

On Friendship Between Online Equals

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Received: 5 July 2014 / Accepted: 12 November 2014 / Published online: 25 November 2014
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Abstract There is an ongoing debate about the value of virtual friendship. In contrast to previous authorships, this paper argues that virtual friendship can have independent value. It is argued that within an Aristotelian framework, some friendships that are perhaps impossible offline can exist online, i.e., some offline unequals can be online equals and thus form online friendships of independent value.

Keywords Virtual friendship · Social media · Philia · MMORPG

1 Introduction

Virtual friendship is defined here as a form of friendship that exists on the Internet and is seldom or never combined with offline interaction. Many believe that such friendship is not genuine. In “Unreal friends,” which seems to have become a classic within the contemporary debate, Dean Cocking and Steve Matthews argue that “within a purely virtual context, the establishment of close friendship is simply psychologically impossible” (2000, p. 224). Most recently, the debate has turned explicitly to discussions on the Aristotelian notion of friendship. Barbro Fröding and Martin Peterson claim that virtual friendship counts as a form of friendship but that, “from an Aristotelian point of view, virtual friendship is *less valuable* than other friendship relations” (Fröding and Peterson 2012, p. 202; emphasis added)—the reason being that social networking sites allow individuals to be selective about when, how, and for how long they interact, in a very different way from offline interaction. They suggest that both agents in the interaction may have less than full knowledge of each other and also that they are unaware of this lack of knowledge. Such agents can only admire parts of each other rather than the whole. The latter is required if the friendship is to be perfect.

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In another recent paper, McFall (2012, p. 221) argues that social networking can aid existing friendships, but that perfect friendship “can never be created and sustained entirely through technological mediation” (*sic.*) because technology-mediated communication “pertains the loss of direct perception of shared activity and corresponding moral development.”¹

We offer a defense for an alternative view, as we develop an account of how virtual friendships are not only possible from an Aristotelian perspective, but may have independent value. Some offline² unequals may be online equals, where “friendship between equals” is based on mutual recognition of good moral character. We propose that individuals who therefore would most certainly not become equals in the Aristotelian sense, had they met offline, can foster a genuine friendship online.

The article is structured as follows. Section 2 presents how our position relates to, and how it differs from previous contributions to the current debate over virtual friendship. Section 3 outlines the Aristotelian notion of friendship on which we base our argument and explain what it means to be equals. Section 4 challenges and refutes common arguments against the possibility of genuine online friendship. In particular, we focus on arguments which suggest that online interactions distort and omit information which is otherwise revealed in offline interactions, rendering online relationships incapable of being genuine. We argue that proponents of such views fail to appreciate the potential of social media. In Section 5, we develop and outline our alternative position: namely, that online friendship may be genuine; moreover, offline unequals may become equals online.

2 Setting the Debate

In the debate over virtual friendship, many have claimed a significant difference between friendship developed in the physical world and virtual friendship, e.g., “the internet environment emasculates and distorts the institution of friendship” (Cocking and Matthews 2000). Even if virtual friendships are thought to exhibit some of the characteristics of friendship, they are typically seen as less valuable or otherwise of a lower form than offline friendships. Briggie (2008, p. 71) argues forcefully against such views, claiming that computer-mediated communication (CMC) can “promote exceptionally strong friendships” and that the distance involved can foster deeper bonds: observation and communication from a distance can afford greater depth than observation and communication close up. Briggie argues that the deliberateness of written exchange in the virtual environment can reinforce the quality of friendship. Offline communication is often hasty and insincere; CMC allows for delays and thereby more

¹ In yet another recent article, Vallor (2012) explores the ethical significance of social networking in relation to friendship and the Aristotelian notion of the good life. Vallor argues that social networking can support and strengthen friendship when used to supplement offline interactions. While Vallor contributes to the discussion on Aristotelian friendship and social networking, she does not discuss whether virtual friendship can be genuine.

² We deliberately avoid the standard abbreviation IRL (“in real life”), it being far from obvious that what happens online is *not* in real life. What happens online *is* real: online interaction can have consequences for offline life and vice versa. Sharing information online may have legal consequences; sharing information about one’s workplace may impact one’s job; many couples first met online; adolescents’ online relationships may spill over into offline relationships (see Stern 2007, Boase and Wellman (2005), Hampton et al. (2009), Katz and Rice (2002), Raacke and Bonds-Raacke (2008) and Smith (2011)).

thought-through communication. Although believing that CMC can foster genuine friendships, Briggie holds that they may not do so because online exchanges often end up in shallow relationships.

