

Tracing Aristotelian Friendship Dynamics in John le Carré's *Agent Running in the Field*

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ABSTRACT

This research explores the ethical and sociological dimensions of human connection by analyzing the types and impacts of friendship in John le Carré's *Agent Running in the Field*. Utilizing Lorraine Smith Pangle's interpretation of Aristotelian friendship and a Moral & Humanistic extrinsic approach, this qualitative study investigates how personal bonds navigate political polarization and institutional power dynamics. The findings indicate that the relationship between the main characters, Nat and Ed, transitions from a *friendship of pleasure*, facilitated by recreational badminton, to a *friendship of virtue*, grounded in shared political convictions against a backdrop of societal indifference. This virtuous bond profoundly impacts both individuals: it rescues Ed from his ideological isolation and rigid social boundaries, while triggering a moral crisis for Nat that destabilizes his professional allegiance to MI6. By ultimately choosing to protect his friend over obeying state directives, Nat's actions subvert the traditional expectations of the intelligence service. The study concludes that the novel distinctly portrays Western male friendship as an individualized sanctuary and a trans-political form of resistance. By celebrating interpersonal differences and shared moral virtues, the narrative demonstrates that personal loyalty possesses the ethical agency to challenge and transcend institutional mandates.

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INTRODUCTION

Friendship is a relationship of mutual affection between people that is above "acquaintance" or an "association", which, according to Lydia Denworth (2020), is not only important to a person's spirit and mental health, but even critical to their physical and emotional well-being. Friendship, as Pangle's (2002) idea, is a deep relational and interpersonal bond, recognized by philosophers not merely as a form of affection, but as a fundamental moral virtue (Hossain, 2023). In philosophical discourse, the existence of a friend is the very essence of humanity itself. Elechi (2018) argues that friendship is an absolute necessity for human existence because this relationship fosters both virtue and happiness; a true friend is viewed as an *alter ipsa* or "other self," where the relationship is maintained for the sake of friendship itself and not as a tool of exploitation for selfish ends. This conception is deeply rooted in Aristotelian thought, which places the highest form of friendship as a bond between virtuous individuals who share their lives through conversation and shared activities (Badhwar & Dadlez, 2018). Thus, friendship is meaningful as an ethical commitment in which the well-being of others becomes the primary goal.

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Beyond emotion and ethics, the meaning of friendship is also built upon aesthetic appreciation and an orientation toward the common good. Refsum (2025) argues that friendship fundamentally depends on mutual appreciation for shared experiences, as well as a strong attraction to the unique characteristics of the friend. It is through these shared experiences that friendship possesses the power to transcend the boundaries of formal justice, giving it an essential “trans-political” nature for building solidarity, even within societies that tend to be self-centered (Hossain, 2023). Ultimately, whether within the realm of personal relationships or broader institutional associations, friendship is always centered on the values of the common good that unite its participants (Brennan, 2023). This multidimensional understanding of friendship makes it a crucial foundation for analyzing dynamics, loyalty, and individual identity within both literary narratives and real life.

Agent Running in the Field is a 2019 novel by a British writer John le Carré, who was well known for his writings, fiction and non-fiction, about espionage. The novel follows Nathaniel shortened to Nat, a 47-year-old British intelligence agent, who is approaching the end of his career with MI6. One day, a man named Ed visits a badminton club Nat is a regular in looking for a challenge, which Nat reciprocate, and eventually become friends with each other. However, Ed’s actions put Nat in hot water, and now he must choose to turn Ed in or turn him into a spy.

Research on friendship in literary works, particularly in the spy fiction genre, holds significant importance because it represents the intersection between personal relationships and global political dynamics. Blistène and Van Puyvelde (2022) confirm that John le Carré’s works are crucial as a lens for studying intelligence activities and international affairs, given that his narratives blur the line between fact and fiction and offer a universal perspective on the ethics of intelligence. Furthermore, friendship is recognized by philosophers as a valuable moral virtue; Hossain (2023) notes that in the Aristotelian conception, friendship transcends legal justice and possesses a trans-political nature that reveals a hermeneutics of solidarity within a postmodern society that tends to be self-centered. In the context of modern espionage narratives, analyzing how secret agents negotiate their personal “virtues” within state structures becomes crucial, as Refsum (2025) argues regarding the politics of friendship, this allows us to rethink political discourse and moral commitment through the nuances of complex and unstable interpersonal bonds. Therefore, examining *Agent Running in the Field* is not about dissecting character relationships, but about dissecting how universal human values endure within a political landscape rife with indifference.

