



4. *That Which Is Worthy of Love: A Philosophical Framework for Reflection on Staff-Student Partnerships for the Future University*

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Abstract: In this article we develop a philosophical understanding of student-staff partnership through a novel interpretation and development of Aristotle’s friendship arguments. In contributing to an emerging critical field of study of student-staff partnership, we begin by explaining the current state of being a student in the neoliberal university. In light of the polylythic changes neo-liberalism impresses on student being and becoming, and how partnerships are proposed paradoxically as both a *counterculture* and *servicing* this agenda, we develop a typology of partnership that helps those working in, and proposing to work in partnership, to discuss their ethical basis. For Aristotle, “What is worthy of love?” in the relationship, is a salient question. Is it utility? Is it pleasure? Is it virtue and flourishing? In the typology we propose an additional form of partnership—where *creativity* is a central activity worthy of time, energy, and love. It is reasonable to suggest that student-staff partnerships are likely to remain, if not grow, in the future university, and are likely to have a significant impact on the being and becoming of the student. It is for this reason we develop the typology in order for participants, particularly students, to have clarity in understanding the ethical motivation and purpose of the partnership in the university. We see this clarity as enabling students to see how the partnership will contribute to their notion of the flourishing life.

Keywords: partnership, Aristotle, friendship, utility, pleasure, virtue

Introduction

Underpinning the discussion in this article is a concern that becoming and being a student in contemporary higher education takes place in a context where the neoliberal agendas of marketisation and consumerisation are having great impact on universities.¹ Our focus is the increasing attention to and growth of student-staff partnerships and how the various forms such partnerships can be examined, based on an appreciation of Aristotle's analysis of friendship.

The article begins by examining the context in which becoming and being a student presently takes place and which affect becoming and being a student in the future university. We then explain Aristotle's friendship arguments and present the three kinds of friendship he identified, before addressing the question of why his friendship arguments are relevant to student-staff partnerships. We argue that these arguments help in thinking critically about such partnerships in terms of their moral basis and the equalities and inequalities that characterize them. The pivotal section of the article then follows. In this we set out a typology of student-staff partnerships based on the Aristotelean friendship arguments. The typology comprises four types of partnership, three of which reflect Aristotle's types of friendship. The fourth is an additional type that involves an intrinsically valued good that is emergent from the shared partnership activity and is something more than the individual outcomes that occur as a result of the partnership.

We then proceed to explain how our typology can be a useful framework in thinking critically about student-staff partnerships and how this is important for student becoming and being in the future university. In the concluding section, we highlight two central points: first, the central argument of the article, which is that it is unethical to engage in a partnership and not have an understanding of what that partnerships aims to achieve; second, that the intention behind the development of our typology is to help in sustaining an ideal that students be supported in the pursuit of truth and reason, not only within their disciplinary practice, but within the relationships that are central to their practice and the wider practices of the university that may sit outside of their disciplines or schools.

¹ Stephen Ball, "Performativity, Commodification and Commitment: An I-Spy Guide to the Neoliberal University", *British Journal of Educational Studies* 60, no. 1 (2012): 17–28.

Being a Student in the University—The Context

Being a student in contemporary higher education is shaped by polyolithic neoliberal agendas of marketisation and consumerisation.² Such consumerist approaches commodify university learning and teaching;³ the student is portrayed as “consumer” or even the “sovereign consumer”, driven by narcissistic self-love⁴ and the lecturer as the “commodity producer” or “service provider”⁵ in a transactional relationship where higher education is the commodity that students feel they must possess.⁶ While students recognize this perception of themselves as consumers, this view does not fully reflect their understanding of their identity as higher education students, nor how they become and behave within higher education settings. Student identities, experiences and relationships within higher education are complicated and often contradictory.⁷

In an attempt to counter the consumerist discourse that pervades higher education, the concept of *partnership* is argued to be a lens through which to see *student being* in higher education differently,⁸ as a counter narrative to the traditional and neoliberal view of higher education,⁹ and as a pedagogically sound alternative to the rhetoric and framing of “student as consumers”.¹⁰ Such partnership involves a different way of seeing how students *become* and *be* students in higher education. In recent years, interest in the idea of partnerships between staff and students in higher education has grown

² Ball, “Performativity”.

³ Rajani Naidoo and Ian Jamieson, “Empowering Participants or Corroding Learning? Towards a Research Agenda on the Impact of Student Consumerism in Higher Education”. *Journal of Education Policy* 20, no. 3 (2015): 267–281.

⁴ Elizabeth Nixon, Richard Scullion, and Robert Hearn. “Her Majesty the Student: Marketised Higher Education and the Narcissistic (Dis) Satisfactions of the Student-Consumer”. *Studies in Higher Education* 43, no. 6 (2018): 927–943.

⁵ Naidoo and Jamieson, “Empowering”.

⁶ Nixon, Scullion, and Hearn, “Her Majesty”, 928.

⁷ Michael Tomlinson, “Student Perceptions of Themselves as ‘Consumers’ of Higher Education”, *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 34, no. 4 (2017): 450–467.

⁸ Mick Healey and Ruth Healey, “‘It Depends’: Exploring the Context-Dependent Nature of Students as Partners’ Practices and Policies”, *International Journal for Students as Partners* 2, no. 1 (2018): 1–10.

⁹ Kelly Matthews, Alexander Dwyer, Lorelei Hine, and Jarred Turner, “Conceptions of Students as Partners”, *Higher Education* 76, no. 6 (2018): 957–971.

¹⁰ Mick Healey, Abbi Flint, and Kathy Harrington, *Engagement through Partnership: Students as Partners in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education* (London: Advance HE, 2014).

in policy, practice and research. As Flint notes¹¹ there is now a plethora of books, journal articles, journal special issues, conferences, events, resources, frameworks, guidance and professional development opportunities to support practitioners who wish to enact partnership within their settings. Equally, the discourse of partnership also features in national policy and policy guidance, and within institutions (e.g., through student charters or learning and teaching strategies). While references to partnership proliferate, attempts to pin down its definition are difficult.

