

ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS OF FRIENDSHIP BASED ON ANONYMITY: THE SOCIAL MEDIA EXAMPLE

Omobola Olufunto Badejo and Ndukaku Okorie

Abstract: In philosophical literature, one pertinent debate is the interrogation of ethical issues arising from a social activity, such as internet-based friendship. Social media has undoubtedly become an organised platform for making friends, but with inadequate analysis of its ethical implications. This is important because friendship is a relationship with significant moral implications. This paper will examine the ethical implications of issues such as anonymity, commitment, risk, empathy and shared history arising from social media friendship. The study will make use of both primary and secondary sources of data. The primary source will include Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. Secondary source include books, journal articles and the Internet. Data collected will be subjected to textual interpretation, conceptual analysis and philosophical argumentation. The paper will argue that genuine friendship requires a history of shared experience, which is absent in social media friendship. Hence, social media friendship cannot be known to be genuine. **Keywords:** Anonymity; Commitment; Empathy; Ethical Implications; Friendship; Risk; Shared Experience; Social Media.

Introduction

The aim of this study is to argue that it is difficult, if not impossible, to establish social media as a platform for genuine friendship. Friendship is a natural and social relationship that is important for a good life and the mental well-being of human beings. Humans are social beings that can hardly thrive without relating with each other and often on an intimate level. It has been proven that friendship helps to alleviate social anxiety disorder, increase self-esteem, decrease level of stress and improve communication skills. Tons of research emphasise the importance of friendship to physical and mental well-being, and argue that those that keep friends fare better than those who do not.¹ This explains why philosophy

1 Such research include Leon C. "Why do Friendship Matter for Survival?" (2005),

should be interested in a critical examination of friendship and locate it within an ethical framework.

From the antiquity, friendship is conceived to be mutual, physical and devoid of anonymity. For example, both Plato and Aristotle stressed the reciprocal or mutual nature of friendship.² Both Aristotle and Aquinas stress that friendship involves wishing and acting for the good of another for other's own sake.³

In contemporary times, internet based friendship or social media friendship has formed a vital part of how human beings make friends and this medium of making friends has come to stay. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat are internet platforms that thrive on online friendship. A lot has been done on friendship in philosophy, but philosophical discourse on social media friendship pales in significance. According to Shannon Vallor, there is no ethical theory that can properly serve as an ethical framework for social media friendship.⁴ Most social media based friendship has a major characteristic that 'real'⁵ friendship lack, and that is anonymity. Hence, there is an increase in ethical issues arising from social media friendship based on anonymous responsibility. This paper therefore examines the ethical implications of social media friendship based on anonymity.

To achieve this aim, the paper is divided into five sections. The

Brent L.J. "The Neuroethology of Friendship" (2014), Amati V. "Social Relations and Life Satisfaction: The Role of Friends" (2018) and Helliwell J.F. "Comparing the Happiness Effects of Real and On-Line friends." (2013) amongst others.

- 2 Plato, *Lysis*, 212 a-d. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, VIII. II. 3-4, v.5. See also Cicero, *De Amicitia*, ch.6. sec 20. And more recently, Sidgwick, Henry. *The Methods of Ethics*. New York: Dover, 1966. 257, Telfer, Elizabeth. "Friendship" Aristotelian Society Supp. Vol.12 (1970-71), 223-241.
- 3 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, VIII. II. 3. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae I*. See also Diogenes Laertius in *Greek and Roman Philosophy after Aristotle*, ed. Jason Saunders. New York: Macmillan, 1966. 132, and more recently Sidgwick, Henry. *The Methods of Ethics*. 258. Blum, Lawrence. *Friendship, Altruism and Morality*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980.
- 4 Vallor, Shannon. "Flourishing on Facebook: Virtue Friendship and New Social Media." *Ethics Inf Technol* 14:3 (2012): 185.
- 5 'Real' here does not mean that friendship based on social media is not real, but just to differentiate between friendships based on physical contact from that based on the internet.

first section gives a background to the discourse on friendship in philosophy. The second section will identify and briefly discuss some prominent ethical features of friendship. The third section attempts to define social media based friendship and the context in which the paper conceives it. The fourth section discusses some of the advantages and disadvantages of social media based friendship, but without any prejudice to social media friendship. The next section launched our arguments in the paper; that is, given the nature of social media based friendship, it is difficult to establish it as a genuine form of friendship, if at all it can be genuine. The paper concludes that given the lack of sufficient shared history and experience in social media based friendship, it is a more risky form of friendship and cannot be easily determined to be genuine.

