

Eleven

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Social media gets a bad press. Boomers shake their heads at millennials who rely on their smartphones as if they were vital organs. Parents wring their hands when their 9-year-olds start asking about Facebook and Instagram, opening the door to a murky, silent world of cyber bullying, ‘thinspiration’, pornography, and career paedophiles. We read online articles like ‘7 ways Facebook is bad for your mental health’ (Kenrick 2014) and ‘Is social media bad for you?’ (Brown 2018). Chamath Palihapitiya, a former Facebook executive, claimed that the site is ‘ripping apart the social fabric of how society works’ (Sini 2017). We regard a ‘digital detox’ – a period of time spent abstaining from the devices we use to access social media – as a healthy thing to do (Hayes 2018). So ubiquitous are concerns about the negative effect of social media use on our lives that Facebook itself has responded in a blog post (Ginsberg and Burke 2017).

Are we right to worry about social media? I want to explore this issue here. We’ll begin by looking at the science. Then we’ll consider some conceptual issues relating to what friendship is and the extent to which our interactions with people via social media can give us what we usually get offline. We’ll also consider an important way in which those of us for whom social media wasn’t available until adulthood are likely

to overestimate the disadvantages of social media and underestimate its advantages. To keep things simple (and because I am not hugely adventurous with social media), we'll focus mainly on Facebook.

THE SCIENCE ON SOCIAL MEDIA AND HAPPINESS

Social media can make us feel bad. A 2015 study found that social media was linked to stress, particularly in women – although the level of stress can be mitigated by having more education, being married or living with a partner, being younger, and being employed (Hampton et al. 2015). Facebook use has been shown to increase negative mood, especially by making users feel that they have wasted their time, and we routinely overestimate the extent to which using Facebook will make us feel better (Sagioglou and Greitemeyer 2014). Symptoms of depression and anxiety have been shown to increase with the number of social media platforms used (Primack et al. 2017).

On the other hand, however, there is evidence that Facebook users are more trusting, have closer relationships, get more social support, and are more politically engaged than non-Facebook users (Hampton et al. 2011); that social media users are more aware than others of major events in the lives of people close to them (Hampton et al. 2015); and that Facebook users are more likely to be made happier by their friends' happy posts than they are to be made less happy by their friends' unhappy posts (Coviello et al. 2014). It turns out, too, that the way we interact on social media matters: while negative social interactions on social media are correlated with depression, positive interactions are not (Davila et al. 2012).

A survey of the empirical data on the effect on us of social media use is, of course, relevant when trying to decide whether it makes our lives better or worse. But focusing on the data also encourages us to take a consequentialist view of things. That is, it encourages us to believe that using social media is a good thing if it brings good consequences (makes us less depressed, more cheerful, and so on) and a bad thing if it makes us feel bad. This way of looking at things ignores much that is important and relevant in considering whether we should be concerned about Facebook. Living a good and fulfilling life does not depend solely on doing things that make us feel good and avoiding things that make us feel bad. Abandoning a desperate friend in her hour of need in favour of going out partying might make us feel cheerful, but behaving in that way is not part of what being a good friend is, and friendship is something that we value. Good friends support each other through the hard times, and often make personal sacrifices to do so. How do we work out whether social media supports and enriches our friendships, rather than undermines them, given that having our friendships supported and enriched is not necessarily going to result in the more positive outcomes identified in the studies mentioned previously – less stress, less depression, less anxiety?

FACEBOOK AND THE ARISTOTELIAN VIRTUES

One attempt to address this issue has been made by Shannon Vallor (2012). Focusing on an Aristotelian virtue-ethics conception of friendship, she tests whether the sort of interactions that people have via Facebook can exemplify and support true friendship. Virtue ethics is sometimes said to be one of the three major ethical approaches, along with deontology and

consequentialism. Deontology evaluates and explains why certain behaviour is ethical primarily with reference to duties and rules; consequentialism does so primarily with reference to the consequences of the behaviour. Virtue ethics focuses on virtues or character traits. On a virtue ethics account, certain actions are right primarily because they express and/or cultivate certain virtues, such as courage, temperance, or practical wisdom. Actions are wrong primarily because they express and/or cultivate vices.

