Temperance, Addiction and Social Media
Friendship

Recent research has examined users’ abilities to bring about the virtue of friendship through use of social media such as Facebook. Insofar as this work has more or less assumed that one is capable of apprehending the highest form of friendship, perfect friendship, authors have overlooked the possibility that variables may influence or prevent one from securing the virtue of friendship through use of social media. In this paper I assert that one such variable is the virtue of temperance, particularly when one is engaging in a self-indulgent, excessive use of social media or if in doing so one is responding to what may be a form of behavioral addiction. In view of the pervasive unrestrained use of social media this is an important omission. I submit that when such users’ ends are closely examined, those who use social media excessively as a result of ill-formed habits or as the result of addictive tendencies are pursuing the end of self-satisfaction as a good in itself, rather than pursuing the good of friendship per se. In these cases, the practical wisdom of affected individuals has been compromised to the extent that one is no longer virtuous and is therefore incapable of securing the virtue of friendship by using social media. This paper seeks to add to the discussion of how the virtues are attained through use of social media and to add also to the conversation about the unification of the virtues.

Keywords: Virtues, Aristotle, Social Media, Temperance, Friendship

Introduction

Over the past several years writers have begun to examine uses of social media through the lens of virtue ethics. Much of this work has focused on the virtue of friendship and how it is constituted on social media platforms such as Facebook (see e.g., Fröding and Peterson 2012; Mc Fall 2012; Sharp 2012; see also Elder 2014; Kaliarnta 2016). Unfortunately, these analyses have assumed that an agent is fully able to apprehend the good of friendship, and that all social media use is done in moderation and thus there is no need to account for excessive use, even though such use is pervasive (see Banyai et al. 2017). I believe that one such variable that can influence one’s ability to bring about the virtue of friendship is the virtue of temperance, particularly when considering that social media is conducive to excessive use and addictive-like behaviors, both of which may be seen as intemperate, and since the ends of such behaviors may be shaped by physiological or psychological dependencies not related to the apprehension of friendship per se, but rather to the device or devices through which one interacts with friends on social media. Therefore if one is engaging in excessive, intemperate use of social media, perhaps owing to some form addictive-like attachment to the pleasures afforded by social
media use as a distinct end, I suggest that such use may foreclose or impede one’s ability to concurrently bring about the virtue of friendship.

In what follows I extend previous normative assessments of social media friendship by using the Aristotelian virtue of temperance as a starting point. In doing so I believe that Aristotle’s account of temperance is ideally suited to assessing social media use not only for its contextual flexibility, but for the manner in which temperance (along with other virtues) demand of the human agent the ability to align practical wisdom with human action. My focus will be on use of social media namely for its ubiquitous use in society. Therefore I will not focus solely on a given social media platform (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram); rather I will argue that all social media use coalesces on the pursuit of social companionship (and related friendship) as a primary (if not the primary) goal of individuals using the technology. One could conceivably widen the scope of such an analysis or direct it to include the Internet in general or perhaps smartphone use in particular. However, I believe that doing so would likely conflate Internet, smartphone or tablet use with particular software or applications that drive use of these devices, making it difficult to identify the intended ends of device use and to then understand how such use might be characterized as addictive.

Before I begin, I must make a number of important points. First, there is widespread disagreement among psychologists and social scientists that excessive use of social media does not meet the diagnostic definition of addiction (see e.g., Kuss and Griffiths 2011). Therefore, in this paper I will use the term “addiction” colloquially to mean excessive use of social media that is difficult to control and that has the outward appearance of a behavioral dependency. Although imprecise, my intent is to illustrate how such uncontrolled use of social media may influence one’s ability to apprehend the virtue of friendship in and through one’s use of social media. Although confirming or dismissing diagnostic definitions of social media addiction lies well beyond the scope of this paper, I will entertain at least the possibility that a form of such an addiction may exist (see e.g., van den Eijnden et al. 2016; Andreassen et al. 2012).

Second, in his writings Aristotle did not treat of addiction per se. This is not surprising, given that current understandings of the term as a psychological or physiological disorder date to nineteenth-century medicine and the rise of Temperance Movement (Franzwa 1998). Instead, Aristotle recognized that some people are driven by a form of compulsion, an external force that can shape and direct human action. I will address this as it relates to temperance later in this paper.