History and Nature of Friendship in Philosophy

The discourse on friendship is not alien or new in philosophy. There is a significant body of work on the importance and ethical significance of friendship in philosophy. For example, Epicureans are of the view that the ultimate goal of human life is to achieve pleasure over pain. However, life has many impediments to this goal, but friendship is one of the avenues to overcome some of these impediments. Moreover, the best source of safety against evils of life is found in friendship.⁶ Epicurus identifies trust and security as the ethical traits of friendship. Epicurus also highlights the importance and depth of friendship when he argues that a friend should be able to die for another.⁷

Another ancient philosopher that engaged extensively in a discourse on friendship and its implications in philosophy is Aristotle. First, Aristotle defined man (human beings) as a political animal.⁸ This suggests that human beings are social beings that rely on relationships, such as friendship to thrive. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle defines friendship as a mutual feeling of goodwill between at least two people.⁹ Aristotle iden-

6 Rist, John. "Epicurus on Friendship." *Classical Philosophy*, 75:2 (1980):122.

7 Ibid. 129.

8 *Aristotle: Politics*. Translated by C.D.C. Reeve. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1998. P.4.

9 *The Nicomachean Ethics of Aristotle*. Translated by R.W. Browne. MDCCCLIII, Book VIII, p.202.

tifies three types of friendship. First, is friendship based on utility, and this occurs when two or more people become friends because of the benefits they can derive from each other. Second, is friendship based on qualities and this occurs when two or more people are drawn to each other because of the qualities they possess, such as beauty, wit, charm or intelligence. Third, is friendship based on goodness, which occurs when two or more people are drawn towards each other because of the goodness they can collectively achieve for the society and each other.¹⁰

It follows that friendship is a recognised ethical tool for individual and collective moral well-being in philosophy. Hence, there is a need to understand the nature of friendship, types of friendship, examine it within various ethical theories and emphasise the ethical implications.

According to Aristotle, the third type of friendship, that is friendship based on goodness, is the type of friendship that lasts. The other two types of friendship are accidental and will change over time, because what we need from each other may change over time, but goodness stands the test of time. Beauty, wit, charm and intelligence may fade, but only shared goodness will last.¹¹ The ethical traits of friendship therefore, according to Aristotle, are justice and goodness.¹²

Nicomachean Ethics serves as a convenient contemporary start off for discourse on the nature of friendship in philosophy. According to Dean Cocking and Jeanette Kennett, “Friendship is widely recognised to be a highly important moral good and standard philosophical accounts have sought to locate this good within a moral framework.”¹³ This implies that friendship has moral implication and dimension. According to Tara Smith, “Friendship is a relationship between two people marked by mutual esteem and affection, concern for other’s wellbeing, pleasure in the other’s company, and comparatively intimate levels of communications.”¹⁴

From this, it can be deduced that friendship involves companion-

10 *The Nicomachean Ethics of Aristotle*, pp.205-209.

11 *Ibid.* p. 208.

12 *Ibid.* pp. 208-209.

13 Dean Cocking and Jeanette Kennett. “Friendship and Moral Danger.” *The Journal of Philosophy*, 97:5 (2000): 278.

14 Smith, Tara. “Egoistic Friendship.” *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 42:4 (2005): 263.

ship. Although, there is hardly any literature in early philosophy that directly relates to the nature of social media friendship, the closest is Soren Kierkegaard on the media. Kierkegaard had a deep aversion for the press and media. According to him, “The daily press is the evil principle of the modern world, and time will only serve to disclose this fact with greater and greater clearness. The capacity of the newspaper for degeneration is sophisticatedly without limit, since it can always sink lower and lower in its choice of readers. At last it will stir up all those dregs of humanity which no state or government can control.”¹⁵ Kierkegaard gave four major arguments against the media, and Eguchi Satoshi did a good summary of the arguments thus:

(1) Journalism was run by a few talented persons and many incompetent ones, (2) journalism, in reality, had little part in Denmark’s liberalization movement in those days, but, in fact, the king Frederic IV had been a leading character, (3) to import foreign ideas into Denmark would only be a leap and would impede gradual development that should be desired, and (4) anonymity of newspaper articles would make people irresponsible and spoil the correctness of information.¹⁶

The most relevant to this discourse is Kierkegaard’s fourth argument that emphasised anonymity as one of the ills of the media. Although, this paper will not critically examine Kierkegaard’s position on the media, neither would it endorse or reject it, it will borrow the trait of anonymity that Kierkegaard recognised as a major characteristic of media based information and argue that it is similar to what happens in some cases where friendship is formed through social media platforms. In other words, the trait of anonymity that Kierkegaard identifies in the press is the same trait that characterises social media based friendship. It is important to note, however, that anonymity is just one trait of social media friendship; there are other ethical traits that can be identified in both ‘real’ friendship and online friendship.

