

# 1 Three Friendships – and Lots of Questions

## Shrek

**DONKEY:** Hey hey hey. Come back here. I'm not through with you yet.

**SHREK:** Well, I'm through with you.

**DONKEY:** Uh uh! You know, with you it's always *me me me*. Well guess what – now it's my turn. So you just shut up and pay attention. You are mean to me. You insult me. You don't appreciate anything I do. You're always pushing me around, or pushing me away.

**SHREK:** Oh yeah? Well, if I treated you so bad, how come you came back?

**DONKEY:** Because that's what friends do. *They forgive each other.*  
(*Shrek*, Dreamworks 2001)

The award-winning children's film *Shrek* came out at just the right time (in 2001) to be a favourite with our children when they were small, for family viewing (in fact, for multi-repeat family viewing). *Shrek* is a fairy-tale animation about a sad, lonely, angry, alienated ogre in a world that rejects him for being scary, ugly, and different. With Donkey's help, Shrek has just rescued the beautiful Princess Fiona from a dragon. Since this is a fairy-tale, Shrek has of course fallen in love with Fiona, but since he is an ogre and she is (apparently) a princess, he is sure his love is in vain. He has always kept up a tough and cynical exterior, but now he has stormed off from

Princess Fiona because he has overheard her saying ‘Who could love a hideous, ugly beast?’ – and mistakenly assumed that she meant him.

Fiona said those painful words to Donkey. Like Shrek, Donkey is a misfit in the world of the film; their shared exclusion is the starting point of Shrek and Donkey’s friendship. Now Shrek thinks that even Donkey has betrayed him – that even Donkey and Fiona are laughing at him behind his back. But Donkey goes after Shrek and confronts him to ask Shrek why he has stormed off. As the saying is, every good story has a beginning, a muddle, and an end. The dialogue that I quote comes from the turning-point in the film where the muddle is about to be resolved.

Outside fairy-tales, in the real world, it is easy to allow our society’s snobbery about ‘popular culture’, and its weird combination of mawkish sentimentality and condescending dismissiveness about children (who after all deserve neither, given that they are simply young human beings), to blind us to the fact that many children’s films provide excellent resources for thinking about big ethical questions. And that includes big ethical questions about friendship. (*Methodological note #1*: So don’t ignore children’s films and literature. Also, *methodological note #2*: Don’t do philosophy only by referencing other philosophers. Throughout this book, I shall be careful to observe both.)

So with *Shrek*. ‘That’s what friends do,’ says Donkey, and his words land a blow even on the harshly unidealistic Shrek. But aside from what Donkey mentions, forgiving each other, what *is* it that friends do? What is it to be a friend? Is there even one thing, actually, that it is to be a friend?

Some philosophers, including me, are interested in what we call *role ethics*, the study of the duties, rights, obligations, and so on that arise from occupying a role. A role here means something like *colleague* or *parent* or *lifeguard* or *firefighter* or *philosophy professor*. Friendship too seems pretty clearly to be some kind of role, with particular obligations and prerogatives and emphases and specialisations that flow from occupying the role. But if friendship *is* a role, what obligations and prerogatives does the role of friend involve, and why? How might the obligations, prerogatives, and so forth that come from one role mesh, or clash, with those that come our other roles?

Alongside the question whether friendship is a role, and if so what kind of role, there is the connected question whether FRIENDSHIP is what philosophers call a thick ethical concept. (Note: I follow a common convention among philosophers of writing the names of concepts in capitals when those concepts are particularly under scrutiny.) Thick ethical concepts are concepts like PROMISING, GENEROSITY, HONOUR, TRUST. They are, as we could call them, *bridging* concepts: that is, they are concepts that link possible courses of action in the world, via particular institutions or traditions or practices or dispositions in the world, to moral verdicts like RIGHT, WRONG, GOOD, BAD, OBLIGATORY. (The concepts named by these morally verdictive words are often called the ‘thin ethical concepts’. It is a further question whether any ethical concept is entirely ‘thin’, entirely lacking in social and historical situatedness. Indeed it is a further question whether any naturally occurring concept at all is thin in that sense – one that I have

answered ‘No’, in an essay called ‘There Are No Thin Concepts’ (Chappell 2013). But certainly only some concepts play the bridging role just outlined between descriptions of the world and practical deliberations.)

