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Three Conceptions of Best Friends

Abstract

We often speak of our own 'best friends' and those of other people. But what does it mean for someone to be a best friend? While there is a large empirical literature studying the antecedents and consequences of best friendships and a small body of philosophical research on this topic, this question has not been addressed in detail. In this article, my aim is to fill this lacuna by distinguishing three different conceptions of best friends based on the semantic properties of the term and the ways in which it is used in both academic discourse and ordinary parlance. They include those of a (i) comparatively best friend; (ii) comparatively best close/good friend; and (iii) institutional best friend. I conclude by drawing out the implications of this typology for empirical and philosophical work on best friendship and by identifying several avenues for future research.

Keywords: best friend; friendships; social relationships; special obligations; Best Friends Forever; Bromance

1. The need for a conceptual analysis of 'best friends'

Not all friendships are created equal, at least not if ordinary ways of speaking are considered. Many of us commonly refer to certain individuals as our 'best friends'[1] or other people's 'best friends', which is borne out by the circa 148'000'000 hits that a search for this term delivers on Google.[2] To date, however, no in-depth scholarly attempt has been made to clarify what it means for someone to be a 'best friend'. Empirical researchers studying the antecedents and consequences of best friendships have a tendency to let participants to their studies nominate their own best friends without providing

a definition (e.g. Burleson et al., 1992; Camirand & Poulin, 2022; Leenders, 1996; Nelson & DeBacker, 2008; Oswald & Clark, 2003; Prinstein, 2007; Tolson & Urberg, 1993; Weisz & Wood, 2005; but see Baiocco et al. 2014 for an exception). As far as philosophy is concerned, which is arguably the first discipline to turn to when looking for conceptual analyses, what we find is that the phenomenon of best friendship has been mostly neglected. For example, in the almost 400 pages-spanning *Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Friendship* (Jeske, 2022), the term 'best friends' is mentioned a mere five times , with one of the references being to cats and dogs, whereas both Mark Vernon's *The Philosophy of Friendships* (2005) and Alexander Nehamas' *On Friendship* (2016) use the term 'best friends' only twice. (These findings do not change when we substitute the adjective 'best' for that of 'closest', which are sometimes used interchangeably; in the *Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Friendship*, the term 'closest friends' makes only two appearances, while Vernon uses it only once and Nehamas only thrice.) The main exception is Mary Healy's (2017) article on best friendship among minor children in which she criticizes the policy of some UK-based primary schools to discourage their pupils from having best friends. However, even here, the question of what a best friend consists of, or might consist of, receives relatively short shrift – all that is said about such friendships, which are sometimes alternatively referred to by the author as 'close friendships' (Healy, 2017, p.188; p.190), is that they involve 'deeper, long-term, more exclusive relationship based on mutual affection and support' than ordinary friendships (Healy, 2017, p. 186).[3]

This contribution fills this gap by offering the first detailed analysis of what it means, or could plausibly mean, to be a 'best friend'. After clarifying the notion of a 'friend' (section 2), it distinguishes three different understandings of such friendships based on the semantic properties of the term 'best friend' and the ways in which this term is used in both academic discourse and ordinary discourses. They concern those of a (i) comparatively best friend; (ii) comparatively best close/good friend; and (iii) institutional best friend (section 3). I end by showing how this typology can benefit empirical and philosophical research on best friendship and by proposing several avenues for future inquiry (section 4).

2. Friendship

To gain a deeper understanding of what it means, or could plausibly mean, to be a 'best friend', we must first explicate its genus, namely that of a friend. For our purposes, it is not necessary to endorse a highly specific conception of friendship, given that the three types of best friendships distinguished later in this contribution are compatible with a broad range of different conceptions (for an overview, see Helm 2021). Accordingly, rather than defend such a fine-grained understanding of friendship here, I will use this space to highlight some traits that are widely deemed to be necessary for its existence.