15 Eguchi, Satoshi. “Kierkegaard’s Media Critic in the Age of Reflection.” International Kierkegaard Conference Kathorike Uniiversiteit Leuven Oct 13, 2002.

16 Eguchi, Satoshi. “Kierkegaard’s Media Critic in the Age of Reflection.” International Kierkegaard Conference Kathorike Uniiversiteit Leuven Oct 13, 2002.

Ethical traits of Friendship

Ethical traits of friendship include shared history, telepathy, empathy, patience, knowledge of self, generosity, tolerance, humour, risk, loyalty, encouragement, familiarity or anonymity and commitment. Friendship is natural, but has a lot of ethical traits packed into it. First is shared history. Shared history is when two people or more go through some experiences that afford them the opportunity to know things about themselves. Environment, work space, schools are some of the places where history is shared amongst people. The shared histories between people often determine whether they will become friends or not. If and when they become friends, it also determines how deep the friendship can go. Shared history is very important to any form of friendship. It often determines the level of commitment and trust that can be put into that friendship and also determines if the friendship will last or not.

Shared history leads to knowledge of the self. The history two or more people share, reveal things about them without telling the other parties expressly. Hence, for example, Mrs Cooper knows Mr Drew loves animals even without Mr Drew telling her so. Another example is, although causal friends, Ms Mary knows Ms Jane cannot be trusted with money given some things she gleaned from their shared experience in their work place.

Knowledge of the self subsequently determines the level of trust, commitment and loyalty involved in friendship. Ms Mary, for example, is not too committed or loyal to Ms Jane because of the knowledge she has of her. Telepathy, empathy, humour, generosity and familiarity develop as friendship deepens between two or more people. Hence, Mrs Cooper, for example, might be able to accurately predict some things about Mr Drew after some months or years of friendship with him; this is telepathy. Mr Drew is likely to feel sad when Mrs Cooper is sad; this is empathy. Some of these traits will be examined later in the paper, especially shared history.

Undeniably, every friendship comes with a level of risk. Some low and some high. A friend may share information with another friend that can put her at risk, but trust and familiarity allows the friends to overlook the risk and embrace the friendship. Some friends have the spare key to each other's apartments, know some sensitive details about each other and

literarily can ruin the life of the other person. Nevertheless, the level of empathy, shared history, knowledge of self, leads to trust that makes the seeming risk insignificant. Can the same be said of friendship based on social media platforms?

Social Media Based Friendship

Internet platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat amongst others are successful platforms for networking, advertising and communication. One of the uses of these platforms is that it enables users to communicate and make friends on a very wide platform, even across continents. It makes it easier for people to communicate with each other, even without seeing each other. Hence, it cannot be disputed that such an internet platform is an effective tool for a necessary form of relationship such as friendship. As mentioned in an earlier part of this paper, human beings are social beings that maximise their nature through relationships such as friendship. Social media has undoubtedly become a well-organised platform to actualise this natural side of human beings.

Statista.com reveals that social media is an effective platform for friendship and by 2021, there will be at least 3.09 billion users of social media platforms. This huge number of users suggests that a large number of friendships formed on social media platforms are based on anonymity. Hence, there is an urgent need to examine social media friendship within an ethical framework.

There are roughly three levels of social media based friendship. First is an already existing and established offline friendship that migrates to the internet to strengthen the relationship. This type of friendship is not based on the social media and is not based on anonymity. Second is friendship initiated on a social media platform, but evolves into a level of offline and physical friendship. This type of friendship, when it successfully evolves, is no longer a purely social media based friendship and will move from the level of anonymity to familiarity. Third, is friendship initiated and sustained on a social media platform. This type of social media friendship starts and stops on the social media platform and remains on the level of anonymity. Our argument in this paper applies strictly to this type of social media friendship.

