**Social Media, Interpersonal Relations and the Objective Attitude**

“The Machine is much, but it is not everything. I see something like you in this plate, but I do not see you. I hear something like you through this telephone, but I do not hear you. That is why I want you to come. Pay me a visit, so that we can meet face to face, and talk about the hopes that are in my mind.” (E. M. Forster, *The Machine Stops*)

**Introduction**

Philosophers interested in the effects of social media on interpersonal relationships have been drawn to the question of online friendship. According to the Aristotelian accounts that are prevalent in the literature, friendship is partially constitutive of human flourishing. On almost any account, friendship is an important good that typically contributes to wellbeing. It is far harder for most people to do well without friends. Social media users frequently have hundreds of virtual “friends” on platforms such as Facebook. Some of these virtual friends are also offline friends and much social media use is about the maintenance of existing offline friendships. However, it is the relatively new phenomenon of purely virtual friendships that has attracted most philosophical attention. Can there by friendships that are sustained *entirely* through social media? Are purely virtual friends authentic or ersatz?

Taking this literature as a point of departure, I shall argue that there is a more fundamental issue. Reciprocal friendships are composed of persons not things. We relate to persons as persons by adopting what P. F. Strawson called the “participant” attitude, which is partly constituted by reactive attitudes. However, the affordances of social media make us more likely to adopt the objective attitude by inhibiting certain interpersonal emotions. This is problematic for two reasons. First, the objective attitude tends to undermine interpersonal relationships, including friendship. Second, the objective attitude is a morally risky attitude to adopt towards persons. It makes us more likely to treat persons in ethically problematic, thing-like ways. But none of this is inevitable. Elder and Vallor have persuasively argued that virtuous virtual relationships are possible given appropriate care and attention. How should we weigh these considerations? This is a deep question that turns on our judgments about structural features of aretaic and deontic ethics. I shall argue that virtue-theoretic assumptions in the current literature tend to push us towards paying excessive attention to the positive features of social media and disregard its likely harms.

1. ***Online Friendship – The Current Debate***

Much of the current debate traces back to Cocking and Matthews (2000) who argue that authentic virtual friendship is impossible because friendship depends on forms of non-voluntary self-disclosure that require physical presence. It is through non-voluntary self-disclosure that we come to know our friends. The non-voluntary aspect is important because we do not have perfect self-knowledge, cannot perfectly articulate what self-knowledge we have, and are often motivated to present ourselves in untruthful ways. Even with good will and sincerity, text-based, voluntary self-disclosure presents others with a limited and distorted image. In this way, text-based communication can filter out information about character that is necessary for mutual interpretation and, therefore, necessary for friendship formation.[[1]](#footnote-1) For example, it can filter out nonverbal cues and limit the dynamic interplay of conversations conducted in real time. Cocking and Matthews maintain that this is inevitable and, while they allow that internet “friendships” are possible, they deny that these are true friendships. The inauthentic replicas are “quite inferior” even if they have significant value for some people (2000).

Other contributors to the debate have shown more optimism about the possibility of authentic virtual friendship. For example, Briggle (2008) argues that text-based correspondence can facilitate forms of self-disclosure that are more authentic, honest and deliberate than those that are typically possible in-person. The distance imposed by technologically mediated communication can be an advantage because there is less reason to engage in the forms of minor deception that often grease the wheels of friendship between individuals who spend considerable time together in-person. Briggle also argues that Cocking and Matthews are committed to ruling out too much insofar as their arguments would apply equally to pen pals. He cites examples such as American Civil War correspondence and the letters between Seneca and Lucilius. These examples may suggest that an unusual degree of commitment, self-awareness and literary skill are required to overcome the barriers to self-disclosure that Cocking and Matthews identify. Nevertheless, Briggle seems right that deep, authentic forms of self-disclosure are possible in principle.

Munn (2012), Vallor (2012, 2016) and Elder (2014, 2018) all defend broadly Aristotelian accounts of virtue friendship. By contrast with transactional forms of friendship based on pleasure or utility, virtue friendships involve a concern for the other’s moral character (*Nicomachean Ethics,* 8.3-4). On Munn’s view, friendship requires mutual caring, intimacy and shared activity (the Aristotelian requirement of “living together”). He argues that some, but not all, forms of online communication enable friendship formation understood in this way. In particular, he argues that Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games such as *World of Warcraft* can do so by allowing for shared activity that compensates for the lack of physical togetherness.[[2]](#footnote-2) Nevertheless, he maintains that social media such as Facebook are “incapable of independently providing a realm in which friendships can develop” (2012). They allow for communication, but not shared action.

On Vallor’s view, virtue friendship requires reciprocity, empathy, self-knowledge and shared life. She provides a nuanced, detailed discussion of the effect of social media on these four conditions for virtue friendship and concludes that authentic virtual friendship is possible, but difficult. In some respects, social media facilitate friendship and in other respects their “key structural deficiencies” pose “significant obstacles” (2012). A. Elder (2014) also argues that social media can provide platforms for shared activity or living together that allow for the formation of authentic friendships. In particular, social media can facilitate reasoning, play and the reciprocal exchange of social goods, information and ideas. I shall return to Elder’s and Vallor’s virtue-theoretic approach to virtual friendship below.