The importance of analyzing Aristotelian types of friendship in this novel is also supported by their relevance to character development and ethical conflicts. Kristjánsson (2022) emphasizes the need to restore the position of “friendship for virtue” in contemporary ethical discourse, not merely as an ideal concept, but by realistically examining why even the best friendships can crumble or trigger moral dilemmas. This aligns with Vakirtzis’s (2018) findings, who argues that within the Aristotelian framework, the factor of pleasure derived from virtuous activities serves as the primary motivation giving rise to variations in friendship among moral agents, challenging the view that Aristotelian friendship is monotonous. Previous literary studies have demonstrated the flexibility of this theory, ranging from classical tales such as *Panchatantra* (Banerjee, 2023) to popular modern literature such as *The Death Cure* (Septian & Pardi, 2022) and *The Body* (Muanah & Supsiadji, 2018), all of which confirm that friendships of utility, pleasure, and virtue directly shape the protagonists’ quality of life and moral compass. By applying the Aristotelian framework to

the interactions between Nat and Ed, this study fills a gap by demonstrating how shared ideological views –not merely the utility of work– creates a “virtue-based friendship” that actually destabilizes their professional compliance, proving that friendship focused on the common good can even inform our understanding of political justice (Brennan, 2023).

This research is focusing on the impact of the friendship has on the two main characters’ lives, from the shifting of opinions from a friend’s influence to the decision to choose between friend or other things like job security or family, and it is shown through solving the research’s problem statements; what are the types of friendship shown in *Agent Running in the Field* according to Lorraine Smith Pangle’s interpretation of Aristotle’s theory of friendship, and how said friendships affecting Nat and Ed’s lives.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research design using non-numerical data (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998) combined with the extrinsic Moral & Humanistic approach. This approach, as conceptualized by T.M. Scanlon (1998), is highly relevant and valuable for analyzing literary elements as a means of exploring human nature and moral dilemmas. In the context of espionage narratives, this method allows researchers to look beyond political intrigue and focus on the psychological complexities of inter-agent relationships. Nevertheless, a major limitation of this qualitative method is its vulnerability to interpretive subjectivity in text analysis. In order to mitigate this, Aristotle’s theoretical framework of friendship –which categorizes friendship into utility, pleasure, and virtue– based on Lorraine Smith Pangle’s (2002) interpretation, is applied as a strict conceptual parameter to ensure the objectivity of the analysis.

The primary data in this study consists of literary artifacts, specifically the novel *Agent Running in the Field* by John le Carré, with a specific focus on textual units such as narrative, dialogue, and internal monologue that represent the interactions of the main characters (Nat and Ed). Since this is a qualitative literary study, the primary instrument is the researcher themselves (human instrument), who acts as both a critical observer and an interpreter of the text. As a measure and operational guide, this study employs an auxiliary instrument in the form of a thematic coding matrix to map specific indicators of the three types of Aristotelian friendship and assess their impact on the characters’ lives.

Data collection procedures were conducted systematically through the technique of close reading, performed repeatedly on the entire text of the novel. This phase began by identifying text sections relevant to the research question, followed by extracting key quotations that demonstrate the formation and escalation of the friendship between Nat and Ed. Data integrity and the validity of findings were ensured through strict contextualization; no quotation was taken out of its narrative context. Additionally, a cross-validation process was conducted by continuously referring back to the theoretical literature of Pangle (2002) and Scanlon (1998) during data collection to prevent confirmation bias.

