

Social Media and the Virtues

Chapter 2: Computing and AI Ethics

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Essential Questions

- What kind of people do we **become** through our daily digital habits and social media use?
- Can **virtue ethics**—a 2,400-year-old philosophical tradition—help us navigate the challenges of social media?
- How has the rise of **Web 2.0** fundamentally changed the way we form communities and relationships?
- Is social media actually causing a **mental health crisis** among teenagers, or is the evidence more complicated?

Guiding Theme

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

Why Virtue Ethics for Social Media?

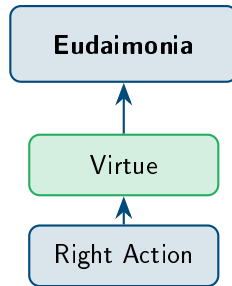
- **Rule-based ethics** asks: “Is this particular action right or wrong?”
- **Virtue ethics** asks: “What kind of person does this action make me over time?”
- Social media is not just about individual posts or clicks—it **shapes our character** through daily habits.
- Philosopher Shannon Vallor argues that technologies can either **cultivate or undermine** virtues like patience, honesty, and empathy.

Key Insight

Virtue ethics focuses on long-term character formation, making it especially suited for analyzing technologies we use every day.

Aristotle and Eudaimonia

- **Aristotle (384–322 BCE)** was a Greek philosopher, student of Plato, and tutor to Alexander the Great.
- **Eudaimonia** is often translated as “happiness,” but is better understood as “human flourishing” or “living well.” (Aristotle 2009)
- Eudaimonia is not a temporary feeling but a **way of living**—achieving your full potential as a human being.
- Aristotle’s key insight: “Happiness is an activity of the soul in accordance with **virtue**.”



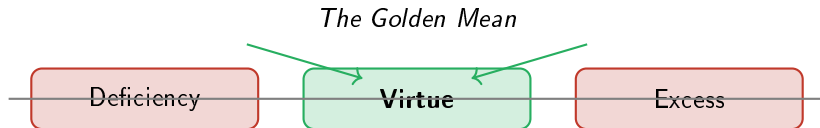
What Are the Virtues?

- A **virtue** is a stable character trait that enables us to act well and to flourish as human beings.
- Virtues are developed through **practice and habituation**—we become courageous by repeatedly acting courageously.
- Each virtue lies between two corresponding **vices**: one of excess and one of deficiency.

Vice (Deficiency)	Virtue (Mean)	Vice (Excess)
Cowardice	Courage	Recklessness
Insensibility	Temperance	Self-indulgence
Stinginess	Generosity	Wastefulness
Self-deprecation	Truthfulness	Boastfulness

The Doctrine of the Mean

- **The doctrine of the mean** states that virtue is the balanced midpoint between two extremes (vices of excess and deficiency).
- The mean is **not mathematical**—it varies depending on the person, situation, and context.
- Finding the mean requires **practical wisdom** (phronesis) to judge what is appropriate in each circumstance.



Phronesis—Practical Wisdom

- **Phronesis** (practical wisdom) is the intellectual virtue of knowing what to do in particular situations.
- It is not enough to know *that* honesty is good—phronesis tells us *how* to be honest in a specific context.
- Susan Sauvé Meyer: “You are not a good person unless you exercise **good judgment**.”
- Phronesis is developed through **experience and reflection**, not just by learning abstract rules.

Applying Phronesis to Social Media

Practical wisdom helps us judge: When should I post? What should I share? How should I respond to criticism? What content deserves my attention?

Aristotelian Virtues for Social Media

- **Truthfulness online:** Are you presenting yourself honestly, or does your profile show a more glamorous life than reality?
- **Appropriate humor:** Aristotle recognized that jokes often come at someone's expense—what will you laugh at or share?
- **Self-presentation:** The vice of excess is **bragging**; the vice of deficiency is **false modesty** or inauthenticity.

Key Insight from Susan Sauvé Meyer (Meyer 2023)

Technology has increased our opportunities for social interaction, but it has not changed our fundamental human concern with how others perceive us.

Communitarianism and Civic Virtue

- **Communitarianism** emphasizes that human identity and virtue are formed within communities—including **political communities**.
- Key thinkers (MacIntyre, Sandel, Taylor) argue that liberal individualism neglects our obligations to the **common good**.
- **Civic virtues** are character traits necessary for democratic citizenship: tolerance, civic friendship, commitment to truth, willingness to deliberate.
- Aristotle: Humans are *zoon politikon*—"political animals" who flourish through participation in **shared civic life**.