1. ***Friendship, Persons and Things***

There seems to be some consensus in the literature that although social media affect interpersonal dynamics in potentially problematic ways, there is no bar in principle to authentic virtual friendship. Of course, this conclusion depends on an Aristotelian analysis of friendship that not everyone will accept.[[3]](#footnote-3) Whichever approach we take, though, a satisfactory account is constrained by an axiological commitment to the special value of friendship in human life.[[4]](#footnote-4) Social media alter the way in which we relate to one another. The question of whether virtual friendship can be authentic is less fundamental than the question of whether those altered patterns undermine or retain friendship’s distinctive values. Metaphysically, it is less fundamental because we cannot identify friends prior to understanding the kinds of values that friendships instantiate. We cannot identify friendships and only then ask whether the relationships are valuable as if this were a further, open question. If there are axiological constraints on the concept of friendship then a relationship that does not realize certain values is not a friendship at all. Another way to make this point is to observe that the question of whether virtual friendships are authentic turns on the question of whether virtual friendships enable friends to realize values that are characteristic of in-person friendships and, therefore, whether they can fulfil the same structural role in the good or flourishing life. I shall return to the ethical dimensions of friendship after connecting it with personhood.

Elder persuasively argues that we can think of reciprocal friendships as social entities jointly composed by friends (2018). Given this picture, however, we might add that not just anything can be a part of a reciprocal friendship. In particular, it seems that friends must be persons. Moreover, they must relate to each other as persons, much or most of the time. [[5]](#footnote-5) Notoriously, the term ‘person’ is used in different ways by different philosophers and within the context of different debates. For present purposes, I shall follow Locke to the extent that I shall take person to be a “forensic” term in the sense that claims of personhood are partly normative rather than purely descriptive. To ascribe personhood is, *inter alia*, to ascribe moral standing, considerability or significance.If this is right, to think in terms of persons is already to think in normative terms. We cannot *discover* persons prior to putting in ethical work for more or less the same reasons as we cannot say what friendship is prior to considering its value. Moreover, insofar as friendships are composed of persons, and insofar as ‘person’ is a forensic term, to think about friendship is already to think in ethical terms. In particular, I take one of the defining features of personhood to be that persons have non-instrumental value. When we relate to a person, therefore, we relate to someone whose value does not wholly depend on the desires of others, including, of course, our own desires. Therefore, putting the point as cautiously as possible, it is morally risky to treat a person solely as a means to one’s own ends. In this way, persons are unlike things which we are free to treat in purely instrumental ways.[[6]](#footnote-6) Persons, but not things, can compose morally demanding reciprocal relationships such as friendships. This is one reason why Aristotelian virtue friendship involve a non-instrumental concern for a friend’s wellbeing.

The dichotomy between persons and things seems to be a deep, structural feature of our conceptual scheme that could only be challenged or discarded at significant cost. It is reflected in the folk distinctions between psychological beings and physical beings that structure how we understand our environments from infancy onwards. As psychologists since Piaget have noted, one of an infant’s first tasks is to figure out which objects in their environments have conscious minds and agency, and which do not.[[7]](#footnote-7) Notice also that consciousness and agency are, very plausibly, two necessary conditions for personhood.[[8]](#footnote-8) This gives us another path to recognizing the conceptual connections between personhood, friendship and ethical demandingness. The conceptual difference between persons and things has moral significance given that we ought not to treat persons just as we like. As persons are conscious agents, we have reason to take their conscious experiences into account as features of the world that matter independently of our desires.

1. ***Persons and Strawsonian Attitudes***

We can helpfully co-opt P. F. Strawson’s distinction between objective and participant attitudes in this context. While Strawson was trying to make sense of debates concerning freedom of the will, the two attitudes also characterize two quite different approaches we take to persons and things, at least when all is going well.[[9]](#footnote-9) For Strawson, the participant attitude involves “the non-detached attitudes and reactions of people directly involved in transactions with each other” (1974). The reactive attitudes that are partly constitutive of the participant attitude include familiar, everyday interpersonal emotions such as gratitude, resentment, forgiveness, love, guilt, shame, remorse, anger, trust, indignation, a sense of betrayal, contempt, indignation and (dis)approbation. These are the attitudes that we adopt towards persons who we take to be accountable for their actions and who we take to have moral standing. Moreover, these attitudes form the basis of attributions of responsibility and ground our ideas of justice and punishment. Persons rather than things are the appropriate objects of the participant attitude, and, even then, only when persons are taken to be responsible for their actions.

It is generally inappropriateto adopt the participant attitude towards a mere object or thing. To forgive, love, praise, blame or feel betrayed by a mere object is to make the mistake of anthropomorphization or fetishism. What should we say about the case of adopting the objective attitude towards persons? Strawson characterized the possibility as follows:

To adopt the objective attitude to another human being is to see him, perhaps, as an object of social policy; as a subject for what, in a wide range of sense, might be called treatment; as something certainly to be taken account, perhaps precautionary account, of; to be managed or handled or cured of trained. (1974)

The matter is complicated by the fact that while mere things are not persons, a person is a thing (employing the ‘is’ of predication not identity). Because persons arethings we sometimes do require treatment or management, for instance when our bodies break down or when we lose self-control. Nevertheless, it is *morally risky* to adopt the objective attitude towards persons. As Strawson observed, there is a connection between the participant attitude and “the recognition of the individual’s dignity” (1974). In Kantian terms, persons have dignity not price (*Groundwork,* 434). When we adopt the objective attitude towards persons we are less than fully sensitive to their mental states and, therefore, less responsive to them as conscious agents. As a result, we are more likely to relate to them as things or tools whose value depends on satisfying our own desires and we are more likely to disregard their moral interests.[[10]](#footnote-10) We might call this phenomenon *depersonalization, thingification* or *objectification.[[11]](#footnote-11)* When we depersonalize someone, we are more likely to treat them as replaceable, saleable, and as lacking in agency. Most often, abandoning the participant attitude merely leads to thoughtless disregard for their thoughts and feelings. However, it can also be the attitude of the slave-owner, the colonizer, the subjugator and even the perpetrator of genocide (Lifton 1986; Smith 2011). While the objective attitude does not *inevitably* lead to such forms of moral evil, it is always morally risky. All things being equal, there is reason to avoid adopting morally risking attitudes and, therefore, reason to avoid environments that make us more likely to adopt such attitudes.