In the final stage, the collected data was analyzed using a descriptive thematic analysis method under the Moral & Humanistic approach. First, the data was categorized into Aristotelian friendship classes to determine the characteristics of Nat and Ed’s relationship (such as the shift from pleasure-based friendship to virtue-based friendship due to shared ideology). Second, the texts were evaluated in depth to uncover the moral implications and causalities of these relationships regarding the characters’ lives –specifically how friendship triggers conflicts of loyalty between national duty and personal values. Final conclusions

were drawn based on a synthesis of textual evidence and philosophical review, providing a comprehensive understanding of the essence of friendship amidst the tensions of the intelligence world.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

The Portrayal of Friendship in John le Carré's Agent Running in the Field

Based on an in-depth analysis of John le Carré's novel *Agent Running in the Field* using Lorraine Smith Pangle's (2002) interpretive framework of Aristotle's theory of friendship, this study identifies the evolutionary trajectory of the relationship between the characters Nat and Ed, which manifests in two primary types of friendship: friendship of pleasure and friendship of virtue. Specifically, friendship of pleasure is clearly portrayed in the early phase of their relationship, which is built on a foundation of competitive recreation; where Nat and Ed find mutual satisfaction, challenge, and enjoyment through the intensity of their badminton matches as well as their casual post-match interactions at the club bar. However, this finding also reveals that the relationship is not static but undergoes a significant deepening into a friendship of virtue as the two begin to find common ground on moral values and strong ideological beliefs, particularly regarding contemporary political issues such as Brexit and the leadership of Donald Trump. In this virtuous phase, their friendship transcends a mere shared hobby; the bond transforms into a space of validation for Ed, a young man previously isolated due to the radicalism of his views, and sparks Nat's admiration for Ed's integrity and perseverance, which remind her of her own daughter, Steff. Mapping these two typologies is crucial, as it is this transition from a friendship based on pleasure to one rooted in ideological virtue that ultimately serves as the catalyst for the moral conflicts and shifts in loyalty experienced by the two main characters throughout the narrative.

Friendship of Pleasure in John le Carré's Agent Running in the Field

In the context of a friendship of pleasure, Nat and Ed's relationship did not emerge from a vacuum, but was initiated through an intense physical activity: a badminton match. When Ed challenged Nat and they played for the first time, Nat immediately realized that they were both equally skilled – a competitive dynamic he hadn't felt in a long time (Carré, 2019, p. 57). This sporting activity was not only a recreational routine but also the primary medium facilitating their initial attraction to one another. This view is consistent with Refsum's (2025) perspective, which emphasizes that friendship fundamentally depends on mutual appreciation of shared experiences – in this case, the presence of a third entity in the form of an object of interest or a concrete situation like a badminton match. The match created a bonding atmosphere between them even before any intellectual conversation took place.

Furthermore, the pleasure Nat derives from the match possesses a deep psychological dimension that is essential to her character. As an intelligence agent whose life is steeped in secrecy, finding someone who can provide a purely competitive challenge on the court offers Nat a form of emotional release. Within an Aristotelian framework, pleasure is not only a shallow affective sensation, but also a value judgment that accompanies virtuous activity (Vakirtzis, 2018). Vakirtzis (2018) further argues that the pleasure obtained from these shared activities acts as a key motivational factor and primary attraction in choosing whom to

befriend. For Nat, the narrative that he views Ed as an exciting individual demonstrates that pleasure acts as an initial magnet that breaks the monotony of the agent's life.

This pleasure-based interaction then extends beyond the badminton court, manifesting in their habit of spending time together at a club bar drinking ale while chatting. It is in this casual setting that Nat and Ed begin to explore each other's personalities without overwhelming expectations, purely because they enjoy each other's company. This phase is highly representative of the essence of friendship of pleasure, where the primary focus of the relationship is the emotional comfort of the moment. According to Septian and Pardi (2022), a friendship of pleasure plays a crucial role in bringing happiness into the protagonist's life, providing a sense of comfort that ultimately helps shape the individual into a better and more relaxed person. The relaxed atmosphere of the bar loosens Ed's usually rigid and closed-off defenses, while providing Nat with a space to unwind.

It is important to emphasize that the "friendship of pleasure" phase in this novel is not only a narrative accessory, but also an absolute essential foundation before their relationship transforms into something more morally and politically weighty. Without the foundation of enjoyment built through shared activities at the badminton club, it would be impossible for someone as defensive as Ed to open up to a stranger like Nat. These enjoyable interactions serve as a gateway to intellectual intimacy. This dynamic confirms the view of Badhwar and Dadlez (2018) that strong friendships are often formed by individuals who share their lives through a combination of joint activities and constant conversation. It is the pleasure gained from playing and chatting at the bar that gradually bridges the gap, fostering the trust needed to move toward the stage of friendship of virtue.

