Abstract: It has become quite common for people to develop 'personal' relationships nowadays, exclusively via extensive correspondence across the Net. Friendships, even romantic love relationships, are apparently, flourishing. But what kind of relations really are possible in this way? In this paper, we focus on the case of close friendship. There are various important markers that identify a relationship as one of close friendship. One will have, for instance, strong affection for the other, a disposition to act for their well-being and a desire for shared experiences. Now obviously, while all these features of friendship can gain some expression through extensive correspondence on the Net, such expression is necessarily limited ' you cannot, e.g., physically embrace the other, or go on a picnic together. The issue we want to address here however, is whether there might be distinctive and important influences on the structure of interaction undertaken on the Net, that affect the kind of identity 'Net-friends' can develop in relation to one another. In the normal case, one develops a close friendship, and in doing so, one's identity, in part, is shaped by the friendship. To some extent, through extensive shared experience, one comes to see aspects of the world (and of oneself) through the eyes of one's friend and so, in part, one's identity develops in an importantly relational way, i.e., as the product of one's relation with the close friend. In our view, however, on account of the limits of, and /or the kind of, shared contact and experience one can have with another via correspondence on the Net, there are significant structural barriers to developing the sort of relational identity that is a feature of close friendship. In arguing our case here, and by using the case of Net 'friendship' as our foil, we aim to shed light on the nature and importance of certain sorts of self-expression and relational interaction found in close friendship.
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Unreal Friends[*]

ABSTRACT

It has become quite common for people to develop 'personal' relationships nowadays, exclusively via extensive correspondence across the Net. Friendships, even romantic love relationships, are apparently, flourishing. But what kind of relations really are possible in this way? In this paper, we focus on the case of close friendship. There are various important markers that identify a relationship as one of close friendship. One will have, for instance, strong affection for the other, a disposition to act for their well-being and a desire for shared experiences. Now obviously, while all these features of friendship can gain some expression through extensive correspondence on the Net, such expression is necessarily limited – you cannot, e.g., physically embrace the other, or go on a picnic together. The issue we want to address here however, is whether there might be distinctive and important influences on the structure of interaction undertaken on the Net, that affect the kind of identity "Net-friends" can develop in relation to one another. In the normal case, one develops a close friendship, and in doing so, one's identity, in part, is shaped by the friendship. To some extent, through extensive shared experience, one comes to see aspects of the world (and of oneself) through the eyes of one's friend and so, in part, one's identity develops in an importantly relational way, i.e., as the product of one's relation with the close friend. In our view, however, on account of the limits of, and /or the kind of, shared contact and experience one can have with another via correspondence on the Net, there are significant structural barriers to developing the sort of relational identity that is a feature of close friendship. In arguing our case here, and by using the case of Net "friendship" as our foil, we aim to shed light on the nature and importance of certain sorts of self-expression and relational interaction found in close friendship.

Introduction

It is a familiar, but nevertheless striking fact, that contextual factors have a strong bearing on the content and nature of our communications with one another. There are economic, cultural, institutional, technological, and even seemingly quite trivial factors – such as the amount of time one has to communicate – which influence the content and nature of communication. Our interest here, however, is on the effects the context of communication has on the nature of our relationships, and the nature of the self within those relationships. To take the first point, our relationships with others are clearly directly affected in virtue of the kinds of communication permitted by contextual influences; second, if we believe our relationships with others partially determine what we are like as persons, then we are committed to the idea that the context of communication has indirect, though potentially quite marked, effects on the nature of ourselves, insofar as this nature is a product of those relationships.

We apply these general thoughts to the case of the internet, and to the effects it has, and potentially could have, on the development of personal relationships there. In particular, we are interested in

whether close friendships are possible through text-based internet contact alone.[1] Our thesis has two parts, a descriptive and a normative component: first, we observe, and provide an explanation for why it is, that the internet affects the nature of our alleged friendships there. Indeed, we argue that within a purely virtual context the establishment of close friendship is simply psychologically impossible.[2] (We do not address the issue of the effects internet communication might have on our already existing friendships; rather we explore the possibility of developing a friendship on the net from scratch.) Our analysis proceeds largely by way of contrasting the kinds of personal interaction occurring in virtual and non virtual environments. This leads to the second part of our thesis: by coming to understand what is lacking in the virtual cases we aim to shed light on what is valuable in genuine friendship.

