doing so.

Kierkegaard and subjective communication

Kierkegaard's use of the terms which follow is somewhat idiosyncratic. Scholars have explored them extensively, often with great subtlety of interpretation, and nearly as

often ended in disagreement about precisely what he means by them. I am not entering that debate here. Rather, I am describing the kind of communication which is characteristic of counsel in the light of my own understanding of Kierkegaard. With that caveat, let us look at Kierkegaard's use of "objective" and "subjective," as well as "direct" and "indirect," in the context of communication, and look at how it relates to the practices of giving advice, testimony, and counsel.

The defining attribute of what Kierkegaard calls "objective thinking" is its indifference to particular, existing people.⁹⁴ It is concerned instead only with the object of its thinking – the proposition or injunction, unmoored from the person thinking it.⁹⁵ Objective communication, then, involves detaching a piece of thinking from someone's mind and setting it adrift in the wide universe with the assumption that someone else will pluck it out of the ether and drop it into his own mind. There need be no connection between these two people, only a transfer of information. Such a transfer is also direct – it presents precisely the information in question rather than leading up to it or skirting around it in any way. We have been taught that this sort of objectivity, this clean transfer of pure facts, is the best way to communicate truth. We are often enjoined not to let anything personal bias us. Such objectivity, according to Kierkegaard, actually inhibits communication and increases misunderstanding.

By ignoring the particular people involved, an objective communicator cannot take into consideration any unforeseen confusion or misunderstanding on the part of the individual listener.⁹⁶ If I tell my friend, "If you want children, you really should talk to your husband about it," she may interpret this advice in various ways. She may infer that I think she needs her husband's permission to have children, and be offended. She may conclude that I'm tired of the topic and wish she'd talk about it with someone else. Or she may take my words the way I mean them – that her husband is the other person most involved in the question of children, and as such should participate in whatever decision is eventually reached. Say that my friend hears my advice and agrees with it.

⁹⁴ Kierkegaard, *et. al.*, 1992. Standard citation of *The Works of Kierkegaard*, which I follow from this point onward, takes the following form: KW VII.161.

⁹⁵ This corresponds with testimony's characteristic function of transferring content – people "form a given belief on the basis of the content of a speaker's testimony" (Lackey, 2010. p 73).

⁹⁶ KW VII.58

Under which interpretation is she agreeing? If a third party heard the interaction, they would have no reason to think that her verbal agreement indicated anything less than actual agreement and understanding, but neither would they have any reason to prefer that interpretation over any of the other possibilities. Purely objective communication does not require that she understand and agree to the right interpretation, but only that she “acknowledge the same thing verbatim.”⁹⁷ This, of course, does not measure up to the kind of communication we think should constitute advice. Shouldn’t successful advice (or testimony) conduce to actual understanding of what the speaker intends to convey? If this is the case, then advice is not purely objective, but must require some measure of concern for the existing subject. But even this combination of concern and accurate understanding does not meet Kierkegaard’s requirements for subjective communication.

Subjective communication requires not only that the hearer understand the speaker, but that she understand him in the right way and arrive at her conclusion for the right kinds of reasons. Kierkegaard insists that real communication – communication that results in the listener’s understanding and appropriation of what is being communicated – is subjective and is rooted in “subjective thinking.” The subjective thinker cares more about the person who is doing the thinking than about the content of the thought, whether that person is herself or someone else. She takes the thinker to be of essential importance, and the content secondary.⁹⁸

Kierkegaard also addresses the priority of the thinking subject by focusing on what he calls the “process of becoming.” In the context of communication, this process is the way in which a particular person comes to possess knowledge and assimilate it into her own perspective – what Kierkegaard calls “appropriation.”⁹⁹ It prioritizes the path

⁹⁷ KW VII.57. By the “same thing” here, he refers to the same words or phrases, not necessarily the same informational content.

⁹⁸ This emphasis on the people involved bears a superficial resemblance to one particular theory of testimony: the “interpersonal view of testimony” (IVT). The IVT places the interpersonal relationship of the interlocutors at the center of the discussion of testimony-related epistemology. While it does have this emphasis in common with counsel, the IVT still takes testimony to be fundamentally a transfer of information from one person to another; its interpersonal focus is directed at the epistemic justification for testimony, and (rightly) does not redefine testimony itself. So while the IVT regards the speaker giving testimony as an agent, rather than as simply a repository of information, it does not thereby change the fact that this speaker aims to transfer her knowledge to the listener (Lackey, 2010. p 78-79).

⁹⁹ KW VII.55

or process by which the person comes to understanding, rather than prioritizing the content of that understanding. Put another way, the subjective communicator thinks of the other person as another subject who must tread her own path to truth and not as an object of or receptacle for the speaker's communication. Hence, the corresponding mode of communication is dialectic. That is, it assumes a back-and-forth between two people: the same sort of reflective process that, in the individual, constitutes subjective thinking. So subjective communication is necessarily both conversational and person-oriented.

Subjective communication is also indirect and "artistic." It is indirect in that it does not just say something straight out, and it is artistic in that it is a creative process which builds a path to understanding, rather than simply dropping some assertion at the listener's metaphorical feet. One person lays out before her interlocutor whatever path will bring him to *appropriate* some truth, however roundabout this way turns out to be.¹⁰⁰ Sometimes this path will mirror her own interior journey, but not often, since the communicator cannot control where the path ultimately leads. And because truth is in the process and not the destination (or "result," to use Kierkegaard's term), this is not a shortcoming. Kierkegaard prioritizes the person and the path and "omits the result." Subjective communication takes as primary the particular people involved, so any path laid down must be tailored to the person invited to walk it. And the interlocutor must be invited, not commanded. For Kierkegaard, true communication is the path, and only a willing traveler can take it.¹⁰¹

This is not to say that subjective communication doesn't aim at anything, only that it doesn't aim at the aforementioned "result." It does, however, aim at the appropriation of some (possibly undetermined) truth by the person on the path. What the subjective communicator does not do, and probably cannot do, is specify what that truth will be at the outset, during the process, or any time before her interlocutor actually arrives at it – and perhaps not even then. Rather, she converses in a way that allows her interlocutor to discover, consider, believe (or reject), and situate into his preexisting understanding of himself and the world each idea which might serve as a stepping stone toward further understanding. This is appropriation, a process of

¹⁰⁰ KW VII.56

¹⁰¹ KW VII.57

becoming, which is the goal of subjective communication. And it is the process which is the goal, not the endpoint one reaches after having undergone it. You have not found truth, Kierkegaard thinks, if you somehow attained complete understanding and integration without going through the process of getting it, since truth is in the process of becoming.

I am not entirely sure whether Kierkegaard's subjective communication is always open-ended, or whether it sometimes admits of limited goals. On the one hand, he says that it "omits the result" and "sets the other free." These, and similar comments, seem to indicate that subjective communication is entirely open-ended. On the other hand, he also talks about subjective communication being indirect and gives examples in which the subjective communicator is trying to convey something specific. This is indirect, but not open-ended. Counsel's form of subjective communication, however, is always open-ended as a whole, though it usually contains parts which are not.

Let us consider again my friend who wants children. For the purposes of giving advice (or testimony), it is enough that she understands my meaning rightly. Once she understands what I mean, she can believe it or act on it as she sees fit. But for subjective communication to be successful, she must come to some conclusion herself and not merely accept my assertions or injunctions. Rather than telling her, "Talk to your husband," I must prompt a conversation that gives her space to work out not only what she should do, but why she should do it. "The secret of [subjective] communication," Kierkegaard says, "specifically hinges on setting the other free."¹⁰² The subjective communicator insists on giving scope to her interlocutor's thinking, not confining it. Advice confines. If taken, it limits possible decisions. If only considered, its emphasis on one way of addressing the question may still narrow the range of options entertained. This is not always a bad thing, as there are many circumstances in which such communication is appropriate, but it sets advice (and testimony) apart from fully subjective communication. Because of what they are, advice can be given as a one-way transfer of information but we can only engage in subjective communication through

¹⁰² KW VII.57

dialogue. It should not surprise us, then, that Kierkegaard's paradigm case of a subjective communicator is Socrates.¹⁰³

The Socratic example

One way to understand subjective communication is to consider the nature of Socratic dialogues. First, they often end in *aporia*.¹⁰⁴ Far from directly telling his interlocutors what, say, justice is, Socrates leads them along a winding path which may not even reach its stated destination. The emphasis is on the process, not the result. Second, the dialogues are often shaped by the particular people with whom Socrates converses. He does not address them generically, but shapes his comments and questions to fit each individual interlocutor. Current philosophical works usually begin with a definition or explanation, then go about demonstrating its correctness with a series of arguments, examples, and the like. These works aim at transferring some content from the author to the reader – objective communication. In contrast, Socratic dialogues are a back-and-forth in which multiple hypotheses are raised and examined, revised or discarded, by the various participants in their full particularity.

One might object that Socrates so dominates many of the dialogues that his interlocutors contribute little to the process. I think this is a valid point, though it can be overstated, but I also wonder whether it is a function of the writing-down of these dialogues. Without going into the debate, it seems clear that Plato's writings are works of art, not transcription. Further, it seems to me that if his works are condensations of real conversations, he would be most likely to cut the parts that 1) contributed least to the progress of the discussion and 2) did not come from his teacher, Socrates. If this is the case, then the original conversations would have included substantially more from the interlocutors – especially more disagreement and more original, if irrelevant, thoughts. That is, they would have been real conversations. In Kierkegaard's terms, they would have been instances of subjective communication. Alternately, if the dialogues are

¹⁰³ KW VII.171-175

¹⁰⁴ "*Aporia*" means something like "no path" or "no way." In the context of Socratic dialogues, it is a term of art used to denote the way in which no definite conclusion is reached. They have tried many paths, but they haven't found one that definitively leads to the truth, though they may have made good progress in that direction.

meant only to capture the spirit of Socrates' practice, and were not based on any particular conversations, the point should still hold. Works of art that seek to capture an essence are likely to exclude extraneous elements which do not directly contribute to grasping that essence. In either case, the dearth of substantial contributions from the interlocutors in the dialogues does not in itself demonstrate a corresponding silence in whatever conversations Socrates may have really had.¹⁰⁵ Surely this also explains Socrates' skepticism about books. Books deal in objective communication – they cannot “answer back,”¹⁰⁶ as well as his complaint about orators, who can make speeches indefinitely but cannot properly answer questions.¹⁰⁷ It seems that for Socrates, philosophy just *was* an interpersonal activity, and since books were neither persons nor capable of responding to others, they were not suitable for it. A Socratic version of doing philosophy, then, requires the mutuality of subjective communication. On the whole, Socrates' aims were not limited to the aims of counsel, for while he does seem to desire self-transformation in his friends, this was not the aim of his conversations. Rather, they seem to be joint investigations aimed at understanding truth which might, in turn, change everyone involved for the better. Nevertheless, his approach to dialogue is very similar to counsel's method.¹⁰⁸

Kierkegaard is not the only philosopher to recognize the subjective nature and transformative power of Socratic dialogue. Pierre Hadot contends that much of ancient philosophy was a kind of spiritual exercise which aimed at “realizing a transformation of one's vision of the world and metamorphosis of one's personality,” rather than at “the acquisition of purely abstract knowledge” or the creation of systems.¹⁰⁹ Socratic dialogue in particular is a “communal spiritual exercise,” in which,

“The dimension of the interlocutor is, as we can see, of capital importance. It is what prevents the dialogue from becoming a theoretical, dogmatic expose, and forces it to be a concrete, practical exercise. For the point is

¹⁰⁵ For more on this topic, see Pierre Hadot's discussion. (Hadot, 1997. p 91&92)

¹⁰⁶ *Phaedrus*, 275d

¹⁰⁷ *Protagoras*, 328d-9b

¹⁰⁸ For more on Socrates' mode of communication, see the discussion of leading questions on pages 83&84, and especially footnote 89.

¹⁰⁹ Hadot, 1997. p 20-1. This first quote is from Arnold Davidson's introduction to the work.

not to set forth a doctrine, but rather to guide the interlocutor towards a determinate mental attitude. It is a combat, amicable but real.”¹¹⁰

This is an apt description of Kierkegaard’s subjective communication, so to the extent that he and Hadot have rightly identified the therapeutic character of Socratic philosophy, Socratic dialogue also resembles counsel.

Hadot also draws attention to another characteristic of Socrates’ practice which Kierkegaard’s description of subjective communication mirrors: the idea that the journey is where truth is to be found rather than the destination. He writes,

“...the subject-matter of the dialogue counts less than the method applied in it, and the solution of a problem has less value than the road travelled in common in order to resolve it.”¹¹¹

The resemblance between counsel and Socratic dialogue is complicated if we take the view that Socrates was only feigning ignorance in his conversations in order to bring his interlocutors closer to wisdom (“Socratic irony”). If this is the case, then Socrates could have had a particular conclusion or destination in mind for his friends, or at least a set of acceptable destinations. Rather than wondering, along with his interlocutors, whether virtue could be taught, for instance, he would have known the answer beforehand and steered the conversation accordingly. Suppose this is so. Then open-endedness of Socrates’ subjective communication is even more impressive, since he rarely actually takes his interlocutors to that kind of conclusion. Rather, he must prefer to leave them still wondering and struggling – still in the middle of appropriation. Why? Presumably, some truths take a long time and a lot of work to reach subjectively and fully appropriate. One conversation won’t cut it. So Socrates both gave his friends the time they might need, by not overloading any particular conversation, and subtly goaded them to continue thinking about it, by refusing to conclude their discussions with a satisfying answer. I don’t know whether the theory of Socratic irony is correct, but to the extent that it is, it only makes Socrates’ use of open-ended subjective communication more impressive.¹¹²

¹¹⁰ Hadot, 1997. p 91

¹¹¹ Hadot, 1997. p 93

¹¹² Kierkegaard hints at this sort of thing when he talks about the self-control and “art” required to communicate without falling into objective communication. (*KW* VII.59&60)

Counsel's relation to various forms of communication

While an interaction between friends must be subjective *as a whole* to count as counsel, the interlocutors may sometimes communicate objectively within this context. Indeed, counsel often contains various forms of communication, ranging from direct and objective to entirely open-ended and subjective.

