

Virtue Ethics and Modern Technology

Are Social Media and AI Making Us Stupider, Meaner, and Less Happy?

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The Central Question

- Not just “What should we do?” but “**What kind of people are we becoming?**”
- Technology isn’t just a tool—it shapes our **character**
- Every swipe, click, and scroll is a form of **practice**

Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics

“We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit.”

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What technological habits have you developed in the last 5 years?

Who Was Aristotle?

Life (384–322 BCE)

- Born in Stagira, northern Greece
- Studied at Plato's Academy for 20 years
- Tutor to Alexander the Great
- Founded his own school, the *Lyceum*

Revolutionary Thinker

- Focused on **observable nature**, not abstract forms
- Bridged theory and practice
- Founder of systematic logic

Why Aristotle?

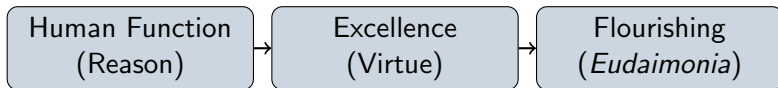
- He asked: *What is human flourishing?*
- He connected virtue to **habit and practice**
- His ethics are **deeply practical**—about how we actually live
- He understood that our **character is shaped** by repeated actions

The Key Insight

Our character is not fixed. We *become* virtuous through practice.

Aristotle's Ethical Framework: The Big Picture

- Ethics as inquiry into the **good life** (not just right action)
- The **function argument** (*ergon*): What is the distinctive function of human beings?
- **Virtue** (*arête*) = excellence in performing our function
- Virtue leads to **flourishing** (*eudaimonia*)



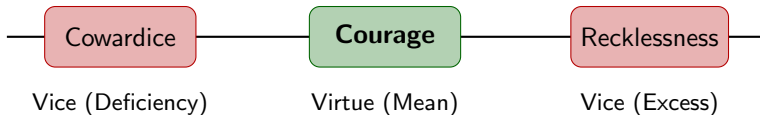
Eudaimonia Defined

- **Eudaimonia** = “flourishing,” “well-being,” “living well and doing well”
- *Not* “happiness” in the modern hedonic sense (feeling good)
- Activity of soul in accordance with virtue over a **complete life**

| | Eudaimonia | Hedonic Happiness | Life Satisfaction |
|----------------------|-------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Focus | Living virtuously | Feeling pleasure | Judging life positively |
| Timeframe | Complete life | Momentary | Retrospective |
| Source | Virtuous activity | Pleasant experiences | Meeting expectations |
| Can be wrong? | No (constitutive) | Yes (can feel happy doing bad) | Yes (can be mistaken) |

The Nature of Virtue (*Arête*)

- Virtues are stable **character traits** (*hexeis*)
- The **Doctrine of the Mean**: Virtue as balance between excess and deficiency
- Virtues are **acquired through practice** and habituation



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Can you identify the mean between “too much time spent online” and “too little”?

Intellectual vs. Moral Virtues

Intellectual Virtues

- **Sophia:** Theoretical wisdom
- **Phronesis:** Practical wisdom
- **Episteme:** Scientific knowledge
- **Nous:** Intuitive reason
- **Techne:** Craft/skill

Moral Virtues

- Courage
- Temperance
- Justice
- Generosity
- Honesty
- Friendliness

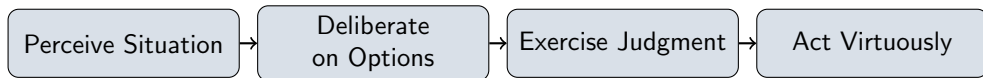
Key Insight

Phronesis (practical wisdom) is the “master virtue”—it tells us how to apply all the other virtues in particular situations.

The Role of Phronesis (Practical Wisdom)

Phronesis involves:

- **Perception of particulars:** Seeing what the situation requires
- **Deliberation:** Reasoning about means to good ends
- **Integration:** Balancing competing considerations
- **Judgment:** Knowing when and how to act



Why This Matters for AI

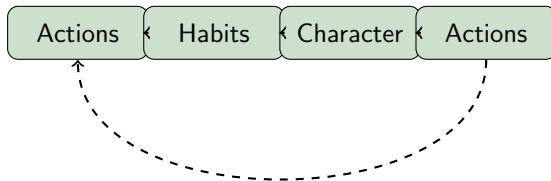
Phronesis *cannot be reduced to rules or algorithms*—it requires human judgment shaped by experience and character.