One frequently used definition of partnership is a “relationship in which all involved—students, academics, professional services staff, senior managers, students’ unions, and so on—are actively engaged in and stand to gain from the process of learning and working together”.¹² This definition is broad and can incorporate the many different practices and activities that are defined as partnership. In order to categorize some of these different activities, a distinction is made between partnership practices that focus on governance and those on pedagogy, and in relation to pedagogic partnership practices specifically. Healey, Flint and Harrington’s Conceptual Model¹³ identifies four key areas where students can be partners in learning and teaching: learning, teaching and assessment; course-design and pedagogic consultancy; scholarship of teaching and learning; and subject-based research and inquiry.

The Conceptual Model is depicted as four overlapping circles which show their inter-relatedness. Each of the categories is introduced and examples from higher education practice of the enactment of partnership are provided. In the category, *learning, teaching and assessment*, Healey, Flint and Harrington suggest that students can be active partners in their own learning,¹⁴ also known as active learning; examples of active learning include internships and placements, community engagement, peer learning and instruction, and more flipped approaches to teaching and learning whereby students engage with materials prior to face-to-face meetings allowing for more discussion time in class. Assessment activities can also be presented with more emphasis on partnership through, for example, more opportunities to self- and peer-assess, formulate feedback, develop assessment criteria or choose assessment tasks. In relation to *course-design and pedagogic consultancy*, the authors show how students can be engaged in the development of curriculum design.¹⁵

¹¹ Abbi Flint, “Moving from the Fringe to the Mainstream: Opportunities for Embedding Student Engagement through Partnership”, *Student Engagement in Higher Education Journal* 1, no. 1 (2016): 1–6.

¹² Healey, Flint, and Harrington, “Engagement Through Partnership”, 12.

¹³ Healey, Flint, and Harrington, “Engagement Through Partnership”, 22–25.

¹⁴ Healey, Flint, and Harrington, “Engagement Through Partnership”, 36–41.

¹⁵ Healey, Flint, and Harrington, “Engagement Through Partnership”, 48–52.

They draw on Bovill and Bulley’s ladder of student participation in curriculum design as a useful model to explore practice and to demonstrate the different levels of participation that students have in decision making relating to curriculum (e.g., tutors making decisions based on student feedback, students having choice and influence in specific areas, or students controlling decision making). This category also makes reference to students engaging in pedagogic consultancy, where students work closely with academics to provide advice and guidance on learning and teaching, following activities such as student-led teaching observations, surveying or interviewing students on the program, participating in program meetings and providing feedback and recommendations to staff. There are close links between pedagogic consultancy and engagement in the *scholarship of teaching and learning*, which is a further category introduced by Healey, Flint and Harrington.¹⁶ In the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SOTL), staff usually engage in research and theorising around student learning, which is then disseminated and communicated more widely. SOTL projects can be and are conducted in collaboration with students in order to contribute to the development of learning and teaching. Finally, the Conceptual Model also includes a category on *subject-based research and inquiry*,¹⁷ which the authors argue can facilitate the connection between research and teaching. Here students can engage in the production of original knowledge within their discipline through authentic research (which may or may not be the students’ final, or capstone project) with students having different levels of autonomy in terms of choice of research topic, methods and approach to dissemination. Students can also participate in learning, throughout their programs, that use approaches that closely align to research and inquiry. These opportunities to partner can sit within the formal curriculum or outside of it, can involve all students or just some, and participation can be through election or selection.¹⁸ Equally, there can be different degrees of engagement within the examples of partnership and across the Conceptual Model categories, and at different levels—program, departmental, institutional, and national.¹⁹ As a “big tent” term, the practices, the relationships between partners, and the experiences of partnership will be very different and very much dependent on the context in

¹⁶ Healey, Flint, and Harrington, “Engagement Through Partnership”, 46–48.

¹⁷ Healey, Flint, and Harrington, “Engagement Through Partnership”, 41–45.

¹⁸ Cathy Bovill, “Breaking down Student-Staff Barriers: Moving towards Pedagogic Flexibility”, in *Pedagogic Frailty & Resilience in the University*, ed. Ian Kinchin and Naomi Winstone (Rotterdam: Sense, 2017), 151–161.

¹⁹ Healey, Flint and Harrington, “Engagement Through Partnership”.

which they occur,²⁰ and this diversity makes partnership especially difficult to define.²¹

Rather than focusing solely on the practices, activities or products of partnership, it is argued that partnership should be seen as a process,²² as a way of doing things,²³ or as an ethos that is imbued with values which underpin the practice (and practices) of partnership.²⁴ Cook-Sather, Bovill, and Felten emphasize, specifically, the principles of respect, reciprocity and shared responsibility for learning and teaching as fundamental for partnership working,²⁵ and Healey, Flint, and Harrison make reference to authenticity, inclusivity, reciprocity, empowerment, trust, challenge, community, and responsibility.²⁶ Partnership practices, then, are seen by some to be grounded in a set of beliefs and values, that can disrupt and transform current perceptions of higher education and the roles that staff and students play therein. The pervasiveness of the term “partnership”, and its use and meanings within everyday language,²⁷ however, mean that the term is open to hijack by senior managers and policy makers whose use can support rather than counter neoliberalist agendas²⁸ and can “stifle genuine partnership processes that are gathering momentum”.²⁹ Those engaged in partnership can have very different rationales, motivations and understandings of partnership and their engagement in it.³⁰

In this article we introduce a framework to facilitate the critical analysis of the rationales for types of partnership, so that those engaged in partnership

²⁰ Healey and Healey, “It Depends”, 6.

²¹ Alison Cook-Sather, Catherine Bovill, and Peter Felten, *Engaging Students as Partners in Learning and Teaching: A Guide for Faculty* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2014).

²² Healey, Flint, and Harrington, “Engagement Through Partnership”.