Søraker (2012) discusses the value of virtual friendship and investigates whether online friendship is less conducive than offline friendship to subjective well-being. He offers no firm normative conclusions. He does argue, however, that from a purely philosophical perspective, it is difficult to conclude that virtual friendship is inferior to offline friendships. He also suggests several considerations that may be relevant when deliberating on the role virtual friendship ought to have in one's life. For instance, virtual friendships give the parties involved someone to share both positive and negative experiences with, as well, and that having a social network can make it easier to engage in and discover pleasurable experiences (2012, p. 15). Both these aspects can be facilitated by online interactions. We agree in many respects with Søraker on the potential value of virtual friendship to subjective well-being, as well as to some of the arguments he offers against the view that virtual friendships are inferior. However, we do argue that not only do virtual friendships have potential value of different sorts, but that virtual friendships can have independent value.

Munn (2012) offers yet another perspective on virtual friendship by focusing on engagement in shared activity in massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs). Munn denies the possibility of establishing genuine friendships via social media and earlier forms of CMC, i.e., newsgroups, chat rooms, email, and instant messaging. He maintains instead that the shared experience among MMORPG players is similar to the shared experience people find in the physical world, and hence that MMORPGs can foster real friendship.³ He claims that social media and earlier forms of CMC lack this shared experience because participants engage with the medium in which the activity takes place more than with each other.

In contributing to the debate over virtual friendship, we wish to apply the Aristotelian concept of friendship. Like Briggie, we believe that genuine online friendship is possible. Like Munn, we believe that shared experience is a large part of what makes this possible. However, our account also differs from these two. We argue that people who are not equals and so cannot be genuine friends in the physical world can be genuine friends and equals within a purely virtual context. "Friendship between equals" is a mutual exchange between individuals on equal footing. In Section 3, we explore the notion of friendship between equals and offer our interpretation of Aristotle on friendship.

3 The Aristotelian Notion of Friendship

For Aristotle, friendship, *philia*,⁴ is key to human happiness and flourishing (*eudaimonia*). According to him, well-being cannot be separated from friendship. To

³ Munn's main focus is World of Warcraft (WoW), even though certain other forms of virtual interaction such as Second Life might suit his argument better. These are effectively online meeting places that provide more of a virtual "hangout" than a game and so resemble offline life more than games do.

⁴ It is standard in the friendship literature to remark that the Greek concept of *philia* is much wider than the contemporary concept of friendship. If so, then—given the flourishing of online friendship—this may change. In any case, this is a different debate from the one we address here.

share one's life with friends is considered to be so important that a life in isolation is not even worth living: "without friends no one would choose to live, though he had all other goods" (NE, VIII, 1155a). Aristotle distinguishes three basic kinds of friendship, depending on what attracts friends to each other. Some are bound together by *mutual pleasure*, others by *mutual utility*. However, in a *perfect friendship*, what binds two people together is a mutually recognized relationship between adults of equal moral standing (NE, VIII, 1156a–b). As Copper (1998, p. 315) points out, perfect friendship and moral character are intimately intertwined for Aristotle: the central aspect of genuine friendship is "recognition of the other person's moral goodness." Genuine friends need not be as identical as possible, in all respects; what they *must* both have is good moral character. A true friend is not egoistically motivated but wants for the other what is good for the other, for the other's own sake. According to the Aristotelian model, the most important part of perfect friendship is mutual well-wishing and well-doing out of mutual concern. Cooper writes:

The central and basic kind of friendship, then, is friendship of character. Such friendships exists when two persons, having spent enough time together to know one another's character and to trust one another... Each, loving the other for his good qualities of character, wishes for him whatever is good, for his own sake (Cooper 1998: 320).