Though the practice of counsel is characterized by a subjective form of communication, any given instance of counsel may also contain other sorts. So long as the overarching character of the conversation is subjective, the interlocutors can speak directly and objectively, give advice and testimony, and generally use any sort of communication at all. How much of this any particular conversation can include and still be counsel will vary, depending on the people involved, the kind of change being pursued, and other circumstances. For instance, suppose the counselee's brother has just told her that he is thinking about adopting an autistic child, and she knows next to nothing about autism. She talks to her friend, who is a special education teacher, in part to get the information she needs and in part to decide what to think about her brother's situation. So their conversation will include direct testimony (facts about autism) and perhaps some advice (what issues she needs to think about, given her situation), as well as more open-ended communication about how she should feel/think about her brother's decision.

The entirety of such a conversation remains counsel so long as the *overall* character of the friends' communication is subjective. By "overall," I mean both that the conversation's overriding tone is subjective and that it maintains that tone throughout the entire conversation. For the conversation to be subjective, every instance of direct/objective communication must be in the service of communicating subjectively. We can see this in the example above. When the special ed. teacher tells her friend facts about autism, she does so as a part of a larger conversation. If that conversation as a whole is subjective in character, then the direct communication about autism counts as a part of counsel. If, on the other hand, it only served to introduce some advice about what the friend should do, so that the larger conversation is not subjective, then that information about autism is not a part of counsel.

In addition to being indirect, the communication characteristic of counsel is open-ended. By open-ended, I mean that it has no fixed endpoint or destination but that it grows as if organically, step by step. When we build a road, we plan out its entire path and construct it knowing its endpoints. It is *not* open-ended. When a plant grows, the growing tip is made of undifferentiated cells that have the ability to become whatever kind of cell the plant needs next.¹¹³ What grows there, as well as the direction it takes, is open-ended and determined by external circumstances and the needs of the plant. Similarly, an open-ended conversation has the potential to go anywhere and turn into anything. This is primarily a function of respect, as we shall explore at length in the second half of the chapter. The open-endedness of counsel is limited by its context and ends, but otherwise follows Kierkegaard's injunction to "set the other free."

Just as counsel's communication is subjective *overall*, so it is also open-ended, overall. Both friends are looking for a change in the counselee, the precise nature of which has not yet been determined, and their style of conversation reflects this. Additionally, the counselor's communication is especially open-ended. This is a function of her recognition that she is helping with someone else's process, and that the person whose process it is (the counselee's) needs to take each step in that process for himself. To use Kierkegaard's terminology, it is *his* process of becoming, and so *his* appropriation must constitute (or contribute to) the change being sought. The counselor, therefore, keeps her communication open-ended to give her friend the space he needs for this to happen. This also explains why it is usually more appropriate for the counselor to defer to the counselee's judgment during their conversation than *vice-versa*, since the person deferring largely cedes direction of the conversation to her interlocutor.

Open-ended communication can best be seen in contrast with other kinds of communication. These forms of communication occupy a spectrum, from direct testimony (or advice) to less and less direct methods (what I call "leading questions" and "adaptable questioning"), and then to the open-ended style of communication characteristic to counsel. Finally, there is a kind of communication so entirely open-ended that it is not actually compatible with the context and ends of counsel. In the

¹¹³ These undifferentiated cells are called the *apical meristem*, in case you were wondering.

following sections, I'll describe and give examples of each sort of communication, all but the last of which have a place within the practice of counsel, giving special attention to the open-ended style of communication which is the characteristic means of counsel.

Testimony & advice

Testimony is the presentation of some descriptive content as true, either simple facts or some combination thereof which forms a narrative or argument. It is, according to Jennifer Lackey, “intimately connected with the notion of conveying information.”¹¹⁴ For instance, an explorer records her discovery of an unfamiliar plant, and a student explains how a certain set of circumstances prevented him from attending class. Testimony can be given face-to-face or through a record of some sort. This distinguishes it from subjective communication, which requires unmediated conversation with another person.

Advice presents evaluative content in the form of injunctions or “ought” statements. This ranges from advertisements, to how-to manuals, to moral imperatives. It tells us how to have a good time, what buttons to push, and whether to lie. As with testimony, it can either be conveyed in conversation or recorded to be read or viewed in the absence of the advisor.

You can record your testimony and never know the person to whom it is delivered. You can formulate advice based on a set of circumstances and never meet the person who is in them. This is what moral theories and self-help books do. But this sort of impersonal means is not the only, or even the usual, way to give testimony or advice. More commonly, we testify directly to one another in the context of conversation.

Testimony (as well as advice) is given from outside – it is meant to transfer knowledge (or at least something purporting to be knowledge) from one person to another. While the testifier may hope that her audience gains understanding because of this new knowledge, the practice itself aims only to impart knowledge. This is a further distinction between the testimony and counsel: whenever counsel introduces new

¹¹⁴ Lackey, 2011. p 72

knowledge, its aim is for the counselee to understand and appropriate it, not only to accept it.

It may be that advice is a species of testimony or that testimony is a species of advice. Advice is, after all, information about what one should do, and testimony is a transfer of information. On the other hand, testimony can be seen as advice about what to believe: each time we give testimony, there is an implied “believe me” attached. So testimony and advice may well be the same thing, distinguished only by the nature of their content. For my purposes here, I take advice to sometimes be a species of testimony and other times be a non-testimonial injunction whose content in either case is evaluative and which aims at some response beyond belief, such as a decision, action, and/or change in attitude.¹¹⁵

Testimony can be a simple statement, a more complex explanation, or even something interactive. The first two are kinds of barebones testimony, and bear very limited resemblance to counsel, merely resulting (sometimes) in similar outcomes. They include injunctions like, “Always tell your friends the truth,” and explanations that begin, “Pluto is not a planet because...” This kind of testimony is not difficult to distinguish from counsel, as it does not involve dialogue and clearly aims to transfer information. On the other hand, conversational forms of testimony/advice can sometimes be hard to distinguish from open-ended communication. Two familiar examples should help clear this up: leading questions and teachable moments.

Leading questions

In some cases, testimony (or advice) takes the form of a series of leading questions. This variation is more indirect than simple statements but still aims to transfer some particular information from one person to another. Think of Socrates demonstrating his learning-as-recollection theory. He asks a slave, uneducated in geometry, a series of questions in the form, “Wouldn’t you say that _____?” or “Is

¹¹⁵ This is not a particularly novel position. For instance, Eric Wiland argues that advice reports about what is relatively important or desirable (which is a form of testimony), but also tells the advisee what to do (an injunction whose aim is action or decision). (Wiland, 2000. p 8) On the other hand, some people resist the action-guiding aspect of advice and propose that advice should be a kind of testimony about how the advisor would respond to the situation. (Mesel, 2014. p 27)

it like _____ or like _____?” The answers are meant to be obvious, so that the slave is inexorably drawn to a particular conclusion. In this case, Socrates aims to show that the slave already has the answers in some form and only needs to recall and synthesize them. Leading questions usually lack substantive participation from the interlocutor, and that person’s appropriation of each answer is nominal. It would be easy to answer all the leading questions correctly but to internalize neither those intermediate answers nor the final conclusion. We sometimes see this in Socratic dialogues: interlocutors are prodded into what looks like nominal agreement with particular conclusions (“Yes, Socrates. Clearly, Socrates. How could it be otherwise, Socrates?”). Subjective communication, by contrast, requires the interlocutor both to actively contribute to the conversation and to appropriate the steps which lead to her ultimate conclusion. In this way, leading questions are rarely subjective and never open-ended. Of course, both interlocutors have to cooperate for this sort of conversation to work. If one person tries to use leading questions and the other doesn’t respond in kind, but asks his own questions or challenges the logical structure, then he, by acting as a subject, can derail an unsubjective form of communication.

It’s not hard, however, to imagine situations in which leading questions, while not at all open-ended, could still be somewhat subjective. Suppose I want to learn about the effects of earthquakes on intertidal ecosystems. I am very fortunate to have a friend who knows all about this topic. She knows about my childhood hours climbing around tidepools, my academic background in biology, and the sideways, by-analogy way my mind works. She is good at reading me and can tell whether I’m confused or enlightened or skeptical, etc. When she embarks on an explanation, she not only tailors it to what she knows about me, she does so in way that invites my participation – she uses leading questions. In cases like this, leading questions can be used in subjective communication. Of course, she may slip into adaptable questioning as well, which we will see in the next section, or other modes of communication. It is hard to stay on script (which is essentially what a series of leading questions is) when two people are interacting as people. If subjective communication “sets the other free,” then leading questions won’t quite fit the criteria in most cases.

An interaction made up of leading questions is technically dialogue but is overwhelmingly one-sided.¹¹⁶ Thus, one way to see how leading questions are a species of testimony is to imagine how the conversation would go without an interlocutor. The speaker asks a series of rhetorical questions which, if reworded into statements, suffice to form a complete argument. The interlocutor is unnecessary, mere window dressing to help the speaker sell his argument. So while the end may be right – some good for the interlocutor – the means are too direct for the conversation to qualify as subjective, and the goal is too specific for the conversation to be open-ended. Thus, while an instance of counsel may contain leading questions, a conversation composed entirely of this genre cannot itself be counsel.

Adaptable questioning

A more indirect way of giving testimony (or advice) is the method of adaptable questioning we use in “teachable moments.” In using this method, we approach our desired conclusion by an indirect path rather than by trying to get from point A to point B by the shortest route possible, as leading questions tend to do. While adaptable questioning does use questions to arrive at a particular conclusion, it does not force the discussion along a predetermined path. Interestingly, it often aims at more robust or comprehensive goods than does the more direct method.

This form of communication is both common and useful. For example, suppose a colleague comes to me and says, “My boss is flirting with me, but I already have a boyfriend. What should I do?” I could answer directly and say, “Be polite, but tell him to back off,” or “Pick one or the other, but don’t two-time your boyfriend.” And sometimes such advice would be appropriate. But I notice that she looks more pleased about the

¹¹⁶ We might wonder why Socrates uses the genre of leading questions at all, given his alternatives. There are two ways to answer this, neither of which is wholly satisfying. First, this may be an artifact of Plato’s stylization of the dialogue form. That is, it may be that Socrates did not rely this sort of communication at all, but used more indirect communication. But such communication is very long and convoluted and often relies on personal knowledge not available to someone outside the conversation. So when Plato created the written dialogues, he streamlined things to fit the form.

The second possible explanation rests on Socrates’ faith in reason. If our moral failings emerge entirely from our ignorance, then it makes sense to coerce a person into taking certain logical steps, even if they offer lively resistance. Once a person knows the inevitability of the right answer, its implications for her are inescapable. Once the slave learns the fact about geometry, he cannot will himself out of knowing it. Once a counselee learns something about morality, for example, she cannot erase it from her memory.

situation than disturbed, so I conclude that such direct communication would probably fall flat. Instead, I might approach the question indirectly, while at the same time having a definite conclusion in mind. If my indirect communication is successful, she will come to this conclusion by her own reasoning, aided by my questioning. How exactly this transpires will depend on a number of factors, including (but not limited to) my acumen, her reasonableness, and the situation.

Another variation of this is what we colloquially call “teachable moments.” These take advantage of opportunities that arise in an ongoing conversation. For instance, a man might want his children to treat each other with respect. His aim in a particular conversation could be to convince his son that siblings are not exceptions to the general “respect other people” rule. Rather than simply telling him so (direct communication) or asking explicitly leading questions like “Is your sister a person?” (marginally indirect communication), he might begin with, “Did you take your sister to the park today?” and work from there. It might look something like this:

Dad: Did you take your sister to the park today?

Son: Yeah.

Dad: Were any of your friends there?

Son: Mmm-hmmm. Adam and Rico.

Dad: Did you play tag?

Son: (*with disdain*) No, Dad. We played space rangers.

Dad: Oh. I see.

Son: [*Long description of the play with multiple references to a children’s TV show.*]

Dad: Sounds like you had fun. Did Lydia (*the sister*) play with you?

Son: No, she played with George.

Dad: Did she want to play space rangers with you?

Son: No, she likes to swing all the time.

Dad: Why didn’t you just make her play with you?¹¹⁷

¹¹⁷ Or, if the father is suspicious that his son is blocking the sister from what she really wants to do – play space rangers with her brother and his friends – he might ask something like, “Doesn’t she like space rangers?” to encourage his son to consider and value the sister’s preferences. As in the other possibility, the father’s goal here is for his son to respect his sister.

Son: That's silly, Dad.

Dad: I suppose you're right.

Here, the father has established that though being siblings is a special relationship (the boy took his younger sister to the park), this does not negate a sibling's right to make her own choices (forcing his sister to play with him would be "silly").

Whether or not this instance of adaptable questioning is an example of counsel depends on the man's purpose going into the conversation. If he has it in mind to teach his son about respect and uses a discussion of the trip to a park as a means to accomplish this, then he is engaged in indirect testimony, which (taken alone) is not open-ended enough to qualify as counsel. If, however, he has no particular message in mind but is only trying to facilitate his son's own process of discovery and reflection, then the conversation was sufficiently open-ended to be counsel. The character of the discussion, then, does not depend solely on the actual words exchanged, but also on the intentions of the interlocutors.

There is a substantial difference between my two examples: in the first, my colleague asks my opinion, and in the second, the father's questions are unsolicited. This is as it should be. A father, after all, has a particular responsibility to his children – in this case, to help them learn to respect others. I have no such special responsibility toward my colleague, but only that which any acquaintance owes another. That responsibility may be fully discharged by tactfully disagreeing with her rather than, on the one hand, disagreeing rudely, and on the other, trying to change her attitude.

So the father is justified in doing what, in the other case, would have been meddling. But how far does his responsibility extend? This is hard to answer, but I think that whatever we conclude in practical terms, the principle to follow is already present in counsel. He must aim at the good of his children. If that good requires him to hold his peace, perhaps so that his children may develop their own moral autonomy, then he needs to refrain. In this case, the next part of the conversation belongs to the child, and anything the father could say would probably be speaking out of turn. Special relationships, like the parent-child case, can justify what we might charitably call preemptive counsel – trying to jump-start someone else's process of self-transformation

before they have begun it. But the question remains – what, if anything, justifies preemptive counsel outside such relationships, and when is it just meddling?

