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Why virtual friendship is no genuine friendship

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Abstract   Based on a modern reading of Aristotle's theory of friendship, we argue that virtual friendship does not qualify as genuine friendship. By 'virtual friendship' we mean the type of friendship that exists on the internet, and seldom or never is combined with real life interaction. A 'traditional friendship' is, in contrast, the type of friendship that involves substantial real life interaction, and we claim that only this type can merit the label 'genuine friendship' and thus qualify as morally valuable. The upshot of our discussion is that virtual friendship is what Aristotle might have described as a lower and less valuable form of social exchange.

Keywords   Virtual friendship · Aristotle · Virtue ethics · Facebook

Introduction

In the last few years, social community sites such as Facebook, MSN, and Hyves have gone from being driven by special interest groups to becoming basic social neces-

sities of everyday life. If you do not exist online you simply do not 'exist'. The average user of Facebook in Europe has 139 friends, and it is not uncommon to have two or even three hundred online friends.[1] Although concerns have been raised about the lack of privacy, hacking, and the potentially tempting opportunity for service providers to use information stored on their sites for business purposes, many people seem happy to continue living their social lives online.

In this article we argue that social community sites are, contrary to what many users seem to think, not a key to meaningful social relationships. To be more precise, we argue that if we understand the notion of friendship in a broadly Aristotelian manner, virtual friendship does not qualify as genuine friendship. In our view, virtual friendship is what Aristotle might have described as a lower and less valuable form of social exchange. Further to this point, we argue that virtual friendship is analogous to certain, questionable, forms of alternative medicine: social community sites are potentially harmful since what is described as a route to social success may in fact turn out to be a toxic substance leading to isolation, just as some alternative medical substances harm rather than cure the patient. Furthermore, by opting for the alternative 'medicine' the individual may forego proven and functioning methods for achieving meaningful social interaction. In other words, what is flagged as a fast-track to meaningful social relationships and social inclusion is in fact an illusion as these relationships, whatever else they may be, do not contain the necessary components that go into genuine friendship.

In an early and attention-grabbing article on virtual friendship, Cocking and Matthews argue that, 'within a purely virtual context the establishment of close friendship

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[1] Metro, The Netherlands, 1 December 2010.
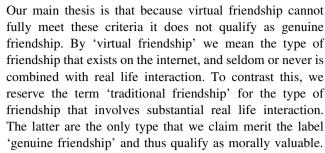
is simply psychologically impossible'.[2] Cocking later developed this claim further and argued that, 'certain features of text-based online contexts largely rule out the development of close friendships exclusively in those contexts'.[3] However, in a comment on the original article by Cocking and Matthews, Briggle claimed that 'Cocking and Matthews are … wrong about the possibility of friendship—as defined according to their own criteria—flourishing wholly online'.[4] Briggle's conclusion is, in opposition to Cocking and Matthews that, '[t]he increased distance and slowed pace of Internet relationships can foster friendships of equal or greater closeness than those in the offline world'.[5]

Although we agree with many of the views put forward by Cocking and Matthews, as well as with some of Briggle's criticism, there are also important differences between the claims we make in this article and theirs. First of all, in contrast to Cocking and Matthews, we do not argue that virtual friendship is *impossible*. Our claim is a more narrow claim about the moral value of virtual friendship; we do not question that virtual friendship counts as a form of friendship. All we seek to show is that from an Aristotelian point of view, virtual friendship is less valuable than other friendship relations. This also highlights an important difference between our view and that of Briggle: While he maintains that virtual friendships are not merely possible, but are often more valuable from a moral point of view, we of course deny this positive appraisal.

However, the main difference between our position and those mentioned above is that we explicitly relate our normative conclusion to Aristotle's theory as it is presented in the Nicomachean Ethics, and we do so on a relatively detailed level.[6] Cocking and Matthews briefly mention Aristotle's theory of friendship, but their main concern is their own analyses of various types of friendship relations. Our point of departure is thus different from theirs, as is the scope of our conclusion: All we believe to show is that given Aristotle's theoretical framework, virtual friendship does not qualify as genuine friendship, as defined above.