So thick ethical concepts can be a key connecting factor in moral explanations and moral justifications. For instance, my practical reasoning (explicit or inexplicit) might say: ‘I must give these books back before Christmas, because I PROMISED’ (using capitals as noted above). Or: ‘That was a good thing to do because it was GENEROUS.’ Or: ‘She felt obliged to resign as a matter of HONOUR.’ Or: ‘It was particularly bad to leave the dog in kennels so long when she was just beginning to TRUST you.’

Now it seems clear that we can use role-descriptions in something like the same way. For example: ‘I am a lifeguard, so I must dive in the water right now.’ To dive in the water is my duty, my obligation, something it would be wrong for me not to do. How so? Because there are people out there in the water right now who, as the newspapers say, have got into difficulty, and because I am a lifeguard. So here the role of LIFE GUARD is the key link between a situation-description and an action-prescription for me.

It also seems clear that we can use FRIENDSHIP in this sort of explanatory way. Consider again Donkey’s ringing affirmation, ‘That’s what friends do’, in the quotation above. Given the capitalising convention that I have mentioned, it looks like we should rewrite this as ‘That’s what FRIENDS do.’ Apparently friendship too is both a role *and* a thick ethical concept. And more generally, it seems

that the names of most roles are typically thick concepts. PARENT certainly behaves like a thick concept, as when people say things like ‘I care because I’m your mother’ or ‘You’re my father, you’re supposed to be there for me.’

Come to that, it has often been argued that MAN and WOMAN are thick ethical concepts too, and roles as well. A whole host of song lyrics suggest exactly this: just to give two of the most famous examples, Bob Dylan’s ‘Just Like a Woman’ and James Brown’s ‘It’s a Man’s World’. At a rather more cerebral level there is Simone de Beauvoir’s ([1949] 1972, 1) famous aphorism, at the beginning of *The Second Sex*, that *On ne naît pas femme: on le devient* (‘One is not born woman: one becomes it’).

Some people read de Beauvoir’s aphorism as designed to echo Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s equally well-known slogan, ‘Man is born free and everywhere he is in chains’, *L’homme est né libre et partout il est dans les fers* (Rousseau [1762] 1913, xvi) – so that de Beauvoir’s point is that the role and the concept of WOMAN, at least as we have it, is a kind of prison from which people (mainly but not exclusively the female ones) need to be liberated. They take her slogan as a call for the *abolition* of the roles of gender, just as we might take slogans like Rousseau’s as a call for the abolition of roles like SLAVE. However, de Beauvoir’s aphorism is also often quoted as an *approval* of the role of WOMAN, at least in some form or other: for example by those who think that ‘gender is performative’, and who don’t think that all such performances are so pernicious that the gender roles MAN and WOMAN should be abolished altogether.

Whether or not we should be abolitionists about the role of WOMAN is not something that I will talk about here. (I talk about it a bit in another book of mine, *Trans Figured*; see Chappell 2024.) But it is worth noting something that the example vividly teaches us. This is that, for any role, there is not only the question of what that role involves, but also the more fundamental question of whether we should allow the role to exist in our society at all. (Consider SLAVE again. Or MAFIOSO. Or CONCENTRATION CAMP GUARD. Or, I am tempted to say with an eye on the UK specifically, PEER.)

Has anyone ever been an abolitionist about FRIENDSHIP? Yes: some people have thought that we are obliged to care equally for everyone. Friendship, they think, undermines this obligation by pointing us towards some people in particular, at the expense of others in particular. This is something that utilitarians might conceivably think, and sometimes have (more about them later). It is also something that revolutionary socialists have sometimes thought: part of the point of calling everyone ‘comrade’ is that under communism *everyone* is my comrade. We all hold all property in common, and all means of production, and all political power. In exactly the same way – the idea is – we all have our affections in common.

Some religious movements too have sometimes tried to abolish ‘particular friendships’. Here is the American Jesuit Charles Shelton SJ:

... Until the post-Vatican II era, caution against ‘particular friendship’ was a common feature of Jesuit training. I have heard older Jesuits describe their training:

during recreation periods, they had to walk in threes rather than twos, and they were expected not to spend too much time alone with the same companion. Homophobic fears and the cultural ethos of the time no doubt fuelled such policies, [and] because we are members of a religious community, a myopically held assumption of 'affection in common' prevailed – a sort of levelling of the emotional field . . . the assumption was that we somehow violated our common way of living if we wrote about or focused on specific relationships to the exclusion of the wider brotherhood. (1975, 4)

As Shelton adds at once, he sees a very simple problem with any such attempt to exclude partiality:

The problem with such a premise is, simply, that it doesn't work! Humans naturally desire bonded attachment and, depending upon the relationship, such attachment varies in its quality and intensity. Even in the 1940s and 50s, when the training was more restrictive, some Jesuits naturally gravitated toward certain men who later came to be considered close friends . . . (1975, 4)

We will come back to the ideas of partiality and universal benevolence in Chapter 2, when we look at utilitarianism.