Michael Sandel on Civic Virtue

Democracy requires more than voting—it requires citizens with the **character** to engage respectfully with those who disagree, to seek common ground, and to place the common good above narrow self-interest. (Sandel 1996)

The Civic Virtues in Detail

Essential Civic Virtues:

- **Civic friendship:** Seeing political opponents as fellow citizens, not enemies
- **Tolerance:** Respecting others' right to hold different views
- **Deliberative capacity:** Ability to reason together about the common good

Supporting Virtues:

- **Epistemic humility:** Acknowledging we might be wrong
- **Commitment to truth:** Valuing facts over tribal loyalty
- **Civility:** Engaging respectfully even in disagreement

The Democratic Stakes

These virtues aren't optional extras—they're **necessary conditions** for democracy to function. Without them, we get tribalism, gridlock, and the erosion of shared reality.

MacIntyre, Practices, and the Common Good

- Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue* (MacIntyre 1981) warned that modern society has lost **shared frameworks** for moral reasoning.
- Without shared traditions and practices, moral discourse becomes mere assertion of preferences—"emotivism."
- **Key insight:** Virtues are cultivated through participation in **practices** with shared standards and goods.
- Democratic deliberation is itself a **practice** requiring specific virtues: listening, reasoning, compromising.

The Question for Our Age

If virtues require shared practices and communities, what happens when our primary "community" is a social media feed algorithmically designed to show us only what we already believe?

Review Questions—Part 1

- 1 **Define eudaimonia.** Why is “flourishing” considered a better translation than simply “happiness”?
- 2 **Explain the doctrine of the mean** using an example relevant to social media use.
- 3 **What are “civic virtues”?** Why do communitarians believe they are essential for democracy?
- 4 **According to MacIntyre,** what has modern society “lost” that makes moral reasoning difficult? How might this apply to online discourse?
- 5 **Discussion:** Can a person develop civic virtues like tolerance and deliberative capacity primarily through online political engagement? Why or why not?

Technology and the Virtues

- Recall: For Aristotle, virtues are developed through **practice within communities** that model and reinforce good character.
- Philosopher **Shannon Vallor** argues that technologies are not neutral tools—they **shape the conditions** under which virtues can (or cannot) flourish. (Vallor 2016)
- **Key question for Part 2:** How has the rise of Web 2.0 changed the communities and practices through which we develop virtue?
- Psychologist **Sherry Turkle** warns that digital communication may undermine capacities for empathy, patience, and authentic self-knowledge.

Vallor's Central Claim

“New social media invite **new habits** of communication and social interaction... [that] have the potential to impact our cultivation of the virtues.” —Shannon Vallor, *Technology and the Virtues* (2016)

Before Web 2.0—Communities of Virtue

- **Web 1.0** (approximately 1991–2004) was the “read-only” web—users consumed content created by professionals.
- From a virtue ethics perspective, Web 1.0 had **limited impact** on character formation—it was more like a library than a community.
- Traditional **communities of practice** (families, schools, neighborhoods, churches) remained the primary sites where virtues were cultivated.
- Face-to-face interaction was still the default mode of social life, preserving opportunities for **empathy, patience, and presence**.

Aristotle's Insight

Virtue is formed through repeated practice in community with others who model good character. The question: What happens when our “communities” become digital?

Defining Web 2.0—A New Context for Character

- “**Web 2.0**” (coined 1999, popularized 2004) marked the shift from passive consumption to active participation online.
- Tim O'Reilly's definition: “The web as a platform”—users now **create content**, not just consume it.
- From a virtue perspective, this is profound: our daily **habits of communication and self-presentation** now occur in digital spaces.
- Vallor asks: Do these new habits cultivate virtues like honesty and empathy—or do they cultivate their opposing vices?

The Virtue Ethics Question

Web 2.0 isn't just a technological change—it's a change in the **environment where character is formed**. What kind of people are we becoming through our daily digital practices?