Third, in what follows I will broaden Aristotle’s conception of necessary objects that fall under the influence of temperance. In essence, he believes that common appetites are those humans share with animals, which are fundamental desires for objects necessary for existence, namely food and drink.

1Unless otherwise noted, all references are to Aristotle 2009. References to his other works have been abbreviated as Eudemian Ethics (EE) and Politics (Pol.).
Because they involve objects necessary for survival, he thinks these fall directly under the sphere of temperance. Although one does not require companionship for survival in the same way that she requires food and drink, I propose that since companionship reflects our nature as social animals that it can nonetheless be thought of as a necessary object subject to excessive desire.

Finally, it must be noted that the possibility of virtues influencing one another, or in some way being unified, is the subject of debate (see e.g., Telfer 1990; Langan 1979). Aristotle never fully develops the idea that possessing (or not possessing) some virtues may influence one’s ability to possess (or not possess) other virtues. At one point he considers the argument that “the same man, it might be said, is not best equipped by nature for all the virtues, so that he will already have acquired one when he has not yet acquired another” (EE, 1144b, 34-5). He replies: “This is possible in respect of the natural virtues, but not in respect of those in respect of which a man is called without qualification good; for with the presence of the one quality, practical wisdom, will be given all the virtues” (EE, 1145a, 1-2). Thus, I will assert that insofar as temperance is a natural virtue, one who possesses it possesses also practical wisdom. As such a person is virtuous, he will (all things being equal) apprehend the virtue of friendship. Conversely, one who lacks temperance will lack also practical wisdom and therefore will not be in a position to secure the virtue of friendship. My thesis will be that this linkage between temperance, practical wisdom and friendship is particularly present when one uses social media (which is itself the subject of temperance or addiction) in order to render the virtue of friendship.

I begin by summarizing Aristotle’s account of temperance, including continence, incontinence, and self-indulgence. I then explore the possibility that excessive social media use in pursuit of a good such as companionship may be subject to temperance, incontinence, or self-indulgence. Insofar as excessive social media use may be construed to be incontinent or self-indulgent (depending on the constitution of the agent), I examine how addiction to social media use relates to incontinent or self-indulgent action. I then assert that insofar as it is intemperate, excessive social media use prevents one from apprehending the virtue of friendship using social media, namely due to the ends sought; that is, the pleasures resulting from social media use instead of the virtue of friendship per se.

Aristotle on Temperance

Since social media overuse deals with behaviors that are either excessive or deficient, Aristotle’s account of temperance is a logical starting point particularly since he locates it between excess and deficiency: “temperance and courage, then, are destroyed by excess and defect, and preserved by the mean” (II.2, 1104a, 25). Therefore, a temperate (i.e., virtuous) person manages her desires by maintaining a mean between excess and deficiency.
However, temperance should not be understood to be a functional mean between excess and deficiency with each being intemperate. Since he thinks that it is virtually impossible for one to reasonably choose to be deficient in terms of food and drink, Aristotle asserts that excess (i.e., self-indulgence) is opposed to temperance and is to be regarded as intemperate.

Importantly, however, he links temperance to pleasures (i.e., bodily) in the following way:

Nor is there in animals other than man any pleasure connected with these senses, except incidentally. For dogs do not delight in the scent of hares, but in the eating of them, but the scent told them the hares were there … temperance and self-indulgence, however, are concerned with the kind of pleasures that the other animals share in … these are touch and taste (III.10, 1118a, 17-26).

Thus, the sphere of temperance is bodily pleasures or needs, specifically for food and drink, that we have in common with other animals. Consequently “the temperate man craves for the things he ought, as he ought, and when he ought; and this is what reason directs” (III.12, 1119b, 14-20). If one fails to be temperate, one is either incontinent or self-indulgent. What differentiates them is the nature of the choice that precipitates either form of action. One who is incontinent knows the right choice yet chooses the bad. He writes: “But of the people who are incontinent with respect to bodily enjoyments, with which we say the temperate and the self-indulgent man are concerned, he who pursues the excesses of things pleasant … not by choice but contrary to his choice and his judgment, is called incontinent” (VII.4, 1148a, 5-10). Therefore one who is incontinent has acted “contrary to his choice and his judgment” in what is a temporary turning away from the good: “the incontinent man regains his knowledge, the same as in the case of the man drunk or asleep” (VIII.3, 1147b, 6-9) and therefore “is subject to regrets” (VII.8, 1150b, 29-30).

