

Doing friendship, thinking friendship.

An introduction

*Philipp Lenhard and Andree Michaelis-König**

By way of incessant dialogues with his contemporaries, so states Hannah Arendt's in her 1954 article *Philosophy and Politics: The Problem of Action and Thought after the French Revolution*, "Socrates tried to make friends out of Athens' citizenry". Friendship, she continues, inspired exactly the kind of activity that was needed to foster a "community" out of "people who are different and equal. The community comes into being through equalizing [...]. The political, non-economic equalization is friendship, *philia*."¹ This much remains true of friendship up to the present day: Friendship is at the root of our understanding of how democratic political communities function because it designates a field that tackles the production of equality as the basis of how we come together as a society.

This concept of friendship can be considered historically and culturally specific for the so-called Western world, as it goes back to the political tradition of ancient Greek culture. However, perhaps it is not so much the philosophical tradition fostered by the ancient texts of Plato and Aristotle, but the patterns of practising friendship that lead to the impression that friendship is an old and deeply familiar concept to us. It is through learning and repetition that we perpetuate our culture of friendship. Thus, friendship remains one of the most basic and implicit topics in children's books. We teach our children that friendship, along with family ties, is perhaps the most important social safeguard of the community. However, this 'lesson' is not so much rooted in theory or ethics, it is learnt by practice. Friendship always was based on codes and rituals. One of the earliest examples for this is Aristotle's reference to "the bushel of salt"² friends must share by eating together for a longer period of time that allows them to get become familiar with each other. We also know many rituals of friendship like the kiss, the photograph, and the ring as tokens of friendship, and of course the importance of letter writing as the media practice par excellence among friends.³

Through these rituals, the learning of friendship is a tradition-forming and tradition-preserving process that perpetuates and passes on concepts of friendship.

* **Philipp Lenhard**, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München, Historisches Seminar, Geschwister-Scholl-Platz 1, 80539 München, Germany. **Email:** philipp.lenhard@lmu.de

Andree Michaelis-König, Universiteit Antwerpen, Faculteit Letteren en Wijsbegeerte, Stadtcampus, Grote Kauwenberg 18, 2000 Antwerpen, Belgium. **E-Mail:** andree.michaelis-konig@uantwerpen.be

However, it also creates opportunities for reinterpretation and transformation. While tradition is often portrayed one-sidedly as restrictive and limiting from the perspective of modernisation theory, the other side is often forgotten: that tradition provides a secure ground from which immanent potentials can unfold. This is not only true regarding new practices of friendship that are most pertinent today during an age when social media appears to take the place of letters once and for all,⁴ it also touches the topic of gender as it remains crucial for Friendship Studies today. Although the philosophy of friendship idealised friendship among men, there are many instances of friendship with or among women that need to be rediscovered in modern history. Precisely because friendship depends so much on practice, on *doing friendship*, those other constellations were always a possibility, despite a philosophical tradition that predominantly ignored them.

Given this situation, one may rightfully state that the study of friendship as a discipline is both very old, as it reaches back to antiquity, and relatively young, as many sociological or historical phenomena of doing friendship have only been rediscovered relatively recent. Extensive is the discourse on friendship both in philosophy and theology.⁵ However, regarding historical research, the chain of tradition of friendship so far has mostly been treated either as a pure history of ideas or, in the sense of historicism, a specific epoch has been studied in isolation.⁶ Important studies were focused, for example, on how the concept of friendship developed from the Greek (Aristotle) to the Roman (Cicero) context. Others examined to what extent the Renaissance adapted the Aristotelian friendship of virtue,⁷ but these studies often showed us elements and practices of friendship as limited to a specific culture, or time, while neglecting the universal and transhistorical relevance of friendship. This applies not only to the field of history but also to literature, theology, and philosophy. On the other hand, in the field of friendship sociology, a historical perspective was usually dispensed with altogether and the focus was placed on the function of friendship in a specific social context.⁸ At times, particular practices of friendship also came into view, and friendship was distinguished as a form of social intercourse from other relationships such as kinship, marriage, or professional collegiality.⁹ However, most sociological studies focus on the function and benefits of friendship in a more or less differentiated society. In both historical and sociological works on friendship, an interest in the specificity of a theoretical or cultural context outweighs the importance of friendship as a transcultural and transhistorical phenomenon.