Aristotle's virtues were intended to be applicable in a wide range of situations. As a result, despite the fact that he died over 2,000 years before the appearance of the internet, his virtue-based conception of friendship is flexible enough to apply even to today's electronically mediated interactions. Vallor tells us that one way of using Aristotle's account of friendship to evaluate the impact of social media on our friendship involves reflecting on 'how various uses of new social media could impact the development of specific virtues or vices. We might, for example, consider whether specific new media practices are likely to hinder or promote the development of ethical traits' (Vallor 2012: 187). Vallor notes that Aristotle used the term 'friendship' in several ways, not all of which resemble today's use. She identifies four Aristotelian virtues as relevant to our friendships today: reciprocity, empathy, self-knowledge, and the shared life.

Vallor argues that all of these virtues are to some extent supported by our Facebook interactions. Reciprocity – social 'give and take' – is at the heart of most of Facebook's features: sending and accepting friend requests, 'liking' and commenting on posts, tagging friends, and so on. These interactions also support empathy – the capacity to feel the joy and suffering of others – as we see when people post about their hangovers,

illnesses, weddings, promotions, etc., and others respond by celebrating or commiserating with them. Self-knowledge (of the sort of people we are and how we fit into the world) can be advanced by Facebook interactions; as can the shared life, which involves a community of people living together with shared values and actions.

Vallor notes, however, that these four friendship-constituting virtues are not all expressed and supported to equal extents in our Facebook interactions. For example, while Facebook expressions of empathy are better than no empathy, there is something especially valuable about empathy expressed in person, as when we comfort a grieving friend with a hug. And since our Facebook interactions need not involve living and striving together with a community of people with whom we interact in a sustained, intimate way, the opportunities afforded by Facebook for development of self-knowledge and a shared life are inferior to those that arise in offline settings.

LOSS AVERSION, STATUS QUO BIAS, AND THE VALUE OF FACEBOOK

One problem with the analysis conducted by Vallor – which is, I think, an example of a much more general bias when we consider the impact of Facebook on our friendships – is that it proceeds by evaluating our Facebook-mediated friendships against the gold standard of traditional friendships. We think of traditional friendships as confined to meatspace; that is, to the world outside the internet. This latter model of friendship is natural to anyone born earlier than the mid-1980s, since they (okay, we) first formed adult friendships without the aid of social media. Facebook and other social media are, for this group of people, later optional add-ons to the institution of

friendship, rather like Candy Crush and Tropicats are later optional add-on games to the institution of Facebook. Taking meatspace-only friendships to be the norm against which alternatives are evaluated affects the way we see differences between the two models. People in general care more about avoiding losing valuable things that we already have than about gaining new valuable things – even when the value lost or gained in each case is equal. This phenomenon was first described by psychologists Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky in 1979, and is called *loss aversion*. It means, roughly, that in order for us to welcome a change in the status quo, the benefits of the change may need to be significantly larger than the drawbacks.

As a result, it should not surprise us when people who were born earlier than the mid-1980s – a group that includes most (perhaps all) of the researchers cited in this chapter – express the view that Facebook is bad for friendship. People in this group are likely to weigh what Facebook might be costing our friendships far more heavily than what our friendships gain from Facebook.

By contrast, we can expect younger people whose first adult friendships have been formed in the age of social media to attach more weight to the good that Facebook adds to friendship. This is what they would lose were they to lose Facebook. For these people, the suggestion that Facebook has impoverished friendships must feel rather like the suggestion that telephones or cars have impoverished friendships. There is a sense in which these suggestions are impossible to conceive: younger people no more have memories of (adult) friendships pre-Facebook than they do memories of (adult) friendships pre-telephones and pre-cars. It does not matter that not everyone uses Facebook, just as it does not matter that not everyone

has a telephone or a car; what matters is living in a world in which these technologies are available and normal.

Another related thought is this: we tend to prefer the status quo. Psychologists call this *status quo bias*. People who grew up and formed friendships before the appearance of Facebook are more likely to favour the sort of friendships that were cultivated pre-Facebook, and younger people whose friendships have been formed in the age of social media are more likely to favour the sort of friendships that they have cultivated and enjoy against the backdrop of social media.

Given status quo bias, how can we work out whether a given alteration to friendships – such as the explosion in popularity of Facebook over the last decade or so – really is a bad thing, or whether some people are simply led to believe it is a bad thing as a result of their biases? One approach is to weigh the arguments from both sides: from the pre-mid-1980s brigade who grew up without Facebook, and from the younger people whose friendships developed alongside it. Younger people currently publish very little in this area, but are increasingly likely to argue their case in academia and elsewhere.

