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# **Semiotics of Friendship**



An Encyclopedic Approach

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# Introduction

## Part 1: What it's about

For the purpose of our investigation, let us assume that there are three kinds of people. And, as often with typologies, you may belong to more than one kind! In group one, we have those who have friends, good or bad. Group two is people who are friendless, and who may be sad or happy to live with no friends. Group three is those who think about the friendships of their own circles, wondering about what they mean and the quality of these relationships, and even start to think if they belong to group two. Why can friendship be so intriguing? The answer must be found in the complex semiotics of friendship. *Semiotics*, the study of signs, signification, meaning making, and the nature of signs, communication, and signification is a very general field of research and scholarship that is applied, in this book, as one important lens to approach the questions of friends and friendship. Another field, also multidisciplinary, is *friendship studies*, which approach friendship from the perspectives of anthropology, philosophy, psychology, history, etc., even semiotics. That is why a semiotics of friendship will tend to break the boundaries of single-disciplinary approaches, and why a semiotics of friendship invites for an encyclopedic approach.

Thus, this book is about friends, friendship, and studies of friendship, written from multidisciplinary perspectives, deeply inspired by semiotics, but also other fields, such as ontology. Why *ontology*? Until recently this was another word for that part of philosophical inquiry that dealt with metaphysics, the question of being and the mode of being, or in the plural, modes of being. For instance, are thoughts just patterns of physical activities in the brain, or do they have their own realm, and if so, what is it? Could that realm be the same as the realm of signs? Many philosophers aimed to develop just one such general theory, a “true theory of the fundamental mode(s) of being”, but they often disagreed, and so, for instance, the ontologies of Kant, Spinoza, and Hegel were different and made up a contested plurality of theories that has been highly discussed within the confines of philosophy. Also the great philosopher and semiotician Charles Sanders Peirce developed his own sketch of an evolutionary ontology, based on three modes of being (Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness, illustrated by spontaneity, reaction, and mediation, respectively).

Now, ontology kept evolving. Due to the rapid development of science – especially the biophysical sciences, with their peculiar vocabularies specific to each subject matter, as well as the growth of big databases for genes, proteins, and other substances relevant also to medical research – a profound need emerged to enable

the translation of terms known by biochemists and molecular biologists into terms understandable by not just medical doctors, but also to researchers from many other fields. How can local experts within a discipline present their contributions so as to communicate with and gain understanding (and recognition) from experts in other fields? Translation via ontology became an answer. Ontology came to be seen as a more structured way of translating a highly specialised world of facts, discovered in for instance biology, to experts from other fields like medicine. Translation is thus closely linked to interpretation, as a central semiotic process.

Indeed, the overt use of ontology became a computer and information science approach to facilitate more reliable communication between fields, ordering massive amounts of information by building virtual specialised encyclopedias of systematic and standardized definitions, descriptions, and relational pointers to the relevance of a concept, a substance, or a theory across different fields of research. It became a way of showing the properties of a subject area and how they are related, by defining a set of concepts and categories that represent the subject. Such ontologies could be seen as a set of different local taxonomies describing the conceptual structure of each field of research. They are in a sense, *specialised encyclopedias*. The historian of physics Thomas Kuhn developed the notion of a *paradigm*, and one of its components is the ‘ontological models’ that researchers to some extent share about what exists as an object of inquiry; Kuhn sometimes called these the field’s shared *metaphysical commitments* (e.g., all physicists must believe in the existence of a finite small number of fundamental forces of nature that has previously been established).

Now, talking about friends and the cluster of relationships we call friendship, we can ask whether different researchers within the fields of friendship studies (anthropologists, psychologists, historians, social scientists, behavioural biologists, and many more) face similar challenges communicating with each other. For instance, are they committed to seeing friendship as a psychological feeling, a social relation imbued by power differentials, an ethical commitment with obligations, a linguistic trope, a political alliance, or a form of love? How do all these perspectives interrelate (if they do)? The semiotics of friendship may seem confusing, but an encyclopedic approach may help us translate their findings into our common language.