To digress a bit, let us consider this incidence: in 2019, it was reported that a young female adult put up an online poll for her social media friends. The poll was on whether she should commit suicide or not. The woman said if the poll suggests that majority of her friends wants her to commit suicide she would go ahead and do so. When voting ended on her poll, majority of her social media friends voted in favour of suicide and she eventually committed suicide. Hence, on the one hand, there is a disadvantage to social media based friendship. On the other hand, in the same 2019, it is recorded that not less than hundreds of millions of people have enjoyed easy and instant communication, connected to people all over the world positively, job and business opportunities, advertisement of products on a wider platform, fun and some sort of psychological satisfaction, all through the social media, these are some of the advantages of social media based friendship.

It then shows there are both advantages and disadvantages of making friends online. Although some of these advantages and disadvantages will be briefly outlined, the focus of the paper is not on the advantages and disadvantages of social media based friendship, neither is it interested in pitching social media based friendship against other forms of friendship. The purpose for outlining these advantages and disadvantages is to create a background for the ethical implications of social media friendship.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Social Media Based Friendship

One advantage of social media based friendship is that it is largely convenient. First, it reduces or in several cases eliminates the stress of physical contact. If we are friends via a social media platform, we do not need to have any prior or any physical contact at all to remain friends. Social media friends can stay in touch frequently without phone calls or physical contact. This explains why many ‘real’ friends complement their friendship with social media platforms. Even some friends who have frequent physical contact are also friends on social media platforms, to enjoy the convenience that social media friendship offers.

Another aspect of the convenience of social media friendship is that it allows a friend to share his or her life with many friends at the same

time. For example, I have a message I intend to share with friends, with just one message and a click I can reach as many friends as possible at almost the same time. A third advantage of this convenience is that it allows one person to have several friends at the same time. While, a person may be more reluctant to make many friends off social media, social media makes it easier for people to do so.

Another huge advantage of social media based friendship is that it allows some psychological satisfaction. There are instances where a person may not want to share his or her burdens with the familiar faces around, but wants to share. Such a person can choose a social media friend for unburdening. This can give the person the psychological relief needed at that moment. This is good for mental health as it allows for offloading. There are cases where suicidal people have reached out to anonymous friends online, and the anonymous friends were able to convince them to get help rather than commit suicide. Some have received huge financial help from anonymous online friends, yet would have been embarrassed to seek the financial help from 'real' friends. There is a way that anonymity allows for vulnerability that familiarity may not afford one.

Another advantage of social media based friendship is increased networking, more job and business opportunities. People who have online friends have often enjoyed more job opportunities than those who do not have online friends. People who have online friends and who sell goods and services have enjoyed more patronage than those who do not. They also enjoy the opportunity to make more people aware of their skills or the goods and services they sell. So social media based friendship allows for wider networking and opportunities.

Social media based friendship also has its disadvantages and they can range from mild to grave. Anonymous social media friends have defrauded many people of their life earnings. The anonymity feature of social based friendship can be deceptive. Hence, in many cases, people steal the identities of others to perpetrate fraud online. People have suffered depression and some pushed into suicide after being defrauded by social media friends. This is one grave disadvantage of social media friendship based on anonymity. In 2017, a story of an 80-year-old man defrauded of 2 million dollars by a social media friend surfaced on YouTube. The 'friend' used a false identity and defrauded an old man suffering from dementia

of all he had.

Another disadvantage of social media based friendship is also linked to its anonymity. A social media friend builds trust without any prior tangible knowledge of the online friend. There is also no shared history between social media friends; hence, the risk involved is huge. There are cases where social media based friendship has led to kidnapping, injuries and even death. In 2012, a Nigerian woman was invited to Lagos by some online friends to help enhance her business. She was lodged in a hotel, drugged, beaten up, robbed, raped and eventually strangled.

Although, this risk is not peculiar to social media based friendship, as there are reports of 'real' friends who turned on their friends and killed them, it is worse with social media based friendship because there is no genuine shared history between the friends. Shared history can give an insight into the personality of a friend, and can help determine the level the friendship can get to. If the Nigerian woman had prior shared history with these social media friends, it is not likely she would trust them enough to transact business with them in private.

This is because those who had a shared history with these friends off social media, confirmed they were shady and could not be trusted. If she had this information, she would have been wary of getting close to them. It is difficult to access the character of an anonymous friend and one cannot be sure if an online friend has empathy or not. In other words, the knowledge of the self is absent from social media friendship based on anonymity and this increases the risk involved in this type of social media friendship.