Habituation and Moral Development

Aristotle

"We become just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts, brave by doing brave acts."

- Virtue requires **practice**—we learn by doing
- **Moral education** and environment matter enormously



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What character traits might daily social media use be cultivating in you?

Modern Revival: Alasdair MacIntyre

After Virtue (1981): Diagnosis of moral fragmentation

- **Emotivism critique:** Modern ethics lacks a shared framework
- Moral language has become “masks for expressions of personal preference”
- Virtues require **social practices** and **traditions**
- We need **narrative unity**—understanding our lives as coherent stories

MacIntyre

“I can only answer the question ‘What am I to do?’ if I can answer the prior question ‘Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?’”

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Does social media help or hinder you in constructing a coherent life narrative?

Modern Revival: Rosalind Hursthouse

Virtue ethics *is* action-guiding!

- The **v-rules**: “Do what is honest,” “Don’t do what is cruel”
- Act as a **virtuous person** would act in the circumstances
- Virtue ethics handles **moral dilemmas** and “moral residue”

| | Deontological Rules | V-Rules |
|--------------------|----------------------|------------------------|
| Form | “Don’t lie” | “Be honest” |
| Focus | Prohibited actions | Character & motivation |
| Guidance | External constraints | Internal compass |
| Flexibility | Rigid application | Contextual wisdom |

Modern Revival: Martha Nussbaum

Capabilities Approach: What must humans be able to do/be to flourish?

- Universal human **vulnerabilities and needs**
- Connects virtue ethics to **policy and social justice**

Nussbaum's Central Capabilities (Selected)

- 1 Life—living a life of normal length
- 2 Bodily health—nourishment, shelter
- 3 Senses, imagination, thought—education, free expression
- 4 Emotions—attachments to things and people
- 5 Practical reason—forming a conception of the good
- 6 Affiliation—living with others, self-respect
- 7 Play—recreational activities

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Which of these capabilities might technology enhance? Which might it diminish?

Technomoral Virtues for 21st-century flourishing:

- We habituate ourselves *through* our technological practices
- Technology can cultivate virtue *or* vice
- Need a new framework for the digital age

Vallor's Twelve Technomoral Virtues

- | | | |
|----------------|------------|-----------------------------|
| • Honesty | • Courage | • Flexibility |
| • Self-control | • Empathy | • Perspective |
| • Humility | • Care | • Magnanimity |
| • Justice | • Civility | • Technomoral Wisdom |

Part II

Intellectual Virtues Under Threat

Is Technology Making Us Stupider?

Intellectual Virtues at Stake

Key **intellectual virtues** under examination:

- **Curiosity:** Love of learning
- **Intellectual humility:** Recognizing limits
- **Love of truth:** Valuing accuracy over comfort
- **Open-mindedness:** Considering other views
- **Intellectual courage:** Following evidence
- **Intellectual autonomy:** Thinking for oneself

The Central Question

Are social media and AI systematically undermining our capacity to develop and exercise these virtues?

Argument 1: Technology and Intellectual Vice

The Argument in Standard Form

- ① Intellectual virtues are cultivated through sustained, effortful cognitive practices (attention, memory, critical analysis, deep reading).
- ② Social media and AI systematically replace or undermine these practices.
- ③ Habituation in intellectually passive behaviors cultivates intellectual vice, not virtue.
- C. Therefore, social media and AI tend to undermine intellectual virtue.**

Our task: Examine the evidence for each premise.

Premise 1: How Intellectual Virtues Are Cultivated

Intellectual virtue requires **effortful practice**:

- Develop **sustained attention** through deep reading and focused study
- Engage in **memory work** through effortful encoding and retrieval
- Practice **confronting difficulty** by struggling without immediate help
- Seek **diverse exposure** by encountering challenging viewpoints
- Cultivate **slow thinking** through deliberate reasoning over snap judgments

William James

“The faculty of voluntarily bringing back a wandering attention, over and over again, is the very root of judgment, character, and will.”