*Semiotics of friendship* is here taken to imply some elements of ontology in both the original metaphysical sense of ontology (a philosophical inquiry into the very nature of the phenomenon of friendship, such as we see already in Plato and Aristotle) and in its information- scientific sense as reconstructing the local ontology-relevant output of very different kinds friendship studies (approaching friendship from the perspectives of philosophy, psychology, sociology, political science, history, etc.). The approach taken in this book is thus to use the format of an encyclopedic dictionary to organize these ontologies in their overlapping similarities,

as well as their differences. Everyone knows what a dictionary is, but one often forgets that there are dictionaries of physics, religion, literature, and even of science fiction, and that the level of exactness for each subject is not the same. If there is a science of friendship (and we will leave that question open in this preface), it may not have “universal laws” of the emotional movement between friends expressed in a mathematical language. This book is not a standard dictionary, then, but a semiotic encyclopedia developed in the context of ontology. It presents a complex map of a cluster of interrelated phenomena, and some analyses of them, and in doing so, one could suggest it offers a complex diagram. Peirce often talked about how a diagram literally lets us see relations which are physically invisible, and by doing so, gain new knowledge about the subject of the diagram, which we can then manipulate imaginatively as physicists do with their equations to make new models to test and learn from.

The project could also have had a subtitle called ‘searching for the negative ontology of friendship’. The neologism *negative ontology* points to a similar term, negative theology (also known as *apophatic* theology), which is actually a cluster of theologies that attempt to approach a deeper understanding of God by discussing explicitly what God is *not*, for instance saying that although there is some sense in the expression ‘God is love’, this love is not a human or ordinary form of love. The idea is that whenever we try to know God or characterize God by some properties, we need to stress God’s absolute transcendence and ultimate unknowability, because as finite beings, humans cannot say anything definite about the divine essence of God. So a negative ontology is here meant to say something similar (although not religiously) – i.e., that in the case of friendship, we can try to say what it is and what it means to people (its characteristic properties and dynamisms as part of its positive ontology and semiotics), and who the friends are (indeed, we will investigate some famous pairs), but paradoxically, when we do so, and even when we *study* friendship by scientific procedures, we are always taken to some limits, some border to something important that cannot be known, something that escapes us. A friend of mine responded to this idea by affirmation: “I think that friendship might indeed be well defined by precisely those things it is not (competitive, self-aggrandizing, instrumental, etc.)” While a medical ontology of biochemical terms allows itself to be an ambitious attempt to build up a growing common database of information and knowledge of the components and processes of the body, the body of knowledge of friends and friendship has another character, for its complexity seems to lie somewhere between the complexity of the natural human body and such mental, cultural or spiritual realities that we denote by such terms as *God*, *gods*, *transcendancy*, *Manchester United*, or whatever object one is preoccupied with sanctifying . . . or even just adequately grasping.

*Semiotics of Friendship: An Encyclopedic Approach* (hereafter called “the book”) presents a new approach to understanding friendship in a complex world. The approach is pragmatic in being guided by the thesis that neither semiotics nor any other theories are a guarantee of comprehensive understanding or insight, but by looking at them all together, in the manner of investigating an ontological diagram, some higher-order relations and insights may be revealed. The book’s largest part is organized as a dictionary that might also be used as a research tool, a reference work, or as a mirror to reflect upon the very relationships constituting ‘friendship’, the differences between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ friends, what friendship ought to be, and the kinds of knowledge – and lack of knowledge – we as humans still have about this important interpersonal phenomenon. In that sense, then, one may argue that the book is not *exactly* an encyclopedia: An encyclopedia for the academic market can hardly be written by one person alone. This is why this book includes important bona fide quotations from the outstanding work of many thinkers. An encyclopedia – or even just a dictionary – one may think, needs to be comprehensive and complete, and it needs to stand the test of time for many years after its publication – yet to present a comprehensive summary of the disparate ways in which ‘friendship’ has been studied across the myriad of academic inquiry in its entirety is, of course, impossible.