Another way is to conduct a ‘reversal test’. This is a heuristic developed by Nick Bostrom and Toby Ord to examine value judgments about the desirability of human enhancement. They set it out as follows:

Reversal Test: When a proposal to change a certain parameter is thought to have bad overall consequences, consider a change to the same parameter in the opposite direction. If this is also thought to have bad overall consequences, then the onus is on those who reach these conclusions to explain why our position cannot be improved through changes to this parameter. If they are unable to do so,

then we have reason to suspect that they suffer from status quo bias.

(Bostrom and Ord 2006: 664–665)

Bostrom and Ord use the reversal test to assess judgments about alterations that occur in a linear way; in particular, improvements in intelligence brought about by genetic engineering. The effect that Facebook has had on friendship is much messier, and not at all linear. Facebook has resulted in us being more available to contact from friends, better able to interact with people from anywhere in the world, better able to keep in contact with childhood friends and people who live very far away, it has increased the ease with which we can discuss news stories and other events with a wide group of people, and so on. It might be possible to apply the reversal test to some of these individual changes; but it is not possible to apply it to all these changes together. The reversal test is much more useful for assessing judgments about the desirability of intelligence enhancement than it is for assessing judgments about the desirability of Facebook.

TESTING FACEBOOK'S VALUE: A THOUGHT EXPERIMENT

We can, though, devise a way to assess judgments about the desirability of Facebook that is inspired by the reversal test. Specifically, we can entertain a scenario that reverses the status quo, and consider how certain changes to that status quo might be received by people who experience them. With this in mind, imagine that Facebook has always been around, and that it was always as ubiquitous as it is now. There was never friendship without Facebook. Even while Aristotle was writing about friendship in the *Ethics*, he was pausing to share

cat memes on his Facebook page and challenging Alexander the Great to Words With Friends. Your parents were Facebook friends with each other, as were your grandparents, your great-grandparents, and your great-great-grandparents. Let's call this world *Eternal Facebook World*, or EFW. To imagine what EFW would be like at our current point in history requires more thought and mental gymnastics than I plan to devote to it here; however, we can be sure of one thing. That is, if – in a mirror of what has happened in the actual world over the last decade or so – people in EFW were faced with the gradual decline and eventual elimination of Facebook over the course of about a decade, we could expect them to be concerned about what they would lose out on as a result. They would, of course, lose exactly what we have gained as a result of the increasing popularity of Facebook, but since we tend to care more about avoiding losses than we do about making corresponding gains, we can expect people in EFW to place more weight on these features than we do.

What sort of anxieties might such people have, faced with the prospect of losing Facebook? Taking a broad view, losing Facebook would restrict the nature and extent of one's interactions with friends, family, colleagues, and acquaintances. Losing Facebook would, after all, entail losing one of the most convenient methods of interacting with people. Facebook makes it easy for us to keep up to date with the lives of a large group of people, regardless of their distance from us. In a few seconds, we can announce a major life event – a birth, a marriage, a promotion, a video of a cat running into a glass door – to hundreds of people, and those responding can interact not only with us but also with each other. Other forms of social media aside, we lack any alternative way of quickly and easily communicating in this way.

That Facebook enables us to keep in touch with people regardless of where they (or we) are in the world has far-reaching consequences for our friendships. Before social media, and especially before earlier technologies like email, telephones, and motorised transport, friendships were heavily restricted by geography. The closer you lived to a person, the easier it was to maintain a friendship with them. It was less easy, in those days, to select friends based primarily on common interests: if you were the only liberal-minded person in a city inhabited by conservatives, or the only fan of satanic death metal in a village full of devout Christians, you had to work at finding areas of common interest with local people if you wanted to have friends. By largely freeing our friendships from the constraints of geography, Facebook makes it easy for us to seek out people who share our interests and values, wherever they might live: we can use Facebook to connect with fellow yoga enthusiasts, fellow victims of domestic violence, fellow Marxists, and so on.