For now, let's proceed on the working assumption that friendship is a thick ethical concept, and not one (like SLAVE or MAFIOSO or perhaps WOMAN) that we simply want to abolish. If so, then it must be worthwhile to ask exactly how the thick concept FRIENDSHIP works, and what exactly it implies for our actions and decisions. It must be a good idea to look around and think when and where we can appeal to friendship in explanations of good

and bad, right and wrong. When is it on-target to say ‘I should do this for you *because you are my friend*’? And when isn’t it on-target? Why is it correct to make that appeal sometimes, and in other places either irrelevant, or positively inappropriate? We all have (or most of us have) an instinctive *feel* for right and wrong uses of such an appeal. It would be interesting to understand better what justifies that feel, or proves it to be unjustified after all.

Here many philosophers will hope for something *simple and unifying* that justifies the feeling that we are right (or wrong) to appeal to friendship in any given case. Philosophers who hope for this are buying into the ambition of the systematising theorist, who hopes to find a straightforward pattern of explanation that works all over the place. Myself I am, as we shall see, pretty sceptical about the systematising ambition. Of course it is nice if things that look complicated turn out to be simple. But I see no special reason to think that they will always or even often do so, in ethics any more than in, say, physics. Given the immense complexity of human life, there is every reason to expect the ethics of human life to be complex too. But if it is one kind of progress to come to see a simple justification for complicated phenomena, it is also progress, of a different kind, to come to see why no such simple justification is available. Maybe, by the end of this book, we will have made a little progress of both kinds.

### *When Harry Met Sally*

A second American comedy film that also raises big philosophical questions about friendship is *When Harry Met*



*Sally.* Here the questions are about friendship and romance. Or perhaps I mean friendship *versus* romance:

**HARRY:** You realise, of course, that we can never be friends.

**SALLY:** Why not?

**HARRY:** What I'm saying is – and this is not a come-on in any way, shape, or form – is that men and women can't be friends because the sex part always gets in the way.

**SALLY:** That's not true. I have a number of men friends and there is no sex involved.

**HARRY:** No you don't. You only think you do.

**SALLY:** You're saying I'm having sex with these men without my knowledge?

**HARRY:** No, what I'm saying is they all *want* to have sex with you.

**SALLY:** How do you know?

**HARRY:** Because no man can be friends with a woman that he finds attractive. He always wants to have sex with her.

**SALLY:** Well, I guess we're not going to be friends then.

**HARRY:** Guess not.

(*When Harry Met Sally*, Columbia 1989, screenplay by Nora Ephron; my quotation is slightly edited)

The brash young Harry's crude and dogmatic assertions are offensive in more than one way. For one thing, they are intrusively personal about Sally's private life, and involve him in an unamiable amount of 'mansplaining' her own relationships to her. For another, it is hard to warm to Harry's airy assumption that all people are either heterosexual men or heterosexual women (and indeed that all people are either men or women). But looking beyond these objections, Harry is raising a batch of really interesting questions.

Not all societies have thought that friendship does conflict with sexual/romantic involvement (whether gay or

straight or something else). There have been plenty of societies where friendship quite often meant a relationship between an older man and a younger man that normally did involve homosexual flirtation at the very least, and quite often physical sex acts as well: the Azande of central Africa, traditional Japan, and Plato's Athens are all examples. (Under what circumstances a younger Athenian man should let an older man have his wicked way with him, and what exactly 'having his way with him' might involve, was in Plato's time a question for endless and no doubt enjoyably titillating debate. These debates are sometimes reflected in Plato's dialogues, for example in the *Phaedrus*, *Charmides*, and *Symposium*.)

So exactly why do so many people say today what Harry says to Sally: that friendship and romance inevitably conflict? Is the idea that romance *destroys* friendship, or just that romance *replaces* friendship? Or is it, as C. S. Lewis once suggested (more about him in Chapter 8), because our society is so segregated by sex that men and women in our society mostly don't have enough in common for friendships between them even to be possible?