- *Friends care about the wellbeing of the other person for that person's own sake*. There are other, instrumental, reasons as to why you might care about how someone else fares, such as that that individual is somehow useful to you (e.g. they might give you money or help you to achieve certain career goals) or that interacting with her brings you pleasure.[4] However, it is difficult to see how one can be called a 'friend' if one cares about other people *only* on instrumental grounds, as evinced by the fact that most of us would not just be shocked to learn that our perceived friends only cared about, say, the elevated social status that associating with us might bring them, but also start questioning whether these individuals are really our friends (cf. Healy, 2017, p. 186; Löschke, 2022, p. 294).
- *Friends interact at least every now and then*, for example by talking on the phone, doing sports together, or watching a movie together (for an overview of gender differences in the types of activities in which people tend to engage, see Roberts & Dunbar, 2015).[5] Specifically, it looks like we should sometimes interact with our friends outside of a professional or purely transactional context and do on a voluntary basis. Unless we add the former restriction, I might be said to be friends with e.g. my boss with whom I only ever interact as part of my job, as well as with my physician whom I only ever see when I have a health problem to discuss or with the cashier at the supermarket to whom I only ever talk as she rings up my groceries.

Even if I care intrinsically about the wellbeing of these individuals, it would be a stretch to label them as 'friends' of mine even if our interactions are perfectly friendly and pleasant (but see Ben-Moshe (2022) for an opposing view as far as physicians are concerned). And unless we add the latter (voluntariness) restriction, I might be said to be friends with people whom I am forced to interact with by some third party, which seems a *reductio* as well*,* at least insofar as I would not spend time with them if I could decide about this freely (for a defence of friendship as an inherently voluntary relationship, see e.g. Rawlins, 2017, and White, 1999,p. 81).

- *Friends generally experience their interactions as worthwhile in their own right*, which may be because they find them enjoyable and/or meaningful. The intuition behind this condition is that if you do not like a given individual, or simply do not enjoy or derive meaning from one's interactions with her, then that person cannot qualify as your friend (cf. Löschke, 2022, p. 289). To avoid confusion, not *all* interactions with a friend need to be experienced as inherently worthwhile. Even in the closest friendships, there will be occasional conflict or other trying moments, yet this in and of itself does not prevent people from being friends as long as such moments are not too common.
- *Friends are partial towards one another*. By 'partial', I mean that they do things for each other, or are simply prepared to do things for each other, that they are not prepared to do for most strangers, such as pay for the other person's drinks at a bar and listen to the other person when she needs advice. This condition is predicated on the assumption that, in the words of Joseph Raz (1989, p. 19), 'a relationship between two people who enjoy amusing themselves in each other's company but do not owe each other any special duties is not a friendship'. Of course, this leaves open as to whether such partiality requirements are moral duties or non-moral ones (cf. Cocking & Kennett, 2000) and, if the former, whether they can be derived from general moral principles that apply to all human beings or whether they are *sui generis* (cf. Collins, 2013; Löschke, 2022) and, if the latter, whether they complement our moral duties

towards those we do not have associative relationships with or whether they (partially) compete with them (cf. Jeske, 2021, sec. 5); for our purposes, it is not necessary to take a stance on these complex issues.

In passing, I should note that while this article focuses on friendships between non-related humans, I am not ruling out that the above criteria can be fulfilled by other kinds of dyads as well, such as romantic partners (Brogaard, 2022; Dunbar, 2018, p. 32); parents and their children (Kristjánsson, 2022); siblings (Newman, 1994); and possibly even pets and their owners (Cheryl, 2022). Suffice it to say that insofar as (some of) these relationships can qualify as genuine friendships, they are likely to be of a qualitatively different kind in many cases than those between non-related humans.

3. Three conceptions of best friends

Having clarified the notion of friendship, we are now in a position to examine the three different conceptions of best friendship. To reiterate, these conceptions have been differentiated based on the semantic properties of the compound term 'best friend' and the ways in which this term is used in both ordinary parlance and academic parlance, which provide important cues as to how it is understood notwithstanding the common oversight to define it.

3.1 Comparatively best friend

The first of these conceptions is derived from the conventional meaning of the term 'best', which suggests the following intuitively plausible understanding of a 'best friend'.

> *Comparatively best friend:* Alf is Brian's best friend if, and only if, Alf is a better friend than at least some of Brian's other friends and not a worse friend than any of Brian's other friends.