In contrast one who is self-indulgent has acted upon a predisposition toward the bad reflective of ill-formed desires. He writes:

Now since some pleasures are necessary while others are not, and are necessary up to a point while the excesses of them are not, nor the deficiencies, and this is equally true of appetites and pains, the man who pursues the excesses of things pleasant, or pursues to excess necessary objects, and does so by choice, for their own sake and not at all for the sake of any result distinct from them is self-indulgent; for such a man is of necessity without regrets, and therefore incurable, since a man without regrets cannot be cured (VII.7, 1150a, 16-23).

Thus, self-indulgence should not be understood as mere excess. Rather self-indulgence springs from ill-formed desires that direct the individual to pursue to excess things that are necessary or pleasant for no other reason other than to pursue them to excess. And these desires are more or less permanent for they are not only acted upon with no regrets but are acted upon by an individual who “cannot be cured.”
Self-indulgence (as well continence and temperance) may be understood in yet another way: by the pains produced, not in the presence of desires, but rather in their absence. Generally speaking, the greater the pain produced by unsatisfied desire, the greater the likelihood that the desire may lead to incontinence or self-indulgence. Aristotle makes the distinction this way: “the self-indulgent man is so called because he is pained more than he ought at not getting pleasant things (even his pain being caused by pleasure), and the temperate man is so called because he is not pained at the absence of what is pleasant and at his abstinence from it” (III.11, 1118b, 29-35). Therefore, one who is self-indulgent suffers far greater pain in the absence of pleasure than one who is temperate.

Consequently, one who is continent may at some point become incontinent yet realize his error and become continent. In contrast one who is self-indulgent is “led on in accordance with his own choice, thinking that he should always pursue the present pleasure; while the other [who is incontinent] does not think so, but yet pursues it” (VII.3, 1146b, 23-26). Finally, one who is temperate is possessive of practical wisdom that directs her to crave for the things she ought, as she ought, and when she ought.

**Incontinence, Self-Indulgence and Excessive Social Media use**

Insofar as it represents a failure to partake in a behavior without moderation it would seem that excessive use of social media is certainly not temperate. However, should it be considered demonstrative of incontinent or self-indulgent? To answer this question, it would be helpful to revisit Aristotle’s sphere of temperance and how different appetites fall under its influence. Aristotle believes there are two important appetites (or desires): common and peculiar. Common appetites are those we have in common with animals and involve the satisfying of basic needs (i.e., food and drink).

In contrast, peculiar appetites represent peculiarities of common appetites. Thus, to satisfy a need for sustenance, human beings (as well as animals) have a common appetite for food, in particular food that is generally understood as being good to satisfy hunger (e.g., bread, vegetables, meats). However, while feeling the same need one may have a peculiar appetite for pastries. So, although all human beings have a common appetite for food needed for sustenance, not all human beings have a peculiar need for pastries as a means of sustenance.

Since common appetites are “natural” in that they correspond to basic (i.e., bodily) needs, Aristotle sees them outside the sphere of temperance. He writes: “Now in the natural appetites few go wrong, and only in one direction, that of excess; for to eat or drink whatever offers itself till one is surfeited is to exceed the natural amount, since natural appetite is the replenishment of one’s deficiency” (III.11, 1118b, 14-19). Consequently, in the natural appetites one can err, but only to excess or by means of self-indulgence. These errors are
seen as being rare insofar as once a natural appetite has been “replenished” the
appetite subsides.

By contrast peculiar appetites are more persistent, as Aristotle explains:
“But with regard to the pleasures peculiar to individuals many people go wrong
and in many ways. For while the people who are ‘fond of so-and-so’ are so
called because they delight either in the wrong things, or more than most
people do, or in the wrong way, the self-indulgent exceed in all three ways;
they both delight in some things that they ought not to delight in (since they are
hateful), and if one ought to delight in some of the things they delight in, they
do so more than one ought and than most men do” (III.11, 1118b, 21-28).