Given the high prestige and value that our society accords to romance and sex, we might think that if a friendship transmutes into a romance, no serious loss is involved anyway – maybe, in fact, something more like a gain. Certainly, when a friendship *doesn't* turn into a romance, we often see that as a failure – at least if it is a man/woman friendship. We more or less expect a film that involves a man–woman partnership of some kind – such as *When Harry Met Sally*, and indeed *Shrek* – to end in a romance,

and we tend to feel a bit cheated if it doesn't. Similarly, both in films and in real life, when a woman (as it usually is) tells a man (as it usually is) 'Let's just be friends', she is usually not giving him a boost, but deflating him.

*(Heteronormativity sidebar: As a rule we have no such expectation about fictional same-sex partnerships, especially not if (as is usual) they are male. No one feels cheated that Holmes and Watson, or Starsky and Hutch, or Morse and Lewis, never end up as lovers. Indeed many people will find the very idea of these pairs as lovers as bizarre and comical as the idea of Morecambe and Wise in bed together. They may also, interestingly enough, find that suggestion threatening. Perhaps this fact about common attitudes in our society gives us a clue that heteronormativity is much more pervasive than it might look to be.)*

Maybe it is possible to do what people often advise us to do, and 'marry your best friend'. Some of us think we have done exactly that. But if you do marry your best friend, do you thereby extinguish your friendship with them? Or your romance? Or both? It might be correct to think of friend and boyfriend/girlfriend as different roles – and husband/wife as different roles again. It doesn't seem so clear that these roles, if that is what they are, must always exclude each other. Or if they do, some people have sometimes thought that the role of the friend is more important than that of the lover:

Marriage with anyone who I don't think the most splendid friend I've ever had doesn't interest me. Love and sex are very fine, but they won't last. Friendship – the kind of friendship I am talking about – is charity and

loving-kindness more than it's sex and it lasts as long as life. What's more, it grows, and sex dwindles: has to. So – will you marry me and be friends? We'll have love and we'll have sex, but we won't build on those alone. You don't have to answer now. But I wish you'd think very seriously about it, because if you say no . . . I don't have to crawl and whine and pretend I can't live without you. I can, and if I must, I'll do it. But I can live so much better with you, and you can live so much better with me . . . (Davies 1981, 311)

By the end of *When Harry Met Sally*, it does look (if you'll forgive the plot-spoiler) like Harry and Sally have both been proved right, in a way. Sally is proved right that a man and a woman can be friends for decades without also being romantically involved, because she and Harry are. But Harry is proved right that friends like them are almost bound to get romantically involved in the end – because he and Sally do. And apparently, they do both end up married to their best friend.

### *High Fidelity*

A third piece of popular culture that we might use for thinking about friendship – and sex and romance too – is Nick Hornby's grimly funny north-London novel *High Fidelity* (1995). A good way to get across what is going on in *High Fidelity* is to use two brief quotations from reviews of the book:

A very funny and concise explanation of why we men are as we are. If you are male, you should read it and then

make your partner read it, so that they will no longer hate you but pity you instead. (Harry Enfield, in *The Independent on Sunday*, quoted as a blurb on the back of the paperback)

I have known quite a few men like Rob Fleming, the central character of Nick Hornby's first novel. Men who not only look for but find the meaning of life in a sleeve note or a chord change in a Pretenders song. Men who believe that the only reliable way to glimpse the soul of another is via their record collection.

I have spent nights celebrating such men's 33 1/3rd birthdays – 33 1/3, because when all is said and done such men would really rather be a piece of vinyl than a human being. In Vinyl-land, you get to rub shoulders with the other great pieces of vinyl. You don't have to relate to those other kind of people, the ones who for some reason don't choose to define themselves in this way – women.

You see, Rob and his friends, Barry and Dick, who work in Rob's second-hand record shop, know that what really matters is what you like, not what you are like. They make endless lists of records, films, episodes of *Cheers*, in order to prove themselves to each other. In *Fever Pitch* (1992), Hornby brilliantly charted the intimate dynamics of fandom long before the vogue for Fantasy Football. In *High Fidelity*, Rob and his mates are experts at Fantasy Compilation Albums, Fantasy Soundtracks for Fantasy Lives.