Friendship of Virtue in John le Carré's Agent Running in the Field

On one side, Ed is a very guarded and closed off individual due to his passion and zealotry over the current day politics, rendering him friendless before meeting Nat, due to how people often get exhausted or dismissive in such topics. It gets to the point that he warn Nat by telling him his opinion of Brexit and Donald Trump, and that if Nat disagrees with it, Ed will cut his losses and leaves. It was only after Ed discovers Nat's opinion over the political topics he is passionate about did he starts to open up to Nat ,as shown in the following sentence:

"My point being that I would not wish to be sitting here with you under false pretense, given that I have admired your play, and you personally. Brexit is the most important decision facing Britain since 1939, in my opinion. People say 1945 but I'm not at all sure why, frankly. So all I'm asking is, do you agree with me? I know I'm over-earnest. I've been told. Plus a lot of people don't like me because I'm outspoken, which I am (Carré, 2019:66-67)".

The manifestation of the friendship of virtue in the novel is initially driven by Ed's rigid ideological boundaries and his profound need for moral alignment. Ed is portrayed as a highly guarded individual whose intense zealotry regarding contemporary political issues has socially isolated him, rendering him friendless prior to meeting Nat. Rather than seeking mere companionship, Ed demands ideological conformity, viewing shared political values as the absolute prerequisite for any meaningful connection. When he issues an ultimatum to Nat—explicitly stating that he will cut his losses and leave if Nat disagrees with his political stance—it reveals the fragility and desperation beneath his outspoken demeanor. The quotation, "*Brexit is the most important decision facing Britain... do you agree with me?*" (Carré, 2019: 66-67), is not merely a conversational prompt; it serves as a moral purity test. By interpreting this through a sociological lens, Ed's character reflects a specific representation

of Western male anxiety in a polarized era, where rigid political conviction becomes a defensive shield against an unpredictable society. It is only when Nat passes this ideological test that Ed feels secure enough to let his guard down, allowing their relationship to transcend the badminton court and enter the realm of virtue.

On the other side, Nat's friendship of pleasure slowly turns into friendship of virtue as he gets to know Ed as a person, as shown in the following retrospective quotation:

Then to add another ingredient to the mix, one that only now I am willing to admit to, although I believe it was present in me from our first improbable exchange. I am speaking of an awareness on my part that I was in presence of something rare in the life I had so far led, and particularly in such a young man: namely true conviction, driven not by motives of gain or envy or revenge or self-aggrandizement, but the real thing, take it or leave it. (Carré, 2019:65).

From the quotation, Nat's transition from a friendship of pleasure to a friendship of virtue is catalyzed by his profound recognition of Ed's moral authenticity. As a veteran intelligence agent entrenched in a cynical world of deception, manipulation, and shifting loyalties, Nat is deeply struck by Ed's uncorrupted idealism. His retrospective admission that he was in the presence of "*something rare... namely true conviction*" (Carré, 2019: 65) signifies a pivotal psychological shift. Nat interprets Ed's political passion not as an annoyance, but as a pure, selfless drive devoid of ulterior motives such as "gain or envy or revenge". This realization highlights a distinctive dynamic in male literary bonds: the older, disillusioned figure finding spiritual and moral renewal through the uncompromising integrity of a younger counterpart. Nat values Ed not just for his competitive company, but for the ethical anchor he provides in an otherwise murky professional landscape.

Nat even sees parallels between Steff, his daughter, and Ed in personality, way of seeing life, and how, later in the novel, their behavior changes as they end up in a relationship and engaged with their respective partners, as shown in the following internal monologue:

Sometimes it was as if someone else was talking out of him. His voice, which was a good one when it was just being itself, would go up an octave, hit a level and a stick there on one didactic note, not for long, but long enough for me to think: hullo, I know this register, and Steff's got one too. It's the one you can't argue with because it just rolls on as if you're not there, so best nod him along and wait till it's runs its course (Carré, 2019:69).