²³ Abbi Flint, “Moving from the Fringe to the Mainstream: Opportunities for Embedding Student Engagement through Partnership”, *Student Engagement in Higher Education Journal* 1, no. 1 (2016): 1–6.

²⁴ Joy Jarvis, Claire Dickerson, and Lewis Stockwell. 2013. “Student-Staff Partnership in Practice in Higher Education: The Impact on Learning and Teaching”. In *Procedia—Social and Behavioural Sciences*. 90—6th International Conference on University Learning and Teaching (INCULT) 90 no. 6: 220–225.

²⁵ Cook-Sather, Bovill, and Felten, *Engaging Students*.

²⁶ Healey, Flint, and Harrington, “Engagement Through Partnership”.

²⁷ Karen Smith and Saskia Kersten, “Exploring Understandings of Partnership in Higher Education Using Methods from Corpus Linguistics” *Student Engagement in Higher Education Journal* 2, no. 1 (2018): 112–113.

²⁸ Healey and Healey, “It Depends”.

²⁹ Kelly Matthews, Alexander Dwyer, Stuart Russell, and Eimear Enright, “It Is a Complicated Thing: Leaders’ Conceptions of Students as Partners in the Neoliberal University”, *Studies in Higher Education* 4, no. 12 (2019): 2204.

³⁰ Flint, “Moving from the Fringe”.

practice can better articulate their reasons for that engagement. A critical examination of the different purposes of partnership will help, we argue, to better understand student being, including identity, intellectual, and moral development and belonging within higher education. In order to do this, we draw on Aristotle and his friendship arguments with the intention that when “work is situated within a surprising form of interpretive framing, such as an unexpected metaphor, it may catalyse a new set of insights”.³¹ Our approach is intended to challenge us to think differently about what it means to be and become a student in the future university.

Aristotle on Friendship

Aristotle engaged with a much wider notion of friendship than our contemporary common sense understanding of the term. By friendship, Aristotle means a state of liking or love. It is not simply affection; nor goodwill, which “seems to be a characteristic of friendship, but still it is not friendship”.³² Friendship in Aristotle’s writings is a translation of *philia* which can cover “all bonds of affection from the closest erotic and familial ties to political loyalties, humanitarian sympathies, business partnerships and even love for inanimate things”.³³

Two questions arise. One is about the central concern or focus of a relationship. Friendships can be focused on different areas of interest and activity. What is the central concern or focus that draws the person into such a relationship? This question applies to relationships in student-staff partnerships to the extent that each party enters or continues the partnership with some central concern or focus in mind. A second, ethical question, concerns the extent to which the concerns or foci of such a relationship are worthy of *philia* or love. Understanding the characteristics of these concerns can help in considering their worthiness as objects of *philia* or love. Aristotle identifies three such characteristics—utility, pleasure and virtue—which we explain below. Our proposition is that this Aristotelean analysis is useful in examining the ethical worthiness of relationships in student-staff partnerships.

³¹ Kelly Matthews, Alison Cook-Sather, Anita Acai, Sam L. Dvorakova, Peter Felten, Elizabeth Marquis, and Lucy Mercer-Mapstone, “Toward Theories of Partnership Praxis: An Analysis of Interpretive Framing in Literature on Students as Partners in Teaching and Learning”, *Higher Education Research and Development* 38, no. 2 (2019): 284.

³² Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, ed. Roger Crisp (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 1167a.

³³ Lorraine Smith Pangle, *Aristotle and the Philosophy of Friendship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 2.

Aristotle starts Book VIII (of the *Nicomachean Ethics*—NE hereafter) indicating that friendship is a virtue and requires the exercise of other virtues. This is an important feature of Aristotle's conception of friendships generally, but more specifically of those of the flourishing life. Aristotle explains that friendship "benefits the young by keeping them from making mistakes, and the old by caring for them and helping them to finish jobs they are unable to finish themselves because of their weakness. And it benefits those in their prime by helping them to do noble actions - 'two going together' - since with friends they are more capable of thinking and acting".³⁴ Examining such friendships raises a compelling ethical question. Is the object of the friendship *the good of the other* or *the good of oneself*?³⁵

There are two types of friendship in Aristotle's view that do not have the good of the other as their main concern; rather the main concern is the good to come from their interaction for themselves. The friendship may have a utility to it—in the case of a business friendship; or it may have pleasure as its central feature—for example, friends who play tennis together or are members of a book club. In fact, we might befriend someone because they make us laugh or they are pleasing to us. We do not so much care about them but what they can provide us. In both examples when the business or pleasure ends, so does the friendship.

Aristotle identifies three kinds of friendship; a virtuous friendship which has an intrinsically valued object of *philia* or love which contrasts with utility-based and pleasure-based friendships:³⁶

Utility

Philia based upon an external good, most likely when a service of some description is required by person *A* toward the service provider *B*. These are likely to be primarily contractual arrangements between a customer and client, for example.

Pleasure

Philia based upon a good that is produced and nurtured by an activity shared by both persons that brings pleasure for them both. It may also be that a person is friends with another because of pleasure that the latter's behaviour brings to the relationship. The relationship is likely to cease once the shared activity ends or that the behaviour is no longer valued.

Virtuous (Flourishing)

Philia based in the good of each other for their own sake. The relationship is a constituent part of a life well-lived. At the centre of the relationship is the good for each other which will be nourished by the virtuous interactions. Utility and pleasure are likely to be present as features of certain activities undertaken within the friendship, but such activities will ultimately contribute to the flourishing of each member of the friendship.

³⁴ Aristotle, *Nicomachean*, 1155a.

³⁵ Aristotle, *Nicomachean*, 1155b.

³⁶ Aristotle, *Nicomachean*, 1156a5–1157b.