We aim, then, to argue why it is that our Net "friendships" lack the kinds of human goods we normally take for granted in ordinary close friendship.[3] At the core of our thesis is the idea that the internet creates a distorting filter on those aspects of ourselves which ordinarily are disclosed to the other in friendship. It is precisely in virtue of the internet context that we are driven to present a view of ourselves in Net "friendship" quite at odds with the view of ourselves we would have presented, and which is available in the non-virtual world. Why is that bad? As we will argue, in the non-virtual case one's identity is creatively drawn, or shaped, in relation to one's friend, chiefly as a result of a process of mutual interpretation, a process that ultimately contributes to the depth and character of ordinary friendship. This process thus promotes within friendship a level of affection, concern for the friend's welfare, and a disposition to share (perhaps even otherwise undesired for) experiences. Friendship-like relations on the Net, however, are structurally and significantly limited in the ways in which this development of self in friendship – and of some of its associated goods – might be brought about.

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[1] In presenting this paper to a range of audiences a frequent question arose concerning the kind of internet communication we had in mind. Let us stipulate that our thesis is aimed at only the kinds of text-based communication common to email and chatroom style forums. Our stipulation is made in connection with the following two points. First, although changes to technology continue at breakneck speed, so that soon video-style exchanges (for example) may well become the norm, the fact of the matter is that at the time of writing the overwhelming quantity of communication carried on through the internet lines is text-based. Second, our stipulation answers the objection that our thesis does not hold because soon the technology will overcome the institutional obstacles we discuss. In a highly futuristic scenario it may be possible to simulate almost without fault the kinds of ordinary face-to-face encounters had in the non virtual world. Notwithstanding objections of the Nozick pleasure machine variety, we can agree with this for the simple reason that those are not the cases our thesis addresses. The case of two-way video interaction does not constitute a counterexample to our thesis either. In such a case much of what we say is missing in the text-based case, has been compensated. Whether friendships are possible in these environments we regard as an open question.

[2] It has been pointed out to us that our use of the term 'virtual' is infelicitous given our focus on email and chat forums. A virtual environment is one that simulates a real environment, but surely email is not a simulation of talking to someone. It is true that email talk is not simulated talk – this reminds us of a point about arithmetic: there could be no real difference between successfully adding two numbers together and simulating such a successful addition. Our point, though, is that email (and other electronic communication) is a simulation of a face-to-face communicative exchange. Perhaps it is not a simulation in the sense of trying to image face-to-face communication; nevertheless, it may substitute for face-to-face communication, and that is all we are claiming.

[3] A brief comment is in order here over our use of scare quotes on the term 'friendship'. Since our thesis is that internet friendships are psychologically unavailable to human agents, the use of this term unmodified is unacceptable to us. But someone might quibble that the use of scare quotes begs the question in favour of our thesis. To avoid this dilemma, and so to leave the issue open as we proceed, we stipulate that by the expression 'Net "friendship"' we refer to those internet relationships *alleged* by some to qualify as genuine friendships.

A second order issue which we address later in the paper is whether internet "friendship" *per se* is a bad thing. Though we think internet "friendship" is quite inferior to non-virtual friendship, we do not think that it is necessarily bad in itself, and indeed for some people it clearly provides an important good. The issue itself, however, is largely an empirical one, which arises on two fronts. First, obviously friendship is an important human good, and so to the extent that my Net "friendships" replace friendships I might well have had non-virtually, this will subtract from the good of friendship. But of course whether or not one's Net "friendships" do replace one's non-virtual friendships is quite dependent on one's particular circumstances. Perhaps Net "friendships" can be had in addition to the non-virtual variety; but perhaps not – a serious issue for social planners, then, is the *extent* to which online societies ought to proliferate.

