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Flourishing on facebook: virtue friendship & new social media

Shannon Vallor

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Abstract The widespread and growing use of new social media, especially social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter, invites sustained ethical reflection on emerging forms of online friendship. Social scientists and psychologists are gathering a wealth of empirical data on these trends, yet philosophical analysis of their ethical implications remains comparatively impoverished. In particular, there have been few attempts to explore how traditional ethical theories might be brought to bear upon these developments, or what insights they might offer, if any. In attempting to address this lacuna in applied ethical research, this paper investigates the ethical significance of online friendship by means of an Aristotelian theory of the good life, which holds that human flourishing is chiefly realized through 'complete' friendships of virtue. Here, four key dimensions of 'virtue friendship' are examined in relation to online social media: *reciprocity*, *empathy*, *self-knowledge* and the *shared life*. Online social media support and strengthen friendship in ways that mirror these four dimensions, particularly when used to supplement rather than substitute for face-to-face interactions. However, deeper reflection on the meaning of the shared life (*suzên*) for Aristotle raises important and troubling questions about the capacity of online social media to support complete friendships of virtue in the contemporary world, along with significant concerns about the enduring relevance of this Aristotelian ideal for the good life in the 21st century.

Keywords New social media · Virtue friendship · Aristotle · Reciprocity · Empathy · The shared life

S. Vallor (✉)
Department of Philosophy, Santa Clara University,
500 El Camino Real, Santa Clara, CA 95053, USA
e-mail: svallor@scu.edu

Philosophy, ethics and new social media

In recent years, the Internet has become increasingly and more centrally involved in the social life of human beings around the globe. Thanks in large part to the recent emergence of popular social networking technologies such as Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, LinkedIn and many others, online friendship has spread in its reach from relatively homogenous early-adopter populations dominated by technophiles and affluent youth, to remarkably heterogenous networks serving senior citizens, busy parents, and marginalized groups of nearly every description. As the wave of online socializing spreads, scholars from a variety of disciplines are attempting to analyze, understand and predict the social and ethical consequences of these emerging changes in the way we communicate, cooperate and maintain friendships with other human beings.

Thus far, the largest portion of this scholarship has been devoted to the collection and analysis of empirical data that can allow us to track emerging patterns of online social activity. However, underlying these important descriptive efforts is a fundamentally normative question: what do these trends mean for the long-term health, happiness and general well-being of individuals and communities? Currently, this question is expressed in the attempts by sociologists, ethnographers, psychologists and others to discover reliable and significant correlations, positive or negative, between online social activity and existing empirical measures of variables thought relevant to human flourishing, such as 'life satisfaction', 'self-esteem', 'civic engagement' or 'social capital'. (Valenzuela et al. 2009; Smith et al. 2009; Subrahmanyam et al. 2008; Ellison et al. 2007; Subrahmanyam and Lin 2007; Valkenburg et al. 2006; Wellman et al. 2001) Though the conclusions emerging from this first wave of studies are hardly