Another disadvantage of social media friendship is the risk of scandals and losing one's privacy. One advantage of social media friendship mentioned earlier is that it allows for psychological satisfaction. However, there are cases in which things can go sour between online friends, or just for the pleasure of it, an online friend can share secrets of another online friend. Due to the nature of the internet, online scandals have the tendency of reaching more people than offline scandals. Hence, a psychological relief may later turn into a nightmare for some social media friends. There are cases where an online friend will share chats, pictures and voice notes shared privately, that the other friend would have preferred not to be made public.

Given the background and nature of social media based friendship especially that based on anonymity and the disadvantages and advantages of social media friendship, what then are the ethical implications of social media based friendship? We now turn the ethical implications of friendship based on anonymity, the social media example.

Ethical Implications of Friendship: The Arguments

In Elizabeth Telfer's *Friendship*¹⁷, her opening statement is that friendships are among the most important constituents of a worthwhile life; hence, she wants to examine what friendship is, how morality bears on it and why it is thought to be important. In line with this declaration, in this section, we undertake to examine the ethical implications of social media friendship. The business of this section will be to propose some arguments justifying that social media friendships leads to some dangerous ethical implications that make it difficult, if not impossible to ascertain its genuineness. As has been said earlier, there are several benefits of social media friendships or networking ranging from easy connectivity, fast sharing and dissemination of information, regular contact, and so on. For example, it is easier for those who tend to be awkward in social situations to meet and connect through social networks.

Social media friends are those people you interact with often, yet may never interact with beyond the internet. The central argument of this paper is that it is difficult to know when social media friendship is genuine. Moreover, if at all it can be genuine, it is still difficult (if not impossible) to establish satisfactorily. An attempt to establish this view will be pursued with three arguments: argument on shared history and experience; argument on friendship as a vehicle for moral and character development, self-examination and moral improvement; and argument on self-understanding, realization and human flourishing. We now turn to the first argument; shared history and experience.

Shared History and Experience

For a genuine friendship, there must be shared history and experi-

17 Elizabeth Telfer, "Friendship", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, New Series, Vol.71 (1970-1971), p.223

ence. What do we mean by this? Is it all genuine friendships that involve common history and experience? Does it imply that genuine friendship is not possible without a common history and experience? According to John Rusen:

History is... an interpretation of past actuality via a conception of temporal change that encompasses past, present, and the expectation of future events... (moulding) moral values into a body of time¹⁸.

History is an account of the past, applied in the present and projected into the future. Friendship is a phenomenon that exhibits this timelines by building on the past experience. This past experience is brought into the present and forecasted into the future. A genuine friendship endures through these interlocking parts of time. A genuine friendship is a product of history and experience that takes place in time and space. It is not all friendships that involve shared history and experience but it is difficult for a friendship to be genuine without shared history and experience. Whether a friendship is genuine or not is easier to establish through shared history and experience.

Shared history and experience do not only define genuine friendship, it facilitates and reinforces genuine friendship. For example, friends that grows up together, have their childhood experiences; such as schooling, are likely to understand each other better unlike a friendship that starts and continue on social media. Having similar experiences in life does not only lead to better understanding of each other. In fact, our understanding of the past shapes our sense of the present and the future. This is what Seixas Peter described as “historical consciousness”¹⁹. This historical consciousness facilitates genuine friendship. Genuine friendship is a relationship that grows out of common history and the interpretation of the experiences of time in human life. On this condition, it will be difficult to establish a social media friendship to be genuine.

A social media friendship in this regard is strictly a friendship that started and continues on social media. In this case, the individuals have

18 John Rusen, “Historical Consciousness”, in Seixas Peter (ed.) *Theorizing Historical Consciousness*, University of Toronto Press, 2004, p. 67

19 Peter Seixas, *Theorizing Historical Consciousness* (ed.), University of Toronto Press, 2004.

never met in life and probably will never have physical contact. The issue of shared history and experience does not even arise; let alone interpreting their experiences of life, which they never had together. If shared history and experience are necessary in establishing genuine friendship (as we think), then social media friendship becoming a genuine friendship is doomed to fail based on the lack of shared history.