I don't have a satisfactory answer for this, but I suspect that whether or not preemptive counsel is meddling depends primarily on norms which the friends have both accepted for their relationship. Some people highly resent anything that smacks of meddling, and they would be unlikely to accept preemptive counsel as a part of any relationship. Others don't mind it from close friends, or friends they consider especially wise or good, but won't take it from the rest of their friends. Some people may even accept it in any friendship. What is important, it seems to me, is that both friends accept it as a part of their relationship. Further, it may go both ways (either friend may preemptively counsel the other) or only go in one direction. While this asymmetry may indicate an inequality in the friendship, this does not, I think, disqualify unidirectional preemptive counsel from a friendship *if* both friends accept it as a norm in their relationship and if it does not degrade the friendship by undermining respect. If this is right, then preemptive counsel is permissible only in cases of special responsibility (*e.g.* parent-child) or mutual agreement.

The above forms of testimony and advice have a useful place within the context of counsel. The primary goal of leading questions and teachable moments, however, is to transfer information or instruction. This makes them species of testimony or advice and not, in and of themselves, counsel.¹¹⁸

The open-ended nature of counsel itself

Counsel is characterized by a largely open-ended form of communication. It does not aim at the transmission of any particular conclusion but tries instead to effect a change in the counselee which neither participant in the conversation might have been able to elucidate at the outset. This calls for a fluid methodology characterized by open-ended questions, suggestions, anecdotes, and the like. For this reason, it is hard to give a concise example of it – the method is not conducive to short conversations – but we can, at least, sketch one in outline. Let's return to my friend who wants children. The

¹¹⁸ With some possible exceptions in the case of adaptable questioning, as noted above.

conversation might go something like this (you may recognize it from the introductory chapter):

Her: I'm already thirty-one. The clock is ticking: if I don't have kids soon, it'll be too late.

Me: Is the lost opportunity the issue? Or do you just really want kids?

Her: *[Explains at length how it's both, but mostly the latter.]*

Me: So what's stopping you?

Her: *[Indecision, and worries about inadequacy for motherhood.]*

Me: *[Tells a story about another friend who had zero experience with children, and then had a child with special needs, but who is a really great mom who dearly loves her daughter.]*

Her: Yeah, I guess I could do that.

Me: *[Talks about the characteristics that will make her a good mother and mentions that Rob (her husband) is also good parent material.]*

Her: *[Ignores the comment about Rob and expounds on things she imagines doing as a mother, proposing ways to keep her career on track at the same time.]*

Me: *[General affirmation of what she just said.]* Query: So why the indecision?

Her: Well, I can't exactly do this by myself.

Me: I suppose not. Have you talked to Rob about it yet?

Her: No.

Me: Why not?

Her: What if he doesn't want kids? *[Launches into a potential train of events which begins with Rob not wanting kids and ends in a messy divorce and single motherhood.]*

Me: That sounds pretty brutal – do you think it might happen?

Her: Well, no. But parts of it might, and I don't want us to be unhappy just because I wanted kids and he went along with it for my sake.

Me: *[Tells how my father generally doesn't like children but loves his own kids and was really awesome to us when we were growing up.]* Ends: And of course he's still crazy about my mom.

Her: Yeah, but what if Rob is different?

Me: Well, you know him better than I do. You've already told me what your fears say about how he might react. What do your hopes say?

... and the conversation continues like this until she has decided to talk with her husband about having children. Or until she's decided not to talk to him about it. Or until she has a different attitude about the matter. Or, to put it generally, until something changes in her that allows the conversation to come to a close, even if that change is only a better appreciation for her own preexisting attitudes. Going into the conversation, my primary aim was to help her in some way. Perhaps I hoped for one particular outcome such that this hope shaped some of my responses, but never was my overriding goal to bring about that specific result. Rather, I wanted her to acquire some good (in an appropriately broad sense) that she needed. This end limited my part of the conversation in important ways. If I had given her advice instead of counsel, I would have been telling her what I thought she should do or, alternately, what I would do in her situation.

Engaging in counsel instead of giving advice often results in the counselee beginning to make a change, and sometimes making it entirely, before she can articulate it as a proposition. First, consider advice. We tend to give advice propositionally, saying things like, "You shouldn't antagonize your boss by joking about his bald spot." If we lead with this sort of statement, the advisee has to work out the reasons for it (perhaps with our help) and then figure out whether and how they fit into her pre-existing understanding of herself and the world. Or she could just defer to us. In other words, she has to start with the conclusion and work backwards to the premises and then forward again to what she should do with it. This is not a bad way of doing things, and in many cases it may be the best way. It is not, however the way of counsel.

When someone changes in the process of counsel, the final change often emerges from a series of incremental shifts or developments. If the counselee appropriates each step she takes along the path toward the final goal, then she has already made significant parts of the final change before the culmination of the conversation. It is very likely, then, that she will have already made the change at which counsel was aiming by the time she can articulate that change at the end of the conversation. In this way,

counsel often produces the change before it reaches a conclusion, and we have already appropriated our new understanding by the time we can say what it is.

Because it aims at a change for the better in the counselee, counsel takes place within preexisting practical and/or moral boundaries. Take for example a woman who believes she has been passed over for a well-deserved raise. She would probably not seriously entertain blackmail as a way of convincing her boss to reconsider. Indeed, we can easily list off any number of moral or practical limits to her options. So when she consults you on the matter, you will not lead her beyond these boundaries. Keeping to this rule is relatively simple when the counselor and the counselee agree on where those limits should be. It is more difficult when they are in disagreement, especially when it comes to moral boundaries. The problem of moral disagreement is a serious one for the practice of counsel, as discussed in the previous chapter. Briefly, there is a conflict between two values we find in friendship: respecting the autonomy of your friend and desiring their good. In the long term, it is usually better to prioritize the former, but extreme circumstances can sometimes justify the kind of paternalism what prioritizes the latter.

Another reason counsel is open-ended is that someone giving counsel will not presume to know the right answer or the proper outcome at the outset. Indeed, she may not come to a final conclusion any sooner than does her counselee, if at all. Even if she is strongly convinced that she has the right answer, she will refrain from expressing this, both because such an expression undermines the method of counsel and out of a sort of intellectual humility that acknowledges her own fallibility. Rather, she provides a second perspective. I don't mean by this merely a second opinion or "another set of eyes." A counselor brings her whole self to the conversation – all her own experiences, her previous trains of thought and their conclusions, her rationality and emotion, her objectivity and empathy, her commitment to the good of her counselee, etc. Put another way, a counselor is a friend *first* and is therefore more concerned with her interlocutor than with the content of any given conversation. And while this gives us reasons to interact in various ways based upon a multiplicity of factors (as we saw in chapter 2), when our friends need help with self-transformation, friendship gives us reasons to

employ the open-endedness of counsel. In this way, the context of counsel (friendship) shapes its methodology.

Absolute open-endedness

Absolutely open-ended indirect communication closely resembles counsel but does not place as many (or in some cases, any) limits on a conversation's possible conclusions. For instance, I may suggest a voyage to Mars as an alternative to moving back in with parents. This suggestion relaxes the practical constraints of the world we live in, at least within the context of the discussion. I can also set aside moral considerations in this kind of conversation. If my interlocutor announces her intention to shoot the neighbor's dog the next time it barks at three in the morning, I can treat this as a reasonable plan. Now, there are three ways this sort of communication is most often used. Two can fall within the range of counsel, but the third is highly problematic. Two potentially beneficial ways of using entirely open-ended communication treat it as a means to a more bounded end, one that would be consonant with counsel.

First, the lack of moral or practical boundaries could be purely hypothetical – thought experiments, for example. We might speculate about the implications of a moral position we do not hold, or make fantastical plans based on a universe we do not occupy. In these cases, we fully intend on returning to the “real world” after our flight of imagination. Indeed, we often engage in imaginative thinking in order to get a fresh perspective on the very limitations such thinking transgresses or to gain a better understanding of real-world circumstances and values. We only pretend to deny those boundaries.

Second, the counselor may set aside for the sake of the discussion boundaries which the counselee either has in fact set aside or else is contemplating doing so. Let's return to the woman who has been passed over for a raise and imagine that she really is considering blackmail. What do we say to her? Of course, one might point out that blackmail is illegal or appeal to some principle she usually lives by, but what if she has already dismissed these limits? Then we might “play along” – continue as though we accepted her new moral position. We would base further discussion on this premise, but all the while hope for her eventual rejection of it. I think we do this frequently when we

disagree with someone about moral principles.¹¹⁹ Perhaps the woman does not see anything wrong with using blackmail to combat particularly recalcitrant forms of prejudice. One way I could engage her is by granting her this principle for the sake of the argument and then helping her discover its implications. My hope would be that she would rethink her principle, and thus her plans – that her reasoning would bring her within a particular moral boundary which I hold to be important. Of course, this might not happen, and I need to accept this at the outset. She may continue to accept a principle I reject, and thus plan an action I deem wrong. But this possibility is inherent to any non-coercive form of persuasion, and particularly to subjective communication, since sometimes the counselee never finds out what the counselor herself thinks.

In the third sort of extremely open-ended discourse, the “counselor” acknowledges no moral or practical limits as binding, and so endorses whatever conclusion the “counselee” eventually reaches.¹²⁰ She exhibits an extreme form of deference to the counselee, not merely bracketing her own views, but not bothering with them at all. This can arise from two different attitudes. First, she may see value as entirely subjective, so that she can honestly support any decision the counselee makes, regardless of how it relates to her own principles. This is a mistake, but not one made from a deficit of friendship or goodwill.¹²¹ It need not, therefore, prevent counsel, though it will hamper counsel’s efficacy. Second, the “counselor” could be ambivalent or even apathetic about moral or other axiological principles. Not only does this approach ignore important aspects of reasoning – moral and practical principles – but it devalues the counselee himself. A counselor values her interlocutor, and so will always have one special boundary in mind: the good of the counselee. She will always aim for the conversation to end up within that limit. If she neglects this boundary, she is not engaged in counsel at all, since while her means is appropriately indirect, she does not

¹¹⁹ For more on this topic, see the discussion of moral disagreement in chapter 3.

¹²⁰ The scare quotes are meant to acknowledge that this sort of conversation isn’t actually counsel.

¹²¹ It is, however, only a mistake because value is not all, in fact, subjective. If I am wrong about this, and all value is radically subjective, such that there are no common standards one would be justified in appealing to (as has been occasionally argued), then this form of open-ended conversation would not be a mistake and would qualify as good counsel.

aim at the right end.¹²² This is a function of the extreme nature of this form of communication – in rejecting limitations, it also rejects ends (since ends are a kind of limit).

To recap, counsel can use any kind of communication, so long as the overarching character of the conversation is subjective and open-ended. This requirement stems from two places: the context of counsel and its aim. The next section looks at the various aspects of the minimal conception of friendship to show how it shapes the method of counsel.

Subjective communication: a natural outgrowth of friendship

Each aspect of friendship invites subjective communication, and when they are taken together, the resulting relationship is a natural home for that kind of conversation. Indeed, friends engage in subjective communication spontaneously and are probably more likely to communicate subjectively than any other group, except perhaps those who are trained to do so as part of their profession. (I am thinking here of those trained in counseling and other communication-heavy professions such as teaching or journalism.) In part, this is because some aspects of friendship actually show us how to communicate subjectively, and some of them give us reasons to do so.

Acquaintance, affection, commitment, goodwill, respect and trust all push communication between friends toward subjectivity. Some do so more directly or forcefully than others, but each plays a role. The better the friendship, the more its aspects nudge the friends toward communicating subjectively. A friendship is “good” or “close” or “genuine” to the extent that it is characterized by a harmonious balance of these six elements.¹²³ So if each element contributes to a conversation’s subjectivity, and a strong presence of each element characterizes a good friendship, it is reasonable to expect that good friends communicate subjectively more often than nominal or casual friends. And this is what we see in life. Indeed, we sometimes even judge the quality of our friendships by the kinds of conversations we have with our friends.

¹²² Of course, the counselor must at the same time keep in mind that she may not actually know what the counselee’s good is, and further, that the goods of autonomy may deserve precedence over other goods in many instances. This tension is addressed at more length in the moral disagreement section of chapter 3.

¹²³ For more on this topic, see chapter 2.

Let us now consider how each aspect of friendship contributes to the open-endedness and subjectivity of the friends' communication.

Respect

Respect, more than any other aspect of friendship, gives us direction in how to communicate subjectively. At bottom, this is because to respect someone is to see her as a subject. In respecting a friend, I acknowledge that she is as significant to herself as I am to myself, and I take her perspective on things to be as sincerely held as mine, at least until she proves otherwise. When this understanding shapes the way I speak with her, my communication will be subjective.

Taking another person's perspective seriously is the basis of subjective communication, while not taking her perspective seriously can actually prevent it. Years ago, I was driving on a twisty mountain road with a friend, and she was terrified that we were going to go flying off the edge and crash at the bottom of a ravine. I did not respect her enough to take her perspective seriously and so did not slow down. I left her alone with her fear, being unwilling to join her in such a (to my mind) stupid place. A good deal of our interaction was unvoiced, but we certainly conversed. She communicated her fear, and I communicated my contempt for it. While I did feel vaguely ashamed that evening, it wasn't until much later, when I was confronting an irrational fear of my own, that I realized how disrespectful I had been toward my friend in not taking her perspective seriously. Later still, I realized that I had lost an opportunity; had I been willing to join my friend in her place of fear, I might have been able to help her deal with it in some way. Joining people where they are and setting them free to advance under their own power are two core aspects of subjective communication which a lack of respect will forestall.