In real life, Rob is 36. His girlfriend, Laura, has left him, prompting some sort of mid-life crisis . . . So Rob does what a man's gotta do and rearranges his record collection . . . (Suzanne Moore, *The Guardian*, 28 March 1995)

If you read *High Fidelity*, one of the things that grabs you straight away about Rob, Barry, and Dick is how rubbish all three of them are at both romance and friendship. Not only are these three men (all default cis-heterosexuals) ham-fisted, inarticulate, and basically lost with women; they're no better with each other. If anything they're worse, because one thing Hornby's novel makes very clear is that while they have a minimal idea of what the role of boyfriend/lover/partner involves, they have no clue at all about what is involved in friendship with other men. As we might also put it: they don't understand the role of being friends with each other.

This is, if you like, another angle on a problem about role ethics that we have already touched on: the problem of the *indeterminacy* of at least some roles, including friendship. In our society today in the liberal West, we don't quite seem to know what the role of friendship is; we don't even seem entirely sure that friendship is a role at all, at least in the way that *colleague* or *parent* or *philosophy professor* is a role. Here Nick Hornby has put his finger on a genuine problem in our society. The nature of friendship, what being a friend commits us to and why, is something that is extremely unclear to most of us today. (And was there any rose-tinted Yesterday when it was *clearer*? Not necessarily.)

Hornby seems right, too, that this is a gendered problem: that it is a particular problem with friendships between men. It's simply obscure to us all, but especially to men, what they can reasonably expect or demand from their friends, and what they can reasonably expect or demand from each other. And that can make our (and especially men's) social world a dark and puzzling place.

Friendship today, we might say, is rather like Christmas. From a thousand and one books and films and songs (and advertisements), everyone knows what 'the ideal Christmas' is supposed to be like. But not many of us are content or comfortable just to buy into that ideal without reservation – not even those of us who are Christians. (Sometimes *especially* not those of us who are Christians.) There is a lot about the ideal Christmas that most of us find fraudulent, fake, silly, saccharine, or otherwise repellent. Similarly with friendship, it's not that we don't know what a friend is supposed to be like. It's more like we know only too well what a friend is meant to be like – and just find we can't endorse that ideal.

In our society there are some fairly specific rules about how to be a man friend to another man, or a woman friend to another woman, but so many people feel like rejecting these rules. You don't have to be gender non-conforming to be repelled and alienated by blokeyness, by the role of the Bloke as we might call it. Probably most intelligent and reflective male-born people find the social prescriptions involved in the Role of the Bloke pretty unattractive. Yet any man or boy who has been in a rugby team or a school cadets unit, or who will insist on watching *Top Gear* or hanging out with train-spotters or real-ale enthusiasts or detectorists, will have had blokeyness imposed on him. (Yes, of course there are female train-spotters or real-ale enthusiasts or detectorists . . . all the same.) In these contexts at least, male friendship is a very well-defined role, involving, let us say, an inordinate interest in malt whisky, engines, muscular sports, loud music, military history, and more or

less explicit photographs of very beautiful women. (Another observation from *High Fidelity*: male friendship seems to involve a lot of compiling lists, too.) But for lots of men, this set of stereotypes causes them nothing but discomfort. Understandably enough, they reject *this* version of the role of male friendship; having rejected this, and found no obvious alternative version, they end up in the same state of confusion about what friendship can be for men as Rob, Barry, and Dick are in in Hornby's novel.

It is an interesting question what corresponding rules and stereotypes our society imposes on the role of friendship for women. The pressures here seem real enough, and in some ways worse. Of course some almost parodic versions of what it is for women to be friends with each other have had plenty of publicity – see *Mamma Mia* or *Absolutely Fabulous* or *Mean Girls* or all those women's magazines and story-books for girls. In some ways these stereotypes for women's friendships might remind us of the kinds of stereotypes for men that we were looking at before; with these stereotypes too, it is only too intelligible if individual women or girls find them stiflingly and uncomfortably alien.

But in the female case there is a further problem in a society like ours, where so many things are, ultimately, organised for and around men. This is that a lot of our society's stereotypes for women are not about how women present themselves *to each other*; they are about how women present themselves, individually or in groups, *to men*. And this of course is another reason for rebelling against the stereotypes.



Whether or not our friendships comply with male or female stereotypes, there is always a further question. And this too comes up in *High Fidelity*, and *Shrek*, and *When Harry Met Sally*. This is the question of how friendship is good for us – a question that will be in the air throughout this book, and my main focus in Chapter 17.

