



# Are You a Temperate “Friend?”

## Discerning Social Media Friendship

### Aristotle on Temperance

Over the past several years writers have examined uses of social media through the lens of virtue ethics, in particular the virtue of friendship. However, what has been overlooked is how possession of other virtues, such as temperance, may influence how the virtue of friendship is apprehended. This is an important omission, given that social media is conducive to excessive use which may be categorized as intemperate. Given Aristotle’s assertion that “the same man, it might be said, is not best equipped by nature for all the virtues, so that he will have already acquired one when he has not yet acquired another” (VI.13, 1144b, 33-4), if one is intemperate (or unable to control her use of social media), then she may be unable to effectuate the virtue of friendship in and through her use of social media.

Social media overuse might clearly be categorized as excessive. But how may Aristotelian virtues be used to describe this excessiveness? Since it deals with behaviors that are either excessive or deficient, Aristotle’s account of temperance appears to be 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” (XI.3, 1103a, 25). Therefore, a temperate person maintaining a mean between excess and deficiency.

Accordingly, “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 not intemperate; she is instead 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 which is marked by regrets.

In contrast, one who is self-indulgent has acted upon a predisposition toward the bad reflective of ill-formed desires. Thus, 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 Aristotle believes they are acted upon by an individual who “cannot be cured” (VII.7, 1150a, 16-23).



### Aristotle on Friendship

Although he alludes to the possibility of one being a friend to oneself, for Aristotle friendship is essential to human sociability. What differentiates different 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 she is fun to be around. 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. Aristotle writes: “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, Aristotle writes, “wish well alike to each other *qua* 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 he 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).

### Temperate Friendship

Is one who lacks temperance in their 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 her use of social media (thereby responding to the pleasures such use affords) is merely using interactions with her 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, receiving “likes” on Facebook, having posts or updates shared, gaining new social media followers, or increasing one’s social capital.

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 sought for the satisfactions those interactions provide not for the good of the relationships themselves.

### Conclusion

Temperance requires of the human agent the ability to align reason with action. As it involves “wishing well” to another *qua* good, perfect friendship requires one to enter into a relationship with another as a good unto itself. Such action is emblematic of perfect friendship. Thus, one who desires to use social media to bring about these ends is acting virtuously. In contrast, one who desires to use social media not to service friendship *per se*, but in order to obtain the pleasures associated with social interactions as an end in themselves, is more properly serving friendships of utility or pleasure. Moreover, if this pursuit of pleasure cannot be controlled by the agent then he is acting intemperately or perhaps in a self-indulgent manner. Thus, perfect friendship, obtains when friendship itself is seen as the proximate end of social media use rather than the inordinate pursuit of pleasures that may result. To that end an intemperate agent cannot bring about the virtue of friendship until she affirms her desires in accordance with reason, including desires that are emblematic of temperance.