Can the utility- and pleasure-based relationships truly be friendships? An instrumental relationship such as a business relationship may not be a friendship, though it may be that certain performances of “friend-like” behaviour is important in completing business transactions. Yet we would argue that a kind of friendship can form in relationships such as those in business, as well as those that yield pleasure. Although friendships for utility and pleasure are imperfect, they are still a significant feature of what it means to be us, as human beings. For example, we need business relationships in order to live the kinds of lives we live. Having relationships based upon utility or a shared pleasure, or on the basis that this or that person is good to have around because of the way they behave do feature as a part of being human. Aristotle’s analysis sensitizes us to the fact that they have an instrumentality at their core and that, if we want to be as ethical as possible in our everyday living, we need to examine carefully the true concern of our relationships.

The third type of friendship sets a high standard for examining the worthiness of friendships. It denotes a *perfect* friendship that is essential, for Aristotle, to living a good, *eudemon*, life. The ancient Greek term—*eudemonia*—bears a poorly translated resemblance in modern English to that of *flourishing*, *living well*, *doing well* and *well-being*.³⁷ *Eudemonia* is the “best, noblest and most pleasant thing in the world” and in striving to live a *eudemon* life we must exercise the soul, which is comprised of our moral virtues, in tandem with our reason.³⁸ We take this as the central Aristotelian feature of what it means to be and live well—namely, to exercise reason and moral virtue in the constant pursuit of a flourishing life. Sherman builds upon this idea of virtuous decision making.³⁹ *Prohairesis* is a “reasoned choice that is expressive of character and the overall ends of that character”. In order to live a *eudemon* life, our actions are aligned to our idea of a *eudemon* life—our thoughts and actions aim toward our evolving conception of what flourishing means to us (*NE* Book I). In the appreciation of our flourishing, we must, according to Aristotle, delight in it together and pursue it with friends as it enables our self-regulation toward the good life. Such friendships are likely, at times, also to share in utility and pleasure, but it is the good for each other that remains the central object worthy of love. For Aristotle, virtuous friendships provide our checks-and-balances and aid in having a sense of self-worth.

³⁷ Alasdair MacIntyre, *A Short History of Ethics*. 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2010).

³⁸ Simon Blackburn, “Eudaimonia”, in *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*, ed. Simon Blackburn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 127.

³⁹ Nancy Sherman, “Aristotle on Friendship and the Shared Life”, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 47, no. 4 (1987): 589–613.

The “remarks and observations” that friends share about life are a “form of self-reflection”⁴⁰. Virtuous friendships from the Aristotelean perspective are, in their best sense, relationships in which people interact closely and support each other in developing toward their conception of a flourishing life. This conception is something that is cultivated, nurtured and checked-in by such relationships. We might say friendship in this sense is about learning, indeed mutual learning.

This notion of mutual learning involves nurturing the good in each other for its own sake. Spending time helping a friend reflect on the direction of their life and offering advice is not done for self-interested reasons. The members of the friendship are alike in their virtue. Though they are not the same people, nor are they aspiring to be the same people, they are alike in having shared virtues and overlaps in their conception of the good life. The friendship is likely to endure as long as each member of the friendship is good; transgressions are likely to occur and the friends will critique such transgressions and help the friend get back-on-track, but this is distinct from the very core of one’s morality being lastingly changed. Such a change is likely to result in there no longer being any shared features of the good central to their relationship. Aristotle holds to the view that goodness and virtue are essential in friendship: “only good people can be friends for the sake of the other person himself, because bad people do not enjoy each other’s company unless there is some benefit in it for them”.⁴¹ These *complete* friendships, according to Aristotle, are lasting and require time and familiarity,⁴² and a sharing of activity.⁴³ Aristotle describes them as rare,⁴⁴ a challenging observation to which we shall return. Friendship based on utility and pleasure is, according to Aristotle, lesser and, as they only superficially resemble complete friendship, such relationships are shallow.⁴⁵ Additionally, shallow friendships are likely to focus on what the other can do for the benefit of one’s own being.

The flourishing life appears to have strong sense of individualism about it, as the focus is on the individual’s flourishing. However, Aristotle does not accept that lives can flourish in isolation. Intertwining our lives and professions with others, in developing relationships toward a shared goal, or a goal that one cannot achieve alone, we have to realize such goals with the help of friends (in the wide sense that Aristotle originally engaged with, which could

⁴⁰ Laurence Thomas, “Friendship”, *Synthese* 72, no. 2 (1987): 232.

⁴¹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean*, 1157a.

⁴² Aristotle, *Nicomachean*, 1156b.

⁴³ Smith Pangle, *Aristotle*, 55.

⁴⁴ Aristotle, *Nicomachean*, 1157b.

⁴⁵ Smith Pangle, *Aristotle*.

also include family members and relations). In fact, the idea of the *eudemon* life relies, according to MacIntyre,⁴⁶ on the shared values and mutual sense of the good that is generated through culture and passed down the generations of that culture. Friends enable us to gain external goods, e.g., material possessions, particular outcomes that need to be met or to enjoy pleasurable activities, but friends can also “help and aid” and act as virtuous agents distanced from, for example, particular situations in which one is particularly prejudiced.⁴⁷ This indicates that some of the elements of a flourishing life require a friend or friends.

Certain behaviours and virtues are valorized by a culture. For example, the culture of a university may, as we have seen, value student-staff partnerships and thereby influence how students see and construct their activity and identity as students.⁴⁸ Aristotle’s analysis draws attention to the importance of not passively accepting such cultural influence. The idea of *prohairesis* decision making suggests that students should raise their consciousness—and the quality of their reasoning—about the impact that decisions and relationships will have on their conception of their life within the university. Considering the ethical purpose of relationships, and the reasons for entering into student-staff partnerships, potentially provides a critical language to consider such partnerships. Drawing on Aristotle’s analysis as a frame will, we posit, help in enabling reflections and conversations about such partnerships to be meaningful and authentic.

The Relevance of Aristotle’s Friendship Arguments to Student-Staff Partnerships

In this section we address the question of why Aristotle’s friendship arguments are relevant to student-staff partnerships. These arguments help in thinking critically about such partnerships in terms of their moral basis and the equalities and inequalities that characterize them. This section provides a basis from which to understand how partnerships are likely to influence student being, and how examining critically the different concerns of partnerships might aid students in developing greater ethical awareness in their ongoing process of becoming in the university.