Spending time together, preferably engaging in *theoria*, i.e., shared intellectual activity, is essential to friendship. A true friend helps the other not merely for pleasure or personal advantage but because she sees her friend as *another self*. The Aristotelian view of friendship is sometimes called the "mirror view" because it calls on friends to hold up a mirror to each other (see McFalls 2012, p. 226). In the mirror, they see each other in ways that would not have been possible otherwise and are shown how to improve themselves as persons.

In summary, genuine friends, as well as being on equal footing, have a mutual recognition of their equality. According to Aristotle, when two persons recognize good moral character in one another and spend time together engaging in activities that exercise their virtues, they constitute a friendship.⁵ If these individuals are equally virtuous, their friendship is *perfect*. In contrast, unequal relationships where individuals do *not* mutually enjoy their shared activities and do not participate on an equal footing are not genuine. The individuals in such a friendship are not similar in their moral progress and development. This can be due to difference in which virtues they have acquired, or to the extent which they have acquired the virtues.

True friends admire the virtue or excellence of the other. True friendship is founded on the inner qualities of a person, while lesser forms of friendship are based on mutual pleasure or utility. Cocking and Matthews (2000) and Fröding and Peterson (2012) among others assert that only these lesser forms of friendship are possible online; the

⁵ The Aristotelian notion of virtue is complex and there is a lot to be said about it. Here, we only wish to indicate that virtue is a character trait which makes its owner a good and morally admirable agent. However, it is not reducible to reliable performance acts, but involves acting from certain reasons and having certain affections toward the object of the virtue. The virtuous person takes pleasure in virtuous actions and does them because they are virtuous. For a discussion on the Aristotelian notion of virtue, see Svensson 2006. Aristotle's discussion on virtue is found in the second book of the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

higher form of friendship necessarily involves the physical world. We turn now to the arguments in favor of this position.

4 Is Virtual Friendship Genuine Friendship?

Cocking and Matthews (2000) and Fröding and Peterson (2012) claim that virtual friendship is either unreal or of less value compared to offline friendships. Though their arguments are sometimes similar, we will treat them in turn.

Cocking and Matthews write (2000, p. 229) that “the interaction in the virtual case seriously distorts and omits the nature of the self that is presented and is, at least partly, created in close relationships.” The suggestion is that individuals taking part in virtual relations appear to be someone they are not: they withhold or manipulate crucial information about themselves, so that the relationship is not based on transparency and honesty. Virtual communication takes place from behind a veil, filtering out many reactions and other social cues. Cocking and Matthews put heavy weight on their claim that involuntary features of behavior are missing from online interaction: in particular, nonverbal cues such as vocal quality, facial expression, and bodily movements are performed without self-awareness. They see this as a substantial loss, given how much this part of a relationship—largely unknown to the agent, but observed by others—reveals about people. In “offline” mode, friends can judge each other’s character against this background of involuntary performances. Observation of these features alongside the more self-conscious ones is what provides the complete picture of a person’s moral character and otherwise reveals the person in all her aspects. In contrast, when these features are hidden from observation, people cannot gain full knowledge of each other. They cannot react to these features by making the other aware of them, thereby helping the other to improve.

Consider an example. Without realizing it, we tend to behave ostentatiously when we eat at restaurants. Knowing us, you realize that we act this way because crowded restaurants make us nervous; our nervousness makes us act in unnatural ways. Because you are our friend and wish us well, you try to calm us down. You may even attempt kindly to make us aware of our problems. Because we see you as a person of genuine good will toward us, we trust and follow your advice, thereby improving our personality and behavior. Our friends see both the good and bad in us. They can help shape us into better people. Cocking and Matthews’ concern about the online absence of unconscious cues and other behavioral features therefore seems to carry substantial weight.

We think it is correct that—as Cocking and Matthews claim—one cannot witness the *bodily* behavior of the people one interacts with online; inevitably, one misses parts of involuntary behavior.⁶ At the same time, we think they tend to overestimate this point and that online interaction reveals involuntary behavior as well. Brodsky writes (2011, p. 3): “a writer’s biography is in his twists of language.” One reveals a great deal

⁶ There are exceptions here: photos and online communication with web cameras, like Skype and Youtube, can (at least to some degree) reveal unintended bodily cues in the sense Cocking and Matthews have in mind. It is also possible that avatars in online games, as a form of replication of the embodied dimension of human communication, may give away bodily cues. For a discussion on how one may give away cues in virtual contexts, see (Soraker 2012, p. 214–5).