When, that is, friendship *is* good for us, because obviously there is such a thing as a toxic friend. It would be better for Othello, and for Cassio too, if he were never friends with Iago. And with all sorts of friendships, even ones that weren't at all toxic to start with, there can, sadly, come a point at which it is either unavoidable, or clearly the right option, simply to end them. But even when my evil friends aren't actively trying to destroy me, as Iago wants to destroy both Cassio and Othello, friendship with bad people can be very bad for me. 'Bad company corrupts good character', St Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15.33 – and he is apparently quoting a Greek proverb of his day, rather like our own 'Birds of a feather'.

Naturally it's better if my friends aren't positively evil. So does that mean that only positively good people can be friends? Well, some folk wisdom suggests that being a good friend can actually conflict with being a good person: as the saying goes, 'A friend helps you move. A true friend helps you move a body.' On the other hand, many philosophers, including Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero (in my fifth aphorism in the Prelude), bring something like moral goodness right into the centre of their account of friendship. These philosophers all think that the only true friendship is the friendship of good men, adult males who are virtuous

(again, notice the gendering). If you don't quite fit that ideal, whether by not being male, or not being adult, or not being good, then you are bound, at least to some extent, to miss out on friendship – at least in its highest forms, and possibly altogether.

(Corinne Gartner has the following to say on this:

Aristotle's account of friendship in *Nicomachean Ethics* VIII–IX [is usually understood] as the locus classicus of a highly moralizing view of the phenomenon, according to which the only genuine friendships are those between two virtuous agents who are attracted to each other on the basis of moral excellence. If this conception is right, then most of our apparent friendships fail to make the cut, and most of us are, strictly speaking, friendless. (2022, 35)

Plato seems open to Gartner's criticism too: see *Lysis* 214c ff.)

Another idea about friendship that we have all heard is the idea that friendships can have a big effect on our own moral character. It is a commonplace of journalism and gossip to say that someone 'was all right until he got in with the wrong crowd'. And it is a central idea in many novels of school life – right back to *Tom Brown's Schooldays* – that friendship is a morally risky business, because we are all so prone to accept or absorb the values of the other human beings around us in our peer group.

A more sombre example than school stories is the case of Nazi Germany. Hitler's regime, no doubt, was one of the things on E. M. Forster's mind when he wrote in 1938, in my sixteenth aphorism, that he would rather betray his country than his friends. But the Nazis understood the

power of peer pressure, the social forces whereby people are made to go along with what is generally accepted by the friends around them, and used it to striking effect as a way of getting German citizens in the 1930s to sign up for far more than the minimum public expressions of commitment to that monstrous regime that they could safely get away with. (A remarkable film about this chilling phenomenon is *Good* (Goldcrest Films 2008), with Jason Isaacs as a Jewish Berliner whose non-Jewish friend (Viggo Mortensen), in the interest of fitting in and avoiding risk, slowly but surely betrays him, all the way down the line to the death-camp.) Given all these dark possibilities, we might wonder what someone would be missing if they never had *any* friends. Is it really so terrible to live the life of Johnny-no-mates, as it's called in the British Army? Why couldn't a solitary get whatever benefits friendship has in some other, perhaps less risky, way?

So for a lot of philosophers, asking 'What is the benefit of friendship?' has often morphed into an adjacent inquiry: about whether friendship (or a friend) is an end in itself, or just a means to some other end. (Perhaps to the end of realising virtue, or value, or utility; or again to realising ambitions, or pleasures, or just having a good time.) Lots of philosophers – most famously Kant – have been emphatic that we are morally required to treat other people 'never merely as a means, but always at the same time as an end in themselves' ([1797] 2017, 4: 439). It sounds like Kant is telling us that it is wrong to treat our friendships as a means to procuring the benefits of friendship: his rather stern advice is that we should treat our friends as valuable in

themselves, and never mind what benefits we get from them. (For a more sympathetic view of Kant on friendship see Karen Stohr, 2022, especially Chapter 25, titled ‘Friends and Frenemies’.)

However, both sides of his means/ends contrast are puzzling. What is it to treat you as a means? What is it to treat you as an end in yourself? And so, what is it to treat you as a means *but not merely* as a means – to treat you as both a means and an end *at the same time*? It is not just Kant who is puzzling on this problem – and rather strangely preoccupied by it. Philosophers in general do seem peculiarly prone to this worry whether, if friendship is a means to an end, that means that we are treating our friends merely instrumentally – ‘using’ them – by having friendships with them. And maybe it’s not just philosophers who are puzzled about this. ‘I only hang out with you because you’re fun. If you *weren’t* fun, or stopped being fun, I’d find someone else, and quickly’: we do quite often think such things. (If we’re rude enough, or provoked enough, we may actually say them too.)