On the Aristotelian analysis, for a friendship to count as morally valuable, and hence virtuous, it must contain the following elements: it must be mutually recognised, the friends must engage in *theoria* (i.e., the contemplation that takes place between virtuous agents), and the love and admiration they feel for each other must be based on virtue.

Our main thesis is that because virtual friendship cannot fully meet these criteria it does not qualify as genuine friendship. By 'virtual friendship' we mean the type of friendship that exists on the internet, and seldom or never is combined with real life interaction. To contrast this, we reserve the term 'traditional friendship' for the type of friendship that involves substantial real life interaction. The latter are the only type that we claim merit the label 'genuine friendship' and thus qualify as morally valuable.

All this said, we by no means object to initiating or maintaining friendships through social community sites. Nor do we have any general concerns about social community sites as such. Interaction on these sites can indeed be valuable in an instrumental sense. In the case of friendship, for example, the people that you first meet online can later turn into genuine friends or even life partners in the traditional sense. Our point is that for a relationship to qualify as genuine friendship it is not enough to merely interact online. Whatever goes on in the virtual world must always be supplemented by a substantive element of real life interaction.

The Aristotelian theory of friendship

Aristotle argues that friendship (*philia*) is key to human happiness. He claims that for any human to be happy she needs friends and other people close to her.[7] Generally speaking, the shared life is always superior and, as human wellbeing and social activity cannot be separated, it is better to engage in practical activities with a friend than to do it on one's own.

The paradigm case of friendship for Aristotle is a relationship that is mutually recognised and taking place between two adults of equal standing. While all other relationships are inferior to this one, Aristotle agrees that relationships between e.g. the non-virtuous may also be called friendship but of a lesser kind, as pointed out above. The most important aspect of friendship is spending time together, preferably engaging in *theoria* as this is the hallmark of the good friendship.[8]

Broadly speaking friendship helps us grow and become more virtuous as our friends inspire and help us. Both parties gain self-knowledge, 'we are able to observe our neighbours more than ourselves, and to observe actions more than our own'.[9] Further to that point Cooper writes that, 'the presumption is that even an intimate friend remains distinct enough to be studied objectively; yet because one intuitively knows to be fundamentally the

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[2] Cocking and Matthews (2000:224).

[3] Cocking (2008:124).

[4] Briggle (2008:72).

[5] *Ibid*., p 73.

[6] We do not claim that our view is the 'true' or 'correct' exegetical analysis of Aristotle's position. All we claim is that it is a *possible* reading that is in line with the overall structure of his theory.

[7] NE 1169b10-15.

[8] NE 1157b19-24.

[9] NE 1169b33-35.

same in character as he is, one obtains through him an objective view of oneself'.[10] So by watching our friend, our 'other self', we discover ourselves. Notably, this is an ongoing process: we change when going through life and therefore we must maintain our friendships not to lose track of ourselves. As Sherman succinctly puts it, 'friendship creates a context or arena for the expression of virtue and ultimately for happiness'.[11]

Good and true friends do things for one another and even though it might not be about counting and taking turns it is nonetheless vital that there is an overall balance which both parties are aware of. But what you do for your friend is not done to secure advantages for yourself, it is done simply because you see your friend as another self. Your friend is an extension of you in the sense that your happiness is to an extent dependent on him and, thus, that part of your fate lies in the hands of your friend(s).