Premise 2a: The Attention Crisis

Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows* (2010) and **Jonathan Haidt**:

- Internet use literally **rewires the brain** for distraction
- **Variable reward schedules** hijack dopamine systems
- “**Continuous partial attention**” replaces deep focus
- Average time on task before switching: declining steadily

| Metric | 2004 | 2024 |
|--------------------------------|-------------|------------|
| Avg. attention span on screens | 2.5 minutes | 47 seconds |
| Deep reading time (teens) | 60 min/day | 15 min/day |
| Phone checks per day | N/A | 150+ times |

Table: Approximate figures from attention research

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When was the last time you read for 30+ minutes without checking your phone?

Premise 2b: Outsourcing Memory and Cognition

Cognitive offloading: Using technology as external memory

- The “**Google Effects on Memory**” (Sparrow et al., 2011) shows we remember *where* to find information rather than the information itself
- **GPS navigation** reduces spatial reasoning and mental mapping
- **AI writing tools** outsource composition and critical thinking
- **Calculators and now AI** deepen the deskilling concern beyond simple math

The Concern

If we don't *practice* remembering, analyzing, and reasoning, we don't develop the intellectual virtues that these activities cultivate.

Premise 2c: Epistemic Bubbles and Echo Chambers

C. Thi Nguyen's important distinction:

| | Epistemic Bubble | Echo Chamber |
|------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Mechanism | Other voices not heard | Other voices actively discredited |
| Result | Missing information | Distrust of outside sources |
| Fix | Exposure to other views | Much harder—trust must be rebuilt |

- **Algorithmic curation** creates bubbles by design
- Engagement-maximizing algorithms reward **confirmation bias**
- Undermines **intellectual humility** and **open-mindedness**

?

How often do you seek out viewpoints that challenge your own beliefs?

Premise 2d: AI and Intellectual Dependency

Shannon Vallor on “moral deskilling” through automation:

- ChatGPT and the **outsourcing of thinking itself**
- Parallel to calculator debates—but *much deeper*
- We lose the **struggle** that builds intellectual virtue
- AI provides answers without cultivating **understanding**

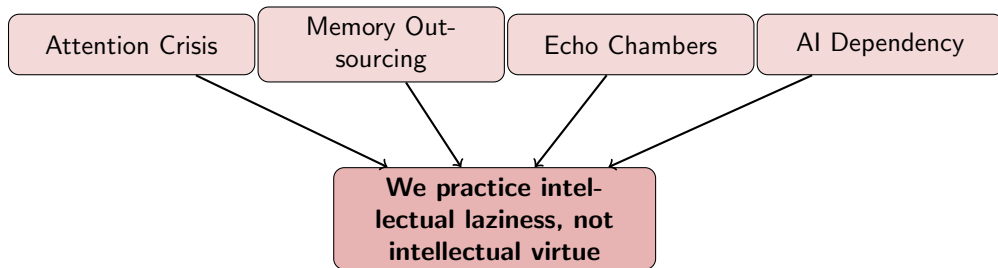
Vallor, Technology and the Virtues

“Technologies that remove the need for us to develop or exercise our own practical skills and judgment . . . can weaken or even eliminate our opportunities to cultivate virtue.”

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When is it appropriate to use AI for help vs. when does it become intellectual “cheating”?

Synthesis: Intellectual Virtue Undermined



Connecting back to Aristotle: We become what we repeatedly do. If we repeatedly practice distraction, outsourcing, and intellectual passivity, we cultivate intellectual vice.

Part III

Moral Virtues Under Threat

Is Technology Making Us Meaner?

Moral Virtues at Stake

Key **moral virtues** under examination:

- **Empathy:** Feeling with others
- **Compassion:** Caring about suffering
- **Patience:** Tolerating delay/difficulty
- **Temperance:** Self-control
- **Civility:** Respectful discourse
- **Honesty:** Truthfulness
- **Justice:** Fairness to others
- **Kindness:** Benevolence

The Central Question

Are social media and AI systematically undermining our capacity to develop and exercise these virtues?