Another big question that philosophers have also worried about a lot arises here, about replacement or ‘trading up’. If I am friends with you purely for the sake of the fun we have, but Jones would be a more fun friend than you, then why shouldn’t I just dump you and hang out with Jones instead?

Philosophers of friendship call this the trading-up problem. The obvious answer (which seems like another appeal to a thick ethical concept) is: ‘Because trading up would be disloyal.’ But then, what is it that makes loyalty so

important in a friendship? Is loyalty always the key thing, with any friend? Does it weigh the same with every friend? (The friend I met by accident in the pub three weeks ago, versus the friend I've known since primary school?) If loyalty to friends is important, then (to come back to Forster's remark) how should we balance it against other kinds of loyalty, like patriotism? Does loyalty mean that I have a duty to cling on grimly to our relationship, even though, these days, you bore me rigid? Or to pretend that you are more fun to be with than you actually are? People say of romantic relationships that 'Love is blind', but maybe friendship is blind too sometimes – maybe friends miss each other's faults through bias and partiality.

Speaking of partiality, here is another ethical problem that arises at once when we think about friendship. When is it morally permissible to be partial or biased towards my friends, and when not? I can choose to invite you to my party, but not Jones, because you are my friend and Jones isn't. So why can't I choose to give you the job, and not Jones, because you are my friend and Jones isn't? What, in short, is the difference between friendship and cronyism, and how do we draw a line between them?

Here we can appeal again to roles. When I appoint someone to a job, I am acting in my professional role, and I should use the standards and the criteria dictated by that role. To appoint someone to a post where we are looking for *the best philosopher available* on the grounds that she is *my best friend available* is to fail to recognise this distinction between the different roles that I occupy, and to appoint by reference to an irrelevant standard.

This answer must be broadly correct, but it is not clear how it determines some of the more marginal cases. After all, the fact that I am good friends with someone isn't *entirely* irrelevant in the workplace; on the contrary, it usually makes our work go much better than it would if we thoroughly disliked each other. So if two candidates are tied for professional ability, and one is my friend and the other isn't, mightn't I use my friendship as a tie-breaker?

My own answer to that is 'No', partly because I think that there is too much scope for self-deception about which comparisons really are ties, and partly because I think that friendship should not be considered positively relevant even in *this* way. On the other hand, I suspect that I would allow *enmity* to be negatively relevant in such a case ... So what we should decide about such cases is rather unclear, or at any rate, the right thing to do about them is not easily compressible into a neat verbal formula – it is likely to be a matter of intuitive judgement, and of what philosophers sometimes call *phronesis* (Aristotle's term for it) or tacit knowledge (cp. Chapter 13). But what these cases do make very clear is that roles overlap, and don't have precise edges. Neither then do the moral standards generated by roles.

As soon as we start thinking about the philosophy of friendship, we face lots of tricky questions like these. If you want quickfire answers to as many as possible of them, then feel free turn at once to Chapter 18, which is a kind of philosophical supermarket-trolley dash that seeks to pile up as many snappy answers to as many snappy questions as quickly as I can.

Some people read philosophy for its answers, others for its questions. Some of us enjoy the journey as well as the

destination, and may even not mind if we don't actually reach any destination, any particular answers.

Philosophy is to be studied, not for the sake of any definite answers to its questions, since no definite answers can, as a rule, be known to be true, but rather for the sake of the questions themselves; because these questions enlarge our conception of what is possible, enrich our intellectual imagination and diminish the dogmatic assurance which closes the mind against speculation. (Russell 1912, final chapter, n. p.)

Maybe what we want is not (or not just) a grab-bag of snappy answers to some philosophical questions about friendship like Chapter 18's, but a more reflective and in-depth exploration of these questions, which links them with all sorts of nearby questions. If that is you, then stay on this page, because that is what the rest of this book supplies.

It's also, on the whole, a better representation of how it is with philosophy. 'Philosophy is a seamless garment', as one of my first and most intimidating philosophy tutors used to say. In philosophy one thing leads to another, and the interconnections are manifold and sometimes surprising. This is partly why good answers to philosophical questions aren't easy to come by: what we say about one question affects what we say about lots of others. This is a book on the philosophy (and the ethics) of friendship. But it is also, and thereby, a book on philosophy and ethics in general, because we can't think about any one ethical or philosophical issue without integrating it into a broader network of other issues.

