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The Ethics of Facebook

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In November of 2010, on his late night television show, *Jimmy Kimmel Live*, Kimmel said, "Remember five years ago when no one was on Facebook and you didn't know what the guy you took high school biology with was having for lunch? Remember how that was... fine?" There were over 900 million Facebook users at time of writing (now closer to 2 billion), and presumably this is not because they are all interested in the culinary habits of obscure people from their past. The popularity of Facebook is remarkable, especially given the fact that it went online in 2004. Why is Facebook so successful? Why do so many people use it, and use it so much? Cynically, one might think that its success is predicated on our desire to have others look at us and our accomplishments as we do the same. Less cynically, Facebook's success is plausibly a result of the human desire to connect with others. We long for community, and when so many people lack this it makes sense that social media have been so successful.

In this paper, I offer a moral analysis of Facebook. What are the morally positive features of Facebook? What are its morally negative features? I will limit my attention to the personal and interpersonal aspects of the use of this technology, and set aside an ethical analysis of the business practices, both past and present, of Facebook.[1] My analysis, then, is not comprehensive. I will argue for a particular thesis concerning Facebook, namely, that in many ways Facebook's moral value for a person depends on the character of that person, though the structure of this technology is not morally neutral. Before we examine some of the specific features of Facebook, however, it will be useful to consider some general issues in both the philosophy of technology and moral philosophy.

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[1] This paper was finalized before the more recent reports of the misuse of Facebook data during the US Presidential campaign of 2016 came to light as well. [Editor's note.]

A Philosophical Approach to Technology

When we think about "technology," we may tend to think of artifacts, such as automobiles or hammers. Recently, many have tended to associate the term with information technology (computers, the internet, wireless communication). However, technology is more than this. Technology can be broadly defined as "the organization of knowledge, people, and things to accomplish specific practical goals" (Winston 2009, 2). Facebook clearly satisfies this definition of technology.

There are two distinct attitudes we tend to have with respect to technology in general, *techno-optimism* and *techno-pessimism* (Winston 2009, 13). The techno-optimist focuses on the benefits of technology, and has faith that whatever problems we face— some created by technology and some not—will be solved by technological fixes. For example, the techno-optimist may claim that the solution to global climate change will be technological, rather than behavioral. Or consider the risks posed by the Internet. With more widespread access to it comes the proliferation of viruses and spyware. The techno-optimist would point to the success of virus protection software as the technological solution to this technology-generated problem, and would have faith that this general pattern will repeat itself as future problems arise. The techno-pessimist, however, focuses on the risks of technology. She has less faith in technological fixes, and a deep concern for the social problems created by technology. In this paper, I will lean towards the pessimistic view with respect to Facebook, though it, along with many technologies, has the potential for both positive and negative moral value.

Philosophers of technology also explore the functions of technology. They are concerned with the ends, purposes or goals of a particular technology, some of which are intended, and some of which are not. Technology has both primary and secondary functions. The primary function is the intended use. For example, the primary function of a butter knife is to cut and spread butter. The primary function of Facebook, as its users likely know, is found within the following statement which used to appear on Facebook's main home page: *Facebook helps you connect and share with the people in your life.* However, technologies also have secondary functions, or applications that were unintended. For example, a butter knife can be used as a flathead screwdriver, and

Facebook can be used for stalking other individuals. With this in mind, it is important to see that the very structure of a technology is not necessarily morally neutral. That is, technology remains poised to function in certain ways, whether or not it was intended to do so by its designers (Johnson and Powers 2009).

Often, by virtue of both its primary and secondary functions, technology affects human agency. That is, we are changed in many ways, as technology can expand our powers to act on and have an effect in the world. Computer technology offers nearly instant access to vast information, automobiles and airplanes enable us to travel much greater distances in much less time compared to the past and Facebook expands our powers of communication with people of our own choosing. It also enables us to find people that would otherwise be very difficult or expensive to locate, including high school biology classmates, if we so desire. Since technology both reflects and shapes individuals and societies, it is important to consider its moral impact upon us. Before considering the moral impact of Facebook, I will first briefly explain the moral framework I will employ.

Virtue Ethics

In recent decades, many philosophers have rejected many of the assumptions of modern moral philosophy, with its focus either on moral law or the consequences of actions, and have instead returned to an ethic focused on character. While others such as Plato and Thomas Aquinas are important figures in virtue ethics, I will focus on Aristotle's views concerning virtue, vice and human flourishing and then employ them in an ethical analysis of Facebook in the next section.