It is not an unmitigated good thing for people to cluster into groups of common interest. It is often complained that this results in an 'echo chamber' in which people are less likely to be exposed to views divergent from their own, and that as a result people have an impoverished understanding of different people and are perhaps less tolerant of them. On the other hand, the ability to seek out people like oneself can be a great source of support to people who might otherwise feel quite isolated. We can expect that people in a world where Facebook has always existed, faced with the prospect of losing Facebook, would resent losing the ability easily and conveniently to sustain relationships with people around the world. Were they to learn that being restricted to friendships with more local people would likely lead them to be more understanding

of others – especially those with views and values different to their own – it is unlikely that they would regard this as sufficient compensation for the loss of Facebook, especially since losing Facebook is not a necessary condition for realising that benefit (they could, for example, implement social measures to encourage a diverse range of people to associate with each other without giving up Facebook).

Another reason for people in EFW to lament the impending loss of Facebook is that this loss is likely to hit some people harder than others: people who live in isolated areas, people who don't have (or can't afford) transport to enable them easily to meet up with friends, elderly people and people with incapacitating disabilities or illnesses, and people who can't afford (or who simply don't enjoy) the activities that go hand-in-hand with seeing friends in person, like dining out or drinks in the pub. It's likely that many would demand that some public measure be introduced to offset the difficulties that such people would face in a Facebookless world. After all, it is common for comparable demands to be made whenever a group in society is adversely affected by some measure – such as the closure of facilities like post offices, bus routes, and medical centres in rural areas.

FACEBOOK AND THE ARISTOTELIAN VIRTUES, AGAIN

Let's revisit the Aristotelian virtues discussed by Vallor in the context of this thought experiment. How might an Aristotelian EFW inhabitant view the impact of the loss of Facebook on the virtues relevant to friendship? We noted earlier that while Facebook supports the virtue of reciprocity, Vallor found that it is less supportive of the other three friendship-related virtues she considered: empathy, self-knowledge, and the shared life. There

is something valuable about meatspace interactions that is lost when we interact via Facebook, meaning that while Facebook expressions of empathy, advances in self-knowledge, and participation in the shared life are better than nothing, more valuable still are the face-to-face interactions that help develop and advance these virtues in us. There is, Vallor argues, a physical dimension to empathy: she tells us that ‘the best comfort to a grieving friend is often a quiet physical embrace’ (2012: 193). Development of self-knowledge requires living in a one-to-one relationship with friends who ‘mirror [our] virtues and noble achievements’ (2012: 194) – a kind of relationship that is common offline, but less common (thinks Vallor) on Facebook. The shared life involves investing with others in ‘shared projects and commitments’ (2012: 197); yet while Facebook facilitates the sorts of exchanges of information that support shared living, Vallor worries that the way Facebook is actually used (especially by young people) is not conducive to the shared life.

One notable aspect of Vallor’s analysis is that she frequently (though not always) sets up Facebook friendships in opposition to meatspace friendships. Facebook fares worse than meatspace at supporting empathy, for example, because it does not provide the opportunity to interact in certain important physical ways with people. Yet, while many of us have Facebook friends whom we are yet to meet, most people use Facebook for maintaining existing relationships rather than for creating new ones – as Vallor notes, citing a study by Subrahmanyam et al. (2008). Our most valued Facebook friendships, then, involve interactions with people we met through means other than Facebook. In most cases, these are people we have met in meatspace, making them friends with whom we interact on Facebook as well as offline. Some of these – such as childhood friends who live far away from us – are people with whom we would likely have lost touch, were

it not for Facebook. In other cases, our Facebook interactions supplement our offline interactions. Even conceding that the virtues of empathy, self-knowledge, and the shared life are best supported when we interact offline with our friends, Facebook need not detract from offline benefits. There are, of course, ways of using Facebook that undermine valuable aspects of offline activity – but the same can be said for other technologies, too. By driving a car too much we miss out on exercise, by using a calculator we risk losing our mathematical skills, by using a word processor we risk our handwriting deteriorating, and so on. Given the positive value that all these technologies add to our lives, the fact that there are also drawbacks to using them does not entail that they are on balance bad. Rather, it should lead us to use them thoughtfully, so as to maximise their benefits whilst minimising their drawbacks.

CONCLUSION

Are we right to worry about Facebook? This is the question from which we began. I think that the answer, in short, is: we are indeed right to worry about what Facebook might be costing us, but if we want a balanced appraisal of Facebook, we would do well to keep in mind what we gain from Facebook, too. And, given that we tend to weigh losses more heavily than gains, we should be wary of underestimating the benefits of Facebook – especially those of us who grew up without it.

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