As we understand social media friendship, it is possible for social media friends to know more about us because we are probably in contact that is more regular. Social media friends are people we probably share information with, share ideas with, share stories and emotions. There is no doubt that these are forms of communication but difficult to establish genuine friendship. It is so because the shared information, ideas, stories and emotions may be all fake. In this regard, it has not in any way helped us to establish a genuine relationship. To worsen it, social media friendship easily leads to the vanishing act syndrome. Social media friends easily disappear or put each other offline once things get difficult or go wrong. An online friend can disappear overnight, whereas a genuine friend is someone who understands your past, believes in your future and accepts you just the way you are. Not abandoning or forsaking you when things get difficult or go wrong is an element of genuine friendship.

The reason why online friends would share fake information, ideas, stories and emotions on social media is that the “supposed” friends do not know them and probably would never meet them. In fact, on social media, people fake virtually everything for their own selfish reasons. They pretend to be what they are not, even deceive about their name, sex, age and location. With this, a sense and feeling of closeness and intimacy will be created when in the actual sense, it does not really exist. It does not really exist because everything built on fake name, sex and others is as fake as its foundation. This perpetuates and enhances unreliable information, hence very difficult to serve as a platform for genuine and true friendship, whereas genuine friendship is understood to involve intimate sharing of feelings at a much deeper level. It also involves a mutually shared understanding of each other’s perspectives. Social media friendship fails in this regard when it should be an avenue for protection and confidence.

Friendship as a Vehicle for Moral and Character Development, Self-Examination and Moral Improvement

Friendship, no doubt is an avenue for moral development and character cultivation. Two or more individuals grow up together to attract each other through behaviour, habit and character formation. Characters are strong sources of influence, especially between or among friends. We are of the view that social media friendship easily create and enable intimacy. However, this intimacy, in most cases lacks commitment, and even when it seems there is commitment, we might not be able to ascertain or establish it. It only leads people to develop what seem like deep connections but are actually precarious and without depth. This portends serious ethical danger because a seeming intimacy that lacks commitment is not likely to lead to genuine friendship. Genuine friendship is not devoid of deep commitment.

Social media friendship lacks the ethical credentials of genuine moral commitment; hence, it is not likely it will lead to genuine friendship. Good friends are supposed to cherish and admire each other's character. They are supposed to serve simply as each other's role model and ethical stewards in terms of moral cultivation, character building and moral development. Human nature is such that, without moral self-examination, without an awareness of one's true condition or moral status, no need is felt for moral self-improvement. Genuine friends are supposed to emulate each other because "each is inspired to develop himself more completely as he sees admirable qualities... manifest in another who he esteems.... Character Friends...are eminently suited as models to be emulated"²⁰. Social media friendship fails in this regard. It fails because there is no way friends could learn and emulate each other online without physical contact and observation. After all, we learn how to do by doing and we learn how to do by watching, observing and making trials.

According to Melden²¹ and Richards²² Moral development can be seen as the formation of a "moral orientation". Melden, in particular maintains that:

20 Nancy Sherman, "Aristotle on the Shared Life" in Neera K. Badhwar, ed., *Friendship: A Philosophical Reader*, Ithaca: Cornell, 1993, pp. 91-107.

21 Melden A.S., *Rights and Persons*, Berkely: University of California Press, 1977.

22 Richards, D.A.J., *Reasons for Action*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1971.

It is an orientation in which we exhibit appropriate sensibilities in thought, feeling and action towards others out of a concern for them as we go about in our ways that affect their and our own interests. It is this moral concern for others as persons, rather than principles and priority rules, which provides us with a rationale for resolving many or most of the moral conflicts that arise, easily and without hesitation.²³

Moral development and improvement focuses on the emergence, change, and understanding of morality from infancy through adulthood. Morality develops across lifetime and is largely influenced an individual's experiences and their behavior when faced with moral issues through different periods: both physical and cognitive development. In this regard, morality concerns an individual's growing sense and meaning of what is right or wrong. It is precisely because of this reason that young children have different moral judgment and character than that of a grown adult.

Genuine friendship is a source of individual's moral development, growth and improvement. It should be a source of encouragement. Genuine friendship encourages moral understanding, mutual respect and tolerance. Mutual respect and tolerance are virtues that genuine friendship should cultivate and nurture, as well. Given the nature of social media, it becomes impossible to establish how a friendship that started on social media, strictly restricted to social media could cultivate and nurture such virtues as tolerance and mutual respect. A good friend is a moral exemplar, worthy of emulation. Social media interaction and transaction is largely based on assumption and imagination of what each friend tells each other. There is no mutual trust on social media friendship.