One immediate thing to note about this definition is that it requires people to have at least two friends of which some need to be better friends than others. Unless this is so, our best friend(s) would also be our worst friend(s), which in a strictly comparative sense would render the title a vacuous one.

Another thing to note about the current conception is that what makes some friends better or closer than others – I will use these terms interchangeably – need not always (just) be that they score higher along the necessary dimensions of friendship outlined within the previous section even if this will sometimes explain why person A is a better friend to B than C is. For starters, it is dubious as to whether increasing the value of several of the identified (potential) dimensions of friendships beyond a certain point will continue to make one a better friend. Consider the fact that friends care about each other and are partial towards one another; although there undeniably exist cases where caring more about a given person or being more partial towards him make us better friends, there seem to be exceptions to this. For example, if Alf cares so much about Brian that he is clinically obsessed with him, it is far from clear that he will be a better friend than Brian's other friend, Cynthia, *even if* they score equally high along the remaining dimensions of friendship. (Whereas it might be thought that such an equal score along the latter dimensions is unlikely, given that for people to be obsessed with us is likely to freak most of us out and consequently reduce the joy or meaning that we derive from interacting with them, one can imagine a scenario where Brian is (largely) unaware of Alf's obsession with him.) The same is true, *mutatis mutandis*, when Alf is so partial to Brian that he would go as far as sacrificing the lives of his own partner and children to save Alf.

There is another problem with the thinking that how good a friend we are is determined solely by our scores along the necessary dimensions of friendship. Just as the features that make some people better footballers than others – e.g. the ability to dribble and to make well-timed headers – are not all the same as those necessary for being a (minimally competent) footballer – e.g. knowing the rules of the game and being able to kick a ball – so it appears that the features that render some of us better friends than others are not all the same as those required for being a friend. For example, while mutual disclosure of deeper feelings does not look essential to friendship *simpliciter* as evinced

by the fact that there seems nothing incoherent about, say, having a casual friend with whom one regularly plays chess but never confides in, such disclosure does look essential for better or closer friendships (cf. Dunbar, 2018). If correct, then how good a friend we are in the current (comparative) sense does not only depend on our scores along the necessary dimensions of friendship but also on how we score along dimensions that are characteristic of higher forms of friendship.

Before moving on to a second conception of a 'best friend', three additional comments on the current one are in order. The first is that a comparatively best friend need not be particularly close or good friend even if they frequently are (as is likely when we consider that, on average, our top-five friends are estimated to receive circa 40% of our total social effort (Dunbar, 2018, p. 36; cf. Sutcliffe et al., 2012). There are surveys that report that 12% of Americans lack a close friend (D. Cox, 2021), which might have a variety of causes including the fact that they are unpopular or have recently lost their close friends due to e.g. death or a relocation. For such individuals, it need not, and in many cases will not, take much to become their comparatively best friend as defined earlier in this subsection ('in the land of the blind, the one-eyed person is king').

Secondly, whether or not friendships must be reciprocal – for an affirmative answer, see e.g. e.g. Healy, (2017, p. 186); Helm (2021, sec. 1); Rubin et al. (2006),[6] for a negative one, see e.g. Berndt & McCandless (2009); Fehr (1996, p. 105) – a comparatively best friendship need not. That is, it is perfectly possible for Alf to be Brian's comparatively best friend without Brian being Alf's comparatively best friend, which is especially likely when one friend is popular but the other is not. That said, research on social networking site MySpace, which during the mid-2000s gave users the option of listing their top 8 friends on their profile (McAuliffe, 2022), has shown that people generally consider those who consider them as their best friend as one of their own top two friends (DeScioli et al., 2011).[7]

Thirdly, although study participants are often asked to nominate a single person as their best friend (e.g. Camirand & Poulin, 2022; Oswald & Clark, 2003; Prinstein, 2007), it is possible to have more than one comparatively best friend. This may be due to two or more friends having equal

cumulative scores along the pertinent friendship dimensions. Yet, it could also be due to them have different friendship qualities that are *on a par* (for elaboration on the phenomenon of parity, see Andreou, 2021; Chang, 2002), in which case it is neither true that one friend is better than the other nor that they are precisely equally good friends. Suppose, for instance, that of two friends A and B, friend A is more supportive and friend B is easier to confide in. Assuming all other factors to be equal, it may be impossible here to say that one friend is better without it necessarily being the case that they are exactly equally good friends. To illustrate this, the so-called 'small improvement test' (Chang, 2002) can be utilized; for example, if friend A, who was already more supportive than friend B, becomes somewhat more supportive still, then insofar as A and B were exactly equally good friends *ex ante*, A must now be a better friend than B. However, it appears that this need not be so even if the increase in A's supportiveness has made A a better friend than A was before.[8]