Therefore, is excessive social media use characteristic of intemperance,
incontinence or self-indulgence? For an answer we must first consider if social
media use or companionship may be thought of as a necessary object; if so then
it may fall under the sphere of temperance. Research has identified that a need
to belong, or a need to be implicated in community (i.e., companionship) may
be considered as a singular driver of social media use that remains consistent
across age groups and social media platforms (see e.g., Sheldon, Abad and
Hirsch 2011; Yu, Tian, Vogel, and Kwok 2010; Gonzales and Hancock 2011).

Although feeling that one belongs (within a community or within a circle
of friends or acquaintances) would seem to be a desire that humans share with
animals (for both are certainly social animals) it would seem also that such a
desire could not be considered a bodily pleasure (as would food, drink and
sex). By extension, then, a need to belong (i.e., companionship) may be
considered a necessary object: Although we do not need it to sustain ourselves
physically, it is nonetheless a constituent part of our sociality; that is, we do not
need it to survive physically, yet we still have a fundamental need for it that is
related to our ends. As Aristotle writes: “he who is unable to live in society, or
who has no need because he is sufficient for himself, must be either a beast or a
god: he is no part of a state. A social instinct is implanted in all men by nature,
and yet he who first founded the state was the greatest of benefactors” (Pol.,
I.2, X). Giving further support to the possibility of companionship as a
necessary object he writes: “Surely it is strange, too, to make the supremely
happy man a solitary: for no one would choose the whole world on condition of
being alone, since man is a political creature and one whose nature is to live
with others” (IX.9, 1169b, 16-18). He continues: “For a human being is not
only a political animal but also one who forms a household. Unlike other
animals, a human being does not mate from time to time with just anyone, male
or female; but in a special sense human beings are not solitary animals, but
prone to forming a community with those with whom they have a natural
kinship” (EE, VII.10.5, 24-25). Throughout these observations he asserts that a
“social instinct,” a need “to live with others,” and humans being “prone to
forming a community” are constituents of human nature. Although Aristotle
does not collapse these into a single human need or drive that brings about
social intercourse these are, I believe, coterminous with a human need for
companionship.
Thus, I think it plausible that companionship is a necessary object and is subject to the sphere of temperance. However, would excessive social media use in pursuit of companionship be considered a failure of temperance, or a case of incontinence or self-indulgence? As a common appetite companionship is something that humans have in common with animals. However, satisfying this need using social media would appear to be a peculiar appetite: Although all human beings (like animals) have a common appetite for companionship, not all human beings have a peculiar need for using social media to attain it.

Following Aristotle’s structuring of incontinence and self-indulgence, excessive social media use might, depending on the agent, fall into either category. For example one user of social media may be pre-disposed to overuse; she knows intrinsically that she ought not to partake in heavy use of social media for doing so is not altogether good (e.g., focusing on social media use at the expense of spending time with others or at the expense of doing other things). Nevertheless, she engages in overuse and, in a mark of incontinence, reflects on doing so and regrets it. Conversely, a different user of social media may knowingly engage in overuse yet, in a mark of self-indulgence, not regret it for he is doing so by choice; that is, a choice to do what he ought not to do. This user would seem to follow Aristotle’s observation that one who is self-indulgent “is led on in accordance with his own choice, thinking that he should always pursue the pleasure; while the other does not think so, but yet pursues it” (VII.3, 1146b, 23-26). Unlike incontinent and self-indulgent social media users, the temperate user would, as Aristotle suggests, “[crave] for the things he ought, as he ought, and when he ought” (III.12, 1119b, 14-20) thereby using social media in pursuit of companionship at appropriate times (e.g., not while driving a car or at the expense of doing other necessary things), and for appropriate lengths of time (e.g., for 10 minutes instead of 3 hours).