Second, a more difficult, and empirically complex issue, would be to see what the psychological effects on forming personal relationships are of prolonged Net interaction. The interesting question here would be to determine whether such interaction brings about a *dispositional* transformation in people's non-virtual personal interactions. For example, would the hitherto shy individual, whose Net interaction promotes in her a modicum of social confidence – something she could never have gained otherwise – be able to transfer this newfound confidence into her non-virtual social interactions? *Maybe* it would, and if so, this would certainly be a good for such a person. On the other hand, would excessive use of the Net for social interaction by people generally, stunt the proper growth of relationships, and bring about a quite different society from the one we know? Again, maybe it would, but the issue is not one to be decided *a priori*. The point is that these effects on our personal relationships are not trivial, and so ought to be considered seriously by those who favour more global changes from the ordinary way we interact socially, do business, teach, and so on, to the online varieties of these activities.

The paper will proceed as follows. We first underscore the point about context and content with an example from the mass media of the way something as seemingly harmless as a time constraint tends to structure and shape the range of opinion permitted there. We then present a brief summary of the various accounts of friendship paying particular attention to what is involved in each of the role of self-disclosure. As we point out in the section following this, there is a natural and appropriate willingness within the institution of friendship to engage in mutual open recognition of a friend's various salient character traits. My self-understanding is often enough crucially dependent on the perspective of my friends, in particular on their judgements of what I am like and on what I do. Because this process of interpretation is mutual, it plays a central role in structuring, and in determining the relational character of our friendships, i.e., of the way we respond to one another as friends, of how such interaction moulds the self within friendship, and so of how the friendship grows and develops given the identity-affecting properties of mutual interpretation. Naturally enough, then, if we are interested in the effects of the internet on friendship, the way to frame the analysis is by looking at how mutual interpretation is affected by internet communication. In Section 4 we argue that the effects on the process of interpretation are quite drastic, and this is largely because of the way the Net permits and disposes us to present a skewed picture to others of what

we are like. In the final section we qualify our position, which is not monolithically opposed to all types of Net "friendships", and we deal with some possible counterexamples.

Context and Communication

An important fact about communication is the way contextual factors affect the content of the information exchanged. Let's call situations where this arises *content sensitive situations*. The point about content sensitivity is made in devastating fashion by Noam Chomsky in his well known attack on the mass media. It is a distinctive requirement of television news and current affairs programming, particularly in the United States, that commentators be able to articulate an opinion within a very short and specific period of time, typically between two commercials. The effect of this requirement, which Chomsky calls 'concision', is that one is only capable of "regurgitating conventional pieties", while still being taken seriously. The mechanism works in the following way: in the mainstream media there are a range of views common to all across the political spectrum, that are, by and large, held to be true by everyone who either broadcasts, advertises, promotes, listens, or subscribes within that commercially-based institution. Such 'established opinion', as we may call it, is generally accepted by audiences of all mainstream political persuasions without the need for defence: "everyone just nods", as Chomsky puts it. But what about propositions that challenge established opinion? Claims challenging established opinion in fundamental ways do require justification; they quite rightly require the presentation of reasons and evidence if they are not to be dismissed as opinion from the "lunatic fringe". The trouble is that, given the constraints of concision, it is simply not feasible to provide support for claims that fall outside established opinion. Those who do challenge received wisdom on public affairs simply haven't the time to properly put their case; as a result, what may in fact be a perfectly reasonable thesis ends up looking like it's from the lunatic fringe, or "from Neptune" as Chomsky puts it. The ultimate effect of concision is to help reinforce received views, to further constrict the range of public debate within a narrow framework of assumptions, and thus to exclude serious questioning of prevailing opinion. Concision thus provides a striking example of contextual influences – in this case the apparently innocent distribution of advertising space – on the nature of the content of communication. We take it as a conclusive demonstration of the general phenomenon of content sensitivity to context.[4]

At the most general level the point to be made here is that context affects content. But this should not disguise a range of important though more particular kinds of this general phenomenon. Concision, for example, falls out of an *institutional* phenomenon within commercial media, and plainly there are myriad other institutional settings giving rise to content sensitivity: in the confessional your confession is affected by a range of constraints, the very pious surroundings for example, and maybe even some form of concision; at the football match, your support for the team is different from the support you provide in front of the television; in the classroom your teaching is

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[4] See the film *Manufacturing Consent: Noam Chomsky and the Media*. Directors Mark Achbar and Peter Wintonick. Produced by Colin Neale, Dennis Murphy, Adam Symansky and the National Film Board of Canada.

responsive to the number of students present, the various media of lecture presentation (overheads and the like), and so on.