A comprehensive definition of Aristotle's notion of *philia* is, 'the mutually acknowledged and reciprocal exchange of goodwill and affection that exists among individuals who share an interest in each other on the basis of virtue, pleasure or utility'.[12] In addition to voluntary associations of this sort, Aristotle also includes among friendships the non-chosen relations of affection and care that exists among family members and fellow citizens.[13]

Based on the above-mentioned definition of *philia*, Aristotle argues that there are three main qualities that determine whether someone qualifies as a friend: excellence, pleasantness and usefulness. He then moves on to saying that these translate into three types of friendships, which often overlap.[14]

1. friendship based on mutual admiration
2. friendship based on mutual pleasure
3. friendship based on mutual advantage

Aristotle claims that the first type of friendship is superior to the other two because it is based on excellence. What the two friends admire is the virtue of the other. It thus deals with the inner qualities of a person. In these situations we love our friend for intrinsic reasons and not solely as a road to pleasure and utility. You must not choose your friend because he makes you laugh or buys you expensive chocolates or has the right connections to secure you the best seats at the opera opening-nights. When you only love that which is useful and pleasant your friend becomes instrumental to securing those goods for you.[15]

Evidently, such behavior is not fitting for the virtuous agent. These intrinsic qualities are stable (contrary to e.g. fame, beauty and wealth) so even if your virtuous friend falls on hard times he will still have those personal qualities you admire and love. The foundations of such a friendship are good without qualification. Your friend and you like each other, share basic values and you admire each other for the right reasons. You see the virtue in one another and you are drawn to it and you wish each other good only for the sake of good.[16]

Although the three types of friendships overlap, it must always be the case that you see your friend as useful and pleasant *because* you love him and not the other way around.[17] That said, Aristotle also recognises that friends are important as instruments of happiness. He writes that, 'happiness also evidently needs external goods to be added, as we said, we cannot, or cannot easily, do fine actions if we lack the resources. For, first of all, in many actions we use friends, wealth, and political power just as we use instruments'.[18] In addition to this, friends are also intrinsic, necessary components of happiness: 'For we do not altogether have the character of happiness if we look utterly repulsive or are ill-born, solitary, or childless; and we have it even less, presumably, if our children or friends are totally bad, or were good but have died'.[19] In many cases people are friends in both senses because even the finest of friendships include pleasure and utility aspects and this does not taint them in any way.

It is worth stressing that the Greek term *philia* tends to be used in a broader sense by Aristotle and others than the English term 'friendship'. Aristotle's theory of friendship covers all the relationships we have with people around us, ranging from our family to our fellow statesmen. In addition to our modern notion of friendship, it includes a substantial chunk of all the other the members of society, for example the local cobbler[20] and one's political or business contacts.[21] Indeed, Aristotle writes that we even have a certain *philia* with all of mankind and that there is an ever so small element of care among all humans.[22]

Pakaluk claims that, 'since Aristotle uses the term [*philia*] for any affection that expects reciprocation, or that expects and finds reciprocation, no matter how extended or attenuated that affection, he applies it very widely: to families, clubs, clans, and even to reciprocal affections of

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[10] Cooper (1977, p. 322).

[11] Sherman (1989:128).

[12] NE VIII.2.

[13] Cf. NE VIII.9, VIII. 12, IX. 6. See also Sherman (1989: 124).

[14] NE 1156a6-8.

[15] NE 1156a14-19.

[16] NE VIII.3-6.

[17] NE 1138a3-8, NE 1156b18-24, NE 1170a5-6, NE 1236b27-32 and NE 1237a26-33.

[18] NE 1099a31-1099b2.

[19] NE1099b2-6.

[20] NE 1163b35.

[21] NE 1158a28.

[22] See Book 8.1 of the NE.

loyalty and patriotism among citizens'.[23] A slightly more conservative approach can be seen in e.g. Price, Walker and Cooper who all (to various degrees) argue that the lesser kinds of friendship and relationship do not qualify as friendship proper.[24] We shall return to this idea about different kinds of friendships and its implication for virtual friendship towards the end of this article.

