

UNITED WISDOM

Relationships: how a shared space grows between “I” and “we”

Relationships and Shared Life

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Epigraph

> *The superior man is affable, but not adulatory*

Confucius, Analects XIII.23. The clause before the semicolon, in James Legge’s English translation. The complete saying distinguishes ethical ways of relating; it does not establish a psychological personality type.

What this article is about

When people say “we,” they may mean friendship, family, shared work, a temporary agreement, or a community. Each has its own history, conditions of participation, and limits to what can be expected. Closeness leaves these distinctions relevant: they help us understand which undertaking is genuinely shared, which decision remains personal, and what still needs agreement. This article offers an introductory map of relationships through reciprocity, difference, dependence, trust, and common rules. We turn to selected passages from Aristotle on friendship, Confucian sayings about support, and John Stuart Mill’s philosophy of social liberty. Their foundations differ, so comparison will help clarify questions rather than declare every tradition a single theory. An imagined story about two friends shows how expectations change when a pleasant meeting becomes a shared undertaking. The practical section proposes observing one agreement while preserving each participant’s own response and limits.

I. What do we include in “we”?

Consider an imagined story. Katya and Dima have been friends for several years and decide to arrange a small gathering for people they know. Previously, they met when it suited them both. Now there is a date, invitations, expenses, and other people relying on the outcome. Dima continues to see the preparation as an optional extension of friendly conversation. Katya sees it as an undertaking they have accepted together. Before any dispute about their character, the meaning of their agreement has already diverged.

It helps to distinguish their relationship, the particular activity they are doing together, and the terms of participation. The relationship may matter before and after the project. The activity has a particular outcome. Its terms concern time, responsibilities, and the possibility of changing a decision. When these three levels merge, a request to confirm a deadline can

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become a demand to prove friendship, while declining one task can seem to reject the entire relationship.

“We” becomes more informative when we can identify its level. “We are friends,” “we are organizing a gathering,” and “we agreed to divide the expenses” describe different things. The first does not automatically determine the second, and the second does not contain every condition of the third. Recognizing the distinctions lets someone understand their consent, notice consequences for another person, and see where clarification is needed.

This need not impoverish the relationship. It creates room for specific action. People can preserve their friendship while revising a role, or finish a project without promising continued contact. Earlier promises still call for consideration on their own scale. The shared space consists of what the participants actually make common, while its further boundaries remain open to discussion.

II. Goodwill and a response from the other side

In Nicomachean Ethics VIII.2, Aristotle distinguishes goodwill from friendship. Someone can wish another person well without that person knowing it. Friendship, in his account, involves reciprocal goodwill and awareness of it on both sides. This philosophical distinction directs attention to the difference between one’s own feeling, an expected response, and an existing relationship.

Katya may have put considerable care into preparing the gathering. The size of her effort does not tell her how Dima understood the undertaking. Perhaps he agreed to help with only one invitation. Perhaps he promised more, but his circumstances then changed. The first question concerns the agreement known to both. Assessment becomes more precise when it rests on what was said and done rather than a picture of how care must always be answered.

Reciprocity here need not require identical acts. One person has time, another knows how to find a venue, and a third can introduce participants. Different contributions can be recognized when people understand what is expected and accepted. Otherwise, even a generous gesture can carry an undisclosed obligation: someone offers a gift, then discovers that they expected the recipient to make a concession in return.

Aristotle’s criterion belongs to his account of friendship, rather than to every relationship. Raising a child, helping a stranger briefly, and carrying out a professional obligation have different conditions. Still, the question of a response is useful in conversation: does the other person know my expectation, have I received an answer, and does that answer match what I already regard as agreed? Personal goodwill can retain its value while leaving another person’s decision genuinely theirs.

III. A relationship can have several grounds

In VIII.3, Aristotle discusses friendships grounded in utility, pleasure, and good character. His ethical ideal of friendship has its own demanding premises. For this introductory map, the useful distinction is between grounds of connection: the convenience of a common undertaking, enjoyment of company, and concern for a particular person's good are different matters.