On the other hand, having respect for one's interlocutor positions one to communicate subjectively. Consider a conversation I had with the same friend a week after she had her first child. She called me – extremely distraught, feeling entirely inadequate for motherhood, and considering putting her daughter up for adoption. Fortunately for her, a decade had elapsed since our earlier car ride, and I had done some growing-up. Instead of being skeptical about her state of mind, I was able to accept her

perspective as valid and use it as a starting point for our conversation. She told me about the birth, which was traumatic for reasons beyond her control. We talked about postpartum depression and how it might interact with her pre-existing psychological conditions. In fact, we talked for several hours. Throughout, my respect for my friend's perspective shaped my reactions and guided my responses. When she said, "I can't do this!" I didn't roll my eyes and tell her, "Of course you can – millions of mothers already have." Rather, I felt the force of her distress and went looking for its roots. I assumed that she had good reasons for feeling as she did and proceeded accordingly. Even when I found her reasons unconvincing, my respect for her prevented me from dismissing them. They were persuasive to her, so respect demanded that I take them seriously.

Respect also dictated that I let her steer the conversation. This follows from my recognition that my friend is as significant to herself as I am to myself. In a non-counsel conversation, this recognition manifests in taking turns – in sharing the talking and the listening – because both interlocutors recognize that each of them has the same right to be part of the conversation as the other. In an instance of counsel, one person is not only a participant in the conversation, but the topic of it. Moreover, the conversation is a part of her personal development, some aspects of which may come to partially constitute who she is. A non-counsel conversation is a kind of third entity in which both friends participate. A counsel conversation is, to some extent, part of the counselee, and has to be respected as such. This means letting the conversation be what the counselee wants it to be, since this is the equivalent of letting the *counselee* be what she wants to be. There are, of course, limits to this. Some are set by goodwill (the counselor will resist self-harm in the conversation, for example), and some have to do with the fact that the conversation is only *to some extent* part of the counselee. Nevertheless, respect for my friend made me take the above into consideration – I had to respect not only her perspectives, but her prerogatives. I was helping my friend in her process, and I had to remember that it was *her* process. In practice, this made my side (the counselor's side) of the conversation open-ended, allowing my friend to direct the conversation if, when, and how she decided. In this way, respect for a friend will lead one to open-ended, subjective communication when that friend is also the subject of the conversation.

Acquaintance

Subjective communication emphasizes the “existing subject(s)” – the particular people engaged in conversation. Acquaintance with other people entails coming to know them in their particularity. The better acquainted you are with your friends, the more you see them as individuals – distinct from each other and not interchangeable. You know many specifics about their lives, from character traits to odd mannerisms to family circumstances to career goals. Such familiarity influences the way you speak with each friend. There are certain things you do or don’t say – and certain ways you do or don’t say them – which vary from friend to friend, based on what you know about each particular individual. The more you know about your friend, the more you are able to tailor your words to reach her.

Consider the following example. Not long ago, I found myself discussing the state of public education with someone I had just met. I was just about to launch into a condemnation of standardization when she mentioned that she had been the curriculum coordinator in her school district for over thirty years. Well. Learning that fact changed the way I spoke to her. I didn’t shift my opinion or dodge the chance to express it, but I did take the particulars of my interlocutor into consideration and moderated my approach accordingly. I spoke *to her*, rather than merely speaking my mind. So better acquaintance gave me increased ability to communicate subjectively. In the same way, you could rapidly deepen your acquaintance with the man on the bench from Chapter 1 by paying him close attention and through a sort of emotional attunement that grows with affection. The better you came to understand him and his circumstances, the more subjective your communication could be.

On the other hand, we can have open-ended communication with very little knowledge of the other person. When we were kids, my brother and I discovered a program, which we erroneously classified as a “game,” that was meant to simulate a counseling session. It displayed a starting question on the screen (green type on a black background in those pre-Windows days), usually something like “How are you feeling today?” We typed in an answer, and the algorithm produced a new question based on key words taken from what we wrote. Of course, being children, we tried to make our

answers as silly as possible so as to illicit absurd responses from the program.¹²⁴ The program's method, while crude, was very open-ended and designed to approximate subjective communication. The fact that the program was not, in fact, a person and did not know anything about us at all (even in an attenuated AI sense of knowing) severely undermined this method. Similarly, a *person* can engage in open-ended communication without knowing her interlocutor, but the resulting conversation will be only marginally subjective, and therefore not very good counsel.

Acquaintance not only helps us communicate subjectively, it actually pushes us toward doing so. Though we do sometimes talk just to hear our own voices, we usually enter into a conversation wanting to be understood and accepted (or perhaps admired and deferred to) on that basis. Given this motivation, if I don't know my interlocutor, I will try to shape my discourse in a way that is generally acceptable. I hope thereby to gain his understanding and acceptance (or admiration and deference) through sheer probability. If what I say would appeal to 90% of the general population, then it will probably appeal to the person in front of me. Being unacquainted with my interlocutor encourages me to focus on the content of my speech, since I don't know enough about my conversational partner to focus on speaking to him as a unique individual. On the other hand, if I am well-acquainted with the person with whom I'm speaking, I will attempt to shape my discourse to address him as a particular individual. My desire to be understood and accepted (or admired and deferred to) motivates me to speak, but my familiarity with my friend channels those efforts into subjective communication.

Affection

Affection both motivates us to communicate subjectively and guides us as we do so. This is partly because affection disposes us to have goodwill toward the other person and gives that goodwill a specific target by amplifying our sensitivity to the other

¹²⁴ One example: Us - "I feel like roadkill." The algorithm - "What is making you feel like roadkill?" Us - "Your mom." It - "Why do you think my mom makes you to feel like roadkill?" Us - "Because she's an iguana." etc.

person's affective states.¹²⁵ Affection can also temper our interactions by giving us reason to consider the effect of our communication on our friend.

Affection, in the context of a minimal conception of friendship, is a positive affective response to another person. My positive affective response seems to create a connection across which my friend's affective states can reach me. Put another way, my response to a person includes a response to his condition, so my friend's affective state will influence my own. So if my friend is mourning the death of his mother, my own emotions will be affected. This affective response focuses my general *goodwill* toward my friend on something specific and also gives me an especially persuasive reason to do something about it. This sort of reason is what people are talking about when they say things like, "I felt so bad for him, I couldn't just stand by and do nothing," or "She was so proud and happy, I *had* to congratulate her."

Thus far, we've seen that affection can motivate us to act, but not that it motivates us specifically to communicate subjectively. This further step hinges on the fact that we feel affection for specific people and that those people each respond individually to their own unique set of circumstances. Acquaintance lets us know about these factors, but it is affection that makes us care about them. It is affection that makes us participants in a friend's life and causes us to respond in particular ways, rather than allowing us to remain unmoved spectators.¹²⁶ So acquaintance can tell us how to tailor our conversation to the particular person involved, but affection makes us want to do so – it gives us reason to act on our knowledge. Thus, caring about a friend motivates us to talk with *that* person about things that affect *him* in a way that takes *his* feelings into consideration – it motivates us to communicate subjectively.¹²⁷

¹²⁵ This sensitivity is sometimes called "sympathy" or "empathy." I am avoiding those terms here because they have technical meanings in some contexts, and the affective response I am referring to here is not limited to those conceptions.

¹²⁶ For an interesting discussion of *objective v. participant* reactive attitudes, see Peter Strawson's "Freedom and Resentment." He writes, "What I have called participant reactive attitudes are essentially natural human reactions to the good or ill will or indifference of others toward us, as displayed in *their* attitudes and actions." (emphasis his) (Strawson, 1974. p 52-53)

¹²⁷ Other, less admirable things can also motivate us to tailor our conversation to the particular person we are speaking with. For instance, if I want to be admired, but don't really care about the person I'm talking to, I can still take the other person's particularity into account for the sake of winning their approval. In doing so, however, I am not treating them as a subject. Neither is my communication "setting them free," but is instead manipulating them for my own purposes. Such communication, despite its aim at a particular individual, is neither subjective nor open-ended.

Being affected by a friend's feelings and taking them into consideration does not necessarily mean that you will feel the same thing your friend feels, nor even that you will feel anything very similar. Usually, we "rejoice with those who rejoice and mourn with those who mourn," but affection only entails that we will feel *something*. For example, suppose your friend is ecstatic about getting a new car, but all you can see is a huge waste of time (he's going to spend hours every weekend buffing the stupid thing) and money. If you didn't like him, you wouldn't much care that he is wasting his life (as you see it), but since you do feel affection for him, his glee actually pains you. This affective response motivates you to remonstrate with him while at the same time considering his emotional state. You might, for instance, be gentler or more roundabout in your criticism than you would be otherwise, or you may express it through mild mockery or some other form of humor.

This sort of case is useful for illustrating the second way in which affection shapes our communication. When a counselor's emotions are in line with those of her friend, her words and attitude will reflect that. This is usually of some comfort to the counselee, as it affirms both his own emotional response to his circumstances and also the friendship in question. In contrast, when a counselor's emotions do *not* line up with her friend's, she is in a situation like the one in the previous paragraph. If she expresses her reaction, it may hurt the counselee, but if she ignores it, she may not give her friend good counsel. Take the example of your friend getting the new car. If you tell him, "You're making a huge mistake; don't be an idiot," you will be releasing a veritable thundershower on his parade. Leaving aside the effectiveness of this approach, it will make your friend feel lousy. He may feel stupid and crestfallen, or he may doubt the very affection that led you to speak. In any case, some sort of negative reaction is readily foreseeable. Because your affection for him brings his emotional state immediately into consideration (and because the stakes are otherwise not terribly high), you will likely shape your communication so as to avoid outright hurting him. And you will, also out of affection for him, probably balance this care for his immediate reaction with an insistence on bringing the conversation around to whatever it is that your goodwill toward him demands.

Goodwill

Goodwill sets the good of a friend as the aim of counsel, which limits the means one may effectively use. There are some goods that can only be attained through subjectivity (in the Kierkegaardian sense). Many instances of intellectual enlightenment, moral improvement, and emotional realignment fall into this category.¹²⁸ If you want your friend to change such that he has these goods, your best bet is to engage with him subjectively – to help him with his own subjective thinking, the dialogical reflection that forms the basis for self-transformation. In other words, goodwill encourages subjective communication by giving us ends that can best (or only) be achieved by that means.

Suppose one of your friends is struggling to come to terms with his parents' late-in-life divorce. Perhaps he needs to understand that their decision isn't about him and that he shouldn't re-envision his happy childhood in light of this development. Coming to this conclusion and internalizing it so that it informs his attitudes and emotions will almost certainly have to be a multi-step process of reflection and acceptance – what Kierkegaard calls appropriation. This process may include rehashing every fight he remembers his parents having, working through his abstract ideas about marriage, analyzing his mother's decision-making procedures or his father's emotional make-up, expressing his hurt and anger at what their decision is doing to him, or any number of other things, many of which may be only tangentially related to the conclusion/change he will eventually reach. You could help him in this process in various ways. You might ask him why he feels the way he does about particular incidents, make suggestions when he gets stuck in a line of reasoning, be sympathetic or skeptical (as seems appropriate) about his reactions to things, or share relevant anecdotes. You probably won't just come out and say, "You need to understand that your parents' decision isn't about you, and you shouldn't re-envision your happy childhood in light of this development." And even if you do, it isn't likely to do your friend much good.¹²⁹ Just telling him what the end-

¹²⁸ See chapter 3 for a more detailed description of the kinds of goods best (or only) attained through subjectivity. Note that one may achieve these goods while alone, in dialogue with oneself, and that counsel is auxiliary to this process.

¹²⁹ Such direct communication can have a place within the context of counsel, so long as the overall character of the conversation is open-ended and subjective. When and whether one ought to speak so directly will depend on various characteristics of your friend and the circumstances.

point is does little to help him get there, even if he agrees with you. Rather, you join him in the middle of his process and help him with the step he's in the middle of taking. This is quintessentially subjective communication. You address him and his situation in all their particularity and aid him in a process of appropriation which is also his process of self-transformation. Why? In part, because this is the best way for your goodwill toward him to be actualized – the best way to help him achieve a change for the better.

Of course, goodwill can also give us reasons to communicate objectively – to offer advice and/or testimony right away. If my friend is angry at her father, I might say, “You need to confront him!” because I am sure that this is her best course of action and I want the best for her. But my reasons are *prima facie* reasons, and it is often a mistake to act on them. When we consider *all* the reasons that goodwill gives us about how to communicate, we find that while communicating objectively is more straightforward and initially gratifying, subjective communication is often more effective in achieving goodwill's ends.

Commitment

Friendships last as long as they do, at least in part, because of the commitment each friend has to the other. The diachronic nature of friendship encourages subjective communication by radically extending the duration over which counsel can take place. The counselor has his friend's long-term well-being in mind and so does not need to achieve any particular good in any given conversation. This allows him to be content with incremental gains and undaunted by setbacks. For instance, a man dealing with an anger problem by suppressing it may have to become *more* angry in order to unearth and deal with the underlying causes of his anger. His friend can accept this with equanimity because he will be there to help make sure that “two steps forward” follow the “one step back.” It also allows friends to “trade places” almost at will – the counselor becomes the counselee and visa-versa as the needs of one or the other rise to the surface.

Contrast this with a situation in which someone is a counselor (another use of the term!) at a summer camp and has a very limited time to interact with the teens under his supervision. Suppose one of them is eaten up by anger; the counselor wants to help him but also recognizes that to really do so, he'd need a lot more time than summer

camp can afford. What can he do? He may stick with subjective communication, even though this will make very little progress in the time they have and hope that either someone else will pick up where he left off or that their conversations will jump-start the teen's own inner dialogue. On the other hand, he may try to give the teen as much advice as he can in the hopes that he will reflect on it and do the subjective work of appropriation on his own. In either case, the short-term nature of the relationship imposes limits on subjective communication and gives a counselor reasons to communicate objectively instead.

The long-term nature of friendship allows the counselor to be sensitive to how much his friend can handle at a time. Perhaps the friend needs to think through how his father's anger fed his own, take responsibility for the effects of his anger on his family, and accept the fact that becoming less angry will be a slow process. That's a lot to swallow, and he may not be able to achieve even one of those things during a single conversation – it may be too intellectually puzzling or emotionally overwhelming or contradictory to what he is willing to accept. He can take things a bit at a time, secure in the knowledge that his friend will be ready to help whenever he is ready to continue. Or else, his friend, seeing that he has had enough, can let the subject drop until he is ready to tackle it again. Of course, this option requires his friend (the counselor) to know him well enough (acquaintance) to see when he's had enough, or at least to recognize it when it's pointed out. This sensitivity to the other person's particular needs and limitations is a core aspect of subjective communication, especially in the context of counsel. Friends' commitment to each other gives them time to put that sensitivity into action.