⁴⁶ MacIntyre, *A Short History*.

⁴⁷ Sherman, “Aristotle on Friendship”, 591–592.

Thinking Critically about the Objects and Moral Basis of Partnerships

Aristotle's friendship arguments bring to the fore the idea that friendship is a state, i.e. it is an ongoing condition or feature of a relationship. That ongoing process of interaction and connection with another is, moreover, animated by the concern or focus that defines the purpose of the relationship.

Staff members and students who work together in order to explore knowledge or create ideas and challenge thinking can be seen as being engaged in a partnership. Such an ongoing relationship can also be viewed as a professional friendship in the Aristotelian sense—a relationship enduring over a period of time which has a shared concern or focus which the participants value and evokes a feeling of *philia*. An example of such a concern could be a shared valuing of the feelings of love for a subject which is generated in the academics' and students' shared endeavour of teaching and learning about the subject. Other kinds of concern are possible, as we shall explain below. Such a partnership connects the participants over time around a shared intent. Seeing the student-staff partnership as a friendship in the Aristotelian sense encourages us to look for the type of concern or focus that is the purpose of that relationship and therefore where the liking or loving (the *philia*) is directed by staff and students.

Seeing partnership as an Aristotelean friendship thus provides a frame of enquiry for critically exploring student-staff partnerships. That frame of enquiry can be posed as a question for any student-staff partnership: What type of concern is the purpose of that relationship and the focus of staff and students' *philia*? Informed by Aristotle's reasoning about friendship, addressing this helps in clarifying the moral basis of partnerships. It raises issues about the kinds of concern and *philia* there may be in the current and future university and what these may reveal about that moral basis.

Essential to Aristotelean friendships is interaction that brings about some sort of good—something that is valued. Staff and students in higher education engaged together in exploring a subject area may be united in that endeavour through a common love of learning about that subject as an intrinsic good; or, the concern or focus of *philia* may be different. The concern or focus may differ between partnerships, and between staff members and amongst students in a partnership. For example, the concern could be a utilitarian gain (e.g., good results or contacts for future employment), the pleasure some activity generates (e.g., enjoyment of being with others in a learning group or the enjoyment that arises from jointly exploring a subject) and/or it may be an intrinsic gain (*eudemonia* or flourishing, where learning is valued in itself as a process that makes one a better human being).

A fundamental, moral question is raised by this way of thinking about partnerships. What truly deserves our love? Aristotle argues that what “is bad is not worthy of love nor should it be loved”.⁴⁸ Love of bad purposes and concerns leads to morally bad practice and ethical deterioration within the person. The choice of that which is worthy of love is therefore a matter of vital moral consequence. By participating in a partnership, participants are making a choice about the concern they are focusing on and, if they want to be as morally good as they can be, it is essential that they think critically and carefully about the shared purpose to which they are committing in a partnership. Aristotle’s ethical arguments will tend to steer the conscientious would-be partner away from the utility and pleasure-based objects of love and partnership; or at least encourage them to be measured and critically aware when participating in partnerships where utility and pleasure are predominant ends.

The issue of what concern a partnership is focused upon is relevant to higher education policy and practice, where partnerships are used in very different ways. Adopting a partnership approach between staff and students may be recommended with different purposes in mind—for example: to bring about improvements in performance data, but not always necessarily enhance the quality of the learning experience; to enhance the engagement of learners who are disengaged or alienated from their current practice or discipline, or to nurture the knowledge and values of a discipline.

Transparency about the purposes of partnerships is important if participants are to make choices about the object(s) to which they commit themselves. There might be good cause ethically, in some circumstances, to not enter into or continue participation in a partnership. An example could be where partnership descends into, or is based in, a solely self-interested transactional engagement, e.g. university policies stating that “we work in partnerships with students” where neither party believe in the ethics of the “partnership” being thrust upon them in that way because it lacks a genuine form of interest and goodwill in each other. We do accept that it may be more difficult, however, for students, without the transparency we argue for in this paper, to remove themselves from partnerships or hold policies and practices to account.

⁴⁸ Abbi Flint and Luke Millard, “‘Interactions with Purpose’: Exploring Staff Understandings of Student Engagement in a University with an Ethos of Staff-Student Partnership”, *International Journal for Students as Partners* 2, no. 2 (2018): 21–38.

⁴⁹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean*, 1165b.

Thinking Critically about Equalities and Inequalities in Partnerships

Friendship involves equalities and inequalities which raise issues of power. Aristotle's friendship arguments highlight three aspects relating to inequality that are relevant to thinking critically about student-staff partnerships. First, friendships—especially those based on an object valued for its utility—can, and often do, take place across unequal social divides. Aristotle gives as a utilitarian example:

... that ... between a poor person and a rich, or an ignorant person and a learned one, since each of us is eager for whatever it is he happens to lack, and so gives something in return.⁵⁰

Second, friendships involve an equality of exchange of some feature (material gain, pleasure or virtue). For utility and pleasure-based friendships, “both sides get the same and wish the same to each other, or exchange one thing for another, such as pleasure for benefit”.⁵¹ There is most likely to be equality in flourishing or virtuous friendships, according to Aristotle, “the friendship of the good”.⁵² Third, there are friendships that occur across an enduring, socially embedded relationship of superiority and inferiority. Aristotle gives the example of that between father and son, and ruler and ruled.⁵³ In such a friendship, each:

should get more out of the friendship, but not more of the same thing. The superior person should get more honour, and the person in need more gain, since honour is the reward of virtue and beneficence, while gain is what ministers to need.⁵⁴

This introduces the concept of honour as a variable that can bring two people together. Certain partnerships may then bring honour to one party and it is that which they find worthy of love. It is important to be cautious, however, in ascribing too much ethical goodness to honour, as it is something that is given by others and depends on what the givers consider to be honourable:

[H]onour appears to depend more on those who honour than on the person honoured, whereas we surmise the good to be something of one's own that

⁵⁰ Aristotle, *Nicomachean*, 1159b.