Aristotle (1999), like other virtue ethicists, believes that what is most fundamental in ethics is one's character. Aristotle claims that our primary goal, as human beings, is happiness. He defines happiness in a particular way, however, and the word used by Aristotle (*eudaimonia*) is also translated as "human flourishing." The idea is that to be truly happy, to be fulfilled in all aspects of one's existence, requires that we exemplify both moral and intellectual virtue. Virtues, then, are states of character that are conducive to human flourishing. Our function is to reason well and be happy, in this Aristotelian

sense, which requires intellectual virtues like philosophical and practical wisdom. It also requires moral virtues, such as courage, generosity and temperance. Not only do these traits tend to foster true happiness, but they also make us good human beings. In contrast to this, the vices are states of character that hinder human flourishing. So we should avoid greed, foolishness, cowardice and a life lacking in self-control.

The pursuit of virtue is not an individualistic pursuit, according to Aristotle. Friendship is central to a life of virtue, because virtue is achieved as we are in particular kinds of relationships with others. We will return to this issue below, but at present it is important to understand that for Aristotle we need friends who will help us grow in moral and intellectual excellence, or virtue. Finally, many virtue ethicists, including Aristotle, emphasize the importance of the common good. While Aristotle would not endorse all of our contemporary notions of the common good, it is nevertheless the case that many current advocates of an ethic of character also claim that a truly virtuous individual will be committed to the formation of a socially just world in which the rights, interests and dignity of all people are taken into account and appropriately valued.

In addition to the foregoing, Aristotle offers a discussion of different character types which will be helpful as we consider the ethics of Facebook (Halwani 2001). The *virtuous person* is practically wise. She has the ability to use her mind in order to live intelligently, morally and in a goal-oriented way. She possesses and exercises virtues like courage, temperance, generosity, friendliness and wit. She can be counted upon to do the right thing, from a firm and unchanging character that includes her beliefs, desires and emotions. She has a disposition to do the right thing, and someone who knows her well would predict with confidence that she would do what is right. The *disciplined person* also does what is right, but struggles to follow his conscience. He has the virtue of self-control, and though in any given instance he may struggle to do what he knows he ought to do, in the end he successfully does what is right. The *undisciplined person* also struggles to do what is right, but because he does not have the virtue of self-control he fails to do what he should. He will likely be remorseful later. Finally, the *vicious person* is a mirror image of the virtuous person; she has a firm character oriented towards doing what is wrong. There is no inner struggle, and no later remorse. These descriptions are very general, and it is plausible to think that in some areas of life one may be virtuous

while in others one may be disciplined or even undisciplined. For instance, one person may be very honest and consistently so, have discipline with respect to drink, but be undisciplined regarding certain kinds of food.

What is the relevance of this brief foray into Aristotle's ideas about the character types? Given that most of us often fall in either the disciplined or undisciplined category in many areas of our lives, we should be more aware of and seek to resist the morally negative aspects of Facebook. Part of my thesis is that Facebook's moral status for a person depends on the character of that person. Given that in many realms of life, including (perhaps especially) our use of information technology, many of us tend to lack self-control, the morally good and bad aspects of Facebook related to human flourishing are important to consider.

The other part of my thesis is that the structure of Facebook is not morally neutral. It has both positive and negative moral features. We must be aware of these and be intentional about how we use Facebook, or forego using it altogether. Next, we will consider some of these positive and negative moral aspects of Facebook.

Some Positive Moral Aspects of Facebook

Facebook enables us to establish and sustain relationships with other people. It makes possible relationships that may otherwise be difficult or even non-existent. Facebook is useful for fostering relationships with friends and relatives who live far from us, and it enables us to connect with others around the world who have similar interests.

Facebook also provides opportunities for acquiring different kinds of knowledge. We can learn about other places, ideas, people and values. The limits of geography and culture can be overcome via interaction on Facebook. We can learn about political issues in different states and nations, about human rights concerns and about different perspectives concerning a variety of important issues.

Facebook can also act as a catalyst for personal change. At first glance, this might appear to be a strange claim, but we can use our interaction with others on Facebook as a way of cultivating and expressing virtue. For instance, we can intentionally seek to

encourage others rather than mock them, explore different ideas rather than merely interact with those who share our views, and we can in general employ Facebook in a way that helps us grow in unselfishness and other-centeredness. Aristotle claims that we acquire moral virtue through practice. In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, he states that "we become just by doing just actions, temperate by doing temperate actions, brave by doing brave actions" (Aristotle 1999, 19). Facebook is one limited realm in which we can cultivate and practice certain virtues. If one wants to be kind, there are opportunities to engage in acts of kindness. Perhaps one way to begin to cultivate these types of traits is to seek to consistently congratulate others for their accomplishments and say little (or at least less) about our own.