At this point it could perhaps be objected that since *philia* is used in such a broad sense by Aristotle, it seems that his theory of friendship does not imply any particular intimacy. If true, this could in turn be taken to speak against our claim that virtual friendship is no genuine friendship. If, for instance, business contacts count as friends, in the broad Aristotelian sense, it seems odd to maintain that a virtual friendship cannot count as genuine friendship. Our reply to this objection is that the Aristotelian theory of friendship emphasises the importance of *mutual* admiration and love among friends. A major problem with online friendship is that this is often not the case. Both parties have to be aware of the relationship, they must both harbour similar feelings for each other and there must be an overall balance.[25] This is one of the many reasons why virtual friendship is problematic. For the internet user it is often more difficult to ensure that the love and admiration is mutual, as we explain in the next section.

Friendship on the internet

In this section we analyse the difference between virtual and traditional friendship from an Aristotelian perspective. As explained above, there are three different types of friendships. While all qualify as worthwhile to some extent, the most valuable one is friendship based on mutual admiration. Aristotle maintains that for this kind of friendship to exist the following three conditions need to be satisfied.[26]

(i)   the friendship is mutually recognised and takes place between two adult humans of equal standing;
(ii)   the friends spend time together, principally engaging in *theoria*;
(iii)   the admiration and love the friends feel for each other is based on the virtues they recognise in the other.

We concede that (i) can be satisfied in a virtual friendship and will therefore not discuss this condition any further. As for (ii), it is of course possible for the agents to

engage in *theoria* in virtual reality. However, it is a mistake to assume that *theoria* only involves advanced or lofty ideas relating to the nature of science and the like. In fact, *theoria* requires the contemplation of a mixed bag of topics involving both the high and the low.[27] Arguably, agents sometimes withhold what they perceive as less than perfect character traits in themselves when given the practical opportunity to do so. This is problematic as this opens the door to pre-meditatated censorship with regard to the information one discloses about oneself. This threatens to compromise the variation required for *theoria*. Even base matters could, and sometimes should, feature in *theoria*. An excellent example of this is the passage about Heraclitos in the kitchen in Animals I.5. Here we meet a Greek philosopher and hero who does not only suggest that such lowly entities as animals are suitable material for philosophical contemplation of the higher orders but, also that this discussion should take place in a kitchen:

> So one must not be childishly repelled by the examination of the humbler animals. For in all things of nature there is something wonderful. And just as Heraclitus is said to have spoken to the visitors who wanted to meet him and who stopped as they were approaching when they saw him warming himself by the oven he urged them to come in without fear, for there were gods there too so one must approach the inquiry about each animal without aversion, since in all of them there is something natural and beautiful.[28]

Two persons that spend time together in real life are more likely to face a wider spectrum of different situations, and consequently, encounter a larger range of topics meriting contemplation. This indicates that traditional friendship is more conducive to *theoria* than its virtual counterpart. In real life we stumble on situations that are both novel and unexpected and we have to deal with them *in promptu*. This seldom happens on the internet. In the online sphere agents can choose when to engage each other and are thus likely to select situations where they are in control, e.g. when they are in a good mood, not stressed, able to be private and so on. The result of this is that virtual interaction, by being subject to control, is too restricted and unlikely to bring about theoria as defined in the NE.

We concede that it might be possible to solve the problems detailed above through technological advances. Our concerns with respect to (ii) and the pursuit of *theoria* in a virtual friendship are based on empirical assumptions relating to the limits of our current technology. These

[23] See Pakaluk (1998:264).
[24] See e.g. Cooper (1977, p. 316).
[25] NE 1155b26-56a5.
[26] NE 1157b25-30.

[27] See for example the passage on Heraclitus in the kitchen in Parts of Animals I.5.
[28] PA i 5.645a15-23.

limitations might be overcome in the future, and if so, these concerns would be silenced.