An integral part of many institutional factors in this process are the various *technological* requirements giving rise to content sensitive situations. Of course the internet is one context where the variety of institutional norms and conventions is paradigmatically a product of technology. Internet technology imposes structural constraints on communicative interaction thus enabling and predisposing individuals to tailor their verbal behaviour to the specific environment in which it is said. In this way we see that the internet not only affects the nature of this behaviour, but also the nature of the "friendships" that may develop in such an environment, and ultimately the nature of the persons engaged in these "friendships". As we will presently explain, the internet environment emasculates and distorts the institution of friendship. However, before we do so it will be necessary to provide some background describing the variety of accounts of friendship. As we will see, our thesis can be supported regardless of which account one holds to be true.

Three Accounts of Friendship

By 'friendship' we refer, at the very least, to those intimate relationships in which there is deep mutual affection, a disposition to assist in the welfare of the other, and a continuing desire to engage with the other in shared activities. We say that these are at the core of any friendship, and indeed these conditions must be adopted by any serious account of friendship. But these conditions not only do not distinguish the various accounts from one another, they are arguably insufficient in themselves to distinguish friendship from other kinds of intimate personal relationships where they often hold, e.g., the parent-child relationship. What is it, then, apart from these baseline conditions, that makes a relationship one which is distinctively a friendship?

Since Aristotle, many have thought that the answer to this question begins with the role that *self-disclosure* plays in developing the bonds of affection, intimacy and trust in friendship that any account must accept. According to an Aristotelian account – what we might call the *mirror view* of friendship – the essence of friendship resides in the tendency to choose and retain friends who are similar in character to each other. According to this view, the extent to which I recognise aspects of myself revealed in another – particularly, according to Aristotle himself, various virtuous traits – is the extent to which I will be well-disposed to have this other as my friend. This account, then, is essentially one founded on self-love. It is the seeing of myself in the other – and of course vice versa – which provides the *raison d'etre* of our relationship.[5]

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[5] On similarity and similarity in virtue, see, e.g., Aristotle, *The Nichomachean Ethics*, 1159a35 and 1165b14-35. On the self-knowledge to be found in friendship, see, Aristotle, *Magna Moralia*, 1213a10-26; John Cooper, "Aristotle on Friendship", in Amelie Rorty (ed.) *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics* (University of California Press, 1980), pp. 322-323.

A second kind of account focuses not on the disclosure of self *in* the other, but of disclosure of self *to* the other. What this means, to a first approximation, is that unless I am prepared to share certain sorts of private information with my friend in an ongoing way I will not be able to maintain her friendship. Such self-disclosure must proceed on an equal footing, and focuses to a large degree on personal motives, interests and beliefs. Of course not any old information counts here because the point of such disclosure is closely connected to the function of trust and intimacy within the friendship. To pass on to my friend my private thoughts and wishes leaves me vulnerable to that person, and conversely my friend is vulnerable given my knowledge of her private world. (If all we ever disclose to one another are the most mundane details of our daily lives – what we ate for breakfast, which train we took to work, the colour of the black pudding Mom once made, etc. – we are hardly placed in a position of vulnerability due to the very sensitive nature of the private information now in possession of the other. A possible corollary: very boring people would find it difficult to sustain very intimate friendships.) Our privileged position with respect to one another, in terms of the insights of character we attain through secret-sharing, does provide a framework for the carrying on, and the flourishing of our friendship. Let's call this the *secrets view*.[6]