Voluntarily Acts and Ignorance

Having outlined Aristotle’s conceptions of temperance, incontinence and self-indulgence I now wish to review his account of voluntary action for I believe it helps give additional context to excessive social media use. Generally speaking, it may be said that one may act either voluntarily or involuntarily, or intentionally or not intentionally (respectively). Differentiating them is what Aristotle refers to as “the moving principle;” in other words the origins of the action in question as being either internal or external to the agent. Acts that are involuntary, Aristotle asserts, are those that “take place by force or by reason of ignorance; and that is forced of which the moving principle is outside, being a principle in which nothing is contributed by the person who acts—or, rather, is acted upon, e.g. if he were to be carried somewhere by a wind, or by men who had him in their power” (III.1, 1110a, 1-4). Thus, Aristotle asserts that the most obvious examples of involuntary action involve physical coercion or force.
In contrast, voluntary acts proceed from one’s appetitive or rational faculties and therefore reflect intent; that is, deliberation and subsequent choice. Insofar as they originate from within oneself, they reflect the constituent nature of one’s desires and subsequently “contribute” to the movement precipitating action. In this way Aristotle ascribes culpability based on intention: Either one desires to perform an act, or one does not.

As intention has a bearing on culpability, so too does ignorance. If one performs an act in ignorance she is acting voluntarily. But the form of one’s ignorance has a bearing on the voluntary nature of one’s actions, determined namely by knowledge of particulars (i.e., an awareness of the circumstances in which a choice is made as well of the objects in question) as well as knowledge of universals (i.e., an awareness of right and wrong). One one hand, Aristotle thinks that some acts are performed in ignorance: “for the man who is drunk or in a rage is thought to act as a result not of ignorance but of one of the causes mentioned, yet not knowingly but in ignorance” (III.1, 1110b, 25-27).

Consequently, such a person has knowledge of both universals (i.e., that excessive drinking is wrong) and particulars (e.g., that consuming a large number of alcoholic drinks will likely result in drunkenness) as and such, acts voluntarily. While one’s state of inebriation may prompt one to act unknowingly in a sense, Aristotle nonetheless holds him responsible for his action, “since he had the power of not getting drunk and his getting drunk was the cause of his ignorance” (III.5, 1113b, 29-34).

Involuntary acts tend to arise from one acting of ignorance. Such actions are done, Aristotle thinks, without knowledge of universals and particulars. Therefore, Aristotle claims, “the man who was ignorant … is thought to have acted involuntarily, and especially if he was ignorant on the most important points; and these are thought to be the circumstances of the action and its end” (III.1, 1111a, 15-19). Because they are involuntary, acts performed of ignorance are exculpatory, while voluntary acts that are undertaken against knowledge of the circumstances of the action and its end are not. Thus, he writes: “Those errors that are committed not simply in ignorance but because of one’s ignorance are pardonable, whereas those that are committed not because of one’s ignorance but in ignorance caused by some unnatural or inhuman passion, are not” (EE IV.8.11, 1136a, 6-9).

That some acts are either voluntary or involuntary and are either done in ignorance or of ignorance help to qualify incontinent and self-indulgent behaviors. Given the above, self-indulgence would seem to be an act done in ignorance, for since she is indulging, she is aware of both particulars and universals. Moreover, she would be also acting voluntarily, as Aristotle writes: “For the self-indulgent man, on the other hand, the particular acts are voluntary (for he does them with craving and desire), but the whole state is less so; for no one craves to be self-indulgent.” (III.12, 1119a, 31-34). Incontinence is similarly voluntary, for the incontinent “acts voluntarily (for he acts in a sense with knowledge both of what he does and of the end to which he does it)” (VII.10, 1152a, 14-16).
Social Media Addiction and Voluntary Action

Of all the above conditions it would appear that as a voluntary act excessive social media use is done in ignorance: One knows that spending too much time using social media is undesirable, yet he continues to use it excessively. But how might this change for individuals whose uncontrolled use of social media may in some way be driven by addiction? Since Aristotle does not think that voluntary acts are brought about by a force external to the agent, addiction to social media would not be considered a form of compulsion. Rather it might be thought of as Aristotle’s drunk who, although he is drunk, had the power of not getting drunk and as such he has done so voluntarily, in ignorance (III.1, 1110b, 25-27; III.5, 1113b, 29-34). Like the drunk who realized (at some point after that first drink) that becoming inebriated was in some way pleasurable, so too may a social media user realize that excessive social media use is pleasurable.