Trust

While the other five aspects of friendship provide reasons and guidance for communicating subjectively, they do this primarily for the counselor – for the person helping rather than for the person in the process of self-transformation. Trust, on the other hand, is what allows this latter person to take on the risks of subjective communication. Of course, this trust is usually based on a recognition of the other aspects of friendship in their friend. Through trust, then, all aspects encourage the counselee to communicate subjectively, in addition to the ways they do so

independently. There is much less trust needed from the counselor's side, which partly explains how professional counselors can engage in subjective communication with patients whom they do not, and perhaps ought not, trust.

The main way trust encourages subjective communication is by promoting self-disclosure and, in the context of friendship, mutual self-disclosure. For subjective communication to work, the interlocutors must be talking to each other *as they are*, not to whatever faces they generally present the world of strangers (to the extent that these things are different). This self-disclosure requires trust. And as much as one-way trust can promote subjective communication, mutual trust does it better. A cynic might assume that mutual trust is akin to mutually assured destruction – if you betray me, I can weaponize your secrets and do the same to you. But this cannot be right within the context of friendship, where genuine affection and goodwill characterize our attitudes toward one another. Rather, as trust is my affirmation of my friend's sincerity, so mutual trust affirms that we are both in a relationship of goodwill and affection *as ourselves*. All this is relatively obvious – we want our friends to like us for who we really are – but it has considerable implications for subjective communication. Subjective communication is communication between subjects – between two real people as they actually are (or, at least, as they take themselves to be). To the extent that we hide our real selves,¹³⁰ our communication will be between fictional characters rather than existing subjects. Since trust leads us to be genuine with each other, it promotes subjective communication by allowing us to be our real selves in our conversations.

To see how trust both sets us up to communicate subjectively and guides us in doing so, let's consider another example. Lars is a habitual user of pornography. He has come to hate this about himself and wants to quit, but his attempts so far have all failed. In the middle of a bout of self-recrimination, his friend Jonah notices that something is off and asks, "Are you alright?" What Lars replies will depend on how much he trusts Jonah and how desperate he is. Even minimal trust can be enough for him to risk the conversation, given enough desperation (or other factors). On the other hand, if Lars

¹³⁰ I'm using this term loosely. By "real selves," I mean both the people we actually are and the extent to which we are able to express this at a given time. Insofar as a person is opaque to himself, there will be a divergence between the two. So if I do not reveal my deep aversion to supercilious people to my friend because I am not aware of it myself, I do not thereby reveal a lack of trust.

trusts Jonah completely, it will take a great deal to *prevent* him from disclosing his struggle. For instance, if he knew that Jonah was in the middle of some devastating personal trauma, he might not want to add to his burden. But other things being equal, the more Lars trusts Jonah, the more likely he is to be honest with him. Suppose that Lars does in fact trust Jonah, and so tells him about his problem. At each juncture where Lars has a choice of whether to be fully open or to obfuscate, he chooses the former. If, as the conversation continues, Jonah justifies Lars' trust in him by continuing his affection, goodwill and commitment, Lars will continue to be genuine. If, by contrast, he begins to withdraw these things, Lars will probably clam up or perhaps try to pass his confession off as a bad joke. He will have lost at least some of his trust in Jonah. In this way, trust shapes conversation from the counselee's side, making it subjective – at least as long as the counselor justifies that trust.

It's important to note that the scope of trust characteristic to friendship is distinct from the scope of trust characteristic of other relationships. One may trust a doctor with one's sexual history in order to address a health issue, but this is a one-way trust given to a role, not a mutual trust between persons. I give her the information because it is a matter of professional interest but personal indifference to her, and because I care about her opinion of me as a patient but not as person. If I trust a friend with my sexual history, I do so with different expectations. Briefly, I expect her to remain my friend, even if my history is not what she might have hoped. Or return to Lars: he doesn't only want to quit using pornography, he wants someone who likes him to keep liking him despite knowing his moral failures and appreciating their gravity. While he might be able to get the first from a 12-step program or series of counseling sessions, he will be hard-pressed to get the latter outside of the context of friendship. The kind of trust that is characteristic of friendship encourages conversations between people *as people*, which is a hallmark of subjective communication.

Each aspect of the minimal conception of friendship, then, either gives us reasons to communicate open-endedly and subjectively, guides us in doing so, or both. Sometimes they do so directly, as respect does, and other times they do so indirectly – either by setting the aim of counsel (goodwill) or through another aspect of friendship

(affection). Taken together, these aspects of friendship form a natural and fertile ground for open-ended and subjective communication, and thus for counsel.

Conclusion

Given that counsel is an outworking of friendship, it is natural that its method should be subjective and open-ended. Each aspect of friendship contributes to this, either by giving us reasons to communicate subjectively, showing us how to do so, or both. Given the aims of counsel – certain kinds of changes for the better in one friend - its necessary mode of expressing friendship is conversation. Taken together, the context and aims of counsel shape its method. This method is subjective because it acknowledges the interlocutors as individual subjects and takes this identity to be the most important aspect of the conversation. It is open-ended in that it does not set a specific end-point as its goal, but aims instead only to effect some change for the better in the counselee.

Of course, people may be better or worse at this method, even independently of how good they are at being friends or knowing what is good. But if two people are very good friends, both well-understand the good, and are both adept at using open-ended subjective communication, then they will be able to do counsel very well indeed. The possibility and characteristics of this sort of ideal counsel is the subject of the next and final chapter.

Chapter Five: Ideal Counsel

A perfect practice for imperfect people

Counsel, like forgiveness, can only exist among imperfect people. Just as you can only forgive someone who has done you wrong, you can only counsel someone who is lacking some good. On the other hand, the quality of counsel tends to improve relative to the quality of the people involved – very evil people are more likely to resist good counsel than are very good people, more likely to give bad counsel, and more likely to give it badly. So even though perfect people would not need counsel, people approaching perfection will become better at it (both giving and receiving) the closer they come. Of course, it may very well be that there are no perfect people and never will be. And even if someone were morally perfect, which some philosophies represent as at least theoretically possible, she would not thereby be a perfect *person*. She would still have other aspects of herself to develop, and the scope open to human development may very well be limitless. In any case, we have not yet approached such limits closely enough to reliably identify them (especially since new avenues for development emerge as we explore the ones we already know about), and if there are limits, it would almost certainly be impossible to reach them all in a single life. Friendship must therefore be a relationship between two imperfect people. If the goodness of this relationship is limited by the goodness of its members, as I take to be the case, then the friendship itself must be imperfect. And since counsel is an outworking of friendship, it would seem that counsel itself is bound to also be imperfect. If this is the case, then in what sense can it be ideal?

Counsel is ideal if and only if it achieves its ends, both immediate and long-term, in the best way possible while expressing and strengthening the friendship from which it arises. This characterization needs to be fleshed out a good deal, and doing so will take most of the chapter. To that end, I consider the criteria for ideal counsel in two sections: one dealing with elements internal to the practice of counsel and therefore necessary for an interaction to qualify as counsel at all, and one dealing with those external to it and thus only needed for *good* counsel. The criteria internal to counsel include good friendship, pursuit of real and relevant goods, and adept use of open-

ended subjective communication. Ideal counsel would have the best possible instantiations of all three. The criteria external to the practice include wisdom and maturity. While foolish, immature people do engage in counsel, they tend to do so badly, whether they are giving it or receiving it. Wisdom and moral maturity, on the other hand, enhance or improve all three of the criteria internal counsel, consequently improving counsel itself. The final part of the chapter looks at two instances of ideal counsel, one typical and the other eccentric.

It is very likely that flawless, absolutely ideal counsel is not instantiated in the real world. On the other hand, I think that we do sometimes approach it closely enough that the difference between some actual instances of counsel and the absolutely ideal is not practically significant. When an instance of counsel fulfills the criteria completely but not flawlessly, it is something like a “perfect game” in baseball.¹³¹ It is almost certain that every perfect game contains defects of some sort – an outfielder out of position or a pitch too easily hit, for instance. But when these defects do not prevent a team from getting the other team’s players out before they are safely on base every time, the game is perfect nonetheless. In a similar manner, friends may sometimes have a “perfect” instance of counsel. Such counsel can have defects – the counselee having moments of unwarranted distrust or the counselor not knowing something pertinent, for example. But when these defects do not prevent the criteria outlined above from being met completely, the instance of counsel may nonetheless be ideal, as I am using the term – close enough to being absolutely ideal that it makes no practical difference to the people involved. It seems important, then, to consider not so much what it would mean to meet the criteria flawlessly, but what it would mean to meet the criteria completely. This practical ideal would allow flaws, so long as they did not prevent the criteria of ideal counsel from being met.

Criteria: elements internal to counsel

Each of the criteria internal to counsel corresponds with part of the definition of ideal counsel. These criteria include good friendship, attainment of a real good, and

¹³¹ A full game in which no player of the opposing team makes it safely on base.

adept communication. Recall that *counsel is ideal if and only if it achieves its ends, both immediate and long-term, in the best way possible while expressing and strengthening the friendship from which it arises*. So, ideal counsel 1) achieves a change for the truly better in the counselee, 2) does so through an optimal use of open-ended subjective communication, and 3) arises from, expresses, and strengthens a good friendship.

The previous three chapters have been devoted to exploring friendship, changes for the better, subjective communication, and how they relate to counsel. To avoid unnecessary redundancy, this section will focus on what ideal counsel requires of each without going deeply into explanations of the things themselves.

Good friendship

Good friendship requires that each of the six minimal elements described in previous chapters – acquaintance, affection, commitment, goodwill, respect, and trust – be strong and that there be balance among them. Good friendship, not being minimal, also requires things not strictly necessary for counsel – a shared life, mutual direction, specific virtues, and some sort of partiality may be examples.¹³² While I do have opinions about such further requirements for a good friendship, I will not go into them here. My account of counsel should be compatible with most conceptions of friendship, since it is manifestly something practiced among friends. My contention here is that whatever your conception of friendship, one hallmark of a good friendship is that it helps the friends counsel better than they would otherwise (*i.e.* if they were not such good friends). It is true that some conceptions of friendship contain elements that are not conducive to good counsel (doxastic partiality comes to mind), but *overall*, even under those conceptions, better friendship is conducive to better counsel. If you like, take your own conception of friendship as a test case. *Is better friendship conducive to better counsel?* If so, then you will also find that the connection is mostly, if not entirely, through the six elements, to the extent that they characterize your conception of friendship.

¹³² As described in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*; Cocking and Kennett, 2000. p 279; Elder, 2014. p 84; and Crawford, forthcoming; respectively.

The six elements,¹³³ which are all necessary for counsel, are connected to other aspects of life and friendship. For example, acquaintance usually deepens with shared life, and trust is often strengthened by seeing virtues like kindness and honesty in the other person. So other aspects of friendship may bolster (or at least affect) the six elements necessary for counsel. They do not aid in counsel directly but do so indirectly by encouraging affection, affirming commitment, deepening respect, etc.

Let us now turn to the strength of each of the six elements. Since the extended description of them in chapter two and the discussion of their relationship to subjective communication in chapter four cover this subject in some depth, the following will be an abbreviated treatment of it. One thing to keep in mind – the ideal strength of each element may not be its maximal strength. Even with all the aspects in balance (a topic which we will address in shortly), such that that excess strength in one does not hinder the others, maximal strength is not always ideal – neither for friendship nor for counsel.

Acquaintance includes knowing facts about other people, recognizing their moods, anticipating their reactions, being familiar with their character, understanding their thought processes, being familiar with their place in the world and among other people, and any similar thing that can be classified under “knowing so-‘n’-so.” Stronger acquaintance, then, is knowing more about another person and understanding them better. Maximal acquaintance – another impossibility for us humans – would be complete knowledge and perfect understanding.¹³⁴ Other things being equal, better acquaintance conduces to better counsel. If you understand who I am now, you are in an excellent position to help me change and to understand why I would want to. If you know me exceptionally well, you may even anticipate what changes I will desire or need next. And the better I know you, the more personal – and thus the more subjective – our conversations will be by default.

Affection is a positive emotional response to another person. Strong affection can manifest as an increased intensity of one particular emotional response, such as a

¹³³ I am using “six elements” as shorthand for the six elements minimally necessary for a friendship which can express itself in counsel, *i.e.* acquaintance, affection, commitment, goodwill, respect, and trust.

¹³⁴ This raises the question of whether maximal acquaintance could be part of an ideal friendship. Would the resulting inability to learn more about a person make the friendship stale? Too predictable?

feeling of approval, or as an increase in the kinds of emotional responses one has, such as feeling happiness or mirth or pride in addition to approval. Maximal affection is a bit difficult for me to imagine. I do not think we humans have the capacity to feel all the possible positive emotional responses all the time, never mind feeling them all intensely. Even only feeling this way when the other person was in our presence or on our minds would be overwhelming. There must be, I think, some ideal amount of affection to feel toward a friend, as well as an appropriate combination of different kinds of affection, which would vary from person to person and from situation to situation. I will leave it to the moral psychologists among us to work that out. For the purposes of counsel, the closer the strength of our affection comes to that ideal, the more it conduces to ideal counsel. The better you like a friend, the more motivation you have to help him. Because your emotional state depends to some extent on his, you will want good things for him, which is one way to talk about the aim of counsel.

Goodwill is what it sounds like – willing the good of another person. What complicates a definition of goodwill, then, is further defining its component parts – what precisely it means to will and what “the good” is. For my purposes here, I am taking goodwill to be a volitional state with attendant emotions, rather than a primarily emotional one. I am also taking goodwill to include the unconscious or latent state which, when triggered, gives rise to consciously (or at least more actively) willing someone’s good. The conception of counsel I am putting forward is decidedly ecumenical when it comes to “the good.” Because counsel is between two (or more) persons who have their own ideas about what is good, goodwill often means willing the good *as they see it*. When we evaluate a counselor’s attitude, this is what we mean by goodwill. On the other hand, when we want to evaluate the quality of the counsel itself, we have to appeal to a *real* good because the aim of counsel is a change for what is *really* better. Since we do not always agree about what constitutes a real good, our evaluations of any given instance of counsel may differ, though in principle we want the same thing.