of oneself through one's online texts, from how and what one writes to the repeated patterns in one's language. Friends may well discover aspects of one's character that one is unaware of from unintended behavior like linguistic slips, grammar mistakes, punctuation, and emoticons. Another cue is *when* one is online. For example, if a person writes very little in the morning, and much during the evening, then there is a behavioral pattern the writer herself is not necessarily aware of. Yet another cue is *how* texting is done. Are the texts short and well formulated? Is the person more into commenting what other people write than sharing her own thoughts and ideas? And *what* topics does the person write about? In addition, character judgments can be based on how people act in online games: is there a tendency to cooperate, or to go solo? How does the person react when her team loses a battle, etc.? The choice of avatar in online games, such as *WoW* and *Second Life* can also give away information about the person's own characteristics (though not necessarily so). This is just a short list of some examples of virtual behavior that potentially reveal behavioral cues the agent is unaware of. Indeed, online behavior is of a different form than offline behavior. Yet, involuntary cues are revealed both offline and online.

Even though we hold that involuntary cues are revealed online, we do not fully disagree with Cocking and Matthews' view. We think that they are correct in their claim that there is a difference between online and offline communication in the sense that some aspects are easier to hide online, as for example details about one's physical health, marital status, and facial expressions. That there is such a distinction is, in fact, one of the reasons for why we hold that online interactions have a benefit over offline interactions: online relationships might assist individuals in expressing themselves in ways that might otherwise be impossible or at least very hard for them.⁷ When online, one can hide some aspects of oneself in order to more freely reveal others. For illustration, consider the following true story: Pete discusses a wide range of topics with Jade, including money, sex, work, and health. Pete has never met Jade and, indeed, does not want to meet her. Jade is an avatar in *Second Life*, where she knows Pete as Rolo. Pete is on cholesterol-lowering medication, but it is not having the desired effect. This worries him, but he fears to discuss it with his wife because he thinks she would fret too much about it. Instead, as Rolo, Pete finds he can discuss his health problems freely with Jade. Pete says that "Second Life gives me a better relationship than I have in real life. This is where I feel most myself. Jade accepts who I am" (quoted in Turkle 2011, p. 158). Turkle writes (2011, p. 159), "the ironies are apparent: an avatar who has never seen or spoken to him in person and to whom he appears in a body nothing like his own seems, to him, most accepting of his truest self".

On the face of it, an ironic reaction seems appropriate. But further reflection suggests that the possibility of Pete's acceptance by and understanding from Jade in a way he is not accepted and understood by his wife is not so farfetched. Precisely because of the virtual character of the relationship, Pete is—by his own admission—able to reveal things he finds difficult to talk about in his offline life, with people otherwise close to him. Pete does not withhold crucial information about himself, the opposite is true, it is precisely this form of personal information he chooses to share. It is not farfetched then to think that the relationship between Pete and Jade is based on the feeling of mutual respect and that they care for each other and both share personal information. If so, their

⁷ For a similar argumentation about virtual friendship, see Søraker 2012, p. 215).

relationship is not one of mere *pleasure*; rather, they want to feel psychologically whole and think that they can achieve this together. They are not interested in a shallow relation in the way critical voices describe online relationships. The contrary is the case. They want to share *more* of themselves than they do offline. Their relation is not of pure *utility* in the sense associated by lesser forms of friendships described by Aristotle. Pete and Jade do not take advantage of one another. Rather, this sort of relationship allows for them to develop their ability to express their true nature. On this interpretation, Pete and Jade feel that they are on an equal footing. That is why they are comfortable living a shared virtual life. It is precisely their inner qualities that bind them together and promote their moral development. Moving this online relationship offline would alter and likely even destroy it: it is the very distance provided by the online context and the lack of physical meetings that allow Pete and Jade to transcend limitations they experience in their offline lives. Pete's object of concern is clearly his physical condition—his sickness—a concern he fears would only be aggravated by his wife's worry should she learn about it. But the dynamics of the situation are not just a matter of Pete's relationship to his wife. They are more about Pete being able to approach others and himself in a manner he is fully comfortable with. Recall Pete's comment "This is where I feel most myself." In the everyday offline world, physical interaction may itself effectively be a filter distorting the relationship between the true natures of the persons involved. In certain contexts, it may hinder—not help—a friendship being established between two persons of equally good moral character. Clearly, people cannot mirror each other properly if they struggle to reveal their true selves.

