



Routledge Research in Applied Ethics

FRIENDSHIP, ROBOTS, AND SOCIAL MEDIA

FALSE FRIENDS AND SECOND SELVES

Alexis M. Elder



Friendship, Robots, and Social Media

Various emerging technologies, from social robotics to social media, appeal to our desire for social interactions, while avoiding some of the risks and costs of face-to-face human interaction. But can they offer us real friendship? In this book, Alexis Elder outlines a theory of friendship drawing on Aristotle and contemporary work on social ontology, and then uses it to evaluate the real value of social robotics and emerging social technologies.

In Part I of the book Elder develops a robust and rigorous ontology of friendship: what it is, how it functions, what harms it, and how it relates to familiar ethical and philosophical questions about character, value, and well-being. In Part II she applies this ontology to emerging trends in social robotics and human-robot interaction, including robotic companions for lonely seniors, therapeutic robots used to teach social skills to children on the autism spectrum, and companionate robots currently being developed for consumer markets. Elder articulates the moral hazards presented by these robots, while at the same time acknowledging their real and measurable benefits. In Part III she shifts her focus to connections between real people, especially those enabled by social media. Arguing against critics who have charged that these new communication technologies are weakening our social connections, Elder explores ways in which text messaging, videochats, Facebook, and Snapchat are enabling us to develop, sustain, and enrich our friendship in new and meaningful ways.

Alexis M. Elder is an assistant professor of philosophy at the University of Minnesota Duluth. Her research focuses on friendship and social technologies. Her publications include “Excellent Online Friendships: An Aristotelian Defense of Social Media” in *Ethics and Information Technology*, and “Zhuangzi on Friendship and Death” in *Southern Journal of Philosophy*.

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Introduction

1. Human Nature, Human Connections, Human Creations

Human beings are remarkable for both our social and technical inclinations. These two interests come together in the realm of social technologies, those tools we invent and use to address our social needs. We are inventive and clever creatures, and these features are very much in evidence here. We have created a staggering variety of technologies, from writing systems and telephones to Facebook, Twitter, and Snapchat, to a rapidly-expanding array of social robotics. But cleverness and wisdom do not always coincide. There is little doubt that the majority of social technologies are intended to benefit users. However, when it comes to the social realm, our needs are complicated. Not every well-meant invention, even when it works as intended, ends up being good for us in the long run. At the same time, to reject our innovative tendencies in the social realm seems foolish. It can be tempting to criticize new technologies by hearkening back to some Golden Age of pre-technological harmony. But this seems both inaccurate in terms of actual history and dismissive of our nature as tool-users and tool innovators. Rather than shy away from our cleverness, we should use it to our advantage. But we should take care to integrate it with a clearer understanding of the subject matter with which it deals.

In this book, I take the view that social technologies can contribute to good lives, but that we should reflect on what these good lives consist in, so as to successfully practice ethical design, deployment, and use of these technologies. In order to make the case for this, I lay out, in this Introduction, some key terms and concepts. As is so often the case in philosophy, the trickiest part will not be introducing novel concepts, but in clarifying everyday or near-everyday ones, in order to make headway on topics that many find confusing or controversial.

2. Clarifying Concepts

To start with, take the question of what makes a life good one. One way to answer the question is by way of a tradition with roots in ancient Greece. The ancient Greek philosophers, and modern virtue ethicists