Maximal goodwill would be to always will the greatest good with the most fervor possible. I do not think that this would be ideal. If we understand goodwill to have a latent component, so that “always willing” need not be a conscious state but is instead “always being ready to will,” then being maximal in that sense could be ideal. But the

fervency condition is troubling. If maximal goodwill does require extreme emotional fervor, then I cannot think that it is ideal. Intense emotions are exhausting and exhaustible – they wear both you and themselves out. If ideal goodwill requires an unsustainable state of perpetual emotional fervor, then it is self-undermining. It seems, therefore, that some lesser degree of emotion would be ideal for goodwill. I imagine that what degree, precisely, will depend on the psychological attributes of the individual. Someone with ideally strong goodwill, then, is always ready to will or actively willing the greatest (relevant) good of the other person with a sustainable emotional fervor which does not interfere with the other aspects of counsel.

Commitment to a friend stretches goodwill out over time. This means that I will that my present goodwill toward a person continue into the future until there is a good reason to discontinue it. Maximal commitment would be an absolutely steadfast resolve to do so. So long as this is what we mean by maximal commitment, and not something like “never letting go of a friendship” or some sort of obsessive loyalty, maximal commitment will be ideal commitment. Strong commitment that conduces to good friendship, then, is a steadfast resolve to continue my present goodwill toward a person into the future until there is a good reason to discontinue the friendship.¹³⁵

Respect, as I am using it, is the appropriate base attitude of one person toward another. In respecting someone, I acknowledge that she is as significant to herself as I am to myself, and that we both stand on equal footing in relation to others (personal commitments aside). Further, I take her perspective on things to be as subjectively valid to her as mine is to me. I take on attitudes and make decisions in light of this knowledge. Given this definition, one cannot have too much respect; it is an internally proportional concept. So maximal respect is the right degree of respect for a good friendship. As it happens, maximal respect is appropriate to *all* interpersonal relationships, but many of these do not need it to be what they are (*e.g.* the relationship

¹³⁵ An interesting implication of the characterization is that even a very short-term commitment can be enough for ideal counsel if its length is appropriate to its character and circumstance. You could conceivably be sufficiently committed to the man on the bench, for instance, for that level of commitment to be ideal, even though its dissolution was imminent. For details about what might constitute a good reason to discontinue a friendship, see the discussion in chapter 2.

between me and the checkout clerk at a grocery store). Friendship, because it is not only between persons but between persons *as persons*, has to include respect.

Trust, in a negative sense, is the belief that the other person will not intentionally wrong others and you in particular, the attitudes which follow from this belief, and the willingness to act based upon it. A minimal friendship needs trust in this negative sense, but a good friendship requires something further. Trust, in a positive sense, is the knowledge of the other person's goodwill, affection, acquaintance, commitment, and respect toward you, as well as the attitudes which follow from this knowledge and the willingness to act based upon it.¹³⁶ This is the kind of trust characteristic of a good friendship. Maximal trust would be unshakable confidence in this knowledge and total reliance upon it when it informs one's attitudes and actions. If maximal trust means a confidence unreasonably closed to revision, then it is wrong for a good friendship. If, for instance, such trust blinds you to some aspect of your friend's character, it will come into conflict with the acquaintance criterion. A good friendship is characterized by trust in the goodwill, affection, etc., which are actually present in the friendship, not by wishful thinking.

Balance. Good friendship not only requires that each of these elements be present to the right degree but is also characterized by balance among them. It seems to me that if all the elements are in fact present in the right degree, they will also be balanced. If, on the other hand, some of the elements are present in the right degree and others are not, they will almost certainly be out of balance, such that the stronger suppress the weaker. For example, an appropriate degree of goodwill coupled with a deficit of respect can lead to paternalism, which is not characteristic of a good friendship.¹³⁷ Or the proper degree of respect combined with too little affection can make us too indifferent to one another to be friends. Alternately, the weaker elements may undermine the stronger. For instance, a lack of appropriate trust tends to lessen affection. And, of course, an imbalance in one friend can affect the other. If your friend does not trust you, despite the fact that you are trustworthy, this will eventually affect

¹³⁶ I am not trying to make a strict distinction between belief (in the negative definition) and knowledge (in the positive one). My choices are made to avoid awkward phrasing and indicate degrees of confidence.

¹³⁷ Even in actual parent-child relationships, where some degree of paternalism is generally accepted, a parent can have too little respect for his child and so fall into unhealthy paternalism.

your attitudes toward him – perhaps a lessening of affection or withdrawal of some measure of goodwill. Since all of the six elements are both *in* each friend and *between* the two of them, it is unsurprising that the any one of them can affect the attitudes of either friend (or both) and also the relationship itself. A perfectly good friendship, then, is characterized by the right degree of every element in both friends, since this is the only condition that assures both balance among the elements in each person and balance in the relationship overall.

Hypothetically, a friendship could be deficient in all six elements and still be perfectly in balance. I suspect that many moderately good friendships are close to this state – deficient but nearly in balance. This would afford them the stability needed to continue, even if they did not deepen. While wildly out-of-balance friendships are unhealthy and often come apart completely, deficient but mostly balanced friendships can be healthy and long-lasting. Sometimes they develop into good friendships; sometimes they don't. For instance, suppose you have a co-worker with whom you get along well and occasionally socialize outside of work. You aren't close friends, but you have a comfortable relationship characterized by moderate levels of the six elements. But neither of you is going to bare your soul to the other without serious external pressure. This sort of friendship is fairly common, I think, and has a great deal to recommend it, but it is not particularly conducive to ideal counsel.

A change for the truly better

The aim of counsel is to help a friend change for the truly better, but in practice, counsel merely operates under the guise of the (apparent) good. Both friends, if they are counseling, are trying to reach some real and relevant good for the counselee – a change for the better that matters now. Since either or both of them may be wrong about what that good is, the people counseling can easily aim at the wrong good or at something that is not good at all. For instance, they may be discussing what new job the counselee should be looking for when the underlying problem is that she is discontent regardless of what job she has. They are aiming at a good but not the one that actually deserves their attention. Or they could be working out whether the counselee should hate or

merely despise his neighbor because of her ethnicity. Here, they are not aiming at any good at all.

Ideal counsel, on the other hand, aims at real and relevant goods – on truly helping the counselee. Since we do not always agree on what such goods may be, we will also sometimes differ in our evaluation of any given instance of counsel. But to the extent that there exists a real good at which it is appropriate to aim in the given situation, ideal counsel aims at that good. Of course, there may be several such goods – for counsel to be ideal, it need not aim at all of them at the same time or even at any one in particular.

Adept communication

The third criterion of ideal counsel internal to the practice is the adept use of its method – open-ended subjective communication. Subjective communication, a concept I have adapted from Kierkegaard, happens when the communicator prioritizes the person he is communicating with, rather than the content of his communication. It is an extreme form of taking one's audience into consideration. In the context of counsel, subjective communication means that the friends see each other *as* friends rather than merely as interlocutors, and that each (but especially the counselor) tailors his communication to the other person as the particular individual she is. This kind of communication can be used to convey specific information, or it can be open-ended and exploratory. For instance, you could relate the complicated issues around a current event in a way that takes into consideration your friend's preexisting knowledge and ways of thinking but that also allows her to appropriate each part – or not – as she sees fit. Here, you are using subjective communication to convey specific information. Then you might encourage her to consider what she should think about it and what, if anything, she should do. In this case, you are leaving the conversation open-ended, allowing and encouraging your friend to take it where she wills. Though counsel uses both kinds of subjective communication, the latter, open-ended sort is the method characteristic of counsel.¹³⁸

¹³⁸ For a fuller description of subjective communication, see chapter 4.

Ideal counsel is characterized by the adept use of this method. On the counselor's end, being adept means saying the right thing at the right time in the right way to properly take his friend into consideration and keep the good in view.¹³⁹ On the counselee's end, it means taking responsibility for your own process of self-transformation, responding genuinely to your friend, and treating your friend as the person she is. While one can be a competent subjective communicator without being close friends with one's interlocutor, the qualities that make a relationship a friendship also give us the tools to communicate subjectively. The better developed these qualities, the more conducive a relationship is to subjective communication.

For the counselor, being adept at the method of counsel is neither simple nor easy. Saying the right thing is hard enough, but to say it in the right way and at the right time, etc., can be very difficult indeed. This is partly because knowing the right thing to say is often beyond us and partly because the right thing may not be comfortable to think about, let alone speak aloud to a friend. Perhaps you remember the case of Lars and Jonah from the previous chapter. Lars is addicted to pornography, hates this about himself, but has failed in all his efforts to quit. Jonah is his friend. If they engage in counsel, I imagine it will be an awkward and uncomfortable conversation. Depending on his own views and experiences, Jonah may have little idea of the right thing to say, let alone the fortitude to say it with grace.

There is the further question of what "the right thing" even means. Is there only one perfectly appropriate thing to say at any given moment, and that is "the right thing"? If so, the odds of saying it are not in our favor. Or perhaps there is a range of things, any of which would be sufficiently appropriate to be "the right thing." It seems to me that with perfect knowledge, one might be able to pin down a single, most appropriate thing to say in any given situation.¹⁴⁰ In real life, however, the limitations of our knowledge put corresponding limits on our ability to identify what that thing is. So

¹³⁹ Very like Aristotle's depiction of a virtuous person, who does things "to the right person, to the right extent, at the right time, with the right motive, and in the right way." (*NE* II.9 1109a27)

¹⁴⁰ This reminds me of an intriguing line from Ursula K. Le Guin's *A Wizard of Earthsea*: "And the truth is that as a man's real power grows and his knowledge widens, ever the way he can follow grows narrower: until at last he chooses nothing, but does only and wholly what he *must do*. . . ." (Le Guin, 1968. p 71)

within the context of counsel – which is, after all, a human practice – it seems reasonable to accept that a range of things may be appropriate enough to count as the “right thing” to say in a given situation. What, then, makes these particular things appropriate?

It should come as no surprise that the right thing to say is something that aims at a real good, however roundaboutly. The right thing to say is also appropriate to the person and his situation – the particular goods that merit attention here and now, the traits and condition of the counselee, etc. This particularity, after all, is what makes communication subjective. Finally, the right thing to say will also create space for the counselee to continue as she sees fit. This corresponds to the open-ended nature of the communication, reflecting Kierkegaard’s observation that subjective communication is meant to set the other free.

Similarly, the manner of saying the right thing is tuned to the counselee and his good. Take style of speech, for instance. My brother and I communicate largely in an odd combination of overstatement and sarcasm, but I would not speak to most of my friends in this manner. Nor would I use it in a serious conversation with him, even though it is our usual style. Instead, I try for a tone that suits both my interlocutor and the topic of conversation. In the same way, word or genre choice, timing, non-verbals, etc. need to fit the person and her situation and to suit the kind of change she is undergoing. After all, finding the right way to say the right thing entails taking the counselee into consideration and keeping the good in view.

In ideal counsel, the counselor’s primary focus is not on her method of communicating, but on her friend. Out of their friendship arises her secondary focus: her friend’s good, or change for the better. In ideal counsel, the method of communication always serves these two ends. For this reason, the counselor’s communication can be judged by how well it achieves them. Since open-ended subjective communication is the best (and sometimes the only) means for both treating a friend as a friend and reaching certain kinds of goods, a counselor’s communication can also be judged by how well it adheres to this method.

For the counselee, being adept at the method of counsel means taking responsibility for your own process of self-transformation, responding genuinely to your

friend, and treating your friend as the person she is. As we examine the practice, it is easy to focus on the counselor's side of the conversation. It looks like that is where counsel "really happens," since counseling is helping a friend in a particular way, and the one helping is the counselor. It may seem more active and interesting than the counselee's side, but this is a misconception. The primary activity in any instance of counsel belongs to the counselee, even though the primary activity *of counsel* belongs to the counselor. This is because the counselee is engaging in the process of self-transformation, which is the primary activity, and both she and her counselor are engaging in counsel, which is auxiliary to this endeavor. Further, both the possibility and success of counsel are just as dependent upon her as they are upon the counselor. The counselee can refuse the help or frustrate the process. Thus, any counsel at all requires the counselee's involvement, and ideal counsel requires this involvement to meet several criteria.

Counsel and, more specifically, the method of counsel require that the counselee take responsibility for her own process of self-transformation. This is partly because counsel can only happen when the counselee is actively in this process and not obviously letting change happen to her – she can't have a conversation about something she isn't paying any attention to. But it is also partly because subjective communication requires the counselee to appropriate her new understandings. When I take responsibility for my process of change, I am active in that process, and my activity is intentional. The intentional activity native to the process of self-transformation is appropriation. I change, in ways relevant to counsel, by integrating new knowledge, attitudes, or other states of mind into my preexisting self: appropriation. So, for the counselee to do the method of counsel well, which necessarily includes some appropriation, she must take responsibility for her process of self-transformation.

Using the method of counsel well also means responding genuinely to one's counselor and treating her as the person and friend she is. Subjective communication, at its core, is communication between subjects, *as* subjects. A subject is a particular person with a unique life and perspective. So when two people to converse as subjects, they reveal some of their own particularity and accept the particularity of their interlocutors. In the context of ideal counsel, these conversations are between good friends. They

know each other well and trust each other with that knowledge. This allows them to respond genuinely to one another, eschewing artifice, in the justified confidence that their friend will continue to accept them. This openness and confidence allows them to communicate subjectively very well indeed. It also contributes to the open-endedness of counsel. One reason people avoid open-ended conversations is that they fear what their interlocutors will think of them, based on the possibilities they consider. I might, for instance, avoid bringing up communes or moving to Borneo when discussing my future plans, if I am doubtful about the reception of such ideas. Good friendship, however, creates the conditions conducive to engaging in the method of counsel well, including giving the counselee reasons to respond genuinely to her counselor and treat her as the individual person that she is.