Still, stories like the one about Pete and Jade are used to support the position that virtual friendships are less valuable compared to offline friendships. Consider now a story told by Fröding and Peterson (2012, p. 205), in which two individuals involved in an online relationship, Alice and Betty, chance to meet offline:

Alice and Betty met online and hit it off immediately... After a couple of months of intense communication, however, Alice begins to notice that Betty never seems to be available on Wednesday and Friday afternoons... The following Wednesday afternoon when Alice is in town she swings by the Community Pool for a swim... She spots Betty, immediately recognizing her from the pictures. Just as she is about to call out her name, she sees that Betty is not alone. She is with her physiotherapist, fully engaged in a session of rehab water gymnastics. It turns out that she suffers from impairment caused by a traffic accident... Regardless of what Alice would have made of the truth, the point is that she, unbeknownst to her, did not have access to all the relevant information. The judgment Alice reached about Betty was ill founded... This example shows that increased opportunities to withhold and distort information is in fact an element intrinsic to online life, and are as such morally problematic.

Like Cocking and Matthews, Fröding and Peterson claim (2012, p. 204) that "two persons that spend time together in real life are more likely to face a wider spectrum of different situations and, consequently, encounter a larger range of topics meriting contemplation." Again, we think this is questionable. Why suppose one has better

access to another's genuine identity⁸ offline? As we noted, it seems possible that face-to-face interactions might *hinder* access to another's genuine identity. Compare Pete and Jade's story to the story about Alice and Betty, in which a chance physical encounter reveals previously unknown facts about one of those involved. We propose an alternative reading of that story. Though interacting as equals online, Alice and Betty are revealed as unequals in the physical world. They probably would not have become friends in the Aristotelian sense had they first met offline. The potential for such discoveries as Alice's is probably one reason why Pete is unwilling to meet Jade: they might be revealed to be unequals offline. Why should one judge a physical relationship as automatically more genuine and more valuable than a virtual one? We will explore this point in greater detail when we develop our own position in Section 5; but first, we want to discuss further Fröding and Peterson's argument against the possibility of genuine virtual friendship in the Aristotelian sense.

We believe that the principle flaw running through Fröding and Peterson's arguments is a failure to recognize the potential of social media and online friendship. Similar to Cooking and Matthews, their concern about virtual relationships is that social media sites increase the ability of participants to be selective in their self-disclosures. Fröding and Peterson write (2012, p. 205):

Because social community sites allow friends to be selective as to the 'when', 'how' and 'for how long' aspects of interactions in a different way to real life, they can (even unintentionally) choose to communicate only in certain situations. The price to pay is that they [the friends] miss out on important, potentially problematic and complex, aspects of the friends' personality. Therefore, the agent ends up admiring and loving parts of the friend rather than the whole of her.

Fröding and Peterson make reference to the possibilities regarding how one depicts oneself online, which, they say, can give rise to two kinds of mistaken beliefs. First, one or both agents may end up with less than full knowledge about the other; second, each may be unaware of this. Unknown character traits are not necessarily undesirable; the mere fact that they are unknown raises problems from an Aristotelian perspective. However, the ability to control how one depicts oneself is hardly unique to social media or other online environments. It occurs in offline relationships in many different contexts. A person might well withhold information about herself and her past to her offline friends. Assume for instance that she is an ex-convict and is ashamed of this, and therefore has decided not to tell any new friends. Such a reaction seems to be normal: *most* offline relationships begin with selective information about when, how long, and how with respect to various things in the past. When two people start to become closer friends, they share more personal information. Why assume that similar behavior is impossible on the Web? It should come as no surprise that people *might* intentionally or unintentionally deceive each other online. They do so offline. All kinds of direct and indirect communication between people are potentially non-genuine. That is the risk one faces when involving oneself in relationships with other people, online or offline.

⁸ For the sake of argument, we suppose the existence of something like "genuine" identity without further consideration, fully aware that the precise nature of such an entity is highly controversial.