Argument 2: Technology and Moral Vice

The Argument in Standard Form

- ① Moral virtues are cultivated through embodied, face-to-face social practices involving vulnerability and reciprocity.
- ② Digital mediation systematically degrades or replaces these practices.
- ③ Online environments actively habituate us toward moral vices (cruelty, impatience, dishonesty, outrage).
- C. Therefore, social media and AI tend to undermine moral virtue.**

Our task: Examine the evidence for each premise.

Premise 1: How Moral Virtues Are Cultivated

Sherry Turkle, *Reclaiming Conversation* (2015):

- **Face-to-face conversation** is the crucible of empathy
- We need **embodied presence**—eye contact, tone, physical co-presence
- Moral development requires **vulnerability and reciprocity**
- Learning to tolerate **boredom and discomfort** builds character

Turkle

“Face-to-face conversation is the most human—and humanizing—thing we do. Fully present to one another, we learn to listen. It’s where we develop the capacity for empathy.”

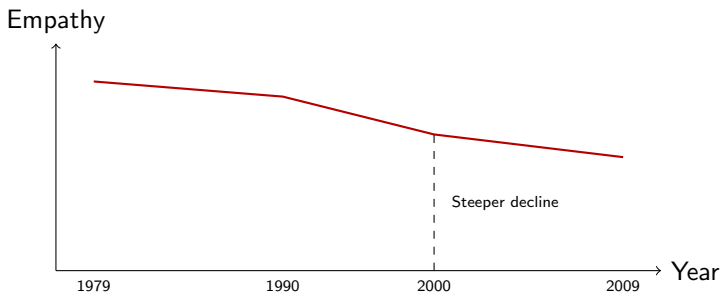
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Do you behave differently in text messages than in face-to-face conversation? How?

Premise 2a: The Empathy Decline

University of Michigan meta-study (Konrath et al., 2011):

- **40% decline** in empathy among college students (1979–2009)
- Steepest decline after 2000—correlates with digital communication rise
- Teens spending less time in **face-to-face interaction**
- Empathy requires **practice**—and we're practicing less



Premise 2b: Online Disinhibition and Cruelty

John Suler's "Online Disinhibition Effect":

| Factor | Effect on Behavior |
|----------------------------------|---|
| Anonymity | "You don't know me"—reduced accountability |
| Invisibility | Can't see victim's pain—reduced empathy cues |
| Asynchronicity | No immediate feedback—say things you'd regret |
| Dissociative imagination | Online self feels separate from "real" self |
| Minimization of authority | Flattened hierarchies, less restraint |

Result

The normalization of cruelty: Behaviors that would be unthinkable in person become routine online.

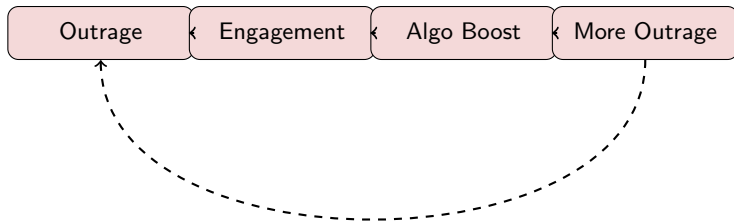
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Have you ever posted something online you wouldn't say to someone's face?

Premise 2c: Outrage as Business Model

Jonathan Haidt on social media's transformation:

- **2009**: Facebook adds “Like”; Twitter adds “Retweet”
- **Outrage generates engagement**—anger spreads faster than joy
- **Moral grandstanding** rewarded over moral action
- **Tribal epistemology**: Demonization of the “other side”



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Have you ever shared something online primarily because it made you angry?

Premise 2d: Dishonesty and Performative Identity

Technology enables and encourages **inauthenticity**:

- **Curated self-presentation** creates a gap between Instagram and reality
- **Performative virtue** allows us to signal goodness without actually being good
- **Deepfakes and synthetic media** make truth increasingly optional
- **AI-generated content** erodes authentic human communication
- These combine to cause a **collapse of trust** in media, institutions, and each other

Hannah Arendt

“The ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced Nazi or the convinced Communist, but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction . . . no longer exists.”