Katya and Dima may understand each other well in conversation yet find it difficult to divide responsibilities. That difference alone does not invalidate years of contact. It shows that earlier experience supported one aspect of their connection. The shared project added another condition: coordinating actions. At this transition, a new expectation can be named rather than treated as something that was always implicit.

Several grounds can coexist. People enjoy talking, help one another, and value each other's qualities. When circumstances change, one component may weaken while another remains. Finishing a job can remove the daily reason to meet while leaving gratitude and interest. Or conversation may become less enjoyable while a commitment to finish an undertaking still stands.

This approach makes several questions available: what connects us now, what connected us before, and which expectation emerged after a change? The answer need not become a single description of the whole relationship. When usefulness matters, it can be discussed openly. When the meeting itself matters, it does not need a defense based on productivity. A map of the grounds of connection preserves complexity and helps prevent one disappointment from being extended hastily to the relationship's entire history.

IV. From a disposition to shared activity

In VIII.5, Aristotle distinguishes a disposition from activity. People can remain well disposed toward each other at a distance, even when living together is no longer their daily activity. His account connects friendship with how people live, as well as what they declare they feel. In our imagined example, the distinction draws attention to available forms of participation.

Katya and Dima have considered their connection steady. Preparing the gathering nevertheless requires new actions: confirming a time, passing on information, and checking expenses. Statements about the value of friendship may be sincere and still leave those tasks unresolved. The undertaking calls for clarity about the action each person is prepared to carry out, its timing, and its limits.

Sometimes a participant gives a very broad assurance: "You can always count on me." It expresses goodwill but makes a particular expectation harder to examine. A more definite

promise lets people see an outcome and revise the division of work. This does not require turning every meeting into an arrangement governed by reports. The appropriate detail depends on the undertaking and the consequences of misunderstanding.

There is also room for ordinary time together without a planned result. Conversation, a walk, or quiet presence can be what people choose to share. Their value need not be measured in completed tasks. The question is which form of participation is being offered: solving a problem, exchanging thoughts, doing something useful, or being present. Clarification helps one person avoid offering an organizational solution to a request for company, while the other avoids mistaking an enjoyable conversation for work already completed.

V. Difference remains within the shared space

A common undertaking does not require its participants to share every preference. Katya wants the gathering to welcome new people; Dima prefers a familiar circle. If they have agreed on a particular format, their personal preferences still exist. Their agreed action sets the arrangement for this gathering without describing their whole lives.

In the first chapter of On Liberty, Mill addresses social liberty: the limits of power that society may legitimately exercise over an individual. This differs from Aristotle’s question about good friendship. It nevertheless helps identify which part of an undertaking affects others and which belongs to personal tastes and pursuits. Mill’s grounding concerns utility and development; his historical restrictions do not become contemporary norms here.

In our story, the disagreement can be discussed around the format of a particular gathering. That makes the subject a shared decision. A demand that Dima change all his habits to confirm the right attitude would reach beyond the original undertaking. Participating in one activity does not already transfer authority over every personal choice to someone else. Distinguishing the scope keeps the disagreement from expanding unnoticed.

Personal choices can also affect shared work. If Dima decides against inviting people he does not know, Katya needs to hear this before the plan depends on his participation. Individual space and the space of coordination exist alongside each other. The former preserves a person’s judgment; the latter lets others take their action into account. The relationship becomes clearer when the boundaries of both can be named and, where necessary, revised.

VI. Affability leaves room for disagreement

In the selected English version of Analects XIII.23, James Legge renders a distinction between affability and flattery. The complete saying concerns a Confucian ethical ideal. It does not invite an automatic division of acquaintances into worthy and unworthy people. For our comparison, the relevant point is that a friendly manner can differ from an effort to confirm every position a companion takes.

If Katya says Dima’s proposed deadline will not work, her answer concerns the deadline. She can preserve regard for him in how she responds: explain what the common plan depends on, ask about an available alternative, and recognize that declining is possible. None of this requires accepting the original proposal. Affability concerns the treatment of the person, while agreement concerns a particular decision.