Nor is there just one correct result for the philosophy of friendship. Despite the attempts of many system-builders

to identify and construct one uniquely true theoretical structure, there isn't just one best way of representing any of the subject matter of philosophy. There is no grasping the whole of the truth about philosophy in one single God's-eye view. The nearest any of us can ever get to that kind of synoptic vision is not at all close. It is a particular, accidental, incidental, untidy journey *through* the terrain, undertaken at a particular time, with particular aims and preconceptions, by a particular explorer: in this case, myself.

Two philosophers who will (as it were) keep us company throughout this book, and who always understood this untidiness of philosophy very well – though in their different ways, they both fought against it – are Plato (427–347 BC) and Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951). Plato was (or so we're told) a playwright before Socrates (469–399 BC) converted him to philosophy, and his dramatic artistry is nearly always evident in his work. Philosophy in Plato's dialogues is exactly what I have just described – an untidy journey undertaken by particular people in a particular time and place.

Of course, one of the things that Plato is most famous for is his quest for a kind of superhuman and transcendent clarity and perfection in philosophy – 'the realm of the Forms', as the *Phaedrus* calls it. But I say *quest*. Plato may be searching for – and may long to find – a superhuman order of metaphysical revelation, but it isn't obvious that he ever actually finds that order; whenever he talks about it, he talks about it indirectly and in metaphors. Moreover, his writings remain at nearly all times irresistibly



human, and this is part of what makes them such a wonderful read. The philosophical inquiries that he portrays in his dialogues are full of immortal longings. But they always start from a conversation between friends, here and now. And quite often they don't get much further than that; they leave us with more questions than they started with. This is how it is for us too when we do philosophy – and this book will deliberately reflect that messy reality.

Wittgenstein too was something else before he became a philosopher: he was an aeronautical engineer. (He was also a soldier in the Austrian Army in the First World War, and a prisoner of war in Italy. At other times in his life he worked as a gardener, a schoolteacher, and an architect. He probably had the talent to be a musician too, though like many musical people he was gripped by a perfectionist puritanism that found fallibility intolerable.) In line with his strong scientific and technological bent, Wittgenstein began his philosophical career not only as a systematiser, but as one of the most ambitious systematisers of all time. In his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* of 1921, Wittgenstein genuinely believed that he *had* found the uniquely true best single way of representing the subject matter of philosophy. But by the time he wrote the Preface to his *Philosophical Investigations* in January 1945, he had – rather against his will – come to see philosophy completely differently:

The thoughts which I publish in what follows are the precipitate of philosophical investigations which have occupied me for the last sixteen years. They concern

many subjects . . . I have written down all these thoughts as *remarks*, short paragraphs, of which there is sometimes a fairly long chain about the same subject, while I sometimes make a sudden change, jumping from one topic to another . . . The essential thing was that the thoughts should proceed from one subject to another in a natural order and without breaks.

After several unsuccessful attempts to weld my results together into such a whole, I realised that I should never succeed . . . And this was, of course, connected with the very nature of the investigation. For this compels us to travel over a wide field of thought criss-cross in every direction. The philosophical remarks in this book are, as it were, a number of sketches of landscapes which were made in the course of these long and involved journeyings. (1951, v)

‘Much contemporary analytic philosophy’, the Oxford philosopher of logic Timothy Williamson has recently complained, ‘seems to be written in the tacit hope of discursively muddling through, uncontrolled by any clear methodological constraints’ (2007, Afterword). Other philosophers, such as the great Canadian philosopher of science Ian Hacking, have thought that discursively muddling through is as good as it gets: first we work out ‘what works’; only later, if at all, do we try to work out *why* it works. For my part, I am on Hacking’s side here. I do not proceed without *any* methodological constraints, but I do take to heart a thought that is central for Hacking, but which Williamson seems rather to discount: the thought that our manner in philosophy ought to be dictated by our matter, and not the other way around.

The philosophy of friendship is an untidy thing, and in this book, encouraged by the examples of Plato and Wittgenstein, I will mostly be quite unapologetic about the untidiness of my study of it. (Though as I say, anyone who still wants something tidier should try Chapter 18.)

However, there are some things that I *would* like to apologise for.