If so then what began as a voluntary act of ignorance evolved into an act done in ignorance. What I mean is that one’s addictive-like use of social media likely began (as with Aristotle’s drunk) with a first encounter or series of encounters during which time she succumbed to the pleasure afforded by social media use and became habituated in seeking out and using social media specifically for the resulting pleasure as an end in itself. I will suggest what pleasures are involved later in this paper. For now, given the foregoing account of voluntariness, one’s first encounters in using social media (in particular to excess) may have been voluntary yet done of ignorance, having no knowledge of the particulars; namely the pleasures resulting from social media use. Once habituated, although his excessive use would remain voluntary, he would then act in ignorance: aware of the pleasures afforded by social media use and that these may encourage excessive use but choosing to partake regardless.

As a strictly voluntary act, if one cannot control her use of social media and is therefore acting in ignorance, and if she is engaging in addictive-like behavior, then what precisely is she attracted to? The answer, I believe, reveals something about the nature of the attachment and the ends sought. Although it might be possible that she is addicted to companionship, evidence suggests she is attached to the physiological or psychological mental stimulation that often results from social media use that can trigger reward centers her brain (see e.g., Tamir and Mitchell 2012; Turkle 2011). If one then obtains satisfaction from such stimulation then it would seem that the proximate end of her action is the stimulation itself (or more accurately the pleasure derived from it), rather than the end of (or good of) companionship or friendship (as a good) per se. For she would be acting upon the knowledge that social media use provides such stimulation, that such stimulation is good and that it is desirable to pursue such a good even if it requires excessive use of social media. This would, as Aristotle suggests, be indicative not only of voluntary action done in ignorance, but of self-indulgence insofar as she “pursues the excesses of things pleasant […] and does so by choice, for their own sake and not at all for the sake of any result distinct from them” (VII.7, 1150a, 21-23).
Friendship and Excessive Social Media use

I now turn to Aristotle’s account of friendship to see how temperance may affect one’s ability to bring about the virtue of friendship. Although he alludes to the possibility of one being a friend to oneself, for Aristotle friendship is essential to human sociability. What differentiates kinds of friendships are what motivates them; what serves as the basis for their formation and ongoing maintenance. What one’s friends do for oneself characterizes both friendships of “utility” and friendships of “pleasure.” He writes: “those who love each other because of utility do not love each other for themselves but in virtue of some good which they get from each other” (VIII.3, 1156a, 10). These are friendships that are founded and maintained quid pro quo (what we may recognize as friendships of convenience) based on some good provided for oneself. One may, for example, be friends with someone because they walk together; walking being a good that one values.

Friendships based on pleasure are similarly quid pro quo. Thus, one may be friends with someone because he is fun to be around. As Aristotle writes: “those who love because of pleasure; it is not for their character that men love ready-witted people, but because they find them to be pleasant” (VIII.3, 1156a, 10). Finally since both are defined by goods they provide, friendships of utility and pleasure are fleeting, or “incidental,” insofar as they are tied to specific ends, “for it is not as being the man he is that the loved person is loved, but as providing some good or pleasure. Such friendships, then, are easily dissolved, if the parties do not remain like themselves; for if one party is no longer pleasant or useful the other ceases to love him” (VIII.3, 1156a, 15).

On the other hand, perfect friendship is enduring because it possesses all the qualities that friends should have. Friends of this kind, he writes, “wish well alike to each other quod good, and they are good in themselves” (VIII.3, 1156b, 5). Thus, those who share perfect friendships share a durable bond that is not rooted in utility or pleasure but is instead rooted in a reciprocal form of love in which one loves another for what and who she is, being fully aware that such love is being reciprocated. Thus Aristotle writes: “This kind of friendship, then, is perfect both in respect of duration and in all other respects, and in it each gets from each in all respects the same as, or something like what, he gives; which is what ought to happen between friends” (VIII.4, 1156b, 35).