The depth of this virtuous bond is further solidified when Nat begins to unconsciously superimpose a paternal framework onto his relationship with Ed. Nat identifies striking parallels between Ed and his daughter, Steff, particularly in their stubborn, didactic ways of expressing their worldview and how finding love eventually mellows their tense personalities. Observing Ed's voice shift into a "register" that "*just rolls on as if you're not there*" (Carré, 2019: 69), Nat responds not with the defensiveness of a political opponent, but with the patient, nodding understanding of a parent. This internal monologue is crucial for the analysis because it recontextualizes the foundation of their friendship; Nat's affection for Ed is woven with a protective, familial instinct. This layer of interpretation demonstrates that their friendship of virtue is highly multidimensional. It is built not solely on shared political ideologies, but also on Nat's psychological projection of family dynamics onto Ed, creating a complex male bond that deeply anchors their loyalty to one another and complicates Nat's professional duties.

For Ed, he is a closed-off individual whose passion and opinions for politics has render him friendless due to being fed up with the topic, to the point that Nat is his first friend ever, and that is not before warning him of his strong political beliefs, which has driven people away from him before, and telling him that he's not afraid to pack up and leave if Nat is

disagree with it. This point can be considered enforced case for friendship of virtue, because Ed tells Nat that he won't be his friend unless he supports his political opinions.

For Nat, he is drawn to Ed as he sees him as a young man who has traits he considers rare in recent generation – stubborn defiance of one's opinion regardless of how others view them because of it, and that he shares many traits with Steff, Nat's daughter, who is just as strong-headed and defiant as Ed, and later becomes much more relaxed and less tense after finding love in their respective fiancées.

The Impact of Friendship in John le Carré's *Agent Running in the Field*

From the story of *Agent Running in the Field*, the friendship between Nat and Ed has left an impact on their lives, for better or worse.

On Nat's end, while his political opinions are almost the same as Ed, he didn't like to openly support it due to being an MI6 agent, but it has slowly eroded from exposure to Ed's passionate opinion over Brexit.

Later on, when Nat is surveilling a Russian agent with his MI6 team, they find that Ed is handing over secret intelligence to them. This causes Nat to be interrogated by MI6 and MI, who turns out to be Ed's true boss, over his friendship with Ed and who Ed is as a person, as someone who is close to him, as shown in this quoted dialogue:

Brammel is the first to recover from the power of speech. "We need to hear it from you one more time, Nat", he announces.

"Hear what?" I demand.

"Shannon's world view. A précis of his motivation. All the shit he spouted at you about Trump, Europe, and the universe, which you appear to have swallowed wholesale (Carré, 2019:236-237)."

From the quotation, the impact of the friendship between Nat and Ed fundamentally disrupts the boundaries between personal loyalty and professional duty, illustrating the profound consequences of Aristotelian friendship in a highly institutionalized setting. For Nat, the exposure to Ed's fervent political convictions slowly erodes his mandated neutrality as an MI6 agent. This ideological convergence becomes a critical liability when MI6 discovers Ed handing over intelligence to a Russian agent. During his interrogation, Nat's superiors view his friendship with suspicion, as evidenced by Brammel's accusation: "*All the shit he spouted at you about Trump, Europe, and the universe, which you appear to have swallowed wholesale*" (Carré, 2019: 236-237). This interrogation highlights how a friendship of virtue can conflict with institutional expectations. Badhwar and Dadlez (2018) argue that true friendships often present moral dilemmas where loyalty to a friend may clash with established epistemic or moral virtues defined by external authorities. Nat's internalization of Ed's worldview demonstrates this exact conflict, positioning their male bond as a subversive force that challenges the rigid, indifferent political structures of the state.

This culminates in them giving Nat an ultimatum – find Ed and either apprehend him for treason, or turn him into a double agent who is loyal to Britain, something Nat is good at, as shown in the following conversation between Bryn, Nat's old friend and now superior in MI6, and Nat:

"Oh my dear boy, You and I together, who else?"

"Doing what, if I may ask?"

"What you've always done best! You befriend your man all ways up. You're halfway there already. Judge your moment and go the other half. Tell him who you are, show him the error of his ways,

calmly, undramatically, and turn him. The moment he says "Yes I will, Nat", put a halter round his neck and lead him gently into the paddock."