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inspired by them, use the term *eudaimonia* to refer to something like this. Aristotle, from whose work I take much inspiration, developed a rich and complex account of what it takes for human beings to live well. The Greek term he used for this desirable phenomenon, *eudaimonia*, is translated into English, variously, as: the good life, living well, well-being, being blessed, happiness, and flourishing, and within the framework of Aristotelian virtue ethics it has overtones of each. Contemporary virtue ethicists—including myself—who take the ancient Greeks to have been on to something important find it helpful to link these concepts together. We also follow Aristotle in thinking that *eudaimonia* is conceptually linked with virtue. Aristotle offers an account of *eudaimonia* in which a creature's ultimate good consists of living well as the kind of thing it is. This explains why terms like flourishing, living well, and well-being are often used to translate *eudaimonia*. "Happiness" gets added to the mix, not by referring to hedonist pleasures, but as an alternate way of getting at the kind of enjoyment found in performing one's work wholeheartedly and well (even if this is not always pleasant). Blessedness, a translation occasionally favored by Terence Irwin (Aristotle 1999), matters here because *eudaimonia* requires elements of good fortune not always under the individual's control: one cannot live well without the right external goods, such as access to adequate nutrition, supportive political structure and community, and enough wealth and resources to take care of basic necessities. Virtues, in an Aristotelian account, do not imply prudishness or purity, even though these are things we often associate with the word "virtue" today. Instead, they are the characteristics necessary for a creature to function well as the kind of thing it is. A knife, for instance, needs a sharp edge in order to cut well, and so sharpness is a virtue of knives. By linking all of these ideas together, we end up with a framework for making sense of a good life as something that is deeply connected to our nature, so that in order to understand what it would be for us to live well, we need to understand what sort of creatures we are.

Fully-developed accounts of what our nature is and what the virtues are that will help us to live according to this nature are abundant in academic philosophy, and it is not my intention here to arbitrate between them or to make my account dependent on the details of one particular account over others. Instead, I aim to make headway by three means: two substantive, one methodological. The methodological element is a commitment to reflecting on what constitutes a good life when we encounter difficult ethical questions in some particular context where various goods or ethical goals appear to be in conflict. This is used throughout the book to shed light on various social and individual goods and technologies.

The substantive elements involve the importance of sociality and technology to human beings. On the importance of the social, Aristotle noted in the *Politics* (Book 1, Chapter 2, Aristotle 2017, 4, 1253a) and elsewhere that human beings are inherently social animals. Like bees or

wolves, we live in organized groups and characteristically work together to accomplish tasks larger and more complex than those manageable by a solitary individual. Thus, even if any given person were not terribly inclined to enjoy others' company, there might be a case to be made for social connection as constitutive of functioning well. But as it happens, I think that for most of us, social connection is also inherently valuable, a point which can be brought out by reflecting on a thought experiment inspired by Aristotle. He claimed, "It would be "absurd to make the blessed [*eudaimon*] person solitary. For no one would choose to have all [other] goods and yet be alone, since a human being is a political [animal], tending by nature to live together with others" (Aristotle 1999, 148, 1169b, 15–20). Note that this involves not only a biological claim about human social organizations, but also an appeal to individual choice rooted in what one values.

Imagine you were given a choice between a life in which you enjoyed all of the material goods, but no human connections, and one in which you had access to all of these, plus friends, family, and community. To most of us, this is not a difficult decision: we opt for the life with social connection over that without. "But wait", one might object. "That's just because the second option involves more than the first". But the second option only seems more desirable because it has more in it that we find valuable: an option that included lots of an element a person considered worthless would not thereby be considered more choice worthy. And suppose we modify the options slightly. You can choose between a life with all the material goods you could ever want but no human connection, and one in which your basic needs are satisfied but you do not always get *everything* you want. But in this second scenario, you still have a rich social life. If the choice between this one and the socially barren one still seems obvious to you, then not only does it seem that the latter choice includes goods missing from the former, but that these goods are so valuable they are worth trading for greater quantities of other goods. This suggests that human connection is not just *a* good, but an irreplaceable element of the best human lives (or at least, the best lives for most humans). Thus, we have both objective and subjective reason to think that social lives matter to us, even if they would not matter so much for or to crocodiles or wolverines. This does not mean that *every* connection is good. But it does imply that good connections are good because they function well *as* social connections, not because they are efficient conveyers of value that could in principle be obtained elsewhere. What we need, then, is an account of what makes such connections what they are, so that we can take what steps we can to help them to function well. That is the topic of Part I of this book.