However, our main concern with virtual friendships pertains to (iii). Genuine admiration and love requires honesty. Both parties must tell the truth about themselves and, equally, be able to see the other as she is without embellishing or idealising the friend. Assuming that we are dealing with virtuous agents (or at the very least, agents who aspire to virtue, so called continent agents), blatant lying is less of a concern. Although it is easy to deceive people on the internet, those who aspire to virtue would simply not be tempted to provide false information about themselves or others. That said, this does not take care of the control element discussed in relation to (ii), which risks introducing another, and more subtle, form of vicious behaviour. Because social community sites allow friends to be selective as to the 'when', 'how' and 'for how long' aspects of the interaction in a different way to real life, they can (even unintentionally) choose to communicate only in certain situations. The price they pay is that they miss out on important, potentially problematic and complex, aspects of the friends' personality. Therefore the agent ends up admiring and loving parts of the friend rather than the whole of her. Of course the unknown parts can be just as virtuous as the known traits (although this seems somewhat implausible) but the mere fact that the friendship is based on limited information disqualifies virtual friendship from meeting (iii). Further to this point, this displays a lack of proper judgement and practical wisdom in the agent proving that she does not have a fully virtuous character.

To spell the problem out in even more detail, the novel possibilities for the agent to choose how they depict themselves online can give rise to two kinds of mistaken beliefs. Firstly, one or both of the agents may sometimes end up having less than full knowledge about the other, and thus poor foundations for her perception about the character and persona of her online friend. Secondly, each party would be unaware of this. Note here that the problem is not necessarily conditioned on the *actual* lack of virtue in either party but that the belief (about the goodness of the other) is based on incorrect or incomplete information. Withholding this type of relevant information is in itself vicious. The character traits hidden might well be exemplary and virtuous, but the fact that they are unknown to the friend is enough to give rise to problems for the Aristotelian. The complete and excellent friendship can only obtain when both agents are fine, noble and excellent in every aspect, and this is incompatible with the withholding or manipulation of relevant information.

To illustrate the problem, consider the following scenario. Alice and Betty met online and hit it off immediately. They now chat more or less every day and feel that they have become quite close. They have, for example, shared intimate secrets, laughed together and even exchanged holiday pictures. After a couple of months of intense communication, however, Alice begins to notice that Betty never seems to be available on Wednesday and Friday afternoons. Unfortunately this coincides with Alice's only free afternoons during the week, time which she would like to spend chatting to Betty. When asked about this Betty becomes evasive and snappy and Alice ends up confused and hurt. The following Wednesday afternoon when Alice is in town she swings by the Community Pool for a swim. As she is about to go in, she spots Betty, immediately recognising her from the pictures. Just as she is about to call out her name she sees that Betty is not alone. She is with her physiotherapist fully engaged in a session of rehab water gymnastics. It turns out that she suffers from an impairment caused by a traffic accident. Her condition is very painful and greatly restricts her ability to e.g. visit clubs, bars, restaurants and other social venues. She is very sad and embarrassed about this and did not want Alice to think of her as 'different' from any other woman their age and thus kept it secret. This is of course understandable from a human perspective, yet it is telling as it shows how Alice's love and admiration for Betty in fact was based on incomplete information. Regardless of what Alice would have made of the truth, the point is that she, unbeknownst to her, did not have access to all the relevant information. The judgment Alice reached about Betty was ill founded and, consequently, their friendship failed to meet condition (iii). This example shows that increased opportunities to withhold or distort information is in fact an element intrinsic to online life, and is as such morally problematic.

The internet and the possibility of lesser friendship

The highest form of friendship cannot be enjoyed solely by interacting online, as argued above. This type of friendship requires a real life component. However, as explained earlier, Aristotle recognises that friendship can come in more than one form and, further to that, be worthwhile even though it might to a limited extent only. What could be called the 'lesser versions' are neither useless nor without value. Consequently, they could indeed be worthwhile to pursue given that the agents involved do not confuse their relationship with the highest form, i.e. the genuine form, of friendship. This raises the following question: how ought we to think about the pros and cons offered by virtual 'lesser forms' of friendships.