3.2 Comparatively best close/good friend

Whereas I have suggested that the notion of a comparatively best friend is a plausible conception of a 'best friend', much scholarly work presupposes a more demanding conception by distinguishing best friendships from 'casual friendships' and merely 'close friendships' respectively (e.g. Demir et al., 2007; Ledbetter et al., 2007; Oswald & Clark, 2003; Rose & Serafica, 1986).[9] This conception can be formulated thus.

> *Comparatively best close/good friend:* Alf is Brian's best friend if, and only if, Alf is a (sufficiently) close or good friend to Brian – I use these terms interchangeably – in addition to being a better friend than at least some of Brian's other friends and not a worse friend than any of Brian's other friends.

This conception encompasses that of a comparatively best friend but adds a requirement, namely that best friends be (sufficiently) close or good friends. To see that studies like the ones just mentioned are

committed to this further requirement – call it the 'closeness requirement' – notice that by locating best friends above mere casual friends, they are assuming that such friendship must be close or good ones. Furthermore, insofar as they also differentiate best friendships from ones that are merely close, they are assuming such friendships to exceed the threshold level for being close. Evidence for these presuppositions is offered by the kinds of statements their authors make about the goods generated within best friendships. For example, Debra Oswald and Eddie Clark write that best friends provide one another with goods such as 'intimacy', 'stability', and 'self-disclosure' and do so more than close or casual friends' (Oswald & Clark, 2003, pp. 187–189).)

What difference(s) does adding the closeness requirement to the notion of a comparatively best friend make? One difference is that the share of people with a comparatively best close/good friend is bound to be smaller than the portion with a comparatively best friend *simpliciter*, albeit exactly how much smaller will depend on how close or good one thinks such friends need to be. (By contrast, as a matter of logical necessity, any person with a comparatively best close/good friend will also have a comparatively best friend, the former type of friendship being a species of the latter.) Another important difference is that comparatively best close/goods friends are more likely to be mutually best friends than are merely comparatively best friends. To be sure, like comparatively best friendships, comparatively best close/good friendships need not be reciprocal; just because Alf is Brian's comparatively best close/good friend, it does not follow that Brian must also be Alf's comparatively best close/good friend. For example, it is possible that although Brian is a close or good friend to Alf, Alf has another friend, Cynthia, who is a closer or better friend to him still. That said, the higher the closeness threshold for such friendships is set, the lower the chance is that they will fail to be reciprocal, given that the more resources (e.g. time, energy) people will need to invest in them that they will be unable to invest in other friendships (cf. Dunbar, 2018; Sutcliffe et al., 2012).

3.3 Best friend in an institutional sense

What the two conceptions of best friends discussed hitherto, namely that of a comparatively best friend and that of a comparatively best close/good friend, have in common is that they depend on how friends cumulatively score along several friendship-related dimensions (see section 3.1). By contrast, the third and final conception is not, or at least not primarily,[10] based on people's performance in particular areas, but rather on whether a specific kind of agreement has been made by them.[11]

> *Best friend in an institutional sense:* Alf is Brian's best friend if, and only if, Alf has accepted the status of a best friend understood as a particular social role with relatively extensive rights and duties of loyalty and support.