Core Characteristics Through a Virtue Lens

Web 2.0 Features:

- User-generated content
- Social networking
- Participation and collaboration
- Global reach and scale

Virtue Implications:

- New contexts for **truthfulness** (or deception)
- New forms of **friendship** (or isolation)
- Opportunities for **generosity**—or narcissism
- **Weak ties** replace thick community

Sherry Turkle's Warning

“We expect more from technology and less from each other.” Digital connection may **simulate** community without providing the sustained, embodied relationships where virtue actually develops. (Turkle 2011)

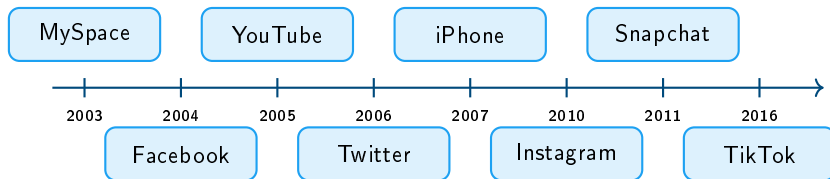
TIME Person of the Year 2006—Optimism and Concern

- In 2006, **TIME Magazine** named “You” as Person of the Year, celebrating user-generated content and collaboration. (Grossman 2006)
- TIME declared: “It’s about the many wresting power from the few and helping one another for nothing.”
- From a virtue perspective, this **optimistic vision** emphasized potential for generosity, collaboration, and democratic participation.
- But even then, some worried: Would online interaction cultivate **genuine virtue**—or merely its appearance?

The Aristotelian Question

Aristotle distinguished between **true virtue** (stable character expressed consistently) and merely **appearing virtuous** in particular situations. Does social media reward genuine character—or performative displays?

Platform Evolution and Habit Formation



- Each platform introduced new **habits of interaction**: status updates, likes, stories, short videos.
- Recall Aristotle: “We are what we repeatedly do.” These daily micro-habits **shape character over time**.
- Vallor notes that platforms are designed to maximize engagement—not to cultivate user flourishing.

The Smartphone and Constant Connectivity

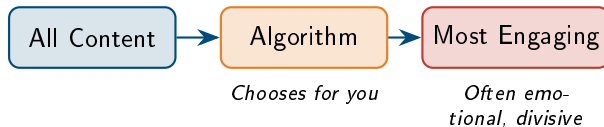
- The **iPhone** (2007) put social media in our pockets, enabling constant connectivity and instant response.
- Sherry Turkle argues this undermines **solitude**—the capacity to be alone with one's thoughts, essential for self-knowledge.
- Constant notifications interrupt **sustained attention**—what Vallor calls a key “technomoral virtue” for our age.
- The virtue of **patience** is particularly challenged when we expect instant responses and infinite content.

Turkle on Solitude and Self-Knowledge

“If we don't teach our children to be alone, they will only know how to be **lonely**.” Solitude is necessary for the self-reflection that virtue ethics requires.

Algorithms and the Erosion of Phronesis

- **Algorithmic feeds** decide what we see based on predicted engagement—removing our need to *choose* what deserves attention.
- This may erode **phronesis** (practical wisdom): the capacity to judge what is worth our time and attention.
- Content that triggers strong emotions (outrage, envy, fear) is amplified—potentially cultivating **vice** rather than virtue.
- Vallor warns of “**moral deskilling**”: when technology makes choices for us, we lose practice in making them ourselves.



Echo Chambers and the Erosion of Civic Virtue

- **Echo chambers** are social media environments where users encounter only views similar to their own.
- Algorithms maximize engagement by showing content that **confirms existing beliefs**—and outrage at the “other side.”
- This directly undermines **civic virtues**: Why practice tolerance if you never encounter reasonable disagreement?
- Legal scholar Cass Sunstein warned in *Republic.com* (2001) that personalized media would fragment the **shared public sphere** democracy requires.

The Filter Bubble Problem

Eli Pariser: Algorithms create “**filter bubbles**” that invisibly edit our view of the world. We lose the **common ground** necessary for democratic deliberation. (Pariser 2011)

Polarization and the Decline of Civic Friendship

- Research shows Americans have become significantly more **politically polarized** since the rise of social media.
- **Affective polarization**: We don't just disagree with the other party—we *dislike* and *distrust* them as people.
- This represents a failure of **civic friendship**—the Aristotelian virtue of seeing fellow citizens as partners in a shared project.
- Social media rewards **performative outrage** over thoughtful deliberation—cultivating vice, not virtue.