Thus this book might be said to mimic an encyclopedia, for reasons that have to do not just with its practical and everyday orientation, but also with ontology, in the information-scientific sense, as well as in its negative (or apophatic) metaphysical aspect. As *an inquiry into the mode of being of friends and friendship as genuine phenomena in the real human world* (as well as among some animals, and in some fictional worlds), this book updates a modern philosophy of friendship that can be traced back to thinkers like Plato, Aristotle and Confucius.

In the information science sense of a categorisation or taxonomical structure, the book presents its semiotic thesis not as a monovocal ‘one long argument’, but as an interconnected web of terms that are organised alphabetically. It consists of a list with an internal conceptual and referential structure (to some extent mimicking a relational network of communicating friends), and that organizes pieces of research-based information that we, as a species, so far have been able to achieve about the ideas of friends and friendship, and it includes reflections both about ‘the dark side’ of many friendships, about the gaps between ideals and reality, and the unknowns and ineffability of friends.

The rest of this preface will lay out this philosophical and semiotic-interdisciplinary thesis in a bit more detail, and provides the reader with some key ideas on how to use the book. The book consists of many brief and a few longer entries built on research, literature, and two kinds of ‘common sense’ knowledge of friendship; proverbs and known instances of remarkable pairs and groups of friends.

The thesis is a simple one about a complex subject: *Friendship can, has been, and should be described in many ways, both because there are many forms of friendship, and because there are several (a finite, unknown, and large number of) ways that friendship can appear in the world, so even using the best evidence we have (from science, literature, and the other arts) we will never get a complete description, not to say understanding of it.*

Yet this does not mean we should abstain from pursuing a more comprehensive understanding of this extremely important aspect of our shared human experience! As Peirce emphasized, inquiry is a never-ending, open process that we should not try to block. But in contrast to many things studied by the sciences, the aim for a single unified theory of the phenomenon, guided by the epistemic norms of simplicity and parsimony, may not be the best strategy to achieve an understanding of something as the phenomenon of friendship.

In balancing the aim for a systematic treatment with the real contingency of friendship phenomena (i.e., their dependency on psychological, cultural and historical contexts), the approach taken in this investigation is often conditioned by *serendipity*. When something is serendipitous, it is discovered by chance in a happy or beneficial way. For instance, we can be lucky to encounter people with whom we become good friends, though we had not planned to do so or specifically searched for new friends. The word *serendipity* is from 1754 and coined by the writer Horace Walpole (1717–1797), the 4th Earl of Orford. Today he is best known as the founder of Gothic fiction and for his many letters. In one of them, written to Sir Horace Mann in 1754, Walpole drew the word from an English version of a Persian fairy tale, *The Three Princes of Serendip*, in which the heroes “were always making discoveries, by accidents and sagacity, of things they were not in quest of” – adding that one of the princes “discovered that a mule blind of the right eye had travelled the same road lately, because the grass was eaten only on the left side, where it was worse than on the right—now do you understand *Serendipity*?”. Of such “most remarkable instances of this accidental sagacity,” Walpole wrote, “you must observe that *no* discovery of a thing you *are* looking for comes under this description.” The fairy tale was an adaptation of the Persian poem *Hasht-Bihisht*, and *Serendip* was an archaic name for Sri Lanka.

The word *serendipity* has later been applied to a variety of discoveries (such as penicillin, velcro, and post-it notes) and plays an important role in the study of discoveries by the sociology of science (Merton & Barber 2004). This book may not always let sagacious readers discover what they are looking for, but it may offer some unexpected, delightful information and serendipitous inspiration. Not only friends, but also how to see, talk about, and understand friendship, can be discovered in ways not planned for, yet beneficial in their intellectual and emotional outcomes. Hence, it is words, notions, ideas and imaginations about friendly love, be

it calm or passionate, and some shadowy features like exploitation in the name of friendship, that the book offers as a field of exploration and reflection. The entries selected could, as the discoveries of the three princes from Sri Lanka, have been a very different cluster and have led to different insights. The ambition is not, as in a standard dictionary, to make a complete and authoritative coverage of all ideas related to the semiotics of friends and friendship.