The second substantive element that I rely on here has to do with the importance of technology to good human lives. Here, philosophers and other thinkers have varied widely, from Luddite rejection of modern

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technology to full-throated technological optimism, the sort that thinks any social ill can be overcome by a clever enough invention. Some, like Albert Borgmann and advocates of the “slow tech” approach, endorse some kinds of technology (especially those in which human beings are integrated throughout the process of using these artifacts) but not others (especially those exemplifying what (Borgmann 1984) terms the ‘device paradigm’, where the artifact “just works” for the user while its functioning remains opaque). But like any good Aristotelian, I think the right amount lies somewhere in the middle and is not reducible to a formula or a unified explanation, as on Borgmann’s account. Furthermore, what the Luddite misses is that innovative tool use, even when socially transformative, is not “unnatural” for human beings. Judging by our history, it is in fact entirely normal for human societies to vary widely and change dramatically over time as technological practices and artifacts are introduced, modified, and adapted. This does not, of course, always make such changes *good*. But it does mean that if we are to take human nature seriously in our considerations about what is ethical, we need to embrace rather than reject this aspect of our humanity. What makes any given technological innovation good or bad has to be specified by something else. The natural thing for the Aristotle-inspired ethicist to say is that innovation is an excellence when it coheres with the other excellences: when a given technology helps us to excel at being human, all things considered. So, in order to deliver a verdict on any given technology, we have to examine how well it integrates with our other values. For social technologies, this means thinking about what excellence in the social realm looks like.

3. Theorizing About Friendship

I tackle this by first laying out a detailed account of a notoriously amorphous concept: friendship. My aim here is not to convince the reader *that* friendship is an important human good. I take that as a premise. (This does not mean it needs to be central to every human life, any more than thinking that art is an important human good means thinking every person needs to devote their life to art.) Rather, it is to reflect clearly and carefully on a number of apparently puzzling features of friendship, in order to better understand a complicated social phenomenon. Furthermore, as this is ultimately being done in the service of providing ethical guidance on social technologies, I focus on articulating the nature of our *ideal* of friendship. While empirical data about actual human practices can be helpful, we need a theory of what is valuable in order to get from a pile of facts to a prescription for what to do.

Why friendship? In the field of philosophy, friendship has been given relatively little attention in recent years, especially relative to other social phenomena such as governments, economies, and even families. So this

might seem to be an odd place for a philosopher to look for information about valuable social connections. There is sometimes a tendency to think of friendship as relatively trivial, the kind of relationship we sometimes choose to engage in for our own amusement, after our more “serious” needs are met. But historically, friendship has often been given pride of place in the social world. From the classical Chinese philosopher Kongzi (Confucius 2003), who praised the importance of friendship to the cultivated individual, to the extensive discussion of friendship in the Buddhist text *Dhammapada* (Buddha 2000), to the chapters on friendship in Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* (Aristotle 1999), on which this volume draws heavily for inspiration, thinkers from a wide range of cultures and eras have identified friendship as an important element of a good life.

In addition, friendship itself seems to be a kind of ideal of human relationship, and while even figuring out who counts as a “real” friend can be difficult, this can be explained in part because calling someone a friend seems to be, among other things, a way of saying something positive about the person and the relationship. To describe one’s co-workers as friends, or one’s family members, or neighbors, is to say that there is something especially valuable about these relationships, over and above their formal membership in social categories such as colleague, sibling, or fellow resident of a community. Therefore, to say something about what a friend is, tells us something about what we aim for in many of our social lives more broadly.

Lastly, many of the most striking technological innovations of our present era, from social media and smartphones to social robotics, are explicitly designed to work with our everyday desires for companionship, comradeship, and friendly interaction. Social entities like governments, corporations, and financial institutions may draw the attention because of their ability to affect our lives in highly visible ways. But the smaller, more frequent, everyday exchanges of friends may add up to a bigger and more insidious impact on our lives overall. And research suggests that social connections, especially close ones like friends and (well-functioning) family and romantic partnerships, are important predictors of long-term well-being (Piore 2015).