⁵¹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean*, 1158b.

⁵² Aristotle, *Nicomachean*, 1158a.

⁵³ Aristotle, *Nicomachean*, 1161a–1161b.

⁵⁴ Aristotle, *Nicomachean*, 1163b.

cannot easily be taken away. [Seekers of honour] seem to pursue honour in order to convince themselves of their goodness; at least, they seek to be honoured by people with practical wisdom, among those who are familiar with them, and for their virtue. So it is clear that, to these people at least, virtue is superior.⁵⁵

The implications of these three aspects of friendship equalities and inequalities are helpful in drawing attention to some of the complexities of power in student-staff partnerships. They raise the question of what equalities and inequalities are ethically desirable or acceptable. It might be argued that it is morally acceptable that academics mark students' assignments and guide Master's and doctoral students and thus have significant power, and that such inequality is integral to the many student-staff relationships. This view is also taken in the qualitative work of Murphy et al.⁵⁶ But, it does not follow that all exercising of unequal power is ethically good. For example, working with students in partnership so that module evaluation data are high could be seen to be a coercive act, forcing a utilitarian relationship not in the best interests of students.

It is important to probe and understand how power and (in)equality might play out. It is essential to understand that partnerships can be unequal, even when the object is one that is intrinsically valued for the flourishing it brings about. The question then becomes whether that inequality is ethically acceptable or not. What makes it ethically acceptable or unacceptable?

Typology of Partnership

In this section we set out a typology of student-staff partnership based on the Aristotelean friendship arguments and our discussion in this article to this point. The typology comprises four types of partnership. Three reflect Aristotle's types of friendship; the fourth is an additional type based on our reflections on the value of incorporating a form of partnership that involves an intrinsically valued good that is emergent from the shared partnership activity and is something more than the individual outcomes that occur as a result of the partnership. The purpose of the typology is to offer a description of types of partnership that can be used to aid critical analysis of partnership practice, including the ethical acceptability of any inequalities involved.

⁵⁵ Aristotle, *Nicomachean*, 1095a-b.

⁵⁶ Rebecca Murphy, Sarah Nixon, Simon Brooman, and Damian Fearon, "I Am Wary of Giving Too Much Power to Students: Addressing the 'But' in the Principle of Staff-Student Partnership", *International Journal for Students as Partners* 1, no. 1 (2017): 1-16.

Utility-Based Partnership

Within a utility-based partnership, there is a clear understanding between those within the partnership about what they will gain from the experience. Partners will enter the partnership expecting to get something specific out of it. While what is gained from the partnership is likely to differ for the staff and students engaged, there is a clear, tangible and readily defined reason for being involved. A functional advantage of the utilitarian partnership is that it can embrace more people than the more demanding virtuous partnership; the advantage of the utility partnerships lies not in its qualitative (moral) character but more in its quantitative potential. Key features of a utility-based partnerships that are working well are likely to be a focus on what the partners can get out of the partnership (its usefulness and transactional character); clear expectations; outcomes-focused; time-boundedness; and a capacity to be scaled-up.

Pleasure-Based Partnership

In this partnership, as with the utility-based partnership, there is a state of mutual liking or love because of the benefit the partners receive through the partnership. In this case the benefit is some form of pleasure. Examples are: where both student and teacher experience enjoyment from the other's contribution to the process of teaching and learning, which might include a teacher's qualities such as "charisma, charm, wit, likeableness";⁵⁷ where rewards are experienced through the partnership, such as praise, respect, pride, honour, and feelings of delight and gratification in the student's work, or where pleasure is gained through the work being done as part of the partnership, or the process of working together itself. Again, as with the utility partnership, the good that each partner sees in the other is an instrumental one (the pleasure and good feelings they evoke) and it has a quantitative advantage in that instrumental partnerships are, in principle, possible in greater numbers than virtuous ones.

Some of the key features of pleasure-based partnerships include a focus on what pleasure (enjoyment) the partnership can bring; the experience of the process being as important as the outcome of the partnership; a strong focus on the relationships between the partners; and a potential to endure beyond the lifetime of the project because of the pleasure enjoyed. As with the utilitarian partnerships, there is not a deficiency in such partnerships, rather the

⁵⁷ David Carr, "Values, Virtues and Professional Development in Education and Teaching", *International Journal of Educational Research* 50, no. 3 (2011): 175.

worthiness of those partnerships does not aim to contribute to the flourishing of the other, or to contribute to the creation of something large than the self.

Virtue-Based Partnership

Virtuous partnerships contribute to or express “an intrinsic *telos*: the promotion of a good and flourishing human life (*eu zen*) and of a virtuous happiness (*eudaimonia*)”.⁵⁸ The common good may be described in terms that involve nurturing or enabling in others the capability to develop their faculties and removing social obstacles to people exercising free development as human beings.

In the virtuous partnership, the partners are in the state of mutual liking or love because of the good they see in each other and that they share with each other by mutually reinforcing the sustenance and development of virtue. The partnership is a community of morally good characters who raise each other up. Unlike the utility-based partnership, the benefits are not equated with the successful execution of “value-neutral—person-independent—skills and techniques”.⁵⁹ The love of the virtuous partners is for the good, the virtues that they foster in each other. Features of the virtue-based partnership include a focus on the virtues that partners bring to and develop in the partnership; seeking to develop those virtues; a tendency to be time-consuming to maintain; transformational in their effect; and being long term, enduring perhaps for a lifetime.

Creative-Based Partnerships

Aristotle’s friendship argument misses a significant feature of what it means to be and become in the university, not only for students, but also for staff. The creative-based partnership is a further, fourth type, that we posit to fill this gap. It addresses the question of what is worthy of love in a different way and extends the parameters of Aristotle’s discussion of friendship. The factor that brings and sustains partners into a state of mutual liking or love in this type is the creative change or outcomes that *emerge through the joint activities of the partners*. The good is an emergent outcome of the interaction and is not based on an instrumental exchange.