But serendipity and contingency do not free a compiler from difficult decisions about composition. As is usual in the preparation of anything, one of the central problems at the outset of compiling this book was deciding what to include and what to leave out. First of all, it is difficult to determine what friendship is. The essential ontological problem of friendship (so far as ontology is the branch of metaphysics dealing with the nature of being) is to determine what it is. As an interpersonal relationship, friendship comes in a myriad of forms, involves emotions, thoughts, actions, roles, and expectations, and seems impossible to define – one thing that makes a systematic treatment of friendship as challenging as exciting. In the *Oxford Dictionary of English*, the main definition of ‘friendship’ runs thus: “a person with whom one has a bond of mutual affection, typically one exclusive of sexual or family relations.” If we accept this as a working indication of what is meant by ‘friendship’, then what is to be done with atypical situations, or with terms like boyfriends, girlfriends, ‘friends with benefits’ or ‘companionate marriage’ where friendship and other forms of love intertwine? An encyclopedic approach to friendship, trying to answer the ontological question about what it is, needs to face the unruly nature of our terminology and how and why some friendships are seen as typical, and others as unlikely. For this reason, other words for other forms of love have been included as contrasting instances, as well as brief case studies where real life often complicates neat definitions (or metaphysical stipulations), to show the limits and ambiguities of the language we are left with, though we often try to be precise, and even improve upon it.

When using the encyclopedic form as a tool or scheme to approach the question of friendship, some readers may think that an encyclopedic dictionary has just one specific form, that it is objective and comprehensive, providing only the precise ‘literal’ or ‘core’ meanings of the terms within the sphere of reality with which it deals, like a dictionary of computer science may do (yet, if it also covers the history of the human invention of the concepts of computation, it may soon begin to look more like a dictionary of human history). But the concept of friendship is very different from the concept of a computer, and a much more dynamic, context-sensitive one, which means that the major A to Z section of this book is closer in kind to dictionaries of semiotics, sociology, philosophy and anthropology than to dictionaries of geography, biology or mathematics. I emphasize this to avoid disappointing the reader and warn against believing that the genre of dictionaries and encyclopedias



is a simple category (as an antidote, consult the entries 'dictionary', 'connotations of friendship' and 'categorising').

However, that the concept of friendship may seem fluid or vague does not mean that it becomes meaningless; for we can meaningfully use the distinctions in language that helps define friendship as a form of love or as a contrast to enmity, its opposite. Vague boundaries are no obstacle to drawing distinctions in answering semiotic questions, and just like we can distinguish between a bald and a wildly hairy head (though borderline cases are continuous with the two extremes), we can still grasp the difference between romantic love and friendship, even if they sometimes may morph into each other. Thus, depending upon the part of reality a specialised encyclopedia focuses upon, it may situate itself in various places in complex continua or in borderlands between objectivity and subjectivity, comprehensiveness and idiosyncrasy, systematicity and disorder. It's like when you take up a novel and expect to find a plot, but some novels (*Tristram Shandy* by Laurence Sterne comes to mind) defy a neat plot structure and enjoy taking the reader by the hand in more aimless, irregular and serendipitous strolls through its narrative landscapes.

This book has no simple plot and is not a novel, but it describes friends also known from some novels about friendship, and it has a clear surface structure: Its main section gives a dictionary-like mapping of the semiotic ontology of friendship; ontology here in the information science sense of a local networked regional vocabulary or jargon designed to deal with a specific aspect of the world (like Kuhn's 'ontological models'). Its deeper semiotic structure is the emerging relational meaning of the phenomena dealt with by the entries, that is, how friendship appears and can be understood in its complex, concrete but also often confusing forms, and how one can get, on the one hand, a better grasp of such phenomena by research-based insights drawn from inquiries in history, philosophy, sociology, etc. (e.g., insights into the differences between friendship according to an ancient versus a modern model), and on the other hand, get a sense of the huge gaps in such knowledge-based approaches to friendship due to its very complexities and opaqueness, in another word, its negative ontology.