Getting clear on what friendship is, then, can help us to make good decisions about the design and use of technologies that implicate it. In particular, my strategy in Part I of this volume is to figure out 1) what it means to reason well about friendship, 2) how we should think about friendships (that is, how we should understand what they are), and 3) how concerns about friendship fit in with concerns about morality, overall. In each case I start with a puzzling aspect of our ordinary beliefs and values about friendship, and attempt to organize and explain these beliefs so as to clear up the confusion without sacrificing important intuitions or beliefs about what friendship is or how it ought to go. Some of the work

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done here is ground-clearing: that is, by clearing up what we are talking about when we talk about friendship as an ideal at which we aim, we can make better use of available technologies, and better innovate when constructing new ones. We avoid getting tripped up on confusions about the target concept. Other aspects of the work lay foundations for specific conclusions about social media and social robotics, allowing for further development in later chapters that, while less abstract and theoretical, engage more explicitly with the technologies in question.

Because evaluating social technologies requires that we reason appropriately about our social connections, I begin Chapter 1 with a puzzle about reasoning in friendship. Reasons seem by their very nature to be repeatable and consistent in order to be rational, and yet reasons for friendships, especially reasons for making friends, maintaining friendships, or ending friendships, do not seem to be subject to expectations of consistency. At the same time, much of friendship does seem to involve the use of reasons, even in these very decisions. Some theorists attempt to explain away the lack of consistency and make friendship ultimately rational, while others try to explain away the appearance of rationality and make friendship fundamentally resistant to reasons. In this chapter, I argue that both pursue a mistaken strategy by taking friends' reasoning to focus tightly on individual friends and actions. What we find in friendship is not reasoning about individuals and how they treat us, but rather reasoning about the constitution and well-being of a complex social entity jointly composed by the friends. By reframing the issue in this way, much of the apparent puzzlement drops away, and various kinds of reasoning typical of friendship that seemed to be in tension turn out merely to be involved in different but compatible aspects of supporting the well-being of the friendship.

Having introduced this idea of a friendship as a social entity, Chapter 2 is devoted to unpacking an ontology of friendship. In addition to the reasons given in Chapter 1, introducing these entities can explain a worry about identity in friendship. There seems to be tension between thinking that close friends are, as Aristotle puts it, "other selves", and thinking that friendship can enrich us by difference as well as sameness. But theoretical resources from metaphysical accounts of the relationship between parts and the wholes they compose can be used to make sense of the idea that friends are other selves and yet different. They do so by making friends out to be different parts of a composite entity, a friendship, and in virtue of being parts be legitimately considered to be identical with the whole they compose. What emerges is an account that prioritizes interactions between and interdependence of friends over similarities between friends. Just as a heart and liver of an organism can look very different and perform very different activities while jointly composing the same organism, so friends can have different roles to play in the friendship and different strengths to contribute, so long as they each help the other to function well and are appropriately interconnected.

Lastly, I discuss the relationship between moral concerns and concerns of friendship. This is a contested issue. On the one hand, loyalty and concern for friends seems to give one reason to behave badly under certain circumstances. As the old adage goes, a friend helps you move, but a good friend helps you move a body. On the other hand, friendship seems to be benefited by the good character of friends. I reconcile this tension and argue that our ideals of friendship give us reasons internal to friendship to be concerned with our own and our friends' character by noting the importance of concern for friends' well-being to ideals of friendship. Once we connect well-being to virtuous character, as we have already seen that virtue ethics does, a concern for morality emerges out of concerns of friendship.