Importantly for present purposes, the objective attitude stands in tension with reciprocal friendship. We cannot simultaneously view someone as an object to be managed and as a friend, at least not over the long haul. As Strawson put it, the objective attitude:

“cannot include the range of reactive feelings and attitudes which belong to involvement or participation with others in inter-personal human relationships; it cannot include resentment, gratitude, forgiveness, anger, or the sort of love which two adults can sometimes be said to feel reciprocally, for each other.” (1974)

Without the participant attitude there would no longer be “any such things as inter-personal relationships as we normally understand them”, but a world of “human isolation” (1974). Wolf develops Strawson’s theme as follows:

We would still be able to form some sorts of association that could be described as relationships of friendship and love. One person could find another amusing or useful. One could notice that the presence of a certain person was, like the sound of a favourite song, particularly soothing or invigorating. We could choose friends as we now choose clothing or home furnishings or hobbies, according to whether they offer, to a sufficient degree, the proper combination of pleasure and practicality … I hope it is obvious why the words 'friendship' and 'love' applied to relationships in which admiration, respect, and gratitude have no part, might be said to take on a hollow ring. A world in which human relationships are restricted to those that can be formed and supported in the absence of the reactive attitudes is a world of human isolation so cold and dreary that any but the most cynical must shudder at the idea of it. (1981)

Given this Strawsonian view, ongoing reciprocal friendship requires the possibility of relating to other persons through the participant stance.[[12]](#footnote-12) There could be no friendship as we normally understand it without the possibility of gratitude, resentment, forgiveness, love etc.

1. ***Social Media and Objectification***

The idea I shall develop in this section is that social media tend to inhibit the interpersonal emotions that are reactions to the minds of others and that are partly constitutive of the participant attitude. At least in part, this is due to the fact that normal social cues are missing when we interact online.[[13]](#footnote-13) Consequently, social media tend to inhibit the reactive attitudes and promote the objective attitude. This makes us less likely to treat others as persons and more likely to treat them as objects or things, which is morally risky. Reactive attitudes are not only feelings, but complex, emotional structures that show up in feeling, thought and action. To adopt the participant attitude towards a person is to be disposed to treat them in certain ways (and often to take oneself to be justified in doing so). The results can be serious. For example, adopting the objective attitude may make us more likely to engage in online harassment, hateful speech, profanity, threats, flaming, cyberbullying, cyberstalking, griefing and trolling. We may also be more likely to engage in forms of disrespectful and polarizing discourse that have come to characterize too many online moral and political conversations.

In an influential study, Turkle argues that many people immersed in technologically mediated communication find themselves feeling “alone together”. She associates this with a tendency towards online objectification:

“Networked, we are together, but so lessened are our expectations of each other that we can feel utterly alone. And there is the risk that we come to see others as objects to be accessed – and only for the parts we find useful, comforting or amusing.” (2011)

“[M]y concern [is] that the connected life encourages us to treat those we meet online in something of the same way we treat objects – with dispatch. It happens naturally: when you are besieged by thousands of e-mails, texts, and messages – more than you can respond to – demands become depersonalized.” (2011)

Some philosophers have also commented on the phenomenon of online objectification. For example, Nussbaum (2010) emphasizes the online objectification of women in particular; on gossip sites, message boards and in pornography. Cocking, van den Hoven and Timmermans similarly remark that:

“objectification of others is ubiquitous on social networking sites with users enabled to treat others instrumentally, deny subjectivity, reduce one another to appearances and regard each other as replaceable” (2012)

Adopting a Sartrean framework, Lopato argues that the “default relationship with the Other online is that of Other-as-object” (2016). Online, the Other is phenomenologically absent. We encounter a two-dimensional representation of the Other that cannot allow for the mutual recognition of personhood.

What explains this phenomenology of objectification? A full answer would discuss the particular affordances of different forms of social media and technologically mediated communication more generally. Clearly, their affordances and psychological effects are not uniform ((Liu et al. 2019). Nevertheless, it is fairly straightforward to describe some of the structural features of social media that tend to produce the effect. The most obvious difference between technologically mediated communication and face-to-face communication is our interlocutors’ lack of physical presence. Consider Turkle’s description of the attitude of a sixteen-year-old participant in one of her studies:

“Right now,” she says, on-screen life “is too much to bear.” She doesn’t like what the Internet brings out in her – certainly not her better angels. Online, she gives herself “permission to say mean things.” She says, “You don’t have to say it to a person. You don’t see their reaction or anything, and it’s like you’re talking to a computer screen so you don’t see how you’re hurting them.” (2011)

Cocking and Matthews were right to note that text-based communication lacks many of the paralinguistic cues that provide clues to the mental states of others. Without another’s visible, physical presence we lack social cues such as facial expression, eye contact or lack thereof, intonation, posture, body language, presentation and dress. As a result, we can struggle to attribute mental states to our conversational partners as we are forced to mindread at a distance.[[14]](#footnote-14) For example, it is often hard to interpret someone’s intentions on the basis of an email (Kruger et al. 2005).[[15]](#footnote-15) A relative lack of social cues makes mindreading (or what psychologists call “mentalizing”) harder. Reactive attitudes are reactions to the mental states of persons, and when we cannot model out interlocutors’ mental states we are less likely to experience the interpersonal emotions that partly constitute the participant attitude. A further important point is that we sometimes acquire self-knowledge, including knowledge of our own mental states, through the reactions of others. We may realize, say, that we are angry when we see the look on our interlocutor’s face. While I have concentrated on other-directed reactive attitudes, with fewer social cues we are also less likely to experience self-directed reactive attitudes such as pride and shame. Online shamelessness is an all too familiar phenomenon that may well be associated with a reduced understanding of our interlocutors’ mental states.