The object of the creative partnership is the contribution of the joint activity of partners to the greater good of others and the group or society. The joint

⁵⁸ Fred Dallmayer, *In Search of the Good Life* (Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 2007), 190.

⁵⁹ Carr, “Values”, 174.

practice of the creative partnership promotes a good and flourishing human life (*eu zen*) and virtuous happiness (*eudaimonia*) in the same way as virtue-based partnerships. The distinguishing feature of the creative-based partnership is that the outcomes are not additive—the simple adding of two areas of expertise together—but emergent. The sum of the joint working is greater than the parts. In this, it is akin to the notion of distributed leadership. Here we are referring to distributed leadership, characterized by “conjoint activity” in which people acting together experience synergy (evoking and releasing latent capacities and possibilities from each other) and reciprocity (influencing each other in way akin to a virtuous circle) and where there is reciprocal learning that generates and co-constructs “new knowledge and understanding” that is not only cognitive but embraces “emotional, social, aesthetic and ethical growth”.⁶⁰ Examples could include partnerships in the pursuit of knowledge and partnerships in aesthetic endeavours that produce art, buildings and spaces enhancing people’s sensibilities. In pedagogical partnerships there is a shared joy of discovering and advancing learning, not only for the partners but also—crucially—*for the contribution being made to the subject of study and the wider benefit of human learning*. To that extent, creative partnerships may be more applicable to Master’s and doctoral levels, and to collaborative learning between teachers.

Some of the key features of creative-based partnerships include a concern, like the virtue-based partnership, to promote a good and flourishing human life; a focus on the product that emerges from the joint activity; the valuing of outcomes which are greater than the sum of the parts of the partnership; and the importance of the wider benefits to society of the partnership. In its focus on contribution and creation, it is distinct, although incorporates, features of pleasure-based and virtue-based partnerships. Shared enjoyment in the creative process is likely to happen, and the good of each other in the process of creation is likely to be fostered as the good moves beyond the relationship and into something larger than one and the other’s being. We propose this to be a particular type of partnership that a student may participate in, in many disciplines, of the current and future university.

The Value of the Typology of Partnership for Student Becoming and Being in the Future University

In this section, we explain how our typology can be a useful framework in thinking critically about student-staff partnerships and how this is important

⁶⁰ Philip A. Woods and Amanda Roberts, *Collaborative School Leadership: A Critical Guide* (London: SAGE Publications, 2018), 84.

for student becoming and being in the future university. We see the typology as a way of developing conversations that can focus on the qualities of the relationships between student and staff, as well as ethical questions about the purposes of partnership—that which is worthy of love. Our view is that in the present and future university there needs to be honest and reflective conversations about the particular forms that student-staff partnerships take. We posit the typology as guidance for knowing and understanding the *philia* of the proposed student-staff relationship. We see such a framework as essential in enabling students and staff to decide where their relationship best sits within the types offered.

We take the view, as shown from the partnership literature, that being a student in higher education presently, and likely in the future, will continue to involve being in and identifying with student-staff partnerships. Partnerships are likely to continue as a central feature of the policies and practices that students are inducted into. Our typology aims to enable students and staff alike to reflect on the purpose of the type of relationship they are in or being asked to join. A lack of clarity concerning the purpose or the worthiness of any activity and its value for one's life can stifle or limit the process of one's becoming.

Imagine for a moment that you are a student invited to participate in a partnership project aimed at understanding student engagement. You are to be paid for your time across the semester-long project. You have an initial meeting with the convening academic—in this case they are a professor of learning and teaching. Initially, both you and the professor are focused on the utility of the partnership—you want the money, the professor wants data to be collected. Once you have collected your data, you then move into the data analysis phase of the project. It becomes energising and interesting, a more pleasure-based partnership. You and the professor start to tease out key themes of student engagement. You sit and have lunch one day, start talking about the project, and then the conversation moves onto likes and dislikes, next steps for you, and the career path of the professor. It is starting to become not just a transaction but is nurturing in your virtues and character for your ongoing development, and you can begin to see a wider, emerging value to knowledge from the partnership. The conversations and interactions for the remainder of the project ebb and flow between, what we describe here as, the four types of partnership. In the next year, the student chooses a module where the professor is their tutor. The relationship has changed: the student is now very much aware of both of the creative and utilitarian aspects of that relationship. The professor has a richer understanding of the learner. Open and frank discussions can be had between each other, where otherwise

they may have not been possible. Whilst lectures, seminars and tutorials focus on the tasks at hand, there is now a shared and deeper understanding of each other in the interest of the other and the self. As before, there is opportunity to focus conversations and for interactions to ebb and flow.

The partners will, no doubt, move between different nuances of *philia* during their time together. It stands to reason that the longer the time they spend with people invested in an activity, all being well, they will get to know each other better. They may move from a utility-based *philia* to a pleasure-based or virtue-based and creative-based *philia*, as indicated in the above example, across the project. One's being is not therefore fixed toward one *philia* only, but it forms and reforms as time continues. The partnership becomes a meaningful part of the working and studying lives of the partners even though the power dynamics change. Aspects of the partnership may come into tension—utility-based motivations with virtue-based benefits, for example. Awareness of the typology can help participants understand the nature of such tensions and to find a way to talk about them.

The positing of a typology does not force students and staff into particular ways of being. The ways of being are likely to already be established or the intention for the *philia* of the partnership already be present, although not verbalized. Establishing a clear understanding and explanation of the *philia* in a partnership, and what the student hopes the partnership would contribute to their being as a student, is crucial. A lack of such clarity can stifle or obscure the partnership's potential for contributing to the student's flourishing and becoming in the university. This is not say that one's notion of the flourishing life might sit within the neoliberal context readily, rather it is that student-staff partnership, informed by critical thinking through the typology, can help in questioning features of the neoliberal agenda. For example, if partners take time to reflect on the focus of the partnership that evokes *philia* and conclude that the partnership is only a utility-based "tick-box" exercise, that process may yet stimulate discussion of exactly what contribution the partnership makes to being a student—and perhaps how its focus might be widened to benefit the student's flourishing and becoming.