Finally there is what can be called the *drawing view* of friendship. According to this view, neither similarity nor secret-sharing is important or distinctive of close friendship. Rather what is central to the nature of friendship is that one's identity is, in part, drawn, or shaped, by the relations one bears to one's close friend, and in turn this process of drawing further structures the relationship. The drawing of the self in friendship is manifested in two dimensions. First, often enough we will be moved to share the kind of experience with a friend we otherwise would (probably) never ourselves have chosen without invitation, not because we feel obligated, or in some way pulled against a natural urge to avoid doing it, but because this is something that the friend has chosen to do. So, for example, my friend, Roger, invites me to a local art exhibition, something I would normally not even think of visiting. My decision to accept is based largely on the thought that the sharing of the experience with Roger would be a good thing. It is not just that I now find myself moved to act because Roger has swayed me, though that is certainly a large part of it, but I now find myself influenced in a new direction which lies outside what I had, prior to that moment, thought properly expressive of my interests. I may thus grow and develop in ways that reflect the character of my friend. In effect, over time, I may become more like Roger. (This may seem to confirm the mirror view, but in fact the order of explanation is quite the reverse since clearly friendships operate perfectly well in cases of marked dissimilarity.)

A second aspect of the drawing account, is the process of interpretation. (As we will see, just as with the first dimension mentioned earlier, the second is important in the other accounts as well.) We will come to it presently, but first a methodological comment. Although the drawing account has been developed and defended by one of us elsewhere[7], we will not take a stand here on which of the

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[6] For such an account, see, Laurence Thomas, "Friendship", *Synthese* 72 (1987).
[7] See Dean Cocking and Jeanette Kennett, "Friendship and the Self", *Ethics*, April, 1998.

standard accounts just outlined best withstands critical scrutiny. We choose not to do this precisely because our thesis ought to stand no matter which account one accepts. As we show in the next section the process of what we call interpretation in friendship is so pervasive that no reasonable account can afford to leave it out. Our account of the importance of contextual effects on the realisation of friendship focuses largely on this process of interpretation in friendship and of the various ways in which it fails; so given the pervasiveness of this failure we can claim our thesis achieves maximal theoretical purchase.

Interpretation

Consider how often we recognise aspects of our close friend's character and the impact this has on how we are moved to interact with our friend and on the realisation of our friendship.[8] I notice, for instance, my friend is anxious in confined spaces, in crowded places, or when her ex-partner is in the room. I notice her excitement or enthusiasm over her team winning the football match, her delight in a delicious meal, or her exuberance in discussion after a few drinks at the bar. Because of such interpretations I will, for example, be more attentive to my anxious friend when her ex-partner enters the room, or try to lighten up the situation with a joke or some strategy of distraction or just discreetly get her out of the room. Similarly, I might affectionately tease her about her excitement at the football game, or how lively she gets after a few drinks. I might, on the other hand, find myself spurred on by her enthusiasm in such circumstances.

Such interpretation of a friend's character, and the ways in which we are consequently moved to relate to one another, are commonplace and central to the realisation of close friendship. In both ordinary as well as significant ways, it is upon the interpretations of character between close friends that mutual affection, the desires for shared experiences, and the disposition to benefit and promote the interests of one's friend are expressed. I express my affection for my friend when I playfully tease her for becoming boisterously drunk after only two drinks; my recognising her enthusiasm for the football moves me to suggest we go to a game together; my lightening up the situation when her ex-partner enters the room exhibits my concern to promote her interests. It is important to note that each of the accounts of friendship mentioned above agree on the significance of the interpretation process to all these features of friendship. Moreover, this interpretation process, together with the impact it has on how the friendship is realised, will also be crucial to these different views of the self in friendship in the following ways: for the secrets view the mutual interpretation between friends will be central to the self that is seen to be disclosed by the friends; for the mirror view it is central to the self that is seen to be similar; for the drawing view, interpretation is crucial to the relational self created within the friendship.

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[8] In this section we use the term 'character' widely to include not only such things as bodily features, and psychological traits, but also such relational characteristics as the kinds of institutions one may be a part of – e.g., being a member of a certain sporting club or political party. The latter may well reflect indirectly on a person's qualities, and such relational features are also of course commonly the subject of interpretation between individuals.

In the section to follow we consider just how important the various indicators of one's friend's character are to the interpretation one has of the friend and so to the ways in which one will be moved to relate to them and to the realisation of the friendship. Such indicators can be either voluntary or non-voluntary. The internet is perhaps unique in its facilitating personal relations primarily on the basis of voluntary self-disclosure, and eliminating many significant aspects of non-voluntary self-disclosure. Given our emphasis on the process of interpretation, the interesting question from this point of view is to determine the effects voluntary self-presentation has on that process and so on the realisation of friendship.