Tolerance and mutual respect are not virtues that can be cultivated and nurtured without mutual trust. However, since social media friendship lacks the needed mutual trust, consequently, we are of the view that it cannot establish tolerance and mutual respect as virtues that accrues from genuine friendship. The implication of this is that since social media friendship lacks the capacity to foster tolerance and mutual respect as ingredients of genuine friendship, it follows that it cannot be a source of genuine friendship. This is because tolerance and mutual respect are part of what characterizes genuine relationship. Unfortunately, they are lack-

23 Melden, A.S., *Rights and Persons*, p. 18

ing in social media friendship.

In ethics, the study of morality and moral theories is moulded by an intricately linked set of tangential issues, of which each has effect on moral growth and development. Genuine friendship, in general and peer groups, in particular play an indisputable role in helping to shape the path of moral development in children and adolescents. In philosophical and psychological literatures, a link between friendship and moral development is identified as essential. This owes to the fact that genuine friendship does not only act as a positive force in fostering moral development, it provide a background upon which children and adults can formulate and frame their moral sensibilities, rules and values. We are of the view that social media friendship is not capable of doing this.

Morality generally is treated as an intrapersonal phenomenon or enterprise studied by observing the principles used in resolving moral dilemma. We strongly believe that social media is not capable of resolving any moral dilemma, hence cannot be a source of genuine friendship. It cannot be a source of genuine friendship because it does not lead to the observation of the moral behaviour of an online friend vis-à-vis the moral principles that guide his or her life. Since this is lacking in social media friendship, it becomes difficult how it can be of help not only in resolving moral dilemmas but also in assisting to produce a morally virtuous individual through moral emulation and mentorship.

Conversely, in philosophical and psychological literatures, friendship is typically viewed as an interpersonal relationship, studied according to patterns of interactions. At its fundamental level, friendship mirrors any social relationship, as it is defined and constrained by certain moral parameters. Only genuine friendship is capable of being defined and restrained by certain moral parameters. One of the problems of social media friendship is that it is not constrained or regulated by any moral standard or parameter. That is why friends can go to the level of uploading and displaying nude pictures. Genuine friendship does not lead to such immoral actions that go into public space unregulated. After all, friendship serves, and should serve an important function as an arena in which moral principles and virtues are learned, tested and refined.

Self-Understanding, Realisation and Human Flourishing

According to John Kleinig and Nicholas G. Evans in *Human Flourishing, Human Dignity, and Human Rights*,²⁴ the metaphor of human flourishing has ancient roots. The biblical writers often appeal to the growth, flourishing, and demise of plants in their characterization of the human life cycle, and there is an important telic dimension to Aristotle's ethics in which *eudaimonia* (variously translated as flourishing, well-being, self-fulfilment, or happiness) is seen as end of human life. Every human life is presumed to have a purpose. Every human being aspires to live to its purpose. The actualization of the purpose of the human life is often characterized as self-fulfilment and flourishing. Friendship is one of the necessary elements or ingredients that enhance the realization of a fulfilled and flourished human life.

Genuine friendship is and should be a source of human self-understanding and flourishing. Friendship contributes significantly to each other's self-understanding because of beliefs they have built and developed over the years. It is through the understanding of each other that also give them the opportunity of understanding each other's good. This understanding of each other's good leads to caring, showing concern and sympathizing with each other. In the words of Lawrence Blum:

The caring within a friendship is built up on a basis of knowledge, trust and intimacy. One understands one's friend's good through knowing him well, much better than one knows non-friends, hence much better and more deeply than one knows their good. One is more sensitive to one's friend's needs and wants than one is to non-friends. In genuine friendship one comes to have a close identification with the good of the other person, an occurrence which is generally much rarer and at a much shallower level with other people.²⁵

Blum's point above buttresses the argument that self-understanding promotes, enhances true and genuine friendship and invariably establish that social media friendship is difficult to be characterized as a true and

24 John Kleinig and Nicholas G. Evans, "Human Flourishing, Human Dignity, and Human Rights", *Law and Philosophy*, Vol. 32, No. 5 (September, 2013), p. 540

25 Lawrence A. Blum, *Friendship, Altruism and Morality*, New York: Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, 1980, p. 69

genuine friendship. The attributes like knowing each other intimately, understanding each other's good is difficult, if not impossible to identify in social media friendship.