"And when I've led him gently in?"

"We play him back. Keep him beavering away at his day job, feed him carefully concocted disinformation which he passes up the pipeline to Moscow. We run him for as long as he lasts, and once we've done with him we let our sister Service wrap up the Gamma network to the sound of trumpets. You get a commendation from the Chief, we cheer you on your way and you've done the best you can for your young pal. Bravo. Any less would be disloyal, more would be culpable (Carré, 2019:256-257)".

From the quotation, the tension reaches its peak when MI6 attempts to weaponize this friendship, giving Nat an ultimatum to turn Ed into a double agent. Bryn, Nat's superior, explicitly instructs him to exploit their bond: *"You befriend your man all ways up... Tell him who you are, show him the error of his ways, calmly, undramatically, and turn him"* (Carré, 2019: 256-257). In this context, the intelligence service attempts to degrade Nat and Ed's relationship from a friendship of virtue into a mere friendship of utility, using affection as a tool for state espionage. However, Brennan (2023) notes that Aristotelian friendships, whether personal or associational, are ultimately governed by a shared conception of the common good. By recognizing the manipulative nature of MI6's command, Nat is forced to evaluate which "common good" holds higher moral weight: the deceptive operations of his government, or the authentic, albeit flawed, integrity of his friend.

On Ed's side, having a friend in Nat has managed to have Ed loosen up and becoming less tense in life. He also met Florence, Nat's junior, during one of their badminton sessions when he asks Nat to have that session be Double as he's bringing his sister because she wants to play with him, who eventually becomes his fiancée, as shown in Nat's inner bfflement over the turn of events, and Ed's retelling of introducing Florence to his family, in the following paragraphs:

As we grasp hands, I grapple with two more irreconcilable pieces of intelligence. Florence has stuck to her Office vows, at least so far as I'm concerned. And Ed, an identified Russian spy, proposes to marry a recently employed member of my service, thereby multiplying to infinity the opportunity for national scandal. But these are just scattered thoughts wafting through my head as he lays out his plans for "a quick Register Office job, no bullshit."

"I called Mum and she was magic", he confides, leaning forward over his beer and grabbing my forearm in his enthusiasm. "She's into Jesus in a pretty big way, Mum is, same as Laura, always have been. And I thought she'd say, you know, if Jesus isn't going to be at the wedding it's a washout (Carré, 2019:282)."

From the quotations above, the impact of this friendship on Ed is overwhelmingly restorative, moving him from political isolation to personal fulfillment. Ed's introduction to Florence through Nat's badminton sessions, which eventually leads to their engagement, illustrates the humanizing power of connection. Ed's enthusiastic retelling of his mother's reaction to his pragmatic wedding plans — *"I thought she'd say, you know, if Jesus isn't going to be at the wedding it's a washout"* (Carré, 2019: 282) — reveals a stark contrast to his previously rigid, dogmatic persona. This transformation aligns with Elechi's (2018) assertion that friendship is an absolute necessity for human development and happiness, without which human life becomes essentially meaningless and absurd. Nat's companionship provides Ed with the emotional scaffolding needed to engage with the world normally, allowing him to experience joy and romantic love outside of his obsessive political zealotry.

This happiness is also what lead to Nat to doubt if Ed really is a double agent. However, seeing how he asks him to be his best man in his wedding, and how similar it is to how Steff, his daughter, mellows out after being engaged her boyfriend, is what convinces him that Ed is not a spy, and that there must be other motives in him giving a Russian spy classified documents, as shown in the following internal monologue of Nat's as he, Ed, Prue and Florence having a dinner party at a chinese restaurant.

Their wedding chatter and inability to leave each other alone awaken echoes of Steff and Juno over Suda lunch. I tell them Steff is engaged to be married and they dissolve in symbiotic merriment. I give them the benefit of what is by now my party piece about giant bats on Barro Colorado. My one problem is that each time Ed joins the conversation, I find myself comparing the cheery love-smitten voice I'm hearing with the grudging version of it that Valentina aka Anette aka Gamma had to put up with three nights previously. (Carré, 2019:287).