This portion is relatively technical, and not every concern addressed here may be of interest to every reader. Nevertheless, if you find yourself asking things like, "Why don't we just figure out what the qualities of a good friend are, so we can duplicate them in social robots?" or "Why Instagram your lunch? Why think that it should matter to a person what their friends are up to when they aren't together or at least involved in something of shared interest?" or "What does friendship have to do with morality?" then the conclusions argued for in these chapters will be of interest to you.

4. Theorizing About Technologies

On the issue of morality and moral theory, my approach is broadly eudaimonist, and specifically inspired by Aristotle's account of virtue ethics. I do not consider myself committed to everything Aristotle had to say on the subject. However, the idea of beginning ethical thinking by reflecting on what living well consists in seems to me a fine starting point, and particularly helpful when thinking about ethical issues involving new technologies. In order to decide what constitutes an ethical or unethical technology or use of same, it is often a good idea to start by thinking about what kinds of lives it enables or makes difficult, and how valuable these lives are, relative to the alternatives available. Furthermore, an Aristotelian approach has us answer this question by thinking about what kind of creature we are, and what it would mean for us to function well as that kind of thing, and these issues are quite relevant in the area of social technologies.

An approach informed by virtue ethics in the Aristotelian tradition can begin by observing that we are both social creatures, and innovators of technologies, and have been throughout history and across a wide range of cultures. The question then becomes, how can we innovate well? How can we use technology to build healthy rather than unhealthy social connections? How can we engage our reasoning and emotional capacities wisely and richly when creating and using social technologies?

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In Parts II and III, with a working understanding of the nature of friendship in hand, I go on to consider this question in two rapidly developing contexts: social robotics and social media. Each of these contexts involves a particular kind of issue posed by technologies that engage our social responses. And each presents a rich array of ethical problems and emerging empirical data for use in theorizing about said problems. Although these two areas do not exhaust the array of social technologies, by highlighting two important kinds of issues that can arise in social technologies, and providing resources for engaging with these issues via a context-sensitive, empirically informed virtue ethics, they allow me to demonstrate how we can exercise practical wisdom to make good decisions about social technologies.

4.1. *Social Robotics*

Part II focuses on robots, in particular so-called social robotics. This broad category encompasses a variety of robots designed to engage social responses, for a wide range of ends. It can include assistive robots that help senior citizens around the house, therapeutic robots that teach social skills to children with autism spectrum disorders, entertainment robots intended for the consumer market, companionate robots that provide social experiences to residents of geriatric care facilities, and most notoriously, sex robots. While delivering a detailed analysis of all of these applications would take at least a full book, here I look at several applications, following the thread of friendship begun in Part I. Robots that engage our social responses can appear to users as friends, and based on the details of cognitive ability and circumstance, different users can be more or less aware of the fact that these machines differ significantly from many other things that present a friendly appearance.

The appearance of friendship is, in fact, sometimes explicitly sought-after by some social roboticists. But in order to assess the relationship between appearance and reality here, we need an account of what friendship *really* is. Here, my initial results about the importance of interdependence of valuing creatures with rich lives quickly lead to the conclusion that current and near-future robots are not capable of real friendship. This leads me to probe its limits with a series of thought experiments about the importance of reality and appearances in friendship. In Chapter 4, I intervene on a debate over the ethical importance of this distinction by means of a thought experiment about the relative value of friendly appearances without friendship versus with. Intuitions from this case are connected to a claim by Aristotle that false friends are analogous to false coinage. But as I go on to explore various therapeutic and entertainment uses of social robotics in subsequent chapters, the analogy yields richer and more varied results than it might first appear, and the appearance of friendship turns out to be important to social animals in many ways, even as keeping track of the distinction remains important.

I end up concluding that while social robots present the appearance rather than the reality of friendship, this does not make them automatically immoral nor irrelevant to friendship. Instead, by investigating their use in three contexts (geriatric care, autism spectrum therapies, and consumer markets), I engage in sustained exploration of the varying roles that appearances of friendship can play in helping us to live well as social creatures, from exercising and developing social capacities to reinforcing unachievable expectations to deceiving the vulnerable to activating physically beneficial physiological responses. Just as toy money can help us to develop and exercise our financial skills in a variety of games, toy people, properly deployed, can help us exercise our social muscles. But just as care needs to be taken to avoid misleading people as to the value of fake currency, the same is true of friendship.