Evidence of Polarization

Pew Research: The share of Americans with “very unfavorable” views of the opposing party has **more than doubled** since the 1990s. We increasingly see opponents as not just wrong, but as **threats to the nation**. (Sidoti and Faverio 2024)

The Attention Economy and Democratic Attention

- The **attention economy** captures our attention for profit—but attention is also a **civic resource**.
- Democracy requires citizens who can sustain attention on **complex issues**—not just react to outrage.
- Persuasive design (infinite scroll, notifications, variable rewards) trains us toward **distraction**, not deliberation.
- Platforms optimize for **engagement**, which favors emotional, divisive content over nuanced civic discourse.

The Civic Cost of Distraction

Self-governance requires the capacity to **think carefully** about policy, weigh evidence, and consider long-term consequences. An attention economy that fragments focus undermines democratic competence itself.

Turkle on Conversation, Empathy, and Citizenship

- Sherry Turkle argues that **face-to-face conversation** is essential for developing empathy—a virtue with civic dimensions.
- **Civic empathy**: The capacity to understand fellow citizens' perspectives, even when we disagree.
- Digital communication lets us **curate and control**—we avoid the difficult work of truly listening to different views.
- Turkle: “We expect more from technology and less from each other”—including less from ourselves as citizens.

Research Finding

One study suggests empathy among college students has **declined 40%** since 2000. This affects not just personal relationships but our capacity for democratic life with diverse others. (Konrath, O'Brien, and Hsing 2011)

Vallor's Technomoral Virtues—Personal and Civic

Personal Technomoral Virtues:

- **Self-control:** Resisting compulsive use
- **Honesty:** Authentic self-presentation
- **Humility:** Accurate self-knowledge
- **Patience:** Tolerating delays and difficulty

Civic Technomoral Virtues:

- **Civility:** Respectful disagreement
- **Justice:** Fair treatment online
- **Empathy:** Understanding diverse others
- **Epistemic responsibility:** Commitment to truth

Technomoral Wisdom

Technomoral wisdom is the master virtue: knowing how to live well *with* technology—both as individuals and as citizens of a democratic society.

Review Questions—Part 2

- 1 **According to Vallor**, how do new technologies affect the development of virtue? Why aren't technologies “neutral tools”?
- 2 **What are “echo chambers”?** How do they threaten civic virtues like tolerance and deliberative capacity?
- 3 **Explain “moral deskilling.”** How might algorithmic feeds contribute to this problem for both personal and civic virtue?
- 4 **Why does Turkle** emphasize face-to-face conversation? What virtues does it cultivate that digital communication may not?
- 5 **Discussion:** Vallor proposes “technomoral virtues” for the digital age. Which do you think is most important for *democratic citizenship*? Why?

What the Numbers Tell Us About Character

- Statistics on social media use aren't just about **time**—they reveal patterns of **habit formation**.
- Recall Aristotle: Virtues (and vices) are formed through repeated practice over time.
- **Key question:** What do these usage patterns suggest about the character traits being cultivated in young people?
- We'll examine the data through the lens of specific virtues: **temperance, patience, honesty, empathy, and practical wisdom**.

The Virtue Ethics Approach to Data

Instead of asking only “Is social media harmful?” we ask: “What kind of people are we becoming through these daily digital habits?”

Usage Statistics and Temperance (Pew 2024)

- **95%** of American teens have smartphone access; **46%** report being online “almost constantly.”
- Average daily social media use: **4.8 hours**—nearly one-third of waking hours.
- **45%** of teens say they spend “too much time” on social media—suggesting awareness that temperance is lacking.
- 44% have tried to cut back, indicating a **struggle for self-control** against habit and design.

The Temperance Problem

When nearly half of users *themselves* believe they use too much, we see evidence that the virtue of **temperance** (moderation) is being systematically undermined by platform design.

Daily Habits and Character Formation

Daily Usage Rates:

- YouTube: 73% daily (15% constant)
- TikTok: 58% daily (17% constant)
- Instagram: 50% daily (12% constant)
- Snapchat: 50% daily

Aristotle's Principle:

- “We are what we **repeatedly** do.”
- Daily habits become ingrained character.