The easiest way of making sense of this type of best friendship, which encompasses e.g. Best Friend Forever (BFF)-relationships and so-called 'bromances' about which more shortly (e.g. B. Cox, 2010; Levine, 2010; McCoy, 2014; Robinson et al., 2019; Scoats & Robinson, 2020), is to compare it to another social role: That of a romantic partner. A romantic partner is more than just someone who loves and cares for you, shares intimacy with you, and so on. It is also someone with whom you have agreed to share a particular sort of relationship that is marked by distinct rights and duties, such as the obligation to be faithful emotionally, sexually, and/or financially, and the corresponding right to expect the same from your partner. This becomes clear once it is observed that *even if* there is more affection between you and another person and *even if* you spend a lot of time with this person and possibly even have sexual intercourse with them, there remains a relevant sense in which they are not your romantic partner. Similarly, an institutional best friend is not just someone who cares for you and spends time with you, but also someone with whom you agreed to have a specific kind of relationship with special rights and duties, i.e. ones that are not fully reducible to the rights and duties of comparatively best friends or even to those of comparatively best close/good friends. (In other work

(de Vries, manuscript a), I consider whether these rights and duties track people's moral rights and duties, or whether are simply conceptually necessary for the current type of best friendship). Because of this, it does not seem confused for people to ask those who are already their comparatively best friend or their comparatively best close/good friend whether they want to 'be their BFF', 'be their bromantic partner', or have some other form of institutional best friendship. [12]

How do the rights and duties of institutional best friends differ from those of comparatively best friends and comparatively best close/good friends? The answer is that they are more demanding, surpassing even those found in comparatively best close/good friendships. These high levels of expected loyalty and support are reflected in the labels commonly given to certain types of institutional best friendship, such as a 'BFF' (suggesting a life-long commitment to a given friend; cf. B. Cox, 2010; Levine, 2010; McCoy, 2014) and a 'bromance' (suggesting an exceptionally stark bond between male friends or 'bros' that is akin to both a fraternal relationship even if the parties are not genetically related and to a romantic relationship even if there is no sex or cohabitation involved; cf. Robinson et al., 2019; Scoats & Robinson, 2020). They are also reflected in how such friendships are often described in popular culture. Consider the following passage from song *Bromance* by American YouTuber Ryan Higa and singer Chester See, which has amassed over 48 million views as of early 2024:

> Hold me
> To a promise that I'll be the kind of friend that in the end
> Will always keep you company
> Cause when the world gets tough (Tough)
> And times get hard (Hard)
> I will always love you, I'll be your bodyguard
> Cause you're my bestie, and if you test me
> I'll prove it time and time again, I got your back until the end (Nigahiga, 2012).

Evidently, many friends do not expect this level of commitment from one another *even when* they are close or good friends.[13] This is humorously portrayed in a scene of the television sitcom *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (Season 10, Episode 2) where the lead character, Larry David, informs his friends that he underwent cancer testing and receives the following response from his best and close friend Jeff:

> If you do have cancer, I can't be your friend anymore. I'm not a cancer friend, I can't do the cancer friend. That's not me. It's too much.

After several other friends similarly refuse to be a 'cancer-friend' on account of its demandingness, Larry proposes a 'no-cancer-friend-reciprocity pact' under which 'if anyone gets it [cancer], we stop being friends with you and vice versa'. What is apposite for us is that while this extreme proposal is unlikely to be widely embraced, it is not difficult to imagine people who are a comparatively best close/good friend to someone yet who lack the level of commitment of an institutional best friend as celebrated in *Bromance*. For instance, they might not have agreed nor be willing to extend a full hour of emotional support to their friend every week even if they are willing to offer such support on a less frequent basis, nor might they be prepared to offer substantial financial assistance to their friend or part with one of their kidneys should their friend come to require one. Furthermore, even within close (unilateral or reciprocal) comparatively best friendships, the parties might accept that if they eventually end up living in separate locations, perhaps due to post-college relocation, their friendship will evolve into a much more casual relationship with correspondingly much weaker rights and duties if it survives at all. In such cases, people's friendship will not necessarily be expected to last a lifetime as BBFs at least nominally commit themselves to, neither will it be like a bromance in mimicking fraternal and romantic relationships, which are usually expected to be more durable as well.