Another cause of the relative lack of social cues is the fact that much of our technologically mediated communication is asynchronous. We compose a message and then wait for a response. Because we do not encounter a person in real time, we are not exposed to their immediate reactions and, so, much of the usual bidirectional flow of information is missing. In face-to-face communication our behaviour is shaped in real time by nonverbal responses such as smiles, frowns, yawns and laughter. These nonverbals promote self-knowledge and self-awareness.[[16]](#footnote-16) They are also indicators of our interlocutors’ mental states and powerful elicitors of reactive attitudes that regulate our behaviour in accordance with conventional moral and social norms. In fact, we are so responsive to facial expression that even the suggestion of a face brings our behaviour more in line with conventional norms. In one widely-cited study, people contributed nearly three times as much towards an honesty box for coffee when eyes were displayed as opposed to a control image of flowers (Bateson et al. 2006). The absence of facial expressions and other social cues may contribute to a more general online disinhibition effect, which makes us more likely to violate offline norms (Joinson 2001; Suler 2004). We behave online as if slightly drunk and unresponsive to the social cues that normally regulate our emotional responses to, and behaviour towards, the persons with whom we interact.

1. ***Social Media and Empathy***

For reasons outlined in the previous section, the affordances of technologically mediated communication, including social media, tend to inhibit reactive attitudes. This is morally risky. The reactive attitudes have in common the fact that they are reactions to the mental states of persons. In other respects, they are a heterogenous group and, so, the question of the effect of social media on particular reactive attitudes merits far more attention than I can give it here. Still, I would like to briefly consider the example of empathy given its importance as a moral emotion and a significant cause of altruistic behaviour (Batson 2011).[[17]](#footnote-17) In one fairly recent discussion, Baron-Cohen goes so far as to *equate* empathy erosion with evil, which he suggests “arises from people *turning other people into objects*” (2011). He further argues that:

“When our empathy is switched off, we are solely in the “I” mode. In such a state we relate only to things or to people as if they were things … Treating other people as if they were just objects is one of the worst things you can do to another human being.” (2011)

This is an idea that Baron-Cohen traces back to Martin Buber’s I-thou, I-it distinction. Most likely, he overstates the association between empathy erosion and evil. Other significant motivators of ethical behaviour include anticipation of social approval, guilt, sadness reduction, distress reduction, empathic joy, anger and punishment avoidance (see further Prinz (2007)). Nevertheless, the connection between empathy and objectification seems basically correct and fits within the framework outlined in this paper. Vallor makes a related point, associating empathy with the recognition of another’s status as a morally-demanding person:

“even a stranger with whom I empathize will appear in my experience not as an abstraction, but as a concrete, nonfungible individual with specific emotional experience” (2016).

She also notes that:

“empathic concern relies heavily on the ability to read emotional cues from the faces and bodies of others, since it is this embodied perception that activates the bottom-up circuitry of affective empathy” (2016).

Once more, these cues are often missing online. This makes perspective-taking more difficult, which reduces empathy. While *expressions* of empathy are common on social media, those expressions need not be accompanied by the *feelings* of empathy that are triggered in-person. Worryingly, there is evidence that empathy among young people has decreased just as social media has increased (Konrath et al. 2011; Turkle 2016). Konrath et al speculate that “one likely contributor to declining empathy is the rising prominence of personal technology and media use in everyday life” (2011). Turkle similarly attributes the decrease in empathy partly to the rise in online communication, which she sees as having precipitated a more general “flight from conversation” (2016). Although further study is needed on the effects of social media on empathy, this sort of decrease is what we would expect given the framework defended here.

In sum, the affordances of social media tend to inhibit the emotions that are partly constitutive of the participant attitude. Rather than encountering a morally-demanding person online, we encounter a representation of a person. This representation is in fact a mere thing and not a person. Although we may associate the representation with the person represented, it is harder to do so in the absence of humanizing or personalizing cues.[[18]](#footnote-18) The representation is less likely to trigger our interpersonal emotions and other reactive attitudes. Online representations do not react and fully convey the presence of another person. There is a risk of feeling disconnected from the person represented and becoming immersed in a virtual environment of representations that we feel freer to treat in thing-like ways. Our interlocutors can take on the appearance of characters in an online world that is separate from offline reality and within which the usual moral and social norms apply less strictly or not at all.

1. ***The Desirability of the Objective Attitude***

I have argued that there are dangers to adopting the objective attitude towards persons and that the affordances of social media make this more likely. The final cost-benefit analysis is, however, more complicated than this line of argument might suggest. For it is also the case that we sometimes *desire* to place buffers between ourselves and others, and even to treat persons as things. As Strawson observes, the objective attitude can be a “refuge … from the strains of involvement” (1974). Interpersonal relationships make us vulnerable. Reactive attitudes hold us to account and many are painful to experience. Persons are demanding and sometime require more psychological energy than we are willing or able to expend. Diminished empathy means that we are less moved by the joys of others *and* less open to their pains. Self-directed reactive attitudes such as shame are especially demanding, and shamelessness can feel intoxicating. By contrast, mere things can be interesting and uninterested, largely safe, predictable, reliable and free from the possibilities of hurt, cruelty and betrayal.