Facebook is not merely a potential context for personal moral development, it can also serve as a catalyst for fostering social justice and political change. Political revolutionaries in Tunisia and Egypt made extensive use of social media, including Facebook. As one Egyptian activist tweeted, "We use Facebook to schedule the protests, Twitter to coordinate, and YouTube to tell the world" (Howard 2011). Regarding social change, Asaf Bar-Tura, a philosopher in Chicago, has used Facebook in his work with Jewish and Muslim high school students (Bar-Tura 2010). He used Facebook to promote a bowling night that was planned for the purpose of enabling Jewish and Muslim teenage students in the Chicago area to get to know one another. According to Bar-Tura, Facebook was useful as students from the two groups were able to learn about one another prior to the social event. They found that they did in fact have common ground; their interactions on Facebook undermined some of the media-based stereotypes they held, and had other positive results. The ultimate lesson, however, was this:

> What I have learned from my experience of organizing in Chicago is that the wall-to-wall must result in face-to-face. Profiles must become people. The group must actually gather. Only then can divides be bridged, and social change be made possible (239).

Facebook can be employed to defend and advance important human values and causes. But as Bar-Tura points out, there are limits inherent in such virtual interactions.

Ultimately, we need to be physically proximate in order to overcome such limits. I would add that Facebook also has several negative moral features, to which we now turn.

Negative Moral Aspects of Facebook

There are several barriers to trust on Facebook that are inherent in the structure of this technology. First, online interaction is disembodied interaction (Weckert 2005). This is problematic because one's body anchors one's identity, is used to communicate information and is vulnerable to harm. The disembodied nature of online relationships, like those on Facebook, hinders one's ability to gather certain kinds of evidence for the belief that others are trustworthy. Online, we can be much more measured in our responses and less spontaneous, and there is no body language, tone of voice, or other non-verbal cues which can assist in effective communication. Online interaction may be more conducive to intolerance, fostering more extreme expression of one's views. For many, it is easier to be intolerant when you do not have to look into the eyes of the person you are verbally attacking on Facebook. There is a large body of anecdotal evidence for this, as anyone who has witnessed or engaged in a political or moral debate on Facebook knows. Online interaction also can tend to yield a lack of proper attention to the person with whom one is communicating. One can engage in a chat or interact on Facebook while doing several other tasks, or simply while watching television. Engaging in such activities while talking with one's friend about her fears concerning the future would be rude and insensitive when done in person, but communication via Facebook is marked by such a division of attention. Finally, there is potential for inauthenticity in how we represent ourselves and in how we communicate our thoughts and feelings. Online and on Facebook, we have greater control over our self-presentation, there is less spontaneity, and we possess the heightened ability to fashion an image of ourselves that is not accurate (perhaps intentionally, and perhaps not). It is easier to deceive on Facebook than in the physical world. However, there is evidence that close, meaningful and trusting relationships do develop online (Weckert 2005). Perhaps there are more pitfalls, and given this, the ways in which such relationships develop must be adapted to the online context. Nevertheless, the aforementioned problems are significant.

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There are many problems with privacy related to Facebook. First, there is a risk of giving up too much of one's privacy. This risk is underscored by the fact that what one does on Facebook "feels" private, but of course it is not. The experience of entering information for the Facebook world to see seems private, as one interacts with a computer, smart phone or tablet device. But this is misleading. In sharing one's thoughts, experiences and feelings on Facebook, one is giving up control over this information. This may help one to connect with others on Facebook, but it also potentially leads to problems, given the permanence of one's profile, the presence of others who are not worthy of trust and the fact that prospective or current employers may gain access to this information.

It will be helpful to consider the value of privacy in our social relationships in order to deepen our appreciation for the significance of these problems of privacy on Facebook. The philosopher James Rachels (1975) argues that the reason we value privacy is that it enables us to carry on different types of social relationships with other people. These relationships are defined in part by the amount of information about ourselves that we allow others to have. Part of what distinguishes our close friends from our mere acquaintances is the amount and level of knowledge of ourselves that we choose to make available. The reason we value privacy, then, is that it enables us to retain a level of control in our relationships and pursue deeper relationships with others of our own choosing. Both the control and the relationships themselves have value for us. On Facebook, we can *tend* to give up too much control over that information, which can cause problems in our relationships and other aspects of our lives. This is a significant negative moral feature of Facebook.