Flattery would be another possibility in this example. Katya declares the option excellent to avoid an awkward discussion, then quietly relies on a different outcome. What she says no longer matches the action she expects. Yet labeling every gentle answer flattery would also be inaccurate. Someone may choose careful words because the question is complicated, information is incomplete, or the relationship matters.

The connection between an answer and an actual decision is therefore worth examining. What was accepted? What remains open? Can the other person understand the consequences of my reply? Friendly clarity helps distinguish disagreement about a matter from a judgment about a person. It leaves room for the conversation to continue, without promising that every disagreement will be received pleasantly.

VII. Advice has a limit, participation has a form

Analects XII.23 concerns friendly admonition: offer faithful, skillful guidance, and stop when further progress is not possible. In On Liberty IV, on different grounds, Mill distinguishes concern for another’s good, persuasion, and compelling an adult in matters that concern that person. Comparison raises a question about forms of participation: proposing, discussing, agreeing, or deciding on someone else’s behalf.

Dima may think Katya needs a quieter format for the gathering. He can suggest an option and explain its advantages. If the decision concerns her personal part of the undertaking, repetition does not turn his advice into an agreed rule. To continue participating, he can clarify what action is requested of him and whether a common decision is actually under discussion.

Stopping the advice does not have to end the relationship. Someone can stop trying to persuade, offer a different kind of help, or state a limit to their participation. Dima might be willing to prepare the room while declining to invite people under the chosen format. That

gives the plan a real possibility of revision. Katya gains information and can choose another division of work.

An existing shared commitment also does not disappear because someone calls every request interference. A promise to send a guest list concerns other people. The boundary of advice must therefore be considered together with the subject of agreement. Friendly concern, a personal decision, and responsibility for an undertaking form several lines within a relationship. They can be discussed separately, without expecting one line to settle every other question.

VIII. Dependence can be specific

Katya depends on receiving the guest list in time. Dima depends on Katya communicating the venue’s cost. This dependence arises from the arrangement of an undertaking. It does not automatically describe either person’s independence across their whole life. Naming the dependence precisely makes opportunities to change its conditions clearer.

A resource, information, and an action can be distinguished. Someone may need access to a room, an answer about timing, or a completed part of the work. A participant can offer one kind of support while being unable to provide another. A specific request makes this visible before reaching a general conclusion that someone either supports completely or does not support at all.

The scale of consequences also matters. A day’s delay may be acceptable for an optional conversation and significant for an invitation already sent. No single measure covers all relationships. The measure depends on the undertaking, circumstances known to participants, and the people affected by delay. A shared history can explain the request’s importance without replacing examination of its actual content.

An introductory map must also include relationships where contributions are not expected to be equal. In an imagined family, an adult helps a child; in another situation, a person temporarily needs help with an ordinary task. A response may take a different form or be unavailable for now. Care need not be justified by an immediate service in return. The helper nevertheless has capacities, other commitments, and a question about distributing the burden. Roles and needs therefore require clarification. The friendly-project example does not automatically determine upbringing or care; “we” does not already specify equality, responsibility, or access to decisions.

Changing a dependence is itself a question. People might postpone the gathering, reduce its size, find another resource, or abandon part of the idea. These options can cost time and effort and may not be equivalent. Discussing them returns attention to the undertaking’s arrangement. A demand to become generally reliable becomes a question about which condition is needed now and how the participants will address it.

IX. Common rules support expectations

In On Liberty IV, Mill connects social life with certain conduct toward others, including protection of significant interests and a fair share of common burdens. His argument about social obligations is broader than our small project. It offers grounds for asking what makes participants' expectations understandable and why shared action calls for mutual consideration.

For Katya and Dima, one rule might be a deadline after which changes are communicated to both. A deadline alone does not establish that the division of work is fair. It must be considered alongside participants' capacities and commitments. It does, however, make visible the point where a personal change begins to affect the common plan.

Rules can be explicit or presumed. A habit of replying quickly may never have been discussed; repeated experiences made it expected. A new circumstance reveals that the expectation needs clarification. This need not mean anyone has been deceptive. The questions are whether a habit became a requirement, who knew, and whether revision is possible.