So, on the surface, the major A to Z section of the book has no central argument other than to show the complexity of friendship in the ambivalence between its positive and negative aspects, and to indicate the various important roles of friends in human life, as well as why friendship has often been neglected also, in fact, by dictionaries and encyclopedias. As a work of reference, it is partly based on research, and partly on the subjective experience and choices of the author – to which I will come back in a moment. Consequently, an obvious question is the editorial perspective applied in the choice of material to include. Three selection

criteria have been used, all considered in the context of constructing a map of the positive and negative ontology of friendship. These criteria are:

- 1) That the words headlining the entries are generally considered important in the contemporary discourse of friends and friendship, both in the common imagination and in debates within ‘friendship research’ (as discussed in an entry pointing to longer essays on, e.g., sociology of friendship and other research areas). Such words are relevant both for constructing an ontology of friendship and its semiotics, and for showing its limitations and its negative dimension. Just as a science-based ontology of physics would not only have to say something about the particle structure of matter as known from the standard model of cosmology, it would also have to discuss open questions and unknowns about the dark matter that seems to bind the universe together. A tradition of political thinkers has suggested that it is friendship that binds society together, but how it does so is more opaque than translucent, and there are several ways of translating public discourses on friendship into an ontological framework. Ontologies come in the plural, just as there are several ways of constructing, say a biological ontology, which may give more or less weight to the molecular, cellular, biochemical, ecological, or evolutionary dimensions of living systems.
- 2) Another criterion has been that the words, concepts, theories, pairs (or groups) of friends, and fields of research included are relevant for our interpretations of friendships: This implies an interdisciplinary perspective, as no single field of knowledge is enough to explicate what friendship is (remember that ontology in the information science sense extends beyond ontology as a metaphysical pursuit). At least this is the hypothesis to be tested, and forms a deeper level of the book’s topic and a contribution to the semiotics and philosophy of interdisciplinarity. This hypothesis about the need for many perspectives takes seriously semiotician Umberto Eco’s vision of the *encyclopedia* as the whole multidimensional system of knowledge shared by sign producers and interpreters within different cultural units of expression of meaning (Eco 2000). It is obvious that what is ‘relevant’ in this context is not given by a fixed or universal standard, it varies individually. I could, for instance, have aimed for a dictionary that was based solely upon the contributions of philosophers, but as an interdisciplinary scholar I believe that philosophy is not necessarily the definitive word about all things; even philosophy has its blind spots (as James Stephens maliciously exposed in his novel from 1912, *The Crock of Gold*). Using different disciplinary approaches and perspectives is an enrichment for our understanding.
- 3) Material in other languages than English has most often been omitted, except for works translated into English, such as classics written in other languages. This criterion acknowledges an unescapable parochial aspect of a semiotics of

friendship and its supporting encyclopedia that would have appeared different if written in Danish (my native tongue), Sinhala (the native tongue of my wife), German, Chinese, or in the context of any other of the world's more than seven thousand living languages. Yet, proverbs about friendship from some other languages have been included and translated, and the very idea of translatability is critically discussed.

Why proverbs, some readers may ask. Because even when they contradict each other, which they often do, they offer a sop to the Cerberus of the common wisdom about friendship, which is another rich and at times bewildering source to reflect upon (see the entry on proverbs). Many of the proverbs will be recognized by the reader, who will also already, I am sure, understand the concept of friendship as fluid, changeable, ever-changing, and containing multitudes of meanings that cannot easily be defined or formalised. In terms of semiotics, each specific dictionary approach to friendship will be bound by the particular linguistic, historical, and cultural context as a set of boundary conditions for its terms.

If we think of the terms within common language (or if we think of an ontology in the more technical information science sense of a tool helping to order and translate terms across disciplines), such terms can be seen as defined and explained by other terms that are also explained or explainable in this way, so the whole language can be seen as a huge semiotic network of nodes (terms) whose meanings are interdependent and have no sharp boundaries, even if we delimit a subset of terms as those relevant to friendship. I have not attempted to include all terms that I see as potentially relevant for understanding friends and friendship, as this would have seemed to assume the function of an encyclopaedic editorial office and greatly lengthen the book. In any case, some terms are so obscure and rare that they are of interest only to a few specialists. I have therefore endeavoured to provide a useful and fairly comprehensive list of relevant terms regularly used in the anglophone academic world today; terms in which curious students and scholars are likely to have some interest and about which they may wish to know more. If they happen not to know (or have forgotten) where the metaphor 'good chemistry' comes from, what homophily is, or who Damon and Pythias were, I hope this book will give them the basic information.