So, given the ontology of friendship developed in Part I, I head off a series of bad rationalizations for social robotic technologies, while using an ethical framework that focuses on the importance of cultivating and exercising social abilities to articulate beneficial uses of social robots. And given the importance of friendship to our ideals of good lives, I conclude that this gives us reason to clearly signal when something is merely an appearance of friendship, rather than a real instance of the phenomenon. Friendship requires connection between people, and with the current generation of robots there is nothing with which to connect.

4.2. *Social Media*

When it comes to social media, by contrast, connection between people is the very basis of these technologies. Here, the question is not about that with which one connects, but the quality of the connection. In Part III, I engage in a systematic examination of the ethical significance of these new modes of technologically mediated connection between people.

Technologically mediated connection between people is nothing new. Depending on how broadly one construes technology, this may begin with spoken and signed language itself, and almost certainly encompasses writing, telegraphs, and telephones. The rise of computers and the Internet has enabled email, videochat, and various social media platforms, and the introduction of smartphones has expanded the array from SMS messaging to Instagram, Snapchat, WhatsApp, and more.

Beginning with Socrates's complaints about the inadequacy of the written word in the *Phaedrus*, technological skeptics have worried about the impact of communication technologies on individuals and relationships. In particular, many working in the Aristotelian tradition have expressed concerns about mediated interactions, especially computer-mediated communication, by appealing to Aristotle's claim that the highest form of friendship involves people sharing lives. If people cannot live together, then what we are left with is mere communication, not rich relationship. I begin the third and final section of this book by taking on this objection.

In Chapter 8, I note that Aristotle's own account of living together is "sharing of conversation and thought, not sharing the same pasture" like cattle. Unless we want to take on the implausible conclusion that good friends must cohabit, we should take seriously the idea that friends can enjoy friendship without sharing every aspect of their lives. The question then becomes, what sorts of aspects *do* need to be shared for friendship, and which are possible via various forms of technological mediation?

Without going so far as to fully endorse Marshall McLuhan's famous dictum that "the medium is the message" (McLuhan 1964), it is uncontroversial that different communication channels can shape the messages communicated, and affect the quality of communications and relationships sustained by these communications thereby. So in this third section I explore different ways that various communication channels shape interactions between intimates. More sophisticated objections to technologically mediated communications often involve the relative impoverishment of these communication channels. One way they can be impoverished relative to in-person interaction is by reducing the available content. Consider, for example, the difference between written and spoken language: speech includes elements such as volume, intonation, and pace that are absent from written language. This is a challenge for message recipients, who are given less to work with than in face-to-face exchanges. Another way interaction can be impoverished is by reducing the impact of another's presence during communications, an impact to the speaker. Both of these phenomena seem to have the effect of introducing greater emotional distance between speakers, which in turn seems antithetical to the rich shared lives we associate with excellent friendship even when we reject a literal understanding of "shared living". Chapters 9 and 10 address these concerns specifically.

In Chapter 9, I evaluate asynchronous communication technologies. The ability to pick up and put down conversations at will—or to invisibly disengage from them or refuse to engage at all—seem most useful at establishing and enforcing boundaries between people, rather than enabling connection. But this assumes what turns out to be a false dichotomy between boundaries and the bonds of friendship. I conclude that a clearer account of what constitutes a good friendship has room for healthy boundaries between individuals, and that asynchronous communication technologies have an important role to play in helping people stay connected while enriching each other's lives via the pursuit of often very different activities. Thus, the ontology of friendship developed in Chapter 2 and the importance of distinguishing unification-as-blending from an organism account of shared identity via the collaboration of different parts of an interconnected whole yields substantive results about the ethical significance of communication technologies.