Agreement on a rule and response to its breach can also be distinguished. First, people clarify what action was required; then they consider circumstances, consequences, and repair. An explanation can help make sense of what happened without replacing repair itself. A common rule gains meaning through its relation to an actual undertaking, as well as any claimed authority to judge another participant. Within that space, both fulfilling and changing the rule can be discussed.

X. Trust has a subject and a history

In Ethics VIII.3, Aristotle's account of good friendship requires time and familiarity. The wish for connection can arise quickly, while knowledge of another person develops differently. Analects XIII.25 distinguishes employing people according to their abilities from expecting everyone to be capable of everything. These are different historical arguments; together they help limit an excessively broad expectation of trust.

Katya knows Dima is attentive in personal conversation. This knowledge comes from their contact. She does not yet know whether managing an organizational list suits him. A new kind of reliance needs its own basis: an understandable task, agreement, and experience of carrying it out. Earlier closeness may make the discussion easier without already disclosing every capability.

Trust also need not amount to continuous testing. When every encounter becomes an examination, participants alter the relationship itself. A more proportionate question concerns its subject: what am I relying on now, and why do I regard that reliance as grounded?

Sometimes the basis is sufficient, sometimes clarification is needed, and sometimes the question stays open. Uncertainty can be named without a final label for the person.

The history of an unfulfilled promise also permits specific examination. Which promise was not kept? Has this particular event recurred? What was communicated afterward? Did conditions change? Answers can inform a decision to retain the undertaking’s scope, reduce it, or offer another form of participation. A current decision about trust stays connected to what is entrusted, while the other person’s whole character does not become the verdict of one episode.

XI. A changed relationship keeps its past

Aristotle observes that relationships grounded in usefulness or pleasure can change as their grounds change. In our example, organizing the gathering ends. Daily messages become unnecessary, and the shared schedule disappears. Katya and Dima might return to their former rhythm, choose another, or discover that they now want fewer shared undertakings.

The absence of earlier activity does not retroactively settle whether past meetings mattered. Their significance can be recognized together with the change. Gratitude for what was done need not require endless repetition of the same form of relationship. Equally, wishing to end collaboration does not automatically settle existing promises concerning expenses, borrowed things, or information others are expecting.

Mill’s distinction between personal matters and affected interests helps name this boundary. A person chooses future participation, while consequences of completed joint actions are considered separately. Someone can decline the next gathering and still complete the accounts for the present one. This makes room to discuss the future without requiring the entire history of the relationship to be rewritten.

Change can remain difficult even when its terms are clear. A philosophical map does not promise to remove feelings or secure mutual agreement. It helps identify what has changed and what action is now needed. The relationship’s importance can also be expressed through how its change is handled: recognizing its history, communicating a choice, completing a specific obligation, and leaving the other person room for their own response.

XII. The space between people stays open

“I” and “we” name two perspectives on participation. From the first, someone sees their intention, limits, and personal choice. From the second, they notice a shared outcome, interdependent actions, and consequences for others. Neither perspective alone supplies the whole picture. Shared space develops when participants can bring them into relation within a particular undertaking.

Katya and Dima’s imagined story could continue in several ways. They clarify their roles and hold the gathering. Or they reduce its scale. Or they abandon the project while preserving their friendship. No outcome becomes right through its name alone. What matters is how consent, capacities, consequences, and earlier promises were considered.

Aristotelian reciprocity and shared activity, Confucian support without required flattery, and Mill’s attention to individual concerns and common interests offer different grounds for that consideration. Keeping their differences makes the comparison informative. They do not prove one universal formula for relationships, but they help frame clearer questions about what actually connects people.

A relationship can include common action alongside different views, disagreement alongside goodwill, and a changed form alongside a recognized history. Refusal and ending participation are also possible. This introductory map does not decide which connection a person should preserve. It helps identify the decision’s subject: what am I offering, what is the other person answering, which “we” already exists, and which conditions still require conversation? Each person’s distinctness can then become part of an understandable shared space.

What this means in practice

Choose one modest agreement you actually want to examine. It might concern arranging a meeting, dividing a household task, or working together. You do not have to begin with your most difficult relationship or use this observation to explain your entire life.