Ideal counsel, then, entails that each part of counsel – its context, aim, and method – be as good or well done as possible, given the human condition. But ideal counsel also requires other, external elements. These elements improve counsel both by supporting the various parts of counsel and by optimizing the relationships among those parts.

Criteria: elements external to counsel

The main external element that ideal counsel requires is wisdom.¹⁴¹ Even very close friends with excellent intentions can make a serious hash of counsel if they lack wisdom. This is partly because wisdom helps us aim at real and relevant goods and partly because it improves our ability to communicate subjectively. Wisdom can also make us better at being friends, which improves counsel as well. So while wisdom is not a component part of counsel, and so not internal to it, ideal counsel requires wisdom because of the extent to which it improves all of counsel's internal elements.

¹⁴¹ There may be (indeed, there probably are) other elements external to counsel that would improve it. I am not sure, however, what they might be. It seems to me that creativity may be the best candidate, in that it could be very useful in coming up with what to say (in subjective communication), but while it would be a good characteristic for counseling friends to have, I am not convinced that it is strictly *necessary* for ideal counsel in a way that makes it worthy of being singled out. I tend to think that it can be classified under “adept use of the method,” rather than requiring a category of its own.

Wisdom

Any instance of ideal counsel will require that both friends be wise according to the following criteria: a wise person both understands how to live well and is committed to expanding that understanding; she does not tend to believe things without appropriate epistemic justification; and she is deeply committed to living well.

I take this conception of wisdom mostly from Stephen Grimm and Shane Ryan.¹⁴² Their description of wisdom seems to me to be both in touch with the common notion of wisdom and close to most other contemporary theories of wisdom. As with goodness, counsel is relatively ecumenical when it comes to a definition for wisdom. Most understandings of it, from the ancients to current renditions, describe something that will improve counsel. Since wisdom's role here is to improve the context, ends, and means of counsel, it is more important that we see the connection of our most plausible theories of wisdom to those things that it is to nail down the best possible conception of wisdom as such. Nevertheless, it seems to me that the closer we come to real wisdom (whatever that turns out to be), the better we can counsel, other things being equal.

At its core, Grimm argues (agreeing with most of the current literature), wisdom requires knowledge of how to live well.¹⁴³ This knowledge is further constituted by three subcategories:

- 1) Knowledge of what is good or important for well-being.
- 2) Knowledge of one's standing, relative to (1).
- 3) Knowledge of a strategy for obtaining (1).¹⁴⁴

These kinds of knowledge can bolster counsel by allowing the friends to aim at real goods (1), helping them understand the particular situation of the counselee (2), and providing a reason to use subjective communication, since it is the only/best strategy for obtaining certain of these goods (3). I think Grimm is right that the knowledge of how to live well consists in the combination of these three kinds of knowledge. This insight can be carried over into other conceptions of wisdom that include the idea of "living well," as I do with Shane Ryan's conception in a couple of paragraphs.

¹⁴² Specifically, from (Grimm, 2015) and (Ryan, 2016). Both are working with Sharon Ryan's conception of wisdom (Ryan, 2010), which in turn is responding to (Baehr, 2012) and (Whitcomb, 2010).

¹⁴³ Grimm, 2015. p 139

¹⁴⁴ Grimm, 2015. p 140

Grimm also emphasizes the in-progress nature of wisdom. A wise person has not attained a state of complete wisdom, but is “incipiently” wise. “They are pointed in the direction of wisdom and seem equipped to make progress on the path.”¹⁴⁵ This, like Sharon Ryan’s conception, makes his a *human* wisdom, accessible to real people, rather than what Ryan terms a “divine” wisdom – complete and without need for development.¹⁴⁶ This is not to say that there is not threshold level necessary to be considered wise, only that the threshold need not be unattainable.

Shane Ryan uses Sharon Ryan’s conception of wisdom, but stipulates that understanding how live well, not rational belief or even knowledge, is a condition of being wise. He also rejects her inclusion of “subjects such as chemistry” in the domain of wisdom. Wisdom is, he thinks, wholly about living well, not about believing or knowing things which don’t contribute to that end.¹⁴⁷ To lay out his view, he systematically amends Sharon Ryan’s “Deep Rationality Theory,” resulting in the following formulation:

1. A wise person understands how to live well.¹⁴⁸
2. In very few or no cases does a wise person not believe as it is epistemically appropriate for her to do so.
3. A wise person is deeply committed to both a) acquiring wider and deeper understanding about how to live well, if it is possible to acquire such understanding; b) living well.¹⁴⁹

This is a good conception of wisdom, I think, especially when augmented by Grimm’s subcategories if we take them to constitute the understanding (rather than the knowledge) of how to live well. It captures what we generally mean by wisdom while

¹⁴⁵ Grimm, 2015. p 140

¹⁴⁶ Ryan, 2012. p 110

¹⁴⁷ Ryan, 2016. p 236

¹⁴⁸ Again, I take this to be constituted by Grimm’s three kinds of knowledge, except that here they would be three kinds of understanding: 1) understanding of what is good or important for well-being, 2) understanding of one’s standing relative to (1), and 3) understanding of a strategy for obtaining (1).

¹⁴⁹ By way of contrast, Sharon Ryan’s criteria are as follows: 1) A wise person has a variety of epistemically justified beliefs on a wide variety of valuable academic subjects and on how to live well (epistemically, morally, and practically). 2) A wise person has very few unjustified beliefs and is sensitive to her limitations. 3) A wise person is deeply committed to both a) acquiring wider, deeper, and more rational beliefs about reality, and b) living rationally (practically, emotionally, and morally). (Ryan, 2012)

also not putting it out of reach for fallible human beings. Further, it explicates wisdom in a way that is useful for seeing how wisdom improves counsel.

Each of Ryan's criteria bear directly on one or more aspect of counsel. We have already seen with Grimm's three subcategories that understanding how to live well helps friends aim at real goods, helps them understand the particular situation of the counselee, and provides a reason to use subjective communication. Ryan's second criterion requires a kind of epistemic humility that goes hand-in-hand with allowing communication to be open-ended. If I know that I don't have all the answers, and that the answer I have may not be right for the situation, then I will be more inclined to let the conversation develop with minimal guidance. I will also be readier to listen to and genuinely consider my friend's perspective, which is inherent to subjective communication.

The third criterion both motivates our process of self-transformation and makes us more trustworthy as helpers in another person's process. Someone who sincerely desires both to live well and to better understand how to do so will be open to change in a way that someone apathetic or self-satisfied will not be. He will also want the kind of changes at which ideal counsel aims – real changes for the better. Moreover, we are much more willing to trust person a person committed to living well in two ways. First, we trust their perspective on reality because *they* seem to trust it, and we can see how their life is going as a result of that decision. We have never found “do as I say, not as I do” particularly persuasive. Second, we trust *them* with our process, we “let them in,” because someone committed to living well will be, at least to the extent that they are successful, more trustworthy – more likely to help and not hurt us.

This is not to say that you have to consistently live well in order to counsel, or even counsel well. Some people seem to be better at helping others than at helping themselves. But on the whole, having better people involved – people who live well, in this case – still makes for better counsel.

Wisdom and maturity

A wise person generally also *succeeds* in living well, relative to her circumstances and where she is on the path of wisdom. This, I think, issues naturally from the

combination of her commitment to living well and her understanding of how to do so. For instance, if she has identified being kind to children as part of living well, then she both understands how to do this and is committed to doing it. It is hard to imagine such a person *not* being kind to children most of the time. This tendency to live well, in accordance with one's understanding and given one's context, is a kind of maturity.¹⁵⁰ Generally, maturity entails being fully developed, and the fully developed version of a wise person is one who acts according to her wisdom. Like other kinds of maturity, it is attained through growth.

Growth in wisdom rarely comes without time, experience, and reflection. For this reason, we don't expect the young to have great wisdom, and we tend to hold old fools in special contempt. ("There's no fool like an old fool.") The old sage is an archetype for good reason – we don't find young sages plausible. Or, if there is a young sage, he is a prodigy, and we wonder how he came to be so wise. Given our conception of wisdom, maturation largely corresponds with growing wisdom. As my understanding of how to live well expands and my commitment to do so deepens, I will become more successful at actually living well. This is not, of course, an automatic process. People tire of pursuing wisdom and become disillusioned about the possibility or importance of living well. We can easily become complacent, satisfied with our current understanding of life and the world, and unwilling to entertain new ideas. There are many reasons that people, perhaps most people, do not grow in wisdom and mature as they advance in years and experience. Wisdom and maturity are far from inevitable, which is one reason that ideal instances of counsel are rare.

This conception allows for degrees of wisdom. Some people are wise, but others are *very* wise. Some people may have a minimal understanding of how to live well, perhaps limited by their own context or experience. Others may have aggressively expanded their understanding for decades, and so ended up with a near-comprehensive understanding. One may be unswervingly committed to living well, while another persists despite being plagued by doubts. One believes only as is epistemically appropriate, while another is taken in more often and has to fight free of the false beliefs

¹⁵⁰ I will be using the term "maturity" in this section to denote this particular kind of maturity.

on a regular basis. Each is wise, but they are wise to different degrees and are thereby attaining different levels of maturity.

Two people who are equally wise and mature may not appear to be so from the outside. Some aspects of living well are internal and largely invisible to an observer. Other aspects compensate for adverse circumstances or setbacks, and so may not look like growth. As an analogy, take two people who are learning to walk up stairs well. One is on a standard stairway, while the other is walking up a down-moving escalator. Suppose they both progress in their learning to walk well at the same rate. Nevertheless, the person on the stationary stair may appear to be making more progress, since his circumstances (how far up he is on the stair) will change more dramatically than the circumstances of his counterpart on the escalator.¹⁵¹ In the same way, two people who are equally wise and mature may appear to have disparate levels of wisdom and maturity. The criterion for maturity is how well you live, given your circumstances, not what your life looks like. It is entirely possible, then, to be fooled into thinking that a very wise person in difficult circumstances is not so wise after all, or that a minimally wise person is a veritable sage.

It may be that maturity is actually a part of wisdom, rather than an outgrowth of it. Either way, maturity comes with wisdom. It is not possible for a wise person to live a consistently foolish or wicked life.¹⁵² A wise person lives well in ways, and to an extent, that reflect her wisdom. This is not to say that she always lives up to all the wisdom she has, but that she expresses – if imperfectly – her understanding of how to live well and commitment to do so in the way she actually lives.

Wisdom, maturity, and ideal counsel

Instances of ideal counsel are characterized by a significant degree of wisdom and maturity in both of the friends. Often, instances of ideal counsel are also marked by an *increase* in the counselee's wisdom, since the goods at which counsel aims usually have to do with living well. Again, "wisdom" here refers to the following conception: a wise

¹⁵¹ And then imagine someone walking up an upward-moving escalator. How quickly her circumstances can change!

¹⁵² Contra the odd exception of the "wicked sage" posited by Dennis Whitcomb (Whitcomb, 2010).

person both understands how to live well and is committed to expanding that understanding; she does not tend to believe things without appropriate epistemic justification; and she is deeply committed to living well.

Wisdom contributes to counsel *via* each of counsel's three elements. A wise person recognizes the value of being and having good friends and understands how to do this. She can not only recognize real goods, but also understands the relationships among various goods, values each appropriately, locates them rightly in given situations, and identifies which one(s) her friend currently needs, when this is possible. And a wise person is not only good at subjective communication as a method but is also able to properly integrate it with counsel's aim and allow friendship to direct its course. You may note that these lists overlap with the descriptions of internal criteria in an earlier section. This should not surprise us, since wisdom contributes to counsel by helping us improve each of its component parts.

Having good friendship(s) is a part of living well. A wise person properly values good friendship, understands how to be a good friend, and is committed to whatever number of good friendships is compatible with living well in her circumstances. She is also usually successful at being a good friend.

Since a wise person is committed to expanding her understanding of how to live well, she looks for new ways to improve her friendships and pursues the ways she already knows. For instance, suppose she realizes that two ways to improve friendships are to increase one's acquaintance with and affection for the friend. So she continually gets to know her friends better and reflects on her affective responses to them. Are her negative responses justified, or do they reflect some defect in herself – a lack of charity, perhaps? Are her beliefs about her friends true, and does she know the important things about her friends? Since, being wise, she does not tend to believe things without appropriate epistemic justification, she will usually have correct beliefs about her friends. She will also have a pretty good idea of what kinds of knowledge will most improve the quality of their friendship. It may be nice to know whether your friend likes lima beans, but it's more important to know whether she has a good relationship with her roommate. Suppose also that in looking for new ways to improve her friendships, she discovers that she is sometimes paternalistic. She either already understands why

this is not conducive to living well or else is committed to figuring this out. A wise person, then, is a good friend who is committed to and generally successful at becoming a better one.

A wise person is especially well-positioned with regard to the aims of counsel. Because an understanding of living well includes an understanding of what is good or important for well-being, she has a solid grasp of what ostensible goods are real goods and which ones she and her friends should currently be paying attention to. Being wise, she not only recognizes real and important goods, but also understands the relationships among various goods, values each appropriately, locates them rightly in given situations, and identifies which one(s) her friend currently needs,¹⁵³ when this is possible.¹⁵⁴

Wisdom also makes us better at subjective communication, not only in our adeptness with the method, but also in our ability to properly integrate it with counsel's aim and allow friendship to direct its course. The better our friendships and the more completely we understand real goods, the better we are at subjective communication.¹⁵⁵ So wisdom improves communication by making us better friends who understand real goods. Wisdom also includes understanding "a strategy for obtaining what is good and important for well-being."¹⁵⁶ Since counsel's open-ended subjective communication is the best/only strategy for obtaining some of those things, wisdom also gives us a more direct reason to communicate that way. Finally, living well is a complex whole with interdependent parts. Wisdom gives us an understanding of how the relationships among those parts contribute to the whole. As this applies to counsel, wisdom helps us to both grasp how the three aspects of counsel fit together – specifically, how subjective communication is directed by friendship and shaped by an understanding of what promotes well-being – and to integrate them in practice.

¹⁵³ In Grimm's words, her friend's "current standing relative to what is good and important to well-being." (Grimm, 2015. p 140)

¹⁵⁴ All of these attributes I take to be aspects of living well, but any reasonable account of living well will describe a way of life that supports counsel.