Synthesis: Moral Virtue Undermined

| Virtue | Traditional Practice | Digital Replacement |
|-------------------|--------------------------------|---------------------------|
| Empathy | Face-to-face conversation | Text-based interaction |
| Patience | Waiting, delayed gratification | Instant everything |
| Civility | Social norms, accountability | Anonymous cruelty |
| Honesty | Reputation, trust-building | Curated personas |
| Temperance | Natural limits | Infinite scroll, autoplay |

The Habituation Problem

We are practicing outrage instead of empathy, cruelty instead of kindness, performance instead of authenticity. **We become what we practice.**

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What emotions does your social media feed most often evoke in you?

Part IV

Eudaimonia Under Threat

Is Technology Making Us Less Happy?

Eudaimonia Under Threat

Beyond individual virtues: the **whole flourishing life**

- Eudaimonia requires **integrated exercise of virtue** across a complete life
- It requires **meaningful relationships**, not just connections
- It requires **purposeful activity**, not just consumption
- It requires **self-knowledge**, not algorithmic identity

Important Note

“Happiness” here means *eudaimonia*—not just feeling good, but genuinely flourishing as a human being.

Argument 3: Technology and Diminished Flourishing

The Argument in Standard Form

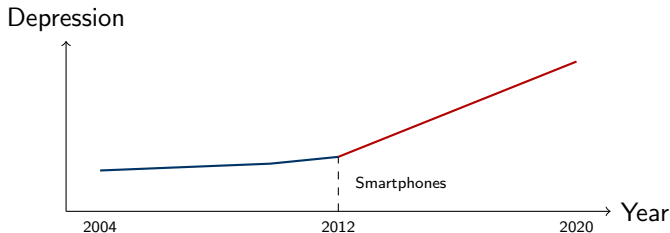
- ① Eudaimonia requires integrated exercise of virtue across a complete life, including meaningful relationships, purposeful activity, and self-knowledge.
- ② Social media and AI fragment attention, commodify relationships, and distort self-understanding.
- ③ These effects directly impede the conditions necessary for eudaimonia.
- C. Therefore, social media and AI tend to undermine human flourishing.**

Our task: Examine the evidence for each premise.

Premise 2a: The Mental Health Crisis

Jonathan Haidt, *The Anxious Generation* (2024):

- Teen depression and anxiety **spiked after 2012** (smartphone majority)
- “**Compare and despair**”: Social comparison on steroids
- **Sleep deprivation**: Phones in bedrooms
- Girls especially affected (social comparison + relational aggression)



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Have you noticed changes in your own or peers' mental health related to tech use?

Premise 2b: Commodification of Relationships

Turkle: “Alone Together”

- **Friendship as metric:** Followers, likes, streaks
- **Dating apps:** Optimization and commodification of romance
- Loss of **serendipity** and organic connection
- **Parasocial relationships:** One-sided bonds with influencers/AI
- The **loneliness epidemic:** More “connected” than ever, more alone

Turkle

“We expect more from technology and less from each other.”

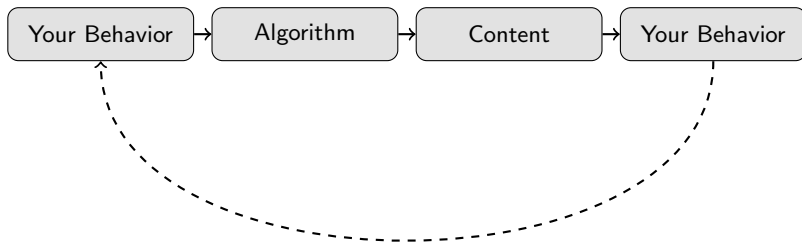
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How many of your online “friends” would you call in a genuine crisis?

Premise 2c: Distorted Self-Understanding

Algorithmic identity: You are what the algorithm thinks you are

- **Filter bubbles** as distorting mirrors
- Algorithm shows you “more of what you’ll (predictably) pay attention to”—but is that *you*?
- The algorithm **shapes your behavior** to maximize engagement. These might not align with your true flourishing.



Part V

Policy Responses

From Diagnosis to Action

From Diagnosis to Policy

If the virtue ethics diagnosis is correct, what follows?