It is the foundational argument of the following interdisciplinary series of articles that a perspective on the praxis of friendship, on *doing friendship*, can change this and provide an overarching umbrella to further our understanding of what friendship was and can be. The praxeology of friendship still remains largely a desideratum for both directions in recent research.¹⁰ Although practices of writing friendship have been studied, particularly in literary studies,¹¹ non-textual practices such as intimate conversation, cohabitation, or traveling together have often simply been assumed – but not examined.¹²

Considering this state of affairs, the following three contributions are meant to push future research toward a reconsideration of friendship as a practice with

transcultural and transhistorical significance. All three go back to an international conference on “Practices of Friendship in History and Literature” that the editors organised in Munich in the summer of 2022,¹³ which was focused on the intersections of thinking and doing friendship based on an interdisciplinary approach that for the first time brought together historians, sociologists, literary scholars, theologians, Islamic studies scholars, Jewish studies scholars, and philosophers. Although the topics varied greatly in terms of time, geography, and subject matter – there were papers presented on such various topics as Nietzsche and the Hebrew Bible, Theodor Fontane and Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī, Paul Celan and modern care work – the reference to praxeology formed a common ground for fruitful and interdisciplinary discussions. We are very pleased to publish here the following highly innovative articles, which represent three different fields of expertise and interest.

Roland Kany, Willow Verkerk, and Hava Tirosh-Samuelson take a broad approach to the question of doing friendship in religious tradition, philosophy, and the modern women’s movement. **Roland Kany’s** contribution “Friendship in Christianity” traces various partly overlapping, partly contradictory traditions of friendship in Christianity “from Jesus to Schleiermacher”. Kany not only emphasises the diversity of Christian traditions and strictly rejects essentialist interpretations, but also refers to religious and social practices that did not necessarily correspond to the respective ideals. Rather, he shows how having friends can be understood as a practice that answers to universal needs and ideals that transcend the social categories of Christian, Jewish, Muslim, or other faiths. Perhaps most fascinating is his example of one particular story of friendship ‘travelling’ through the ages and cultures, perhaps best known today in the version of Friedrich Schiller’s *The Pledge* of 1798. However, Kany not only shows that the story is much older, reaching back to Aristoxenus of Tarentum in ancient Greek, but also that there exists a variety of instances of reframing and retelling of that very story that passes through Christian culture as it was represented in Hebrew and Arabic contexts as well. This leads to the insight that there was a common fascination with the practice of friendship that inspired processes of dialogue and translation throughout the long history of humankind.

In a slightly different way, **Willow Verkerk**, in her contribution, is interested in these exchanges and long-term ties over the subject of friendship as well. In “Is Friendship Possible with the Dead?” she deals with a ‘classic’ author of the philosophy of friendship, Friedrich Nietzsche, and what understanding of friendship he inspired. In contrast to earlier works, Verkerk focusses on the love of the dead and asks for the possibility of posthumous friendship. From a praxeological perspective, this raises the question of the reciprocity of friendship: Does loving someone necessarily imply being loved *by* someone and does being friends require the existence of two subjects facing each other? Inspired by Jacques Derrida’s reception of Carl Schmitt’s polemology in “Politics of Friendship”, she analyses what she calls Georges Bataille’s “necromantic art of reading Nietzsche”. This not only allows her to read Nietzsche on his understanding of friendship but also to follow Bataille in the ways he responded to Nietzsche as a posthumous friend. Furthermore, it leads Verkerk to follow up on the gender roles in friendship this positioning of Bataille

entails. By moving between such different roles that include feminine lovers as much as intellectual friend and partner, Bataille was able to open up the performative framework of being a friend to the dead philosopher.

Finally, the inclusion of women in thinking and doing friendship is the main interest in **Hava Tirosh-Samuels**on's "Friendship, Philosophy, and Gender in Historical Perspective." Tirosh-Samuels on traces the connection between friendship and gender in a broad historical survey that leads to the emergence of modern feminism as a social movement based on an ethics of care. Tirosh-Samuels on identifies this ethics of care with a social form of friendship that transcends the androcentric ideals of male friendship that have shaped not only the discourse of friendship for centuries, but also its academic exploration. Questioning male-dominated perspectives on friendship is one of the core demands of Tirosh-Samuels on's take on the history of friendship philosophy. At the same time, she is tying the women's movement of the 19th century and its understanding of friendship back to ancient philosophy. Moreover, Tirosh-Samuels on is able to show how male ideas of friendship are linked to the formation of secular modernity, which hides and suppresses the participation and agency of women whose real-life friendship practices counter this tendency.

The three articles in this volume give an impressive testament to how practices of friendship are woven into some of the major threads of our cultural history, both as a part of tradition and as a part of counter-traditions such as feminism. They do so by analysing the transhistorical genealogies and poetics of friendship (Verkerk), by pointing out the conceptual commonalities of friendship practices beyond singular cultures or traditions (Kany), and by asking specifically about practices that have been overlooked within these traditions (Tirosh-Samuels on). Together, they open up the field of friendship studies one more time in order to foster new avenues of future research.