So far, two dissimilarities have been identified between institutional best friendships and the types of best friendship discussed in sections 3.1 and 3.2, namely comparatively best friendships and comparatively best close/good friendships. Apart from the fact that institutional best friendships are

agreement-based rather than performance-based, it was noted that they come with more extensive loyalty- and support-related rights and duties than the latter. A third and final difference worth highlighting is that whereas comparatively best friendships and comparatively best close/good friendships sometimes fail to be reciprocal (see my earlier comments), institutional best friendships are *always and necessarily reciprocal,* at least when we consider how institutional best friendships such as BFF-relationships and bromances are understood within contemporary societies. Again, an analogy with romantic relationships and with marriage in particular proves useful. Just as assuming the social role of a spouse requires *both partners* to agree to marry each other, so becoming an institutional best friend under prevailing social conventions requires *both friends* to agree to this kind of friendship, thereby ruling out unilateral institutional best friendships. (That said, people can be institutional best friends without one or even both parties being the other person's comparatively best friend or comparatively best close/good friend even if, especially in recently forged institutional best friendships, these different statuses will often overlap.)

4. Implications for best friendship-research

Having examined three different types of best friendship, namely (i) comparatively best friendships; (ii) comparatively best close/good friendships; and (iii) institutional best friendships, the aim of this section is to consider the implications of the proposed typology for both empirical and philosophical scholarship and to identify avenues for future inquiry.

One important question that our discussion raises for empirical scholars is *whether it is appropriate to ask study participants to nominate a single best friend* as is frequently done (e.g. Camirand & Poulin, 2022; Oswald & Clark, 2003; Prinstein, 2007). For one thing, we saw in section 3.1 that it is possible to have multiple comparatively best friends. Apart from the fact that someone might have two or more comparatively best friends with equally high friendship scores, I suggested that their friendship qualities could be on a par, in which case no friend is better than the other(s) yet without them being exactly equally good. For another, even when people have only one comparatively best

friend,[14] this individual may not be the same person as any institutional best friends that they might have, such as a BFF or bromantic partner (cf. section 3.3). In such cases, study participants are left to choose between persons who each have a plausible claim to being their best friend, albeit in different senses.

Another noteworthy implication of this research is that empirical and philosophical scholars alike are well-advised to *specify the kind(s) of best friendship on which they are focusing*. Not only does this reduce the risk of them talking past each other, it also lowers the probability that study participants will utilize conceptions of best friendship that differ from those of the researchers and/or of other participants,[15] which is a risk that some have recognized. Commenting on his study of best friendships among early adolescents, Roger Leenders notes, for instance, that because no definitions of a 'friend' or 'best friend' were included in the used questionnaire, 'different results may have been found […] if definitions of "friendship" and "best friendship" would have been provided', adding that were grounds to suspect that pupils had 'different concepts of (best) friendship and filled out the questionnaire accordingly' (Leenders, 1996, p. 146).

Still another implication of my findings worth mentioning is that researchers should *offer detailed criteria for the conception(s) of best friendship in which they are interested*, given that all three conceptions admit of different interpretations. For example, those employing the conception of a best friend as a comparatively best friend should specify what factors render some friends better than others, while those working with the notion of a comparatively best close/good friend need to indicate how close or good such friends must minimally be, perhaps by making reference to one of the friendship scales that have been developed (Bukowski et al., 1994; Thien et al., 2012).

Turning finally to the novel lines of inquiry suggested by this contribution, there are several questions that merit investigation. In my own work (de Vries, manuscript a, manuscript b), I have started to address some of these, namely the question of whether best friends in the various senses identified have special moral duties and the question of whether it is appropriate (i.e. rational and

morally fitting) to want to be a best friend in one or more of those senses. Other ones include – but are not necessarily limited to:

- Is there anything pro tanto undesirable about person A being person B's comparatively best friend but not the other way around? If so, are there circumstances where one or both parties should attempt to address this asymmetry?
- Is there anything pro tanto undesirable about A being B's institutional best friend but not B's comparatively best friend and, if so, what normative implications, if any, might this have?
- What are the typical consequences of sharing an institutional best friendship for individuals' wellbeing and quality of life? Do those consequences differ from the effects of participating in a close/good comparatively best friendship?
- Considering life's vicissitudes, can it ever be appropriate to enter a BFF-relationship?
- Can one meaningfully have more than one institutional best friendship, similar to how polyamorists believe we can meaningfully have more than one romantic relationship?
- Should institutional best friendships be recognized in law in the same way that the relationships of married couples are?[16]

My hope is that this article will inspire reflection on these questions as well.