To make the discussion concrete, consider the distinction between professional network sites (such as LinkedIn) and social community sites (such as Facebook and MSN). We believe that there is an important moral distinction to

be made here. While the former offers a clear benefit to the users, e.g. in the way of mutually beneficial business relationships which the agents would not have been able to establish otherwise, the promise of the social network sites rings more hollow. Here the user is made to believe that she is likely to gain genuine friends and form meaningful and deep social relationships with other people. We showed in one of the earlier sections that this is false. However, that is not to say that social community sites are *entirely* without value, in all possible scenarios. If managed properly, they can of course offer very concrete benefits, in an instrumental sense. For example, a social community site might indeed be a very good place to meet people with whom you could become the friend of at a later stage as you advance from interacting online to meeting in real life. Further to this, it is a useful way to maintain already existing relationships, both when the friends are short on time or are geographically separated. None the less, there is an important moral distinction to be drawn between professional network sites and social network sites. Professional network sites, being of mutual advantage to the users, may well qualify as a good vehicle for establishing the 'lesser forms' of friendship, at least as long as no one using the professional network sites is led to believe that there is more to it than that (we take this to be a fairly uncontroversial claim and will thus not account for it in detail). The social network sites, on the other hand, do not even meet the criteria for 'lesser friendship'. Although we concede that these sites can sometimes be of mutual advantage to their users, our moral objection is that some users of social network sites are led to form false expectations and judgements about the true nature of their virtual (social) friendships.

Let us illustrate our argument in an example. Alice has two friends both of whom she has met online: Claudia and Daniella. Claudia and Alice first started talking in a chat forum on the professional networks site LinkedIn. They keep in touch regularly and as both are lawyers it has happened that they have recommended each other's services to potential clients. For all intents and purposes this is a mutually beneficial relationship and is thus a prime example of a valuable lesser friendship.

Alice's second friend, Daniella, shares Alice's keen interest in plants and Alice derives a lot of pleasure from discussing gardening on Facebook with her several times a week. On occasion Alice posts pictures of her garden on her Facebook wall. She is especially pleased about the compliments and positive feedback she receives from Daniella. Unbeknownst to Alice, however, Daniella's only motive for posting those comments is to encourage Alice to share gardening secrets with her. The information Daniella gleans has had a significant positive impact on Daniella's

own garden, and allowed her to grow plants she would otherwise not have been able to.

From an Aristotelian point of view, there is a clear moral difference between the two cases. In the gardening scenario, Alice is deeply mistaken about the nature of her and Daniella's relationship. Alice thinks that Daniella's compliments are sincere and without agenda, something that is not the case. Our conclusion is that Alice's friendship with Daniella has no moral value what so ever, and may even be harmful to Alice, whereas her friendship with Claudia has at least some value, in virtue of being honest and mutually useful.

A metaphor might help to clarify the difference further. Alice's friendship with Daniella is like certain questionable forms of alternative medicine: The friendship is potentially harmful to Alice, since what she believes is a route to deep and meaningful interaction with Daniella in fact is a toxic substance leading to a feeling of betrayal, i.e. the friendship does harm to her rather than cure her social isolation. Furthermore, by opting for the alternative 'medicine' Alice also foregoes proven and functioning methods for achieving meaningful social interaction. In other words, what is flagged as a fast-track to meaningful social relationships and social inclusion is in fact an illusion as these relationships, whatever else they may be, do not contain the necessary components that go into genuine friendship.

To conclude, based on a modern reading of Aristotle's theory of friendship, we have shown that virtual friendship does not qualify as genuine friendship. Virtual friendship exists on the internet and is seldom or never combined with real life interaction, whereas traditional friendship involves substantial real life interaction. We have shown that only the latter type can merit the label 'genuine friendship' and thus qualify as morally valuable. This supports the idea that virtual friendship is what Aristotle might have described as a lower and less valuable form of social exchange.

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