I say "fairly comprehensive" because any work of a lexicography-related ontology will necessarily be limited by the author's reading and knowledge. That I am familiar with some philosophy of friendship, have contributed a little to biosemiotics and philosophy of science, and have some knowledge of friendship studies in other disciplines does not mean that I have read all studies or am well versed in all research conducted on friends and friendships. Therefore, inevitably, there are abundant gaps.

However, twelve main categories of entries can be distinguished at the outset, as follows:

1. Issues (e.g., money, mutuality, satisfaction).
2. Models (e.g., the ancient Greek, the Indian, the modern model of friendship).
3. Kinds or types of friendship (e.g., bad friends, noblest friendship, typologies).
4. Incoherence of theoretical typologies (e.g., complexity, ineffability, thisness).
5. Technical terms (e.g., bestowal, friend-shield effect, homophily).
6. Theories, accounts (e.g. Silver's thesis, Dunbar's number, mirror account of friendship).
7. Cases of friendships (e.g., Achilles and Patroclus, Murdoch's friends, famous friends).
8. Philosophers on friendship (e.g., Aristotle, Kant, Weil).
9. Motifs and themes (e.g., gift, pleasure, social media).
10. Concepts (e.g., eros, presentism, tacit knowledge).
11. Proverbs (e.g., Faroese, Jamaican, Swahili proverbs).
12. Friendship studies (e.g., anthropology, history, semiotics of friendship).

These categories account for a good proportion of terms but there are scores which do not belong to any particular category, and such a taxonomical approach soon breaks down as one begins to classify (thus, there is a critical entry on 'categorising'). The following haphazard list of entries suggests the difficulty of satisfactory division: affection, critique in friendship, globalization, indirection, joint perception, losing friends, maintenance, *metta*, otherness, qualia, rapport, and solitude – to mention no others.

The plan of the encyclopedic part of the book is simple. It is alphabetical and runs from Achilles and Patroclus (though it would have been possible to start from 'abandon' and discuss the advice to approach cooking and friendship with the same abandon) to *xenia*; and consequently, so to speak, from a very close and famous pair of friends to a very formalized kind of friendship. But please don't seek a continuous string of meaning if obsessively read strictly from A to Z. Use, rather, the serendipitous approach of the princes. Each term is given a brief description or definition. In some cases, when I thought it might be helpful or of interest, I give a brief etymology of the term. Whenever I found it appropriate, I have included references to research (listed in the bibliography), either original work or secondary literature. The purpose of secondary literature (of which this book is an example), is to filter; so to speak, primary information sources and original research and provide indicators to this literature. The distinction between original research and secondary literature is sometimes blurred; it might be difficult to label for instance Ray Pahl's wonderful essay *On Friendship*, and Daniel Hruschka's learned treatise *Friendship: Development, Ecology, and Evolution of a Relationship* which is based

upon his own original research but also exemplifies secondary literature, rich in its commentaries to the research of other scholars and scientists.

Too, the research included in the dictionary is often presented by direct quotation or paraphrase, in both cases with reference to the bibliography. It is important for me to emphasize that the vast majority of the material presented here is not due to my own research, but is based upon the work of others. Human knowledge is created by inquirers standing on the shoulders of predecessors, some of them giants, and it is worthy to commemorate, honor and give credit where credit is due, just as it is convenient for the reader to be able to consult the sources for further details. But its incompleteness is humbly acknowledged, not all research could be included, and – as known by all authors of reference works and review papers – the fact that some researchers are referred to and others have been omitted, is far from implying that only the first group and not the latter made important findings; indeed, serendipity is a factor here too – and, perhaps, bias due to friendship.