- **Individual responses:** Digital detox, mindfulness, intentional use
- **Structural responses:** Regulation, design mandates, education
- Virtue ethics case for regulation: Creating environments **conducive to flourishing**

| | Individual | Structural |
|-------------------|----------------------------------|-----------------------|
| Advantages | Personal agency, immediate | Addresses root causes |
| Limits | Willpower exhaustion, inequality | Paternalism concerns |
| Examples | Phone-free meals | Age restrictions |

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Is changing individual behavior enough, or do we need systemic/policy changes?

Policy Proposals

Australia's Social Media Minimum Age Law (2024)

Minimum age of **16** for social media accounts; platforms face fines for non-compliance. Implemented 2025.

| Policy Type | Virtue Ethics Rationale |
|----------------------------|--|
| Age restrictions | Protect developing capacity for virtue |
| Design mandates | Remove features that habituate vice |
| Algorithm transparency | Enable informed choice |
| Digital literacy education | Cultivate technomoral wisdom |
| AI governance | Preserve authentic human connection |

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Should governments regulate social media to protect flourishing, or is this overreach?

Vallor's Vision: Cultivating Technomoral Wisdom

Technology as **pharmakon** (Greek: both poison and cure):

- Technology can cultivate virtue *or* vice—depends on design and use
- Need **intentional design** for virtue cultivation
- Need **individual practices** that build character

Practical Recommendations

- **Digital sabbaths**: Regular disconnection for reflection
- **Attention training**: Meditation, deep reading practices
- **Face-to-face priority**: Protect in-person relationships
- **Critical consumption**: Question algorithmic recommendations
- **Moral “operating systems”**: Explicit frameworks for tech use

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Which of these recommendations could you realistically implement this week?

Part VI

Objections to Virtue Ethics

The Critics Respond

Objection 1: The Positive Liberty Problem

Berlin/Mill: The Paternalism Worry

- ① Virtue ethics assumes a **particular conception of the good life**.
- ② In a pluralistic society, the state should not impose any conception of the good (**negative liberty**).
- ③ Restricting social media treats citizens as children unable to choose their own good.
- C. This is **paternalistic overreach** that threatens individual liberty.

Isaiah Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty"

"Positive liberty"—the freedom *to* flourish—has historically been used to justify tyranny in the name of people's "true" interests.

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Is there a meaningful difference between protecting children and "protecting" adults?

Responses to the Liberty Objection

- ① **Children vs. adults:** Age-based restrictions less controversial
- ② **Addiction and autonomy:** Can you freely choose what undermines your capacity to choose?
- ③ **Market failures:** “Choice architecture” already manipulated by corporations seeking profit
- ④ **Harm to others:** Externalities of social media on democratic discourse
- ⑤ **Soft vs. hard paternalism:** Nudges and defaults vs. outright bans

Key Question

Is it “freedom” to be manipulated by algorithms designed to maximize engagement at the expense of your wellbeing?

Objection 2: The Nietzschean Worry

Nietzsche: Who Decides What Virtue Is?

- ① Virtue ethics assumes we can reliably identify virtue vs. vice.
- ② But historical “virtues” often reflected **power structures** or “**herd mentality**.”
- ③ Some “vices” (pride, aggression) may be **necessary for excellence**.
- C. The virtue critique of technology may reflect **conservative bias**.

Nietzsche, Beyond Good and Evil

“What is called virtue in the herd-man would be vice for the higher man. . . . The virtues of the common man would perhaps signify vices and weaknesses in a philosopher.”

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Could “doom-scrolling” ever be reframed as a virtue? What would that require?

Responses and Conclusion

Responses to Nietzsche:

- **Empirical grounding:** Mental health data, not just “values”
- **Aristotelian** \neq **Victorian**: Different conception of virtue
- Virtue ethics can be **critical tool** (challenges existing norms too)
- The question isn't “Is change bad?” but “Does this change serve human flourishing?”

Final Reflection

The question remains genuinely open. But virtue ethics gives us a powerful framework for asking it:

What kind of people are we becoming—and is that what we want?

Discussion: What practices in your own technological life cultivate virtue? Vice?