Habits Being Formed

- Checking for notifications
- Scrolling without purpose
- Seeking external validation
- Comparing self to others
- Responding immediately

Global Patterns and “Problematic Use”

- The **WHO Europe** study (2024) found 11% of adolescents show “problematic social media use”—up from 7% in 2018.
- “Problematic use” means struggling to **control** use despite negative consequences—a failure of temperance and self-control.
- Girls report higher rates (13%) than boys (9%), suggesting gendered patterns in how platforms affect character.
- 36% report **constant contact** with friends online—blurring boundaries between self and social network.

Virtue Ethics Interpretation

“Problematic use” is essentially what Aristotle would call a **vice of excess**—the failure to find the moderate mean in digital engagement. The rise from 7% to 11% suggests this vice is spreading.

Social Connection and the Virtue of Friendship

What Teens Report (Pew 2024):

- 74% feel more connected to friends' lives.
- 52% feel supported through tough times (down from 67% in 2022).
- Many cite community and belonging as benefits.

Aristotle on Friendship:

- True friendship requires **shared life** (suzên)—spending real time together.
- Virtue friendships are based on mutual character development.
- Utility/pleasure friendships are shallower.

A Troubling Decline

The drop from 67% to 52% feeling supported suggests that social media connections may be becoming **less sustaining**—more like Aristotle's shallow friendships of utility than deep friendships of virtue.

Honesty, Self-Presentation, and Vice

- Recall Susan Sauvé Meyer: Social media creates new contexts for the virtue of **truthfulness** and its opposing vices.
- The vice of excess is **boastfulness**—presenting a more glamorous life than reality (the “highlight reel” problem).
- The vice of deficiency is **false modesty** or **inauthenticity**—hiding one’s true self entirely.
- 34% of girls say social media makes them feel worse about their lives—evidence of harmful **social comparison** fueled by others’ dishonest self-presentation.

The Virtue of Truthfulness Online

The honest person presents themselves **accurately**—neither exaggerating accomplishments nor hiding genuine achievements. Social media’s incentive structures make this mean *very* difficult to hit.

Sleep, Patience, and Self-Control

- Research shows **nighttime social media use** is associated with poor sleep, anxiety, and depression (Woods & Scott, 2016). (Woods and Scott 2016)
- 36% of teens maintain **constant online contact**—even at night when they should be resting.
- This reflects failures of **self-control** (the ability to resist immediate temptation) and **patience** (the ability to wait).
- Turkle: Constant connectivity prevents the **solitude** necessary for self-reflection and developing self-knowledge.



Cyberbullying and the Failure of Civility

- Cyberbullying continues to rise among U.S. youth, representing a widespread **failure of the virtue of civility**.
- Vallor identifies **civility** as a key technomoral virtue: treating others with respect even in disagreement.
- Online environments may **disinhibit** vice: anonymity, distance, and lack of immediate feedback reduce natural restraints.
- The 24/7, permanent, public nature of online cruelty amplifies harm beyond traditional bullying.

Why Digital Environments Challenge Civility

- We don't see the **face** of the person we're hurting (reduced empathy cues)
- **Anonymity** removes accountability
- **Audience** rewards performative cruelty with engagement
- No opportunity for **repair** through face-to-face apology

Social Comparison and Humility

- **Social comparison** on platforms like Instagram and TikTok involves constantly measuring ourselves against others' curated images.
- This undermines **humility**—the virtue of accurate self-assessment, neither inflated nor deflated.
- 46% of teens say social media makes them feel worse about their **body image**—evidence of distorted self-perception.
- The “highlight reel” effect: Comparing our ordinary reality to others' **best, edited moments**.

Vallor on Humility as Technomoral Virtue

True humility means knowing our actual strengths and limitations. Constant exposure to idealized images makes this self-knowledge **systematically harder** to achieve.

When Does Social Media Cultivate Virtue?

- Not all social media use undermines virtue—context and **manner of use** matter greatly.
- **Active use** (creating, meaningfully connecting) may cultivate virtues like creativity and genuine friendship.
- **Passive use** (scrolling, comparing) tends to cultivate vices like envy, impatience, and distorted self-image.
- Marginalized communities (LGBTQ+ youth, those with disabilities) may find **supportive communities** otherwise unavailable.

Vallor's Key Distinction

Social media can **supplement** face-to-face relationships (potentially supporting virtue) or **substitute** for them (likely undermining virtue). The research suggests benefits come primarily from supplementation.