The whole A to Z section is cross-referenced so that the user can move easily from one entry to another. These pointers (*see* and *q.v.*) are the semiotic plumbing and wiring of the book and constitute the skeleton of the ontology of friendship. If, for example, you look up ‘equality in friendship’ you will be referred to ‘stranger’, ‘bestowal’, ‘relational attention’, ‘modern model’, ‘cross-class friendship’, ‘Confucius on friendship,’ and ‘utility friendship.’ Just as one will never be able to say that one knows a good friend fully, or has exhausted the topics that friends discuss, one will never reach a definitive conclusion on the semiotics of friendship, which is open-ended and constantly evolving in its positive and negative aspects.

The *raison d'être* of a reference work, as I see it, is to provide information – be it commonplace or abstruse. For instance, a decent dictionary of biology, the field from which I graduated, will tell us what geotropism, glenoid cavity, gonad, greenhouse effect, grey matter, and grooming are (friendship is not included in extant biology dictionaries, but animal friendship is likely to be included in the future). Similarly, this book (as a relatively non-standard encyclopedic sketch) includes terms that some readers may find rather esoteric – we typically do not count the number of our ‘cross-category’ friendships or ask about our best friend’s process of ‘unselfing’ – yet, such terms can become part of a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of friendship. I should add that, as this is, to some extent, also a personal book, I have, occasionally, spread myself with entries on subjects of particular interest to me, for example knowledge and its role in friendship, unknowns in friendship and in research, and the limits of scientific theory (in contrast to fictional forms like novels) for understanding important things in life such as friendship. But I guess every reader has their favourite themes and subjects.

Let me spell out from the outset that my background in biosemiotics and the philosophy of science does not, of course, make me an expert on friendship (what-

ever such expertise might mean), and I have indicated how my professional context has informed the preparation of the book, which takes a multi- or interdisciplinary approach to its topics. So, I don't want to push any political agenda (except the one of offering tools for thought for speculating about friendship and politics). Moreover, I am not particularly friend-friendly; I believe that friendships can involve as much self-deception, bias, flattery, concealment, and frustration as other interpersonal relationships (this idea is far from new), but also that the norms by which we describe the perils and pitfalls of friendship indicate ideals about the better of its forms; simply put, there are both good and bad friends.

Nor do I think that reading much about friendship necessarily makes one a better, more sensitive, or more perfect friend (but maybe the right kind of reading depth may help question one's exaggerated notions of perfection). I just think that for some people, a life well lived is also a life well examined, and we can examine the lives of others as a way of examining ourselves; friends can actually help in that process. I can see how different my few good friends are from each other and from me, and this has helped me, I believe, to be open and thankful for the gifts of friendship, also of the most 'unlikely' kinds.

There has recently been a revival of attempts to understand friendship philosophically (see the entry on the philosophy of friendship). As said, the interdisciplinary emphasis in this book of its negative ontology contrasts with simply approaching friendship from a single discipline or point of view, be it semiotic, psychological, historical, biological, etc. Interdisciplinary research is a type of research where researchers from distinct fields collaborate and try to integrate their findings. The idea for this book came from my work using friendship studies as a case for investigating interdisciplinarity in fields where it is not yet very visible. Interdisciplinarity is also about the use of different methods. It is obvious that if one uses distinct tools to study something, one gets different kinds of answers, such as if you use statistical approaches or make qualitative interviews to understand, say, loneliness and sociability within a society. Different methods provide better coverage of the different aspects of something, aspects that then need to be integrated. Using a metaphor from trigonometry and surveying, social scientists call this integrative approach *triangulation*, and it can describe the approach taken here as well. Just as there are different styles of reasoning and scientific practice, there are different ways to move on in better understanding the meaning of friendship in people's lives.

During human history, it seems that the discourse of friendship has had its ups and downs, and there is much evidence to suggest that we are now entering a phase in which forming relationships across political, ideological and economic divides is particularly important. When a society is about to move on, from fragmentation and isolation to a more coherent state – when its people can meet again over

common affairs and share essential tasks and basic joys – then good friends is a help, and knowing what friendship means, can be a profound source of inspiration.