From the quotation above, it is the profound depth of this friendship that allows Nat to correctly interpret Ed's actions and make a definitive moral choice. Observing Ed's genuine happiness at a dinner party, Nat draws a parallel to his own daughter's engagement, noting that "*their wedding chatter and inability to leave each other alone awaken echoes of Steff and Juno*" (Carré, 2019: 287). This paternal recognition convinces Nat that Ed is acting out of a misguided, impulsive idealism rather than malicious treason. Refsum (2025) emphasizes that deep friendships rely fundamentally on the mutual appreciation of shared experiences, which can alter one's political commitments. Driven by this empathetic understanding, Nat chooses to subvert his superiors' orders and secretly helps Ed escape Britain. This decisive act proves that their friendship transcends legal boundaries; as Hossain (2023) observes, Aristotelian friendship possesses a trans-political nature that ultimately transcends formal justice, prioritizing the hermeneutic of human solidarity over institutional obedience.

For Nat, his friendship with Ed has resulted in a relatively negative net gain, as he got into trouble when MI6 watches Ed handing over secret intellegences to a Russian spy they keep surveillance on, questioning if Ed knows his secret identity as a MI6 agent and use their friendship to gain access of the classified informations, or even if Nat trained him to be a spy, as it is his specialty skill to train people to be double agent.

For Ed, his friendship with Nat has turn his life for the better, as not only he end up in a relationship with Florence, Nat's junior spy who he brings to their badminton session with Ed's sister under the guise of a co-worker, he also becomes less tense and guarded after having a friend in Nat. It is also thanks to Nat, Florence, and Nat's wife, Prue, did he manages to escape from MI6 by getting him and Florence off Britain.

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that the relationship between Nat and Ed in John le Carré's *Agent Running in the Field* evolves through two distinct Aristotelian stages: the friendship of pleasure and the friendship of virtue. The initial catalyst for the formation of this bond was a shared competitive drive on the badminton court. The bond provides mutual recreation and serves as a means of alleviating the stresses of their respective daily lives. However, the relationship evolves into a friendship of virtue upon realising a profound alignment in their political ideologies, particularly concerning Brexit and contemporary global politics. This transformation has a significant impact on both characters. On the one hand, it rescues Ed from his self-imposed social isolation and dogmatic rigidity; on the other,

it simultaneously destabilises Nat's professional life, forcing him to choose between his loyalty to MI6 and his commitment to his friend.

The findings suggest that within a profoundly institutionalised and cynical milieu such as the intelligence service, personal relationships function as a formidable, at times disruptive, moral compass. The transition from pleasure to virtue signifies that shared anxieties over societal and political issues can catalyse profound human connections that challenge formal obligations. Nat's ultimate decision to subvert MI6's explicit orders – choosing to facilitate Ed's escape rather than manipulating him into becoming a double agent – reveals that the ethical weight of virtuous friendship can supersede the state's definition of duty. This suggests that friendship is not merely a passive state of affection, but rather an active, moral agency that empowers individuals to resist the indifferent machinery of political institutions.

When these findings are placed within the broader context of Aristotelian literary studies, the theory's enduring relevance is confirmed, although le Carré's novel introduces unique complexities. This phenomenon aligns with the observations documented by Muanah and Supsiadji (2018) in their analysis of Stephen King's *The Body* and by Septian and Pardi (2022) in their examination of James Dashner's *The Death Cure*. These studies highlight how friendships characterised by pleasure and utility frequently function as foundational stepping stones, ultimately providing protagonists with solace and a sense of moral grounding. However, in contrast to the coming-of-age or dystopian contexts of those narratives, the adult espionage setting of this novel introduces severe institutional stakes. Badhwar and Dadlez (2018) posit that authentic friendships among individuals of virtue often prove to be in conflict with prevailing moral and epistemic principles. Nat's willingness to deceive his own government perfectly exemplifies this; his actions validate Hossain's (2023) assertion that Aristotelian friendship possesses a trans-political nature that transcends formal justice, prioritising the hermeneutic of solidarity over blind obedience to the state.