Perhaps the point is not so much about the possibilities available online; rather, social media communities make it easier for people to choose how they are depicted and so to deceive or be deceived by those with whom they interact online. If true, it would support the argument that friendships featuring frequent offline components are more valuable than strictly virtual friendships. However, whether it *is* the case depends largely on the sort of social media one means. Fröding and Peterson do not explicitly define “social media,” though they do mention Facebook, LinkedIn, and MSN as examples of online social communities. What they seem primarily to have in mind, however, is something like the traditional chat room; they do not consider other sorts of social media such as MMORPGs and Second Life (in which people interact through avatars inhabiting a virtual world). Unlike traditional chat rooms, these environments are not restricted to text messages.

We believe that both Cocking and Matthews, and Fröding and Peterson, overestimate the risk that people using social community sites may acquire mistaken beliefs. These researchers are clearly apprehensive about the use of social media as a way of seeing and presenting one’s whole self. Although, according to their own and related theories,⁹ online anonymity encourages users to manipulate information about themselves to present themselves as “ideal” persons, the opposite seems to be the case. Recent studies reveal that people are far more inclined to express their identity online without manipulating it. A study by Vazire and Gosling (2004) concluded that “identity claims—at least those presented in personal websites—do convey accurate information about what people are like,” while a study by Gosling et al. (2008) found that a Facebook profile generally is a good representation of the owner’s personality. In her 2013 article on online identity, van Dijck (van Dijck 2013, p. 212) argues that social media platforms actually “promote the ideology of having one transparent self or identity.” According to her view, it is in the platform owners’ interest that users present uniform personas because split identities disorganize the clarity and coherence of their data. In other words, not only is there a lack of will to invent selves, there is a lack of freedom to do this. As for virtual worlds, such as Second Life, Schechtman (2012) provides a compelling account of narrative identity from which we can understand the claims often made by Second Life users that their avatar is not a fictional character, but indeed part of their personal identity. The acts and experiences of an avatar are indeed the experiences and acts of the user. Acting in a fictional context, Schechtman suggests, can be a way of expressing something which is an authentic part of oneself (Schechtman 2012, p. 332). In that sense, an avatar is a real expression of oneself.

A related claim that is sometimes suggested is that people interacting online are easy prey to manipulation and deception—implying that people are unaware of how online information about a person is less comprehensive than offline. This underestimates the users of social networking sites. Certain things on these sites are known by most users, while others require experience and Internet savvy. The Internet novice might indeed believe it when a pop-up window congratulates her on being the one millionth visitor and tells her she has won a car. She may even give out her bank account number and account passwords when requested to do so. By contrast, someone who knows how to navigate online understands the relevant social codes, avoids obvious pitfalls, and

⁹ A critique similar to the one put forward by Fröding and Peterson is offered by Sherry Turkle in her *Alone Together: Why we Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (2011).

successfully identifies spam. Internet users who lack such knowledge may be stigmatized or otherwise disadvantaged in various ways: other users may avoid them, recommend others to avoid them, block them, or report that they are spamming; they may not receive the feedback they need so as to become educated. That aside, just as most drivers know the rules of the road, it seems that most Internet users know how the Internet works and have a sufficient degree of knowhow to protect themselves from deception. By saying this, we do not mean to claim that most internet users have detailed knowledge about how the background framework of social media platforms works. Most people probably know very little about the algorithms used by for example Facebook's EdgeRank and Google Social Search. What we do mean, on the other hand, is that most people are not as naïve when they interact online as critical voices often describe them. When online, most people are careful about how they reveal personal information and they do look out for viruses, unreliable internet users, biased systems, and the like.