Write down the proposal you believe both parties accepted. Separate the other person’s known answer from your assumption about it. If precise conditions are unknown, that is already useful information: a question awaiting clarification is not yet a broken promise.

Name three things: what you value in the connection itself, which action is currently shared, and the outcome expected from that action. Then describe your available contribution and its limit. Try to make the action, time, or resource understandable without requiring someone to guess your attitude toward them.

Examine one disagreement. Does it concern a preference, a way of carrying out the task, a common rule, or consent not yet obtained? Each possibility creates a different subject for conversation. You can ask about capacity, propose another deadline, change a role, or recognize a refusal. Choose a question whose answer would actually help the next action.

After the conversation, examine what became known. An agreement may have emerged, different capacities may have become clear, or the decision may remain open. Do not assign the conversation a promised result in advance. Keep the fact of the answer, your experience of it, and your further choice distinct.

This sequence is the writers' proposed form of observation, developed from the distinctions discussed. It is neither a diagnosis nor an exercise with an experimentally established effect. Its practical value lies in making one connection between personal decision and common undertaking discussable, while allowing a person to remain more than a final description.

Key quotation

> *for a wish for friendship may arise quickly, but friendship does not.*

Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics VIII.3, W. D. Ross's English translation. The exact sentence-final clause. Its context concerns time, acquaintance, and friendship between people of good character; it sets no deadline that can be assigned to every relationship.

Connections between traditions

No.	Two anchors	What the comparison clarifies	Boundary
1	Aristotle, VIII.2: recognized reciprocal goodwill; Mill, I: voluntary, undeceived adult participation	Personal goodwill and an agreed response differ; a proposal still calls for participation from the other side	Friendship and legitimate social liberty have different grounds
2	Aristotle, VIII.5: disposition and shared activity; Mill, IV: common expectations and individual initiative	Connection, task, and terms of participation can be discussed separately	A temporary project is not Aristotle’s shared virtuous life
3	Aristotle, VIII.3–4: enjoyment of company and a friend’s good; Analects XIII.23: affability and flattery	Support allows disagreement about a particular question	Ethical ideals do not become a psychological classification of companions
4	Analects XII.23: a limit to friendly admonition; Mill, IV: persuasion and compulsion	Advice can stop while the form of further participation is clarified	Personal matters and an existing common commitment require separate consideration
5	Aristotle, VIII.3: changing grounds of connection; Mill, IV: others’ interests and responsibility	Ending an earlier form preserves its history without automatically settling promises	Particular contemporary obligations need their own context
6	Aristotle, VIII.3: time and familiarity; Analects XIII.25: abilities in a particular area	Trust has a subject; one form of experience does not reveal every capability	Historical reasoning about employing people is not a contemporary model of partnership

Primary sources

1. Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, Book VIII. W. D. Ross’s English translation. Selected chapters VIII.1–5 were read in full; the opening of VIII.6 was consulted without being treated as a complete chapter. This is philosophical argument about friendship, not contemporary empirical research. The Greek text was not collated.

2. The Analects of Confucius. James Legge’s English translation, verified against the edition metadata. Selected sayings XII.2, XII.23–24, XIII.23–25 and the surrounding passages specified in the research notes were read. Historical ethical and political teaching; the Chinese text was not collated.

3. John Stuart Mill, On Liberty. Original English. Adopted passages concern the definition of social liberty, voluntary participation and association in I, and the opening of IV together with advice, common expectations, and choosing company. Complete chapters and the entire work are not claimed as read. The editor’s introduction is distinguished from Mill’s text; historical colonial restrictions are not adopted as this article’s norms.

The Russian quotations are our translations of the named English versions. Comparisons and the imagined story are original editorial work.

Tags

relationships, reciprocity, friendship, communication, individuality, shared life, common undertaking, consent, goodwill, differences, dependence, trust, expectations, promises, responsibility, support, advice, disagreement, personal choice, common rules, time, relationship history, Aristotle, Confucius, John Stuart Mill, philosophy, ethics, primary sources, intercultural dialogue, United Wisdom

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