There are further genuine advantages that come with the greater interpersonal distance of technologically mediated communication. In the course of his defence of virtual friendships, Briggle observes that “mediation loosens the links of daily life and softens the gaze of a physically co-present person” (2008). He takes this to be a possible advantage because it “can encourage greater honesty and increase confidence in disclosing more about one’s self”, which facilitates friendship (2008). Elder also discusses the advantages of “shielding users from their interlocutors’ potentially intimidating gaze”, notably greater freedom for sincere self-expression (2018). She argues that boundaries between individuals can promote communicative autonomy by making it “easier for individuals to choose whether – and how – to engage” (2018) and by making it easier to bale on poor companions in order to focus more attentively on high quality friendships with healthy boundaries rather than an unhealthy merging of identities. She also expresses the hope that “emotionally rich technologically mediated communication [enriched by images, emojis and the like] may support interpersonal emotional honesty by helping users to practice what we might think of as detachment without disengagement” (2018). There is reason to endorse this hope, especially in the case of people who suffer from social anxiety, or from stigmatized or embarrassing conditions, or who, for whatever reason, struggle to express themselves in-person (see (Amichai-Hamburger et al. 2002; Schneider and Amichai-Hamburger 2010; Bonetti et al. 2010).

The advantages that Briggle and Elder discuss seem entirely possible in the right circumstances. While I have focused more on the dangers of objectification, there are also cases in which we can reap the benefits of a healthy distance from our conversational partners without thereby losing sight of their personhood, or our own. Potentially intimidating gazes have negative moderating effects on our behaviour as well as positive ones. The feeling of relative freedom from the gaze of others has both good and bad effects. Depending on context, it might indeed support greater emotional honesty and self-disclosure. These are sometimes good things. The difficult question, then, is how to weigh these possible goods against the possible harms that I have identified and, in particular, the moral riskiness that accompanies the greater likelihood of adopting the objective attitude. In large measure, the difficult lies in the fact that we cannot answer this question without adopting (or just assuming) some normative framework. Rather than attempting to resolve fundamental questions of normative ethics in the final section, my more modest aim is to indicate how structural features of the current literature have pushed in the direction of paying greater attention to the likely benefits of social media than its likely harms.

1. ***Flourishing, Harms and Benefits***

I have argued that the affordances of social media make us more likely to adopt the objective attitude. The problems with this are twofold. First, the objective attitude tends to undermine interpersonal relationships, including friendship. Second, the objective attitude is a morally risky attitude to adopt towards persons. This neither means that virtual friendships are impossible nor that social media *inevitably* undermine interpersonal relationships or lead to moral harms. Social media create distinctive psychological environments that affect different people with different personalities in different ways at different times and in different situations. These are truisms. Given that all behaviour depends on the interaction between a person and their environment, the same could be said for any technology. Due to this, we need to learn more about the effects of social media on people with different personality types and traits.[[19]](#footnote-19) Given the current state of understanding, it is difficult to be confident in advance about the effects of social media on any given person. Nevertheless, a general tendency to shift away from the participant attitude could be highly significant both for particular individuals and at a population level.

This leads to a further moral question that has not received adequate attention. Because the effects of social media depend on variables such as personality, the consequences are not evenly distributed. For example, there is evidence that social media use can strengthen existing friendshipsfor some groups of users while tending to isolate others. This is one example of the rich-get-richer hypothesis according to which social media primarily benefit individuals with above average social competence (Sheldon 2008; Pierce 2009; Desjarlais and Willoughby 2010; Jin 2013). Importantly for present purposes, it takes practical reason to use social media such that freedom from intimidating gazes does not lead to morally risky attitudes or undermine interpersonal relationships. Jeske concludes her recent book on friendship and social media by observing that the obstacles that social media and new technologies pose to achieving the values of friendship mean that “we clearly need to exert caution and careful thought as to how we use them” (2019). This is true, but it should be added that this demands a level of social and practical competence, self-control and vigilance that few of us could be entirely confident that we possess under all, or most, circumstances.

Elder’s and Vallor’s contributions to the current debate around social media and interpersonal relationships assume a neo-Aristotelian, virtue-theoretic approach. Thus, we are encouraged to reflect on the conditions for developing excellence in human lives. From this perspective, Elder sees no principled reason why technologically mediated communication cannot allow us to practice a form of “detachment without disengagement” that is compatible with authentic friendship and excellence (2018). Perhaps we could think of this as a mean between dis-regard and over-regard for others. Elder also focuses on the case of friendship, which is a positive form of relationship partly constitutive of flourishing. Even her valuable discussion of non-ideal agents focuses on the case of the “developing moral agent” who is progressing towards becoming fully virtuous (2018). Similarly, Vallor similarly adopts a virtue-theoretic perspective on new technology. She insists that “at its most basic, ethics is about … the “good life”: the kind of life that is most worthy of a human being, the kind of life worth choosing from among the all the different ways we might live” (2016). This is certainly onevenerable conception of ethics as concerned with self-cultivation. Moreover, it provides an attractive framework within which to consider the formation of excellent online friendships. However, there is the risk that focusing on the regulative ideal of the kind of life most worth choosing could distract our attention away from the likely harms of a technology for those of us who are somewhat distant from that ideal. Thus, we might fail to notice that an environment compatible with the exercise and cultivation virtue may also be an environment that makes it far more likely that some people will behave in vicious ways. Warzones and natural disasters provide dramatic and dreadful illustrations of this general point.

The fully virtuous sage and the progressor are two staple characters of virtue-ethical accounts of human excellence and flourishing. Consistent with a focus on the sage as regulative ideal*,* Elder mostly focuses on the best case as she considers whether social media can contribute to flourishing lives. Following a discussion of appropriate uses of communication technologies, she comments that “with time, by practicing the virtues in the best way available to me, I may come to more and more closely approximate the ideal agent” (2018). Many of us have similar ambitions. As individuals striving to live well it is natural to cast ourselves in the role of the progressor, turn our attention upwards and consider what we might make of ourselves. However, while it is entirely plausible that the affordances of social media can encourage feelings of freedom that promote sincere self-expression, I have argued that the same affordances can sometimes promote an objective attitude that runs the risk of leading to serious moral harms. For example, the same affordances of social media that might encourage one person to open up to their parents might encourage another person to engage in cyberbullying or threaten to rape a stranger. Or, they might make it more likely that the same person will act virtuously at times and viciously at other times. Most of are not sages and what virtuous dispositions we have are less than perfectly stable.