5 Being Equals Online: Why Virtual Friendship Is Genuine Friendship

As has been emphasized already, the friendship that Aristotle values most highly is the *shared life* (Section 2). Liu (2010) stresses that human beings, according to Aristotle, are social by nature and that to *literally* share one's life with one's friends is crucial for virtue and well-being and for appreciating life as a whole. Indeed, Aristotle asserts that the mark of perfect friendship is *togetherness*: "For nothing is as proper to friends as living together" (*The Nicomachean Ethics*, 1157b, 19–20). Now, one might read "living together" as interaction *in person*; given the circumstances of his lifetime, it is reasonable to believe that this is what Aristotle had in mind. However, thanks to today's technology, physical presence is not the only option. We have multiple tools for caring and sharing, for togetherness and interaction with our friends. The possibility of being social is almost always present, and spending time with friends is easier than ever. We believe that virtual friendship is a way of actively sharing one's life. It is important to note, though, as Shannon Vallor does, that there is a difference between engaging in shared activity and sharing about lives (Vallor 2012, p. 196). Many forms of social networking, it seems, are indeed most often used as a way to maintain already existing friendships. But none of this excludes the fact that they also enable shared activity and perfect friendship between people who never meet offline. This is highly plausible if one turn one's attention to MMORPGs like World of Warcraft and virtual communities like Second Life. Shared activity, such as the engagement pursuit of a shared enterprise with shared commitments, is, as Munn (2012) points out, possible within this context. For instance, in Second Life, one can go to live concerts, night clubs, go ball dancing, or join a philosophy club, among many other things.¹⁰ The more possibilities there are, the more possibilities individuals have to engage in shared activities in a wide range of areas.

¹⁰ For those interested in reading more about the possible forms of interactions and events in which one can take part in Second Life, we recommend *Coming of Age in Second Life*, by Tom Boellstorff (2008). Another possibility, of course, is to create an account and avatar of one's own.

It is easy to understand why many scholars assume that because the Aristotelian idea of living together implies together in person, Aristotle would have seen online relationships as inferior. Online togetherness is, after all, non-physical. It is conceivable, however, that some virtual relationships are perfect from an Aristotelian perspective. If two people of good moral character think that the optimal way for them to engage with each other is through online forums, then why should this be problematic for Aristotle? In fact, the latter corresponds well to another view commonly attributed to Aristotle, namely the idea that the most excellent activity friends can engage in is *theoria*, i.e., pure speculation. If one wants to, one can focus on doing *theoria* together when online. How can one be so sure that Aristotle would have considered as inferior relationships that can foster *theoria* in such a pure sense as online relationships can? At the very least, one cannot know for sure that Aristotle would regard this form of shared activity as yielding less valuable friendship or less potential for mutual admiration, just because people do not meet physically. After all, Aristotle was very open-minded regarding how friends make sense of their shared life:

Whatever someone [regards as] his being, or the end for which he chooses to be alive, that is the activity he wishes to pursue in his friends company. Hence some friends drink together, others play dice, while others do gymnastics and go hunting, or do philosophy. They spend their days together on whichever pursuit in life they like most; for since they want to live with their friends, they share the actions in which they find their common life.” (NE, IX, 1172a, §2).

According to this quote, the most important thing in a relationship seems to be engagement in the activities that gives friends the sense of living together in the way they prefer. Some prefer hunting, others philosophy... Aristotle seems not to put weight on *where* friends do whatever they enjoy doing together. As we have already mentioned, today's online games and virtual worlds facilitate different forms of interactions, such as attending live concerts, engage in fantastic and adventurous quests, or participating in philosophy clubs. Hence, seeing as it is possible to engage online even in *theoria*, the highest sense of human activity according to Aristotle, why should he not have accepted such an online relation as a perfect friendship? As this technology is becoming more sophisticated, we can expect that virtual worlds will allow for even more shared activities.

The demand that people meet face to face reflects a positive bias toward the body, but, as we have emphasized earlier in this article, physical presence is no guarantee that people will not manipulate and withhold information. Furthermore, persons who feel constrained in social interactions by their bodies, like Betty in the story above, can reveal themselves online and be equal to those with whom they interact. Betty's problem is very likely that biases toward her physical features leads to the unlucky result that people she is on an equally good moral footing with fail to recognize the latter. One could feel tempted to say about the Alice and Betty story that the problem is not that Betty hides information about her impairment, as is suggested by Fröding and Peterson, but rather that Alice, when she learns about the impairment, believes that the lack of knowledge about Betty's impairment distorts their relationship as if Betty's moral character somehow springs from her impairment (Fröding and Peterson 2012).