At this juncture we may ask: Is one who lacks temperance as a result of her excessive use of social media capable of bringing about friendship using social media? Aristotle appears to have the answer when he writes: “we must suppose that the use of language by men in an incontinent state means no more than its utterance by actors on a stage” (VII.3, 1147a, 23-25). Therefore it would seem that one who cannot control his use of social media (thereby responding to the pleasures such use affords) is merely using interactions with his friend not to service companionship or to bring about perfect friendship per se (as one who is acting reasonably would do), but rather to obtain specific pleasures. As research suggests, these pleasures include the satisfaction that obtains in sharing one’s feelings (Bazarova and Choi 2014), receiving “likes”
on Facebook (Blease 2015), having posts or updates shared (Nadkarni and Hofmann 2012), gaining new social media followers (Leung 2013), or increasing one’s social capital (Liu et al. 2014). Thus, for such a person it is the pleasure derived from social media use that is the end being sought, not the good of friendship.

Such unrestricted use of social media in pursuit of pleasure would appear to have more in common with friendships of utility or pleasure than with perfect friendship. For one who reflexively uses social media in an unrestricted manner, it is the pleasures sought that serve as ends. Thus it is not a response to what reason dictates, insofar as such use reflects ill-formed desires (i.e., the pursuit of pleasure as an end in itself, instantiated by use of social media per se), but is instead reflective of a turning away from the good that is the mark of self-indulgent action. Resembling relationships of utility or pleasure, in this state friends offer a quid pro quo: They are to be sought and interacted with merely for the satisfaction those interactions provide not for the good of the relationships themselves.

Another way to differentiate the ends sought through excessive social media use is to determine if such use could be considered an expression of love toward one’s friend. To attain true friendship, Aristotle believes that one must commit oneself to another in such a way that one wishes well to her for her own sake. To do so requires one to selflessly commit to another as an expression of love, through which true friendship is expressed. As Aristotle writes: “Now since friendship depends more on loving, and it is those who love their friends that are praised, loving seems to be the characteristic virtue of friends, so that it is only those in whom this is found in due measure that are lasting friends, and only their friendship endures” (VIII.7, 1159a, 32-35). Thus, we may ask: What may an excessive social media user truly love? I submit that since a self-indulgent user of social media has the satisfaction of his own pleasure as his ends, it is the satisfaction of these pleasures that is loved; not the good of friendship nor the friend himself for the sake of himself. Indeed, such a user would have the ability to recognize that there is a time and place for engaging social media, and that some ends are desirable (e.g., serving friendship), while others are not.

Conversely if the aim of excessive use is intended to serve the good of one’s friend, as when a friend is in need, the end is the good of friendship, and therefore the act itself is good. Therefore, I submit that sporadic bouts of excessive use in service to one’s friend is an indication that such excessive use is not habitual and that such use reveals much about one’s motives, which themselves are implicated in virtue. Aristotle makes this clear in prescribing how and when pleasure is to be sought: “to feel [pleasure] at the right times, with reference to the right objects, towards the right people, with the right motive, and in the right way, is what is both intermediate and best, and this is characteristic of virtue” (II.5, 1106b, 16-23). Thus if one serves the good of one’s friend (in and through excessive social media use), and derives pleasure from doing so (from serving the needs of the friend), then one has done so at the right time (i.e., using it to excess now, but not later), with reference to the
right objects (i.e., the good of friendship), towards the right people (i.e., one’s friend), with the right motive (i.e., serving the good of friendship as an end in itself), and in the right way (i.e., using social media excessively only to the extent required to bring about the good being sought). Of course if one pleases herself by using social media excessively as a means of pleasuring herself, then she is doing so at the wrong time (i.e., as a matter of habit), with reference to the wrong objects (i.e., pleasure as an end), toward the wrong people (i.e., for the good of the friend is not the aim of the act), with the wrong motive (i.e., pleasuring oneself), and in the wrong way (i.e., using her friend as a means to her own ends and doing so habitually).

In such a case the pursuit of the virtue of friendship is being mediated by a device and related software platform that themselves have become the objects of desire, not for procuring the end of friendship, but (for the excessive or addicted user) for the stimulation (i.e., pleasure) they provide. In this way the ends sought through social media interactions reveal much about the constituent nature of one’s desires: that by self-indulgently seeking physiological or psychological stimulation as a result of a habituation toward intemperate behavior one is acting on ill-formed desires. That breaking such a habit may require much pain (see e.g., Turkle 2011, p. 227-8; Blease 2015) underscores the self-indulgent nature of the desire and reveals the intended ends of excessive social media interactions.