Moreover, a comparative analysis of the depiction of Western male friendship in le Carré's novel with representations in Indonesian literature illuminates discrete cultural paradigms regarding masculinity and social bonds. In *Agent Running in the Field*, Western male friendship is portrayed as a sanctuary against political anxiety and professional disillusionment; it is a private rebellion where the individual asserts his agency against an indifferent majority system. Conversely, Indonesian representations of male friendship frequently emphasise communal solidarity and collective integration. For instance, Suyono, Gafar and Supriyati (2023) highlight that male friendship in Pramoedya Ananta Toer's *Anak Semua Bangsa* is rooted in an anti-colonial commitment to the collective struggle of the people. In a similar vein, Saragih and Simanjuntak (2022) demonstrate how the male characters in Donny Dhirgantoro's *5 cm* bond over shared dreams and collective identity exploration rather than systemic alienation. This comparison highlights a salient point: while Indonesian narratives frequently employ the theme of male friendship to celebrate societal integration, le Carré employs it to explore the vulnerability and moral isolation of the Western male in a post-truth era.

Notwithstanding these insights, the present study acknowledges certain limitations. Firstly, the qualitative approach, which relies solely on a single primary literary text, restricts the generalisability of the findings across the broader spectrum of contemporary spy fiction. Secondly, by confining the analysis exclusively to Lorraine Smith Pangle's (2002) interpretation of Aristotle, the research may overlook other contemporary sociological frameworks, such as power dynamics or institutional surveillance, which could further

elucidate the complexity of Nat and Ed's relationship. In conclusion, the analysis is wholly text-based, which means that the author's original intentionality and the broader reader reception are not empirically measured.

This study emphasises the profound significance of friendship as a means of reclaiming humanity within a political landscape that is dehumanising in nature. As Elechi (2018) posits, human life is essentially meaningless and absurd without friendship, a philosophical truth powerfully validated by Ed's transformation from a rigid, friendless zealot into a fulfilled, engaged individual. A significant strength of this research is its capacity to link classical Aristotelian ethics with contemporary geopolitical anxieties, thereby demonstrating that literature continues to be a vital domain for ethical inquiry (Blistène & Van Puyvelde, 2022). The key take-home message is that even within the cynical, utilitarian world of espionage, the solidarity found in a friendship of virtue remains a radical, trans-political moral force that prioritises the common good over institutional indifference (Brennan, 2023).

CONCLUSION

In John le Carré's *Agent Running in the Field*, the dynamic between Nat and Ed powerfully illustrates how Aristotelian friendship can bridge significant personal and social divides. The present study reveals that the subject relationship evolves from a friendship of pleasure – anchored in the mutual physical and psychological relief found on the badminton court – into a profound friendship of virtue, solidified by shared ideological convictions regarding contemporary politics. The narrative unites a cynical veteran intelligence agent with an outspoken, socially isolated young civilian, thereby demonstrating how a shared moral compass can celebrate differences, transforming disparities in age, institutional status, and temperament into a unified, authentic human connection.

The impact of this virtuous bond extends far beyond a simple companionship, fundamentally altering the trajectory of both men's lives and challenging the structural power dynamics of the intelligence community. For the protagonist, the friendship provides a vital emotional sanctuary that cures his dogmatic isolation, humanising him and paving the way for his romantic fulfilment with Florence. In contrast, for Nat, the relationship precipitates a profound ethical crisis, compelling him to weigh his mandated, utilitarian loyalty to MI6 against his personal devotion to his friend. Nat's ultimate decision to subvert state orders to facilitate Ed's escape underscores a specific portrayal of Western male friendship: not just as a private emotional bond, but as a subversive, trans-political act of resistance against systemic surveillance and institutional indifference.

This research underscores the significance of friendship as an exemplary manifestation of individual moral agency within the context of modern espionage fiction. Whilst other literary traditions – such as those frequently found in Indonesian literature – often portray male bonds as instruments of communal integration and collective struggle, le Carré's novel highlights a Western paradigm in which friendship serves as an individualised fortress against a corrupt or indifferent state. By celebrating the differences and uncompromising convictions of its characters, *Agent Running in the Field* demonstrates that even in a world governed by deception, the ethical power of a virtuous friendship can triumph over institutional mandates. This offers a profound testament to the enduring value of human solidarity.

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