Even if we agree that social media are compatible with virtuous interpersonal relationships, and may even promote virtue in some cases, we might still worry more about those cases in which social media promote an attitude that makes moral wrongs more likely. This is a concern even if we assume that social media simply amplify our preexisting dispositions without distorting or corrupting them. If the rich-get-richer hypothesis is correct, people who are already relatively virtuous are more likely to flourish by cultivating excellent friendships online. As Vallor puts it, “socially well-habituated individuals are more likely to use social media to enrich, rather than to diminish, their flourishing” (2016). The other side of this, however, is that people who are relatively lacking in virtue are less likely to cultivate excellent friendships online and more likely to become socially isolated. If this is right, social media may amplify our preexisting dispositions and produce both more virtue and more vice within a population. However, it is far from clear that we should support this sort of ethical inequality as the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. Moreover, it is often urged that virtue is relatively rare. For example, Vallor concedes that “of course, studies of new media practices will uncover patterns of vice more often than virtue; virtue is always rarer, and takes more time to emerge and stabilize in social practices” (2016). If so, the ethically rich may be a far smaller group than the ethically poor. It is also possible that vice is not only more widespread than virtue, but also more serious, dangerous and ethically pressing.

Questions concerning the relative priority of the cultivation of virtue and the avoidance of vice are deep and difficult ones. They turn on deep structural features of deontic and aretaic ethics that I cannot hope to address here. It should be clear, however, that in thinking about the ethics of social media we need to consider not only their likely costs and benefits, but also the distribution of those costs and benefits, and deeper axiological questions concerning their relative priority. In this paper, I have argued that the affordances of social media make us more likely to adopt the objective attitude towards persons and that this is a potential harm for two reasons. Firstly, it tends to undermine the basis of interpersonal relationships. Secondly, it is a morally risky attitude that makes us more likely to treat persons in thing-like ways. Furthermore, I have argued that these possible harms should be taken into consideration even if it also true that the relatively virtuous among us can sometimes avoid these risks.

**References:**

Amichai-Hamburger, Y., & Hayat, Z. (2013). Internet and Personality. In Y. Amichai-Hamburger (Ed.), *The Social Net: Understanding our online behavior* (2nd ed., pp. 1-20). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Amichai-Hamburger, Y., & Vinitzky, G. (2010). Social network use and personality. *Computers in Human Behavior, 26*(6), 1289-1295.

Amichai-Hamburger, Y., Wainapel, G., & Fox, S. (2002). " On the Internet no one knows I'm an introvert": Extroversion, neuroticism, and Internet interaction. *Cyberpsychology & behavior, 5*(2), 125-128.

Barnett, J., & Coulson, M. (2010). Virtually real: A psychological perspective on massively multiplayer online games. *Review of General Psychology, 14*(2), 167.

Baron-Cohen, S. (2011). *The science of evil: On empathy and the origins of cruelty*: Basic books.

Bateson, M., Nettle, D., & Roberts, G. (2006). Cues of being watched enhance cooperation in a real-world setting. *Biology letters, 2*(3), 412-414.

Batson, C. D. (2011). *Altruism in humans*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bonetti, L., Campbell, M. A., & Gilmore, L. (2010). The relationship of loneliness and social anxiety with children's and adolescents' online communication. *Cyberpsychology, behavior, and social networking, 13*(3), 279-285.

Briggle, A. (2008). Real friends: How the Internet can foster friendship. *Ethics and Information technology, 10*(1), 71-79.

Cocking, D., & Matthews, S. (2000). Unreal friends. *Ethics and Information technology, 2*(4), 223-231.

Cocking, D., van den Hoven, J., & Timmermans, J. (2012). Introduction: one thousand friends. *Ethics and Information technology, 14*(3), 179-184.

Desjarlais, M., & Willoughby, T. (2010). A longitudinal study of the relation between adolescent boys and girls’ computer use with friends and friendship quality: Support for the social compensation or the rich-get-richer hypothesis? *Computers in Human Behavior, 26*(5), 896-905.

Elder, A. (2014). Excellent online friendships: An Aristotelian defense of social media. *Ethics and Information technology, 16*(4), 287-297.

Elder, A. M. (2018). *Friendship, Robots, and Social Media: False Friends and Second Selves*: Routledge.

Engelberg, E., & Sjöberg, L. (2004). Internet use, social skills, and adjustment. *Cyberpsychology & behavior, 7*(1), 41-47.

Finkenauer, C., Pollmann, M. M., Begeer, S., & Kerkhof, P. (2012). Examining the link between autistic traits and compulsive Internet use in a non-clinical sample. *Journal of autism and developmental disorders, 42*(10), 2252-2256.

Flanagan, O. (2017). *The geography of morals: Varieties of moral possibility*: Oxford University Press.

Fröding, B., & Peterson, M. (2012). Why virtual friendship is no genuine friendship. *Ethics and Information technology, 14*(3), 201-207.

Haslam, N. (2006). Dehumanization: An integrative review. *Personality and Social Psychology Review, 10*(3), 252-264.

Haslam, N., & Loughnan, S. (2014). Dehumanization and infrahumanization. *Annual review of psychology, 65*, 399-423.

He, J.-b., Liu, C.-j., Guo, Y.-y., & Zhao, L. (2011). Deficits in early-stage face perception in excessive internet users. *Cyberpsychology, behavior, and social networking, 14*(5), 303-308.

Jeske, D. (2019). *Friendship and Social Media: A Philosophical Exploration*: Routledge.

Jin, B. (2013). How lonely people use and perceive Facebook. *Computers in Human Behavior, 29*(6), 2463-2470.