Aristotle writes that “the friendship of decent people is decent, and increases the more they meet” (*The Nicomachean Ethics*, 1172a, §3, 10). Why suppose that this decency is or should be restricted to offline friendship? In Fröding and Peterson’s story about Alice and Betty, it might be argued that they are not genuine friends by Aristotelian standards because Betty is withholding from Alice the fact that she suffers from an impairment caused by a traffic accident. To Betty, this is a painful condition and it greatly restricts her from taking part in a normal social life. The story’s inventors, Fröding and Peterson, conclude from this “that opportunities to withhold or distort information are in fact an element intrinsic to online life, and is as such morally problematic.” However, it is feasible to conceive of this example differently, namely that online, Alice and Betty are indeed equals. Betty is not hindered by her impairment when she is interacting online; here, her morally good character shines through. This allows her to communicate more openly and wholeheartedly than is possible when she is interacting physically. Her communication and interaction online can go past prejudices or assumptions about her impairment. There seems no reason to suppose that the physical alternative offers the truer picture of Betty’s personhood than the virtual. No doubt she may be holding something back when she is online, but, on the other hand, there are things about her that she is able to express online that she is not able to express when she meets people physically. Thus, there are good reasons to believe that online Betty is able to offer a truer picture of her personhood than she could offline. Aristotle might have agreed with Fröding and Peterson that the withholding of information is damaging to the friendship, but equally he might entertain the possibility of genuine virtual friendship because of the strong opportunity to present herself it offers Betty.¹¹ It seems clear to us that in at least this case, it seems reasonable to say that Betty and Alice’s online friendship is genuine.

What is more, Betty and Alice are not equals offline, or at least not obviously so. Due to her impairment, Betty, in Fröding and Peterson’s story, is restricted from attending restaurants, bars, or other social venues where one is likely to meet friends. She is also embarrassed by her condition (2012, 205). It is easy to imagine that Betty might not have any genuine friends offline with whom she can have a shared activity of mutual exchange on an equal footing. It is apparent from this that her ability to enter such a friendship offline is very much limited—both due to how others see her, but also by how she sees herself. In contrast to Alice, Betty is not able to enter the sort of friendship which can result in a mutual recognition of good moral character. Thus, Betty will likely not be among those who will be an equal with Alice offline. When she is interacting online, however, Betty is not hindered by her impairment.¹² As we have already stated, online Betty can establish a morally good character, enabling her to become an equal with Alice. Online Betty may come to foster her moral character in her interaction with Alice—only here can they mirror each other on an equal footing. It is in this way, we believe that the virtual friendship between Alice and Betty has the

¹¹ For an illuminating study of this topic, we recommend Biggs “‘Charlotte’s Web:’ How one woman weaves positive relationships on the net” (2000).

¹² For the record, our claim is not that persons with impairments lack a good moral character offline. That is surely a false claim. Some people may have evolved a *better* moral character *because of* their impairment. What we do claim though is that *some* people, impaired or not, are hindered—by themselves and/or other people from establishing a good moral character offline, but are able to do so online. And may therefore establish character friendships they would not otherwise have had.

potential to become genuine in the Aristotelian sense, i.e., to result in a mutual recognition of good moral character.

In conclusion, we want to emphasize that we do not think that online interaction is entirely free of concerns, but neither are we as pessimistic about its impact on friendship as many authors have been. Virtual friendship, we hold, can indeed be genuine, and the possibilities of virtual realities and online interactions can be very promising for people who would otherwise not become friends if offline. Perhaps, this is not very common, but as we have argued in the above, it is not something which should be dismissed. In fact, it might become a common phenomenon as the use of social media and virtual realities increases: virtual friendships can be just as valuable as offline friendships, and opens up for a range of new possibilities.

Acknowledgments We wish to thank the following people for helpful and valuable comments during our work with this paper: Marcus Agnafors, Barbro Fröding, Fritz Gävertsson, Sven Ove Hansson, Asger Kirkeby-Hinrup, Joel Parthemore, Martin Peterson, Per Sandin, Andreas Engh Seland, and Eva Österberg. We also wish to thank the participants at the Research Seminars at The Philosophy Department, Lund University and the Division of Philosophy, Royal Institute of Technology, (KTH), where early drafts were presented. A special thank you to Ingvar Johansson whose comments we have benefited greatly from. We are also grateful for the useful feedback we received from the anonymous reviewers for *Philosophy & Technology*.

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