¹⁵⁵ This is discussed elsewhere, so I won't argue for these claims here.

¹⁵⁶ Grimm, 2015. p 140

While wisdom contributes to good counsel, and greater wisdom generally makes for better counsel, ideal counsel does not require perfect, or even exceptional, wisdom. This stems from two related things: first, the distinction between flawlessly ideal and practically ideal counsel and second, the distinction between the wisdom of the people involved and how that wisdom affects counsel.

Flawless counsel may or may not require exceptional wisdom, but counsel that completely fulfills the criteria set out at the beginning of the chapter¹⁵⁷ does not. Since the latter is what I take to be ideal counsel, it is those criteria which wisdom needs to help counsel fulfill. What level of wisdom this requires will depend on the situation, and most situations do not call for anything like perfect wisdom. Similarly, the areas of life about which one must be wise in order for wisdom to improve any give instance of counsel will vary from instance to instance. Someone who understands perfectly how to live well in her own culture may find it difficult to apply that wisdom to someone in another culture. This will limit how much her (admittedly great) wisdom can contribute to her counsel. Or someone who is not very wise in general may have an area of life he understands very well indeed, and if that is that area under discussion, the limitations on his wisdom will not prevent it from substantially improving his ability to counsel. In either case, the overall level or extent of a person's wisdom is not directly proportional to how much that wisdom improves their counsel. What matters is the extent to which their wisdom contributes to the criteria for ideal counsel in any given instance of it.

It may be easier to see how wisdom contributes to ideal counsel by looking at a couple of examples. In the next and final section of this chapter, I consider two instances of ideal counsel, one typical and the other eccentric. They should illustrate for us both the internal and external criteria of ideal counsel, as well as shedding light on the value of counsel in our lives.

¹⁵⁷ For reference: *Counsel is ideal if and only if it achieves its ends, both immediate and long-term, in the best way possible while expressing and strengthening the friendship from which it arises.* So, ideal counsel 1) achieves a change for the truly better in the counselee, 2) does so through an optimal use of open-ended subjective communication, and 3) arises from, expresses, and strengthens a good friendship

Two examples of ideal counsel

Counsel, even ideal counsel, is far from homogeneous. This reflects the variety in the personalities and circumstances of its participants, the myriad possible goods to be pursued, and the many conversational styles suited to counsel. A typical instance of counsel is a medium-length conversation between two people on a relatively serious subject. But many instances of ideal counsel are not typical. Some stretch out over days, while others are over in seconds. Some involve yelling or hardly speaking at all. In some, more than two friends participate. Sometimes counsel aims at an intellectual change, and other times its aims and methods are almost entirely emotional. Any such instance of counsel may be ideal, provided it takes place between good friends and aims at a real and important good by adeptly using open-ended subjective communication.

Typical ideal counsel

Years ago, my friend Deborah was trying to decide whether she should marry a younger man who was on the verge of proposing. Though she and I lived in the same city and had previously been roommates, our lives had diverged so much that at this point we only got together once or twice a year. Despite the separation, we remained good friends and always picked up where we left off. While neither of us was *very* wise, we were both on the path to greater wisdom and she, at least, had come far enough to be considered *somewhat* wise.

We spent much of one afternoon talking about whether she should marry Fernando. I didn't know him well, so I got her talking about him to try to get a feel for who he was and whether he was well-suited to marry my strong-minded and joyful friend. Of course, what I really wanted was for Deborah to figure this out, so that she could make a decision and be confident in it. Because I knew her well, I realized that she didn't need much input from me. She needed a safe place to work through things aloud and a second perspective to either affirm or question what she said. She trusted me to provide that place and perspective, and I trusted her judgement about what she needed. I also trusted that, being fairly wise, she had a pretty good handle on what sort of marriage would contribute to her living well. I was less convinced that her judgment was sound with regard to Fernando. Deborah had vulnerable areas that romantic attention

could take advantage of, so I pressed her about his character, his family, his work – anything I could think of that might counteract the rosy hue which I suspected colored her vision. I told her about a happy couple with a substantial age difference and about an unhappy one that had married across cultures. She liked and respected me enough to listen to both, and trusted that I had reasons for thinking them relevant. I was torn between excitement for her – she seemed on the verge of such happiness, I couldn't help but respond – and trepidation. It hurt me to imagine her married life if she was wrong about him. As her friend, I wanted her to have a good life, to live well, and this decision seemed like a big one in that regard.

At the end of the conversation, she had not made a decision about whether to marry Fernando, but she had come up with list of things to base that decision on. Some required research; others needed only further reflection. But she achieved a real and important good through our conversation, even though it was not a good we had in view when we began. Further, the whole conversation, and even my initial presence which made it possible, expressed our friendship. Our *commitment* was evident from our continued friendship, despite practical difficulties. Our mutual *affection, respect, and trust* shaped the conversation, and my *goodwill* toward her underlay everything I said. The conversation also reaffirmed and strengthened our friendship – at minimum, we knew one another better and were more committed to one another when it was done than when it began. And finally, we spoke to each other as particular people with valid perspectives – our communication was subjective, and I followed her lead, while she was open to input – our conversation was open-ended. If we did this well, and I think we did, then our use of counsel's method was adept. Combine all of these things, and our conversation was an instance of typical ideal counsel.

Atypical ideal counsel

Atypical counsel can also be ideal. Sometimes ideal counsel is characterized by restraint, and a lack of observable activity need not indicate any defect. This may be because the communication is mostly non-verbal, or it can stem from long lacunas in the conversation. Minimal need for words can also be a byproduct of certain kinds of ends. If the change a counselee needs does not require learning or understanding

something new, then appropriate counsel may not include much talking, or the talking that does happen may not seem to address the aim much at all. If this kind of counsel seems deficient in terms of method, consider: communicating subjectively means tailoring the conversation to the particular people involved. Sometimes some people need less talking. Here's an example:

Several years after the previous example, one of my best friends was killed in an automobile accident. Her husband, whom I did not like, had been driving and lost control. He and their three-year-old daughter survived. For the next few days, I couldn't even think about it without crying; I needed to come to terms with my friend's death, but it wasn't a matter of any new understanding. I already held well-considered beliefs about death. I even understood my own emotional reaction and knew that it was both reasonable and transitory. In retrospect, it seems clear that the change I needed was entirely emotional – I just had to grieve and then get my metaphorical legs back under me.

Another of my best friends, Dana, was my housemate at the time. She saw my grief and wanted to help. She only said two things about it that I remember. She told me she was sorry the day she found out, and she said, "I wish I could do something for you," after it became clear that I didn't want to talk about it. None of our other words to each other addressed it, but when she said, "Good morning," as she did most mornings, I heard her concern. She was almost inviting contradiction. And when we talked about how our days had gone in the evening, I could hear her waiting for me to make the next move. She waited a long time: I didn't talk to her about what had happened until *after* I had regained my emotional equilibrium.

Our two-week, time-lapse conversation was an instance of ideal counsel. For all that we said very little that directly related to my process or the good we were pursuing, we communicated the right things in the right way for us. Perhaps my friend was exceptionally wise, or maybe she just knew me well, but her combination of restraint and non-verbal communication was precisely the right tack to take with me. She communicated so indirectly that a third party looking in might have missed her counsel entirely. Indeed, *she* probably didn't know if it was working much of the time. But it

was. What she did was, if not ideal counsel, then something very close to it. It was exactly suited to help me – my individual self, and not someone else.

Our joint practice of counsel was ideal because 1) it both expressed and strengthened our friendship, 2) it achieved both proximate and ultimate aims of counsel, where these ends were real goods, and 3) we communicated subjectively throughout.

This instance of counsel both expressed and ratified our friendship. One way to see this is by considering its relation to each of the six aspects of friendship. Dana's concern was an obvious display of both her *affection* and *goodwill* toward me, and though I was sometimes unable to reciprocate properly while I was grieving, I emerged from the process with greater affection for and goodwill toward Dana than I had held for her previously. The fact that she continued in counsel over a two-week period demonstrated her *commitment* to me, as did her perseverance in the face of uncertain results. Reflecting on this made me more settled in our friendship, more willing to plan on it lasting further into the future. It helped me both *trust* her more and be more committed myself. I also trusted her with my process of grieving, which was largely internal or, if externalized, kept private. My way of navigating emotional storms has sometimes given people the impression that I am cold or unemotional, since my turmoil rarely shows where others can see it. So it took more trust on my part to let Dana see how I actually process grief (which mostly involves *not* seeing anything), than it would have taken to show her some crying that would have done me no good. For her part, Dana trusted me to know what I needed for myself (in terms of my own process) and from her. It must have been tempting to press for more, but she didn't. I imagine that her choice stemmed from both knowing me well (from having a high level of *acquaintance*) and knowing me well enough to trust me when she came to the end of her own understanding. Likewise, I was well-enough acquainted with her to know that she didn't need me to temper my process for her sake. She was strong and stable enough to be there for me without needing any reciprocity, or even feedback, until I was ready to give it. And finally, this instance of counsel showed the depth of our *respect* for each other. She took it as given that my grief could look different from what she expected, and that it should. I doubt it ever occurred to her that my grief should look more like her

own, let alone to pressure me into expressing it in a way that seemed more natural to her (as others had in fact done). For my part, I knew that my process seemed odd to her, but I didn't resent this – her way of seeing me was not a threat, but another perspective to integrate into my understanding of the world and myself.

This instance of counsel also achieved both its proximate and the ultimate aims, and these ends were real goods. Its proximate aim was that I complete the process of grieving and regain emotional equilibrium by integrating something new (the death of a friend) into my understanding of the world. This appropriation was a good that contributed to what we might call emotional health. None of the alternatives would have been good for me – not grieving at all, suppressing grief, rushing the grieving process, grieving but ending the process without resolution, ginning up excess grief, etc. Ultimately, having attained this good gave me confidence that I would be able to weather another friend's death in the future. It also gave me insights into grief which I did not have before, and this affected how I later interacted with other grievers. So in at least two ways, attaining the proximate good furthered my long-term self-development.

During this instance of counsel our communication was subjective, and Dana, as the counselor, was especially adept at interacting with me in ways that suited my specific self, state of mind, and situation. She knew how I generally reacted to things and, when she was unsure about some particular, took her cues from me. She used this knowledge, rather than some abstract conception or personal presupposition, as the basis for her counsel. She was aware of the me who was actually me and responded to my idiosyncrasies. Dana also paid attention to my mood and actions and assessed my state of mind before she tried to start a conversation. The upshot in this case was that most of our interaction was so indirect that our words never bent 'round to the central topic and consisted instead of non-verbal signs. And finally, Dana took the overall situation into consideration. While my grief was subjectively severe, there was no external emergency, nothing immanent to be dealt with or ruin to be avoided. Thus, Dana knew she could afford to wait. The situation did not call for anything more invasive than her presence and indirect reminders of her continued concern, all of which

she gave me and no more. As I said before, this was precisely what I needed at the time. After the grief had passed, she re-read the signs, and we talked.¹⁵⁸

Ideal counsel, then, is far from monolithic. It can take many forms and stretch across different spans of time. It is as varied as the people involved and situations addressed. But so long as a conversation fully meets the three criteria discussed, it counts as an ideal instance of the practice.

Conclusion

Given the high bar set by the three criteria and the need for wisdom and maturity, ideal counsel may seem out of reach for most people. And perhaps this is right. After all, few of us claim to live up to *any* ideal, so why should the ideal practice of counsel – even modified so as to be only practically ideal – be any different? But as I consider the humanness of the practice, two possibilities emerge.

First, perhaps we don't really need ideal counsel most of the time. Like an ideal cup of coffee, it's great if you can get it, but the non-ideal variety will do the job nine times out of ten. If the best is the enemy of the good, then we should engage in counsel without too much regret that it isn't ideal. We ought not disregard the ideal entirely, however. Even if we can't attain it most of the time, considering the ideal both gives us a target and show us how to evaluate, and thereby improve, our own practice.

Second, on the other hand, it may be that ideal counsel is even more situated than I have made it out to be. Like wisdom, which is situated within the time and circumstances of a life, whether counsel is ideal may also depend on the latent possibilities in the people and situation involved. So while Dana and I were wise *enough* to engage in ideal counsel (counsel that met the criteria enumerated), given our ages and situations, we were not as wise then as we are now (I sincerely hope), nor as wise now as we will be in the future. If we sat down and engaged in counsel tomorrow, it would probably be better than when we did a decade ago. I contend, nevertheless, that what we did then was ideal. This makes sense if counsel is to some degree situated in a

¹⁵⁸ Some of this analysis is speculative, but most of what I've written about Dana's thoughts and decisions at the time comes from conversations we had later. She told me how it was for her, and I told her how it was for me.

way that affects whether it is ideal. On this picture, many people are capable of ideal counsel, at least on occasion. We are not only “incipiently wise,”¹⁵⁹ but also incipiently good friends, incipiently adept at subjective communication, and just generally incipient. Indeed, the whole possibility of counsel is predicated on this, since it aims to take us (at least in small ways) from incipient to “in fact.”

We can, then, both aspire to the ideal and actually accomplish it sometimes, as is the case with many ideals in this life. Of course, not everyone is capable of ideal counsel *right now*, but the practice of counsel itself gives us hope that any one of us may be capable of it *one day*.

¹⁵⁹ To use Grimm’s phrase.

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Vita

Naomi grew up in the Willamette Valley of Oregon, which inured her to a lot of rain and disposed her love the outdoors. When she was twelve, her intrepid father hauled the whole family down to rural Mexico for a summer, which cemented her tendency to travel and aversion to beans. She earned a B.A. in history and experienced culture shock in Kentucky, then spent eight years teaching in Argentina, where she discovered a love for gardenias and philosophy. Upon her return Stateside, she took up quilting and other non-academic pursuits involving dirt, wood, and plants, because there's more to life than thinking about things. But she found the call of philosophy irresistible and so earned a B.A. in philosophy at the University of Oregon before entering the PhD program at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. There, she bought a 100-year-old house to fix up and so indulged both her academic and practical tendencies simultaneously.