Voluntary Self-presentation and Interaction

We begin this section with a brief, though important qualification. In the light of much recent, and well-deserved, attention given to cases of deception and/or the abuse of trust in internet communication, and so to avoid unnecessary confusion, we would like to stress that these are not the cases we are concerned with here; on the contrary we want to stipulate that we are addressing those cases in which people behave with sincerity and with an intention to carry on relations that genuinely aim at friendship. It is of course obvious that cases which feature deception and/or the abuse of trust should not count as genuine friendships, and so the exploration of those cases turns out to be plainly pointless for our purposes; though to repeat, this is not to downplay the very real and serious issues that arise in connection with trust, deception, and the internet.

There is a clear contrast in the ways people are enabled to, and at least very commonly disposed to, present themselves in their relationships on the Net, as compared to their non-virtual relationships in terms of the kinds and degree of control over self-disclosure they may exercise.

Consider first the virtual world. It is because of the range of technologically based structural constraints inherent in Net communication that I am able to present myself to others with such a high level of control and choice. These constraints increase my capacity to present to others, through the presentation of my thoughts and feelings, a carefully constructed self, one that is able, for example, to concoct much more careful and thought-out responses to questions than I am able to in the non-virtual case. In the virtual case, where I can construct a highly controlled and chosen self presentation, I can play down, put a positive or light-hearted spin on, or completely screen out the various things I don't particularly like about myself. I might similarly deal with various thoughts or feelings which, while I might not disapprove of, I might not, for any number of reasons, be very comfortable with. I may have interests or attitudes which I neither disapprove of nor feel any discomfort about, but which nevertheless I might not think worth mentioning when I more carefully choose and control how I present myself. Or I might have interests and attitudes I am simply more inclined to filter out from my conversation with others – perhaps I think they might not be interested

in such things. There are also other aspects of interaction which get sifted out in the refined atmosphere of Net interaction such as the various instances of spontaneous and complex expression. Typical features of interaction in the non-virtual case include such things as rapid-fire half-finished sentences, talking over one another, a complexity of intonation, facial and bodily gestures, and so on – all sorts of content gets a look in that would not do so in the focus provided by the virtual world.

Of course there may also be any number of things about myself of which I am simply unaware, or of which I have little insight, or about which I am self-deceived. For obvious reasons there can be no disclosure of the self here, since plainly you cannot volunteer information you do not have. So, to illustrate, I cannot reveal to my Net "friend" my paranoia about personal safety if I regard placing three deadlocks on the front door as merely prudent behaviour, as would inevitably be revealed in the non virtual world where my friend notices my fussing over the locks.

The nature of my responses to others in the virtual world also diverges from the way we ordinarily respond to our friends. First, it is up to me *when* I respond to their contacts in ways that are unavailable in the non-virtual context; there will be no uncomfortable pause, no *faux pas*, when I hesitate briefly to construct a more carefully honed response. Second, my responses can be made without being interrupted, talked over, or qualified in other ways involving my being subject to the thoughts of others. And, of course, I can choose whether or not I will respond at all.

I can then, choose and control my self-presentation to, and my exchanges with, my Net "friends", in various significant ways which I either cannot, or would not be so disposed to, with my non-virtual friends.

Turning to the non virtual cases of friendship, I might try to make a genuine attempt at, for instance, playing down, sifting out, or simply covering up my overly-ambitious or competitive streak; my envy about those I consider more beautiful, witty or wealthy; my jealousy over my partner's flirtations; my self-obsessions; my stinginess with money; my delight at cruel or blue humour; my hopeless taste in clothes; my silly laugh or my bad manners. Even my best efforts here however, are doomed. My close friends will hardly have to possess great psychological insight to observe, in spite of my attempts to disguise and obfuscate aspects of my self, my excitement at (say) the prospect of beating a competitor, or enjoyment of a cruel joke at another's expense, or my nervous anxiety over my wayward partner. Even if I manage to curb all voluntary behavioural indicators of such things, there are simply too many non-voluntary indicators which no-one we have ever known (*qua* close friend) could consistently screen out. I will, e.g., smile at the joke or try too hard to not smile, or I'll sweat over those of whom I'm envious or jealous, or engage in frenzied small talk in telling desperation to feign indifference.