In Chapter 10, I tackle the issue of emotional engagement via technologically mediated communication. I argue that emoji and other non-verbal

elements of computer-mediated communication are gaining in popularity because they enrich the emotional impact of messages, an unsurprising claim. But less obviously, I conclude that because they allow for emotional responsiveness within the context of boundary-preserving asynchronous communication technologies, as was argued in Chapter 9, they open up new opportunities for emotional interdependence while respecting boundaries and supporting complementary differences. In addition, many of the graphics associated with communicating emotions have a playful, irreverent appearance that, along with distance between friends, can actually support *more* emotional intimacy by making it easier to accept, admit to, and discuss difficult emotions. At the same time, these technologies have the potential to enhance self-awareness via making explicit the choice of emotional signifiers, because these elements of communication are intentional rather than involuntary, as in facial expressions during in-person interactions.

The preceding chapters have established the positive potential of social media. But this positivity is clear-minded, not the wishful thinking associated with naive technological optimism. While I draw on empirical data to support my conclusions, my argument is not that positive implications can be found in every technologically mediated interaction. Rather, it is that relationships have the potential to be enriched by these technologies, given what we already have reason to believe about human beings and the friendships they enjoy. In drawing out the positive potential of social technologies currently enjoying rapid uptake, my aim is not to give a thumbs-up to each and every use. It is to articulate what we aspire to when we embrace these technologies. Like friendship itself, by clarifying the ideal, we may stand a better chance of hitting the target at which we aim, or at least getting closer to it. At the same time, these technologies can present problems for individuals and the relationships they value when used unwisely. So, the question becomes, how can we best navigate these technologies so as to enjoy the benefits while avoiding the risks, insofar as that is possible?

In Chapter 11, the final chapter of the volume, I take a step back from my previous tight focus on the nature of friendship and turn to more foundational features of virtue ethics and individual character. I argue that virtue ethics is the most promising prospect on offer as a source of appropriate guidance for individuals when it comes to ethical use of emerging communication technologies to support one's friendships. I begin with an observation from the anthropologist Stefana Broadbent (Broadbent 2012). She argues that there now exists a new kind of moral choice faced by users of information communication technologies. Unlike most communication channels throughout history, today many of our communication channels funnel through the same devices, especially our smartphones and laptops. Because each communication technology no longer requires specialized equipment and infrastructure, almost anyone

with a smartphone or laptop has, at least in principle, access to many of the same communication channels at any given time. Thus, the choice of which channel to use to communicate at any given time is no longer directly explicable in terms of simple pragmatics such as who has access to a telephone, or how long it takes for a letter to travel through the post. Rather, the choice becomes a moral one, and social norms are correspondingly emerging to offer guidance on this choice. For example, it is becoming widely accepted that it is immoral, all else being equal, to break up with a romantic partner via text message.

Although this suggests a proto-deontological approach, in which rules or principles offer uniform guidance across situations, I argue that ultimately, the details of a context make too much of a difference for these rules to be reliable, while the unpredictability of the effects (especially long-term effects) of emerging communication technologies make consequentialism an unreliable option, while virtue ethics is well-suited to take account of the kinds of variables in play and also highly relevant (as I argued in Chapter 3) to nurturing friendships. I then offer a detailed analysis of the ways that considerations about various virtues can inform choices about different sorts of communication channels.

5. Strategy for Navigating Ethical Issues

Throughout the volume, investigations into emerging social technologies uncover both risks and rewards, which become more clearly visible with a robust account of an often-vague concept—friendship—in hand. This account, in conjunction with the resources of virtue ethics broadly construed, as well as a commitment to reflecting on the value of social relations when technologies present ethical problems, can help us to successfully avoid the risks and maximize the rewards. This allows us to live good lives on our own terms, and to thrive as the creatures we are.

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Part I

Friendship