When friends understand each other, they will be able to correct and morally judge each other sincerely. They will tell each other the truth because they understand each other. However, friends that lack self-understanding of each other will only tolerate and be indifferent to each other's moral failings. This will lead to blind loyalty and sycophancy. Blind loyalty and sycophancy are not true elements of genuine friendship. This is what is mostly prevalent on internet-based (social media) friendship. It has dangerous ethical implication.

The obvious implication is that it creates dangerous illusions of those individuals involved in such relationship. The individuals in such relationship are not what they seem. They create two personalities about themselves; what they are and what they seem. This is a moral failure. They have failed each other. Failing each other in this regard implies failing each other morally and failing each other morally amounts to failing each other as friends. In fact, they have led each other astray, whereas "a true and good friendship cannot lead us astray, for its status as a true and good friendship depends upon its moral qualities"²⁶. There have been instances of internet-based friendship leading friends astray. Internet-based friendship may not foster true and genuine relationship. Social media friendships lack the needed understanding of body language, eye contact and physical contact. All these make friendship more real and genuine. Nevertheless, they are conspicuously lacking in social media forms of friendship.

Social media friendship lacks the necessary and required understanding of body language, eye and physical contact, which are some necessary elements that make friendship more real and genuine. In real life friendship, we experience conflicts and resolve them. This is possible by physical contact and fellow feeling as well as the desire to satisfy each other's emotional need. However, there is a great danger or risk of relying on social media friends during emotional need. The reason is that you cannot be sure, when a social media friend is genuinely in emotional need.

26 Dean Cocking and Jeanette Kennette, *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 97, No. 5 (May 2000), p. 281.

For example, I can present a life of sickness to a friend on social media portraying myself to be critically ill and going through excruciating pain when in the actual sense, I am healthy. In such a situation, am I in genuine emotional need? The response is obviously in the negative. It is in the negative but it is possible for my social media friends to care. They may feel so because they understand what it means to be in a sick bed, going through serious pain. It is also possible for them not to believe the information I have given them online about my fake ill health. In either case, they have not been able to ascertain the true and genuine situation. If they believe in my fake ill health and feel for me that will amount to fake since it is directed at my fake emotional need. An unwarranted and non-existent emotional need is as fake as the fake friendship itself.

Contrarily, if it turns out that they laugh and make mockery of me, the truth remains that they are not sure. They are only doing so based on their own volition whereas at my own end I will be having emotional satisfaction based on their goodwill message. We have ended up deceiving each other. Social media friendship encourages this successfully most times and this is one of the reasons why it is difficult for such to lead to genuine and true friendship.

Furthermore, genuine love is difficult to ascertain in a social media relationship. It is very difficult to establish when an online or social media friendship involves deep love and consequently confiding in each other will be difficult. There is no bond of mutual trust between social media friends. Saying that there is no genuine friendship without deep love and mutual trust is stating the obvious. If it is possible to have deep love and mutual trust on social media friendship, we cannot even tell. We cannot justify social media friendship to be genuine based on what we cannot tell.

Conclusion

The task undertaken in this paper has been to argue that friendship based on social media is difficult, if not impossible to establish that it is genuine. First, the paper examined the background to the discourse on friendship in philosophy; identified and briefly discussed some prominent ethical features of friendship. An attempt to define social media based friendship was carried out. This was followed by the examination of

some strengths and challenges of social media based friendship and then the nature of social media friendship. The study found that the major difference between social media friendship and other forms of friendship is the lack of shared history and experience.

The argument of this paper has been that social media based friendship is associated with some ethical or moral dangers. Such moral dangers make it difficult, if not impossible, to establish its genuineness: and if at all it would be genuine, we are not likely to be able to ascertain. We used three arguments, which are not mutually exclusive, to establish this. With these three arguments; argument on shared history and experience, argument on friendship as a vehicle for moral character development, self-examination and moral improvement, and argument on self-understanding, realisation and human flourishing, we argue that social media friendship has some dangerous ethical implications, which makes it difficult to establish its genuineness. The paper concludes that given the lack of sufficient shared history and experience in social media based friendship, it is a more risky form of friendship and cannot be easily determined to be genuine.

Omobola Olufunto Badejo, Ph.D., is a lecturer 1 in the Department of Philosophy, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria. She specialises in Metaphysics, Logic and African Philosophy.

olufunto@oauife.edu.ng

+2348034976201

Ndukaku Okorie, Ph.D., is a lecturer 1 in the Department of Philosophy, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria. He specialises in Ethics and Social and Political Philosophy.

ncokorie@oauife.edu.ng

+2348038338387.

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