Joinson, A. N. (2001). Self‐disclosure in computer‐mediated communication: The role of self‐awareness and visual anonymity. *European journal of social psychology, 31*(2), 177-192.

Kaliarnta, S. (2016). Using Aristotle’s theory of friendship to classify online friendships: a critical counterview. *Ethics and Information technology, 18*(2), 65-79.

Kasperbauer, T. (2017). *Subhuman: The Moral Psychology of Human Attitudes to Animals*: Oxford University Press.

Kennett, J. (2017). Empathy and psychopathology. In H. Maibom (Ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Empathy.* (pp. 364-376). London: Routledge.

Kiesler, S., Siegel, J., & McGuire, T. W. (1984). Social psychological aspects of computer-mediated communication. *American psychologist, 39*(10), 1123.

Konrath, S. H., O'Brien, E. H., & Hsing, C. (2011). Changes in dispositional empathy in American college students over time: A meta-analysis. *Personality and Social Psychology Review, 15*(2), 180-198.

Kruger, J., Epley, N., Parker, J., & Ng, Z.-W. (2005). Egocentrism over e-mail: Can we communicate as well as we think? *Journal of personality and social psychology, 89*(6), 925.

Laurence, S., & Margolis, E. (1999). Concepts and Cognitive Science. In *Concepts: core readings* (pp. 3-81). Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.

Lifton, R. J. (1986). *The Nazi Doctors: Medical Killing and the Psychology of Genocide*. New York: Basic Books.

Liu, D., Baumeister, R. F., Yang, C.-c., & Hu, B. (2019). Digital Communication Media Use and Psychological Well-Being: A Meta-Analysis. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 24*(5), 259-273.

Lopato, M. S. (2016). Social Media, Love, and Sartre’s Look of the Other: Why Online Communication Is Not Fulfilling. *Philosophy & Technology, 29*(3), 195-210.

Luo, Y. (2011). Three‐month‐old infants attribute goals to a non‐human agent. *Developmental science, 14*(2), 453-460.

Malamuth, N., Linz, D., & Weber, R. (2013). The internet and aggression: Motivation, disinhibitory, and opportunity aspects. In Y. Amichai-Hamburger (Ed.), *The Social Net: Understanding our online behavior* (2nd ed., pp. 120-142). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Mason, M. (2014). Reactivity and Refuge. *Oxford Studies in Agency and Responsibility, 2*, 143-162.

McFall, M. T. (2012). Real character-friends: Aristotelian friendship, living together, and technology. *Ethics and Information technology, 14*(3), 221-230.

Munn, N. J. (2012). The reality of friendship within immersive virtual worlds. *Ethics and Information technology, 14*(1), 1-10.

Nussbaum, M. C. (2010). Objectification and Internet Misogyny. In S. Levmore, & M. C. Nussbaum (Eds.), *The Offensive Internet: Speech, Privacy, and Reputation* (pp. 68-90). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Pierce, T. (2009). Social anxiety and technology: Face-to-face communication versus technological communication among teens. *Computers in Human Behavior, 25*(6), 1367-1372.

Prinz, J. (2007). *The emotional construction of morals*: Oxford University Press.

Schneider, B. H., & Amichai-Hamburger, Y. (2010). Electronic communication: Escape mechanism or relationship-building tool for shy, withdrawn children and adolescents? In K. H. Rubin, & R. J. Coplan (Eds.), *The Development of Shyness and Social Withdrawal* (pp. 236-261). New York: Guilford Press.

Schroeder, J., Kardas, M., & Epley, N. (2017). The humanizing voice: Speech reveals, and text conceals, a more thoughtful mind in the midst of disagreement. *Psychological science, 28*(12), 1745-1762.

Shabo, S. (2012). Where Love and Resentment Meet: Strawson's Intrapersonal Defense of Compatibilism. *Philosophical Review, 121*(1), 95-124.

Sheldon, P. (2008). The relationship between unwillingness-to-communicate and students’ Facebook use. *Journal of Media Psychology, 20*(2), 67-75.

Smith, D. L. (2011). *Less than human: Why we demean, enslave, and exterminate others*: St. Martin's Press.

Søraker, J. H. (2012). How shall I compare thee? Comparing the prudential value of actual virtual friendship. *Ethics and Information technology, 14*(3), 209-219.

Strawson, P. F. (1974). Freedom and Resentment. In *Freedom and Resentment and Other Essays* (pp. 1-25). London: Methuen.

Suler, J. (2004). The online disinhibition effect. *Cyberpsychology & behavior, 7*(3), 321-326.

Sytsma, J., & Machery, E. (2012). The two sources of moral standing. *Review of Philosophy and Psychology, 3*(3), 303-324.

Turkle, S. (2011). *Alone together: Why we expect more from technology and less from each other*. New York: Basic Books.

Turkle, S. (2016). *Reclaiming conversation: The power of talk in a digital age*: Penguin.

Vallor, S. (2012). Flourishing on facebook: virtue friendship & new social media. *Ethics and Information technology, 14*(3), 185-199.

Vallor, S. (2016). *Technology and the virtues: A philosophical guide to a future worth wanting*: Oxford University Press.

Wolf, S. (1981). The importance of free will. *Mind, 90*(359), 386-405.