I wrote above that this is a ‘personal’ book, and, naturally, in the course of making it, I have consulted a number of people and have received support from many. I would like to take this opportunity of thanking them for giving me the benefit of their insights and advice at different stages of the project. I dedicate the book to the memory of my mom and dad, Kirsten and Povl. A prerequisite for its preparation was the free research environment and kind colleagues in the Humanities research group at the University of Aalborg and in the History and Philosophy of Science group at the Department of Science Education at the University of Copenhagen. I am indebted to these colleagues and to my friends through the years, my thinking about friendship would not have been possible without them (and, I guess, their multi-locality) – thanks to Ellen and Jens Peter (Gershøj), Mercy (Roskilde; Nairobi), Rasmus (Santa Cruz; Nørrebro), Molly (St. Louis Park), Mariana (Piracicaba; Marília; Exeter), Henrik (Lyngby), Søren (Amager), Eunice and Mariana (Marília), Mette Miriam (Herfølge; Cambridge, Massachusetts), Frederik and Simo (København), Henrik and Maria (Grenada), Di (Christiania) and Jon (Hertfordshire; Hong Kong), Neha (Gwalior; Mumbai; Vancouver), and Don and Emi (Singapore; Japan). Had it not been for the editors of this book series, Paul Cobley (London) and Kalevi Kull (Tartu), and acquisitions editor Natalie Fecher and content editor Kirstin Børgen at de Gruyter (Berlin), the project would have existed only as a weird idea in my head without materialising into something that could hopefully be of use to others besides my friends. I am much indebted to an anonymous reviewer of the manuscript who provided encouraging, insightful and productive comments. Thanks also to the members of my family who tolerated my absences and solipsistic focus on getting the never-finished book finished, so thanks to Maaleesh and Mandira, Mads, Lars and Jens, Lene, Osvald and Carla, Lise Lotte, Toke, Andrea, Magnus and Oscar, and Viber and Steen. My wife and soulmate Nayana, whom I thank with all my heart, has been a fundamental support along the way.

## Part 2: How to use the rest of the book

The major part of the book focuses on three levels. The first is concrete individual persons who are *friends* and their lived relationships, real or fictional, as known from popular culture or research and scholarship. Find a list of those included in the entry on ‘famous friends’.

The second level is *friendship* as such and all its connotations, typologies and borderline cases related to the semiotics of that concept which is vague, dynamic, historically situated in wider discourse but used by us all in everyday action and

thinking. This includes an entry on ‘proverbs on friendship’ listing a collection of special language entries with particular examples.

The third level is *friendship research* which is also highly varied in approach (from anthropology and philosophy to neurobiology and network analysis) but helps throw some light on the first two levels. A list of the essays included to introduce these academic fields are found in the entry on ‘research’.

Regardless of whether you are a student on your own or enrolled in an undergraduate or graduate programme in the social sciences, arts and humanities, or whether you have to deal academically with friendship as a sign, a relationship, a trope, an illusion, or a discourse, some informational scaffolding may be useful to support your thought-work along these complex issues of friends and friendship. This book supports searches for other perspectives, offering clues and chances for serendipitous discovery, and an explanation based on negative ontology of why any understanding of friendship will always be incomplete.

Both fiction and non-fiction books can be seen as maps of some part of the world. By mapping friends, friendship, and friendship studies, this book is charting territories that are both in flux and still to be known and understood much better. A mapmaker doesn’t know the departures and destinations of the map’s users, and the same applies to this author. So, use this book as you may, as a reference source, as a reflective mirror for your own experiences, or as a tool for studying a form of love that is so common and yet so enigmatic.

Plunge into an entry that attracts attention, follow its internal hints to other entries for more information, and you are already engaged in an evolving vibrant network of ideas about friends, a semiotic network that expands your own ontology of friendship but also expands the new and perhaps unanswerable questions you can ask about this phenomenon. Listed references make sure one can find the sources, if one needs to pursue more details in the literature. And talking about literature, both good research and fiction are genres that can contribute to new understandings of friendship. This book includes friendship stories of both real and fictional characters that we can easily relate to as we reflect on our own experiences and ways of living our social lives.



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