Notes

[1] Or, as they are sometimes referred to colloquially in Anglophone countries, 'our besties'.

[2] Although it should be noted that some of these hits refer to canine companions as opposed to human ones, which are sometimes said to be to as 'man's best friend'.

[3] That said, she does acknowledge that different conceptions of best friendships are possible, writing that 'we can refer to "the best kind" of friendship or "the best people" or simply "those we choose to be closest to" ' (Healy, 2017, p. 187). What is pertinent for our purposes that none of these different conceptions are elaborated.

[4] As it happens, Aristotle believed that personal relationships that are centred around such benefits can be called friendships – this is true even though they do not represent the highest type of friendship on his account – and he referred to ones revolving around utility as 'friendships of utility' and to ones revolving around pleasure as 'friendships of pleasure' (Aristotle, 2009).

[5] As Bennet Helm (2021, sec. 1.3) observes, 'never to share activity with someone and in this way to interact with him is not to have the kind of relationship with him that could be called friendship, even if you each care for the other for his sake'.

[6] For example, Helm writes that, 'friendship […] is essentially a kind of relationship grounded in a particular kind of special concern each has for the other as the person she is', which means that 'whereas we must make conceptual room for the idea of unrequited love, unrequited friendship is senseless' (Helm, 2021, Section 1).

[7] This finding seems best explained by the Alliance Model of Friendship according to which our friendship preferences are shaped by 'cognitive mechanisms designed to assemble support groups for potential conflicts' that increased our evolutionary fitness in the ancestral environment (DeScioli & Kurzban, 2009; cf. Lewis et al., 2015). On this theory, the reason why people tend to exhibit preferences for best friends who do not have better friends themselves even when controlling for levels of similarity, received benefits, friendship duration, frequency of contact, and traits such as generosity and attractiveness is that such friends are more likely to be loyal to them (DeScioli et al., 2011).

[8] An analogy might be drawn with an example given by Chang (2002, p. 699). Defending the possibility of parity, she writes that 'it is surely possible that you rationally judge that the cup of' Sumatra Gold tastes neither better

nor worse than the cup of Pearl Jasmine and that although a slightly more fragrant cup of the Jasmine would taste better than the original, the more fragrant Jasmine would not taste better than the cup of coffee'.)

[9] I say 'presuppose' because, again, definitions are seldom provided.

[10] I say 'not primarily', because in order to be a friend, we saw in section 2 that one needs to be behave in particular ways – e.g. by showing concern for one's friend and interacting with them at least occasionally – that can be construed as performance-requirements.

[11] As such, the current conception of a 'best friend' is compatible with the other two conceptions. Indeed, there are grounds for thinking that, in practice, institutional best friends are often – but certainly not invariably – comparatively best friends as well.

[12] Notice that the term 'institutional best friendship' is not being used here to describe friendship-like relationships that may develop within specific social institutions, such as workplaces or client-attorney relationships. Although people sometimes refer to their 'work friends,' the conception of friendship I outlined in section 2 precludes the possibility of such friendships, requiring two persons to spend time together outside of professional settings. Likewise, even if lawyers resemble friends by virtue of being partial towards particular individuals, namely their clients (Fried, 1976), they cannot be friends on my account if their interactions with their clients remain wholly confined to this professional context.

[13] Other features that sets bromances specifically apart from ordinary male friendships, including ones where at least one party is the other party's comparatively best friend, is that it seems necessary for bromantic partners to share a high degree of emotional intimacy that matches, if not surpasses, the level of emotional intimacy shared by romantic partners and that it is common – albeit arguably not essential – for bromantic partners to cuddle and kiss (Robinson et al., 2019; Scoats & Robinson, 2020).

[14] Which might not always be the case due epistemic limitations.

[15] For example, it may prevent situations where researchers interested in the effects of comparatively best friends on our wellbeing have participants falsely declare not having a 'best friend' because they assume that such friends must be close ones.

[1616] For an argument in support of extending the legal rights and obligations of married couples to other types of (non-romantic) dyadic relationships, see Brake (2012).

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