The Challenge of Developing Phronesis

- **Phronesis** (practical wisdom) is the virtue of knowing how much, when, and in what way to engage with social media.
- Research struggles to identify a clear “threshold”—suggesting the answer requires **individual judgment**, not universal rules.
- Orben & Przybylski found small average effect sizes—but averages obscure the **individual differences** that phronesis must navigate. (Orben and Przybylski 2019)
- The temperate mean will look different for different people in different circumstances.

Why Rules Aren't Enough

Virtue ethics recognizes that no simple rule (“2 hours max”) can replace the **practical wisdom** to judge what's appropriate for each person and situation. This is why character education matters more than screen-time limits.

Review Questions—Part 3

- 1 **How do usage statistics** reveal challenges to the virtue of **temperance**? What evidence suggests teens struggle with moderation?
- 2 **Explain the decline** from 67% to 52% in teens feeling supported. What does this suggest about online friendship from an Aristotelian perspective?
- 3 **How does social comparison** undermine the virtues of **truthfulness** (in those posting) and **humility** (in those viewing)?
- 4 **What is the difference** between active and passive social media use? Why might this distinction matter for virtue development?
- 5 **Discussion:** Why might simple screen-time rules be insufficient from a virtue ethics perspective? What role should **phronesis** play in managing social media use?

Framing the Debate—Character and Resilience

- Jonathan Haidt's *The Anxious Generation* (2024) can be understood as a claim about **virtue formation**.
- His core argument: The “phone-based childhood” is producing young people who lack **resilience**—the ability to cope with adversity.
- Haidt draws on the concept of **antifragility**: like bones and muscles, character *needs* challenges to develop strength.
- From a virtue ethics view, this is a claim that social media environments **systematically prevent** the development of certain virtues.

The Virtue Ethics Translation

Haidt's thesis: Children are being denied the **practice and habituation** necessary to develop virtues like courage, resilience, and emotional regulation. Social media provides the wrong kind of challenges.

Haidt's Evidence as Character Formation Data

- **Timing** (decline begins 2012): Coincides with smartphone saturation—a fundamental change in daily habits.
- **Gender patterns**: Girls, who use image-focused platforms more, show greater effects—consistent with virtue challenges around **truthfulness** and **humility**.
- **Multiple indicators**: Rising anxiety, depression, self-harm, and loneliness suggest failures in developing **emotional resilience**.
- Haidt frames this as a **generational character shift**—not individual pathology but systematic environmental change.

The Two-Part Problem (Virtue Ethics Reading)

- ① **Online**: Constant comparison, validation-seeking, and curated self-presentation cultivate *vices*.
- ② **Offline**: “Safetyism” denies children the challenges needed to cultivate *virtues* like courage and resilience.

The “Great Rewiring” as Habit Transformation

Play-Based Childhood Habits:

- Negotiating conflicts face-to-face
- Tolerating boredom
- Taking physical risks
- Experiencing natural consequences
- Developing through unstructured play

Phone-Based Childhood Habits:

- Avoiding difficult conversations
- Instant entertainment on demand
- Physical safety, digital exposure
- Algorithmically curated experience
- Constant adult monitoring

Aristotle's Insight Applied

If “we are what we repeatedly do,” then these two childhoods are forming **fundamentally different characters**. Haidt argues the new habits cultivate fragility rather than resilience.

Haidt's Recommendations as Virtue Interventions

- ❶ **No smartphones before high school**—Protect the period when foundational character habits are formed.
- ❷ **No social media before 16**—Delay exposure to environments that cultivate vices of comparison and validation-seeking.
- ❸ **Phone-free schools**—Restore opportunities for face-to-face interaction that cultivates empathy and social skills.
- ❹ **More unsupervised play**—Provide the challenges necessary to develop courage, resilience, and practical wisdom.

The Collective Action Argument

Individual families practicing these virtues face social costs. Haidt argues we need **community-wide norms**—precisely what communitarians like MacIntyre say virtue requires.

The Critics—Questioning the Causal Story

- **Candace Odgers** (*Nature*) argues Haidt confuses correlation with causation—a failure of **intellectual humility**.
- She points to alternative explanations: economic insecurity, school violence, climate anxiety, academic pressure.
- From a virtue perspective, these are *also* challenges to character formation—but different ones than Haidt emphasizes.
- Critics argue the international patterns don't match smartphone adoption timing as closely as claimed.