Therefore, in view of the foregoing it is difficult to see how one so effected is capable of attaining the virtue of friendship through excessive use of social media, except in such cases as dictated by the needs of one’s friend. Although in these cases such use may indeed be excessive, it reflects a particular good being sought and served; that is, the good of friendship. Habitual excessive use, on the other hand, is indicative not only of self-indulgence but of ill-formed desires expressive of ends that precipitate choices lacking the guidance of practical wisdom. As a result, one who in this way has been compromised is demonstrating the substantive quality of his character. As Aristotle writes: “For men are good in but one way, but bad in many. Virtue, then, is a state of character concerned with choice” (II.5, 1106b, 34-35). Thus, in such a state one is lacking practical wisdom, is lacking virtue and is therefore unable to apprehend the virtue of friendship.

**Conclusion**

It is my hope that I have added to the discussion of bringing about the virtue of friendship in and through use of social media by demonstrating that variables (in this case the virtue of temperance) may intervene. To apprehend the virtue of friendship requires a steadfast commitment both to the good of friendship (as a good in itself), and to the good of one’s friend (for her own sake, which is also good). To be clear, I do not wish to claim that social media is incapable of exercising such a commitment; rather, *particular uses* of social media are capable of either compromising such a commitment or are reflective
of other commitments entirely. Insofar at the habitual excessive use of social
media is demonstrative of the latter, it represents a commitment to pleasuring
oneself, not a (perhaps misguided) commitment to friendship. Therefore, I do
not assert that all excessive use of social media is per se bad. On the other
hand, it is the habitual excessive use of social media that is bad in itself namely
because it is self-indulgent and reflects an ongoing choice on the part of the
agent to reflexively choose the bad, knowing that such behavior is not
desirable. By asserting this I do not suggest that all forms of long-term
excessive use is undesirable; there may, for example, be cases in which one
uses social media for an excessive amount of time, repeatedly, because his
friend is grieving, his friend is separated by distance, and using social media to
lend support is convenient. Such cases, I maintain, are not habitual, but reflect
an ongoing need to render love to one’s friend. In other words, there is a clear
difference between using social media excessively as a habit of self-serving
pleasure and using social media excessively to bring about the good friendship.

Similarly, I hope to have added to the debate concerning the unity of the
virtues. Applying excessive social media use to such a possibility, if one is
intemperate in the way described, one has no grasp of practical wisdom; one’s
ability to reason has been compromised in such a way that she thinks she is
intending one end (i.e., the good of friendship) while in reality she is intending
another (i.e., the good of pleasure). As result, she no longer has the ability to
make good choices, and this inability would appear to extend to her ability to
apprehend the virtue of friendship. Instead, as I have indicated, she would seem
more able to service friendships based on utility or pleasure than on perfect
friendship.

Taking this a step further, I believe that if we can connect temperance to
friendship then it is possible to connect other virtues to it as well. Justice is one
example. If one is lacking practical wisdom as indicated by a failure of
temperance, then it might be said that he is likewise lacking an orientation
toward the needs of others, of doing what is just. In such a state, by responding
to a perceived good in such a way that runs contrary to temperance, he is
therefore unable to recognize that his actions are not being done for the
advantage of his friend, but namely for his own sake. The same might be said
for prudence: if one lacks the ability to control her responses to pleasure then
she is unable to use practical wisdom to control her behavior. Therefore, if she
lacks temperance (as indicated by excessive use of social media), then she
cannot govern her own behavior and thus is incapable of realizing that her
actions are being undertaken not in service to another, but in service to herself.

Given the ability of social media to precipitate excessive use, being able to
control these desires is fundamentally necessary in order to differentiate and
evaluate the ends being sought. If the agent is unable to control this desire, he
lacks practical wisdom and with it the corresponding ability to make choices,
as Aristotle suggests, “at the right times, with reference to the right objects,
towards the right people, with the right motive, and in the right way” (II.5,
1106b, 16-23). This being absent, an excessive social media user is incapable
of bringing about the virtue of friendship in and through his use of social media.

Works Cited