Similarly, if there is an opportunity to engage in a creative partnership but there are not funds available to pay the student, again, there is a good opportunity, by engaging with the typology, to enable the student to think about the short-term and long-term disadvantages and benefits. Time to reflect and to question the *philia* of the partnership, ensuring that the partnership is authentic, having a clear ethos, that there is trust,⁶¹ and it is not being

⁶¹ Cook-Sather, Bovill, and Felten, *Engaging Students*.

usurped for other ends is what the typology can facilitate for the student. In not understanding, and not having the opportunity to understand, the ethical motivation for the partnership, it is unlikely that anything but a *post hoc* justification could be given for how the partnership contributes to the being and becoming of the student.

Student Being and Probaireisis

Being a student is complex. It involves, *inter alia*, excitement, joys, worries, changing identities, new experiences, new relationships, learning discipline(s) and practices, friendships, and navigating work-life and home-life. Being a student is made all the more challenging in a policy and practice context that often happens *to* students, instead of *with* them. Yet the university presently, and the future university, should require students to develop a sense of the kind of life they wish to lead. For us, the prime role of the university is to help each student to become a person who works in their own way towards their own conception of the flourishing life. Essential to this is the development of reason in such a way that enables the student to make choices characterized by *probaireisis*—that is, decision making that embraces a concern with ethics and becomes a habit of thinking embedded in the person’s character.

In pursuing their view of the good life—which will be partly made up of their own dreams and ideals—it is important to take stock and think about the importance of the flourishing life in being and becoming a student. Whilst competitive markets are at work in the fabric and administration of the present idea of the university, and likely to be in the future idea of the university, there remains a place for more noble aims: the pursuit of truth and the education of reason that is used to interrogate existing ideas and develop new thinking. Other modes of pedagogic relationship may lend themselves to mystifying and dehumanising the student, e.g. the student *as* consumer⁶² and the student *as* object.⁶³ However, we would argue that the kind of interaction required for engaging in any form of partnership ought to encourage and facilitate students making decisions characterized by *probaireisis*—making choices informed by critical reasoning that includes giving attention to ethical issues. This might be a concern for university administrators who are looking

⁶² Mike Neary and Joss Winn, “The Student as Producer: Reinventing the Student Experience in Higher Education”, in *The Future of Higher Education: Policy, Pedagogy and the Student Experience*, ed. Les Bell, Mike Neary, and Howard Stevenson (London: Bloomsbury, 2009), 192–210.

⁶³ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (London: Penguin, 1970).

for “quick wins” for large cultural problems or financial issues; however, the authentic use of the typology requires open and honest discussions in the creation and continuation of any form of partnership. In fact, discussion of openness and honesty moves us to an important notion of the university.

Concerns about threats to the idea of the university as an institution pursuing truth and the education of reason are long-standing. Davidson’s observation that ‘An institution perishes when it abandons the principles on which it was founded and built’,⁶⁴ resonates with much of current literature, just over one-hundred years later, on the undermining and destruction of higher education within democratic societies.⁶⁵ We are not suggesting that the typology of partnership is going to directly counter the neoliberal agenda, but it will, in Aristotelean style, support reasoned reflection on, and criticism of, the role that partnership is, ought, or ought not to, play a part of that culture. It may help in distinguishing from other partnerships those that promote—whether wittingly or unwittingly—the consumerist model of higher education and which hijack the more noble aims of partnership.⁶⁶ There are, as outlined above, certain functions within the typology that are likely to raise awareness of certain hijacking behaviours and should therefore enable the student to question whether they want to participate in such a partnership.

Conclusion

This article argues that it is unethical to engage in a partnership and not have an understanding of the purpose of that partnership that is intended to engage the commitment of partners. If an institution’s leaders suggest that partnership working will be the *modus operandi* for the institution, clarity is required about the definition of “partnership” at work and what that definition ethically entails. If a student is unaware of this framing of the relationship, it cannot, in our view, be called a partnership, as it does not meet the basic requirements of the student having a reasonable understanding of the *philia* central to that partnership. It is knowledge, reason and morality together that enable the student to formulate and strive toward their conception of

⁶⁴ Thomas Davidson, *Aristotle and Ancient Educational Ideals* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1892), 159.

⁶⁵ David Watson, *The Question of Conscience: Higher Education and Personal Responsibility* (London: IOE Press, 2014).

Stefan Collini, *What Are Universities For?* (London: Penguin, 2012).

Martha C. Nussbaum, *Not For Profit: Why Democracy Needs to the Humanities* (Princeton: University Press, 2010).

⁶⁶ Healy and Healey, “It Depends”.

the flourishing life. Clarity and *prohairesis* - choice-making characterized by critical reasoning that embraces ethical issues - are essential as the nature of higher education and the expectations of students and staff are changing.

This article has proposed a typology of partnerships: utility-based, pleasure-based, virtue-based and creative-based. The intention behind the development of this typology is to help in sustaining an ideal that students be supported in the pursuit of truth and reason, not only within their disciplinary practice, but within the relationships that are central to their practice and the wider practices of the university that may sit outside of their disciplines or schools. It would be bold for an institution to suggest that it does not wish its students, or staff, to seek truth and reason although we know that this view is rather contested in some notions of the modern, and likely future university.⁶⁷ Student becoming is a central feature of the university, but what that becoming looks like is, in this reading of an Aristotelean position, contingent on relationships and their *philia*. We posit the typology as a way of developing critical thinking toward this amorphous and pervasive concept of student-staff partnership and its practice.

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⁶⁷ Nicholas Maxwell, "The Scandal of the Irrationality of Academia", *Philosophy and Theory in Higher Education* 11, no. 1 (2019): 105–128.

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