1. Cocking’s and Matthews’ paper was written prior to the rise of social media and focuses on text-based communication through email and chat rooms. McFall, another sceptic about the possibility of authentic virtual friendships, extends his analysis to Skype (2012). Fröding and Peterson (2012) also argue that social media make a certain form of highly valuable friendship impossible due to the limited and distorted nature of the available information concerning the other’s character. Their target is a faithfully Aristotelian model of virtue friendship principally involving shared engagement in *theoria*, i.e.,active study or contemplation. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Munn’s argument seems to be supported by the empirical literature (Barnett and Coulson 2010). Søraker (2012) also emphasizes the relative advantages of virtual worlds for friendship formation. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For example, Kaliarnta (2016) objects that the dominant Aristotelian framework fails to allow for the variety of forms that valuable virtual friendships can take. Moreover, we might note that the question “are virtual friends possible?” invites a conceptual analysis of friendship in order to reveal criteria of authenticity. This feature of the debate might be challenged too. Given the classical theory of concepts, it makes sense to start by identifying necessary conditions for friendship and then ask whether purely virtual friendships meet those conditions. However, for a wide range of concepts, there are empirical (and distinctively philosophical) reasons to reject the classical theory in favour of a prototype theory (Laurence and Margolis 1999). In fact, a prototypical account of the concept <friendship> would align well with aspects of Aristotle’s own discussion: “Hence we must presumably say that … there are more species of friendship than one. On this view, the friendship of good people insofar as they are good is friendship primarily and fully, but the other friendships [of pleasure and utility] are friendships by similarity.” (*NE* 1157a30-32). Perhaps virtual friendships can be similar enough to the prototype that they still count “by similarity”. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. We find expressions of commitment to this value throughout the Western canon: “Of the things which wisdom provides for the blessedness of one’s whole life, by far the greatest is the possession of friendship.” (Epicurus, *Principal Doctrines,* XXVII). “Presumably it is also absurd to make the blessed [*eudaimōn*] person solitary. For no one would choose to have all [other] goods and yet be alone, since a human being is a political [animal], tending by nature to live together with others” (*NE* 1169b17-20). “Let all the powers and elements of nature conspire to obey and serve one man: Let the sun rise and set at his command: The sea and rivers roll as he pleases, and the earth furnish spontaneously whatever may be useful or agreeable to him: He will still be miserable, till you give him some one person at least, with whom he may share his happiness, and whose esteem and friendship he may enjoy.” (Hume, *Treatise*, Bk. II, Pt. 2, Sect. V, p. 363). See further Jeske (2019, Ch. 4) on the question of “what good are friends?”. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. I set aside questions concerning the possibility of non-reciprocal friendship between persons and, say, social robots or non-human animals that are not persons. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Or, perhaps better, *mere* objects or things, so as not to exclude the possibility that some objects are not mere objects, but also possess non-instrumental value. I have in mind objects such as ecosystems and artworks. We might also wonder whether the categories of persons and things are mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive. In particular, there is reason to think that non-human animals may constitute a third distinct and morally significant category. See Kasperbauer (2017) for more on the ideas of animals as a dehumanized contrast class. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See, e.g., Luo (2011). Among other differences, we attribute mental states to persons, treat persons as subjects not objects, speak *to* them not just *about* them, and name them. We continue to be fascinated by fuzzy, penumbral cases such as ghosts, fairies, animals, vehicles, cartoon animals and creatures, shamanic transformations, vampires, zombies, marionettes, children’s transitional objects, social robots, corpses, computers and smartphones. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Conscious experience and agency are widely thought to be sources of moral standing. This is reflected in consequentialist and deontological ethics. It is also reflected in folk morality (Sytsma and Machery 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Wolf also reads Strawson’s distinction in this way. She describes the participant attitudes as “attitudes one has towards individuals only in so far as one regards these individuals as persons” (1981). Again, Flanagan describes them as “attitudes through which we express our common humanity, recognizing them as persons, and according them the positive and negative reactions that come from seeing and treating them as persons.” (2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Some psychopaths exemplify this phenomenon. Their condition is partly a matter of an inability to inhabit the participant stance. This is also true of people with autism. See Kennett (2017) for more on psychopathy and autism within a Strawsonian framework. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Psychologists refer to it as “dehumanization” (Haslam 2006; Haslam and Loughnan 2014). Malamuth et al. (2013) mention dehumanization in the context of online aggression. Depersonalization avoids any commitment to the relevance of species membership. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See Shabo (2012) and Mason (2014) for more recent, detailed defences of this claim. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. I do not claim that this is the only explanation. Plausibly, two further reasons are the *commercial* nature of most social media and its *addictive quality*. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. There is evidence that excessive internet use is associated with an impaired ability to interpret facial expressions and an impaired ability to respond differently to faces and objects (Engelberg and Sjöberg 2004; He et al. 2011). We should note, as ever, that association is not necessarily causation. For instance, it may be relevant that excessive internet use is also associated with autistic traits (Finkenauer et al. 2012). It seems likely that individuals with autistic traits are attracted by online environments that lack hard-to-interpret social cues. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. This problem is partly mitigated by nonverbals such as emojis, images, filters and Snapchat stickers, which go some way towards conveying information normally available in-person (A. M. Elder 2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Decreased self-awareness online can also lead to deindividuation. In turn, this disinhibits us and makes us less likely to adhere to social and moral norms (Kiesler et al. 1984; Malamuth et al. 2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. While Strawson did not mention empathy among the reactive attitudes, it seems reasonable to include it. See further Kennett (2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. A recent set of studies conclude that text-based communication can lead to dehumanization and that, by contrast, voice can have a humanizing effect (Schroeder et al. 2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Personality traits that are known to affect online behaviour include sensation seeking, locus of control extroversion, openness, neuroticism, need for closure, need for cognition and attachment (see (Amichai-Hamburger and Vinitzky 2010; Amichai-Hamburger and Hayat 2013). Notice also that the extent to which we find the objective attitude desirable depends on our personality and our situation. For example, the more we are tired, stressed, uncertain or vulnerable, the more desirable it may seem. In fact, there is the possibility of a vicious circle. If social media make us more tired, stressed, uncertain and vulnerable, then social media make us more likely to desire their objectifying affordances. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)