

Lucy's father was an inventor. He had been working for years on the Ingenium, a machine that would be able to scan someone's brain and detect their personality. If a bank was looking to employ a trustworthy, careful person to look after people's money, the Ingenium would show who to employ. If a football manager wanted to be sure that a young player would be able to handle the pressure of playing in the next division up, the Ingenium would tell him.

Finally, the invention was working perfectly. It was so successful in telling what a person was really like that a huge company had invested millions in putting it into production at their hi-tech factory.

As part of the deal Lucy's father had had to move with his family to the city where the factory was, so that he could supervise it personally. The company was paying for them to live in a huge house. There was even a field with stables for the horse Lucy was learning to ride. Lucy had everything she could want.

Almost everything she could want. The one thing missing was her best friend, Sadie. Lucy and Sadie had been friends since before they knew their own names. At school, they had been inseparable and they were always playing at each other's houses. Now, they were thousands of miles away from one another. Of course, they could see each other in the holidays, and they spoke often on the telephone, but that wasn't the same as seeing each other every day.

One afternoon, Lucy came home from school to find her father looking very pleased with himself, standing outside the house waiting to greet her. "There's someone inside I know you're going to be pleased to see," he said.

"Is it Sadie?" asked Lucy, her face brightening.

"Yes and no," replied her father. "I knew how much you were missing Sadie, and Sadie was sad for you as well. So we used the Ingenium to scan Sadie's personality. Then, we placed an advert in the local paper for girls your age who would like to be friends with a millionaire's daughter. We used the Ingenium to scan their personalities as well, until we found someone who was a perfect match for Sadie. Her name's Nina."

"Nina even looks and sounds like Sadie! In fact, for the last two weeks, it's her and not Sadie that you've been speaking to! Sadie was so pleased that we found you a new friend that she didn't mind helping out. So she told Nina some stories about the fun you'd had together back in the old town, and let Nina pretend to be her. It'll be just like having Sadie back again. Come on in and meet your new friend."

Lucy's father opened the door and went back inside, beckoning Lucy to follow him.

She stood on the doorstep and hesitated.

* * *

Back in Lucy's home town, Sadie was feeling sad. She wondered if Lucy would still want her as a friend, now that she had someone new. But maybe that was for the best. Their lives were so different now – Lucy had lots of new hobbies that went with being rich. She had a horse to ride, and a huge house to live in, and an expensive school full of new friends whose parents were rich as well.

Sadie still liked Lucy, but she wasn't sure that you could really stay friends with someone whose life was so different. They used to have so much in common, but her life must sound so boring compared to Lucy's. It was embarrassing that she could never buy Lucy the sorts of presents Lucy could buy for her. Maybe their friendship had had its time.

A New Friend?

This story raises some of the questions philosophers have explored about friendship. If you are interested in reading some academic philosophy in the raw, get hold of a copy of Aristotle's Ethics and read Books 8 and 9. They are a rich exploration of friendship and connected concepts, and a stellar example of the hunt for clarity of meaning at which philosophy aims.

What makes a true friend?

Aristotle distinguishes three types of friendship – those based on usefulness such as commercial friendships, those based on pleasure, in which he includes the friendships of the young, and those based on goodness – on an appreciation of the character of a friend, not on how useful they are or the pleasures to be enjoyed in their company. That isn't to say that people who appreciate one another's character don't get pleasure from their friendship or find it useful, just that the "lower" types of friendship stop short of the ideal, and are more temporary in nature, because when such a friend is no longer useful or a source of pleasure, the basis of the friendship is lost.

In the story, Lucy may be worried that her new friend will befriend her because, as a millionaire's daughter, she will be useful to her, or they can enjoy exciting activities. But if she has the same character as Sadie, shouldn't that make Nina an ideal candidate for the more profound type of friendship? That brings us on to the question...

Are friends fungible?

"Fungible" (as well as being a word you just have to say out loud), means interchangeable – something that can be substituted for something else because it has the same characteristics.

We like to think we choose our friends because there is something special about them. It's not just that we happen to meet them, so that they would be our friends even if they were very different people. We consider that there is something special about them that makes us want to be their friends.

In the story, should Lucy be pleased because the Ingenium has identified a friend who is "just like" Sadie? Or is friendship about being friends with *this* person, not just because of how they are, but because of who they are, or the shared experiences you have had. Are friendships fungible or not?

How much can a friend change and remain a friend?

Turning round to see the situation from Sadie's point of view, how much can a friend change while keeping a friendship intact? It seems very disloyal to ditch a friend because they acquire a few new tastes; but are there changes which friendship cannot survive? In particular...

Can true friendship exist between unequals?

In particular, can true friendship only exist between equals, or near-equals? Aristotle thought that the highest friendship could not exist across a great gap in virtue, vice, wealth or anything else. If so, this opens up the question of whether we really wish the very best for our friends, or if the selfish desire that they remain sufficiently like us to remain our friends sets limits to what we can wish for them. As Gore Vidal put it, "Every time a friend succeeds, a little something in me dies." Similarly, some friendships are conspiracies of failure, while others (take sporting friendships that involve an element of rivalry) are a spur to improvement. Do I want my friend to be as rubbish as me at maths, or do I want to be as good as him at writing stories?