The Virtue of Intellectual Humility

Both sides of this debate should practice **intellectual humility**—acknowledging uncertainty, considering alternative views, and proportioning claims to evidence. This is itself a technomoral virtue.

Research Quality and Epistemic Virtue

- Critics like **Aaron Brown** and **Andrew Przybylski** argue that most studies Haidt cites have significant methodological weaknesses.
- Przybylski accuses Haidt of “vote counting”—emphasizing **quantity** of studies over **quality** of evidence.
- Only 22 of 476 cited studies have data on *both* heavy social media use *and* serious mental health issues in adolescents.
- This raises questions about **epistemic virtues**: Are we believing what the evidence actually supports?

Vallor on Epistemic Virtue in a Digital Age

Vallor emphasizes that **good judgment about information** is a crucial technomoral virtue. The Haidt debate itself is a case study in how difficult this is when evidence is complex and stakes are high.

Alternative Explanations and Intellectual Honesty

- Critics suggest Haidt underweights alternative factors: economic precarity, academic pressure, COVID effects, climate anxiety.
- **Melinda Wenner Moyer**: “I think Haidt is over-stating the research... in ways that undermine faith and trust in science.”
- **Tobias Dienlin**: The crisis may be “largely limited to the U.S.”—suggesting cultural factors beyond technology.
- The virtue of **intellectual honesty** requires acknowledging what we don't know and presenting uncertainty accurately.

Multiple Factors, One Framework

Even if social media is only *one* factor among several, virtue ethics still provides a useful lens: All these challenges affect the **conditions under which character develops**. The question is which factors matter most.

The Full Picture—Personal and Civic Virtue

- Social media affects both **personal virtues** (temperance, patience, honesty) and **civic virtues** (tolerance, civic friendship, commitment to truth).
- Haidt focuses primarily on personal mental health; but the evidence also shows threats to **democratic health**.
- Echo chambers, polarization, and misinformation undermine the **shared civic life** communitarians say virtue requires.
- A complete analysis must address both individual flourishing *and* our capacity for democratic self-governance.

The Communitarian Synthesis

Personal and civic virtue are connected: We develop character *within* communities, including political communities. When social media fragments the public sphere, it damages both individual and collective flourishing.

Vallor, Turkle, and Democratic Renewal

For Personal Virtue:

- Cultivate **technomoral virtues**: temperance, honesty, patience, humility
- Reclaim **solitude** for self-reflection (Turkle)
- Practice **face-to-face** conversation
- Develop **technomoral wisdom** about personal use

For Civic Virtue:

- Seek out **diverse viewpoints** intentionally
- Practice **epistemic humility** about political beliefs
- Cultivate **civic friendship** across divides
- Support **shared institutions** and factual discourse

The Dual Challenge

We need practices that cultivate both kinds of virtue—and we need **communities** (families, schools, civic organizations) that support these practices against algorithmic incentives.

Practical Wisdom for Personal and Civic Life

Questions for Personal Phronesis:

- Am I practicing **temperance** in my social media use?
- Am I presenting myself with **truthfulness**, or curating a false image?
- Is my use **supplementing** or **substituting** for real relationships?

Questions for Civic Phronesis:

- Do I encounter **diverse perspectives**, or only views I already hold?
- Do I treat political opponents as **fellow citizens** or as enemies?
- Am I committed to **truth** even when it challenges my beliefs?
- Am I contributing to **deliberation** or just performative outrage?

Aristotle's Fundamental Question

“What kind of **person**—and what kind of **citizen**—am I becoming through these daily digital habits?”

Final Review Questions






- 1 **Distinguish personal virtues from civic virtues.** How does social media potentially threaten each type?
- 2 **What is “civic friendship”?** Why do communitarians believe it is essential for democracy, and how might social media undermine it?
- 3 **Explain the connection** between echo chambers, polarization, and the decline of deliberative capacity.
- 4 **Evaluate this claim:** “The threat social media poses to democracy is more serious than its threat to individual mental health.” Do you agree? Why or why not?
- 5 **Final Discussion:** Design a “virtue-centered” social media policy for a democratic society. What would it aim to cultivate? What practices and institutions would support it?



Reflection: What civic virtue do you most need to develop in your own online political engagement?

References I

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