About the authors

Philipp Lenhard is Professor of Jewish History and Culture at Ludwig Maximilians-University Munich. His research focuses on modern Jewish history, comparative and entangled European history, intellectual history, the cultural history of friendship and the history of antisemitism. He has published four monographs, including *Wahlverwandtschaften: Kulturgeschichte der Freundschaft im deutschen Judentum, 1888-1938* (Mohr Siebeck 2023) and *Friedrich Pollock: The Éminence Grise of the Frankfurt School* (Brill 2024), and is the editor of *Lebensfreundschaften jüdischer Intellektueller im 20. Jahrhundert* (Münchner Beiträge 2025).

Dr. Andree Michaelis-König is Professor for Modern German Literature and Culture at the University of Antwerp. His interests lie in research on German Jewish literature, the role of friendship in literary theory, intersectional perspectives on 19th century literature and migration. He is the author of *Das Versprechen der Freundschaft. Politik und ästhetische Praxis jüdisch-nichtjüdischer Freundschaften in der deutschsprachigen Literaturgeschichte seit der Aufklärung* (Winter 2023) and several articles on Modern German Literature and friendship.

Endnotes

- ¹ Hannah Arendt, *The Modern Challenge to Tradition: Fragmente eines Buches* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2018), 543f.
- ² Aristotle: Eudemian Ethics, 1238a, here quoted: *The Works of Aristotle*. Translated into English under the Editorship of W. D. Ross (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1915).
- ³ See on this e. g. Klaus Manger, Ute Pott (eds.), *Rituale der Freundschaft* (Heidelberg: Winter, 2006).
- ⁴ See Björn Vedder, *Neue Freunde. Über Freundschaft in Zeiten von Facebook* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2017).
- ⁵ See most recently Joachim Negel, *Freundschaft. Von der Vielfalt und Tiefe einer Lebensform* (Freiburg: Herder, 2019); Alexander Nehamas, *On Friendship* (New York: Basic Books, 2016).
- ⁶ Carla Risseuw, Marlein van Raalte (eds.), *Conceptualising Friendship in Time and Place* (Leiden, Boston: Brill / Rodopi, 2017). This applies to philological studies of friendship as well. See, for example, Saul M. Olyan, *Friendship in the Hebrew Bible* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2017).
- ⁷ More recent examples are Kevin Vost, *The Four Friendships: From Aristotle to Aquinas* (Brooklyn: Angelico, 2018); Sandra Lynch, *Philosophy and Friendship* (Edinburgh: Edinburg UP, 2005); Ann Ward, *Contemplating Friendship in Aristotle's Ethics* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2016).
- ⁸ Classic texts include Georg Simmel, *Sociology: Inquiries into the Construction of Social Forms* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2009); Niklas Luhmann, *Love as Passion: The Codification of Intimacy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1986); Friedrich H. Tenbruck, "Freundschaft: Ein Beitrag zur Soziologie der persönlichen Beziehungen" in *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie* 16 (1964), 431- 456. See also the overview volume *Freundschaft heute: Eine Einführung in die Freundschaftssoziologie*, ed. Janosch Schobin et al. (Bielefeld: transcript, 2016) and the overview article by Heinz Bude, "Soziologie der Freundschaft," in *Berliner Journal für Soziologie* 27 (2017), 547-557. A remarkable exception is Jost Hermand, *Freundschaft: Zur Geschichte einer sozialen Beziehung* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2006).
- ⁹ Cf. Sasha Roseneil, "Neue Freundschaftspraktiken," in *Mittelweg* 36 17, 3 (2008), 55–70.
- ¹⁰ The authors of this introduction have developed various concepts of a praxeology of friendship in their two monographs on the subject. See Philipp Lenhard, *Wahlverwandtschaften: Kulturgeschichte der Freundschaft im deutschen Judentum, 1888-1938* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2023), especially 12-15 and Andree Michaelis-König, *Das Versprechen der Freundschaft: Politik und ästhetische Praxis jüdisch-nichtjüdischer Freundschaften in der deutschsprachigen Literaturgeschichte seit der Aufklärung* (Heidelberg: Winter, 2023), especially 47-54.
- ¹¹ See especially on 18th century cultures of friendship: Klaus Manger, Ute Pott (eds.), op. cit.; Wolfram Mauser, Barbara Becker-Cantarino (eds.), *Frauenfreundschaft - Männerfreundschaft. Literarische Diskurs im 18. Jahrhundert* (Tübingen: Niemeyer 1991); Ferdinand van Ingen (ed.), *Ars et amicitia: Beiträge zum Thema Freundschaft in Geschichte, Kunst und Literatur* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1998).
- ¹² See for example Barbara Caine, "Taking Up the Pen: Women and the Writing of Friendship," in *Friendship: A History*, ed. Barbara Caine (New York: Routledge, 2014).
- ¹³ The conference took place on June 1 and 2, 2022 at Historisches Kolleg Munich. See: https://www.jgk.geschichte.uni-muenchen.de/jgk_neuzeit/vortraege-tagungen1/konferenz-lenhard/index.html. The conference was sponsored by the Thyssen Foundation.