Facebook also arguably creates the illusion of friendship. True and deep friendship requires something from both parties. The best form of friendship requires time, commitment, sacrifice, a shared vision of the good life and mutual assistance in the pursuit of virtue. Facebook friendship, or "the friendship that makes no demands" (Tedesco 2005), will likely fail to achieve this highest form of friendship because it is arguably the case that some real rather than merely virtual contact is necessary for this kind of relationship. This is less likely to happen with Facebook friends, or even with our

genuine friends via Facebook. Individuals cannot fully experience life together and support one another in the deepest ways through status updates.

There is also evidence that Facebook can encourage narcissistic tendencies. Studies show the presence of links between Facebook and such tendencies (Murphy 2012). I believe that the structure of Facebook can foster these tendencies. A Facebook user posts something for hundreds or even thousands of people to see; it is like standing up in front of a large crowd and announcing something about himself or his life. Research from Western Illinois University showed a link between the number of Facebook friends one has and how active one is on the site to the likelihood of being a "socially disruptive" narcissist. Those with more Facebook friends, who tagged themselves in photos and updated their status throughout the day were more likely to have narcissistic traits. The study found that people use Facebook as a way to feel good about themselves, and that it offers narcissists a way to obtain the attention they crave. A technology that invites you to easily share your significant and trivial thoughts, your dinners, your trips and the activities of your children is like a never-ending Christmas letter or high school reunion detailing your wonderful life for all to see. It can sharpen, enhance and even encourage the formation of narcissistic tendencies.

Facebook activity can undermine our happiness in a variety of other ways. For example, there is evidence that the more time one spends on Facebook, the more one will believe that others have happier lives compared to one's own (Jacobs 2012). When we view the lives of others as they are represented on Facebook, we tend to believe the illusion that they experience constant happiness. In fact, even when we know that the Facebook picture which others offer is inaccurate, the photos of happy people are still influential and tend to be what pops into our minds when we think of our Facebook friends. This can leave the false impression that others are happier than we are, which can increase dissatisfaction with our own lives. By contrast, those who spent more time in face to face interactions with their friends were less likely to believe that they were constantly happy. It appears that the face to face gives us a more realistic perspective regarding the lives of others than the wall to wall.

As any Facebook user knows, it can be a source of distraction from one's other responsibilities and other aspects of one's life. Facebook can hinder productivity at work and relationships at home. One problem with this is that distraction decreases our level of happiness (Tierney 2010). A study conducted at Harvard University showed that whatever people were doing at a given point in time—reading, shopping, etc.—they tended to be happier if they focused on the activity instead of thinking about something else while engaging in the activity. In fact, whether and where their minds wandered was a better predictor of happiness than what they were doing. Facebook can be an ever-present distraction as people access it via their smart phones and tablet devices.

There is also the potential for an addictive-type connection to Facebook and other media. A study of over 1,000 university students in 10 countries asked the students to go 24 hours without their electronic gadgets and media, including social media (Hough 2011). Most of them could not complete the task. They reported experiencing withdrawal symptoms similar to those felt by drug addictions and tobacco-users who abruptly stop consuming narcotics and tobacco. Students used words such as confused, anxious, irritable, nervous, jealous, insecure, depressed, jittery, addicted, angry, lonely, and paranoid to describe how they felt without their access to technology and social media. These are the same terms used by drug addicts as they struggle with their addictions.

An Objection

The defender of Facebook might argue, in response to the above, that the problem is not Facebook, but the person using it. I agree, to an extent. Nevertheless, it could be the better part of wisdom to avoid or at least limit our use of a technology that supports our self-centered tendencies. It might be the better part of wisdom to avoid something that increases mental distraction, eats up a significant amount of time and energy, decreases the quality of our friendships, and has potentially addictive qualities. The upshot is that if a particular technology has the potential to foster both moral and intellectual vice, then special care must be taken in how we utilize that technology. And we should think about whether in our particular case it should be used at all.

Conclusion: A Call to Action

Finally, I would like to ask the reader to consider doing something as a result of the foregoing discussion. This might seem strange in a paper of this sort, but given the fact that ideas have implications for our lives, I want to discuss one possible application: consider going Facebook-free for one month. I am not asking you to delete your account, just deactivate it for 30 days, and reflect upon the impact of this on your everyday life and relationships. Perhaps you will conclude that Facebook should play a different or smaller role in your life, perhaps not. Whatever you decide, you will likely benefit from this experiment in many ways. Susan Moeller, the lead researcher for the aforementioned study involving 1,000 students, recounted that "When the students did not have their mobile phones and other gadgets, they did report that they did get into more in-depth conversations... Quite a number reported quite a difference in conversation in terms of quality and depth as a result" (Hough 2011). A potential benefit is that this experiment will deepen your face to face relationships. And given the human need for deep interpersonal relationships, this alone is a sufficient reason for engaging in such an experiment.

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