The ease with which we interact with one another in non-virtual friendship may thus be undermined, but it is important to understand the way this process may contribute to construction of the relational self within friendship. It will be a focus of my friend's concern for me to not only notice, say, my uncomfortable jealousy, but also to be moved by her noticing it to help me out in some way; perhaps she will help me by, for example, making distracting small talk. Similarly, it might be part of my close friend's interest in me that he not only notice, for example, my delight at a good blue joke, but that this is something he likes about me. How such traits of character of mine continue to be realised within the friendship will, in part, be determined by my friend's interpretations of my concerns and interests, and how they are moved to relate to me on account of this. So, for instance, because of my friend's encouraging influence, instead of trying to hide my enthusiasm for a good dirty joke, I might, at least with her, not only give quite a deal more reign to my enthusiasm, but develop a different view of my character trait here. Thus, I might take to her light-hearted teasing of me about it, where previously I would deny identification with the trait. In such everyday ways my character is, in part, shaped by, and a relational feature of, our friendship.

Everyday real life situations, therefore, undermine efforts to construct one's self-presentations and interactions in highly controlled and chosen ways, such as are present in the virtual world. But the import of these various ways in which I may construct my self-presentation and interaction with others is not just that they are unavailable and standardly subverted or otherwise undermined in the non-virtual friendship situation. It is also, more importantly and as indicated above, 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 friendship. Moreover, these distortions and omissions are of important aspects of the self that provide much of the proper focus of our interest and concern in non virtual friendships. It is, for instance, not only commonplace but *proper* interaction between close friends that such character traits as my stinginess with money or obsession with personal safety, are highlighted, interpreted and may be transformed within friendship.

Let us now consider some likely qualifications, attacks and possible counterexamples to our claim.

Responses to our claim

First, we would want to qualify our claim by acknowledging that there are a range of positive aspects of Net "friendships" given by a heightened sense of choice and control in self-presentation and interaction with others. The heightened choice and control over the nature of my Net exchanges may well, for instance, help shield me from the morally bad influences of others in this environment. If, e.g, my Net "friend" invites me to take part in some morally questionable activity, I am not put on the spot as I might be in a face-to-face situation. Not only am I shielded from, say, her persuasive tone of voice, I have time to digest the proposal, and make my decision in cool, solitary reflection.

Also, consider those, e.g., who are extremely shy or suffer certain physical disabilities, say, of speech capacity, which would otherwise limit their ability to make friends in the non-virtual world. The ability to exercise a heightened measure of choice and control in self-presentation and interaction with others in the virtual social environment surely provides an important human good here. It is surely a much gentler entry to a social world for such a person who can now avoid that uncomfortable social moment, or the intrusion of their disability into a developing friendship, which, in the non virtual equivalent holds great terror.

The advantages, particularly for those in the latter kinds of cases, of a world of communication where voluntary self-presentation and interaction with others dominates are clearly worthy ones. Net "friendship" and interaction may present a significant good and improvement over non-virtual relations for a person afflicted with disabilities deleterious to the development and maintenance of satisfying and fruitful self-presentation and interaction with others. On this account, then, we have reason to regard a world where virtual relations and interactions are available to people as better than, or at least complementary to, a world where they are not.

In the light of acknowledging these advantages it is worth clarifying the status of our thesis. We are not claiming that, necessarily, the world would be a better place if virtual relations and interactions were not available to people. Rather we have claimed that the elements of non-voluntary self disclosure within non-virtual friendships provide both an appropriate and commonplace focus of our interest and concern in our friends, and an important part of the relational self developed in friendship. As such, to this extent, virtual "friendships" miss much of the nature and value of friendship. And this thesis is not affected by acknowledging that, for the reason above, it might be better to have virtual relations and interactions available than not to. Though, as noted earlier, there is a serious planning issue which may well arise, and clearly ought to be considered, having to do with the extent to which virtual interactions are put forward as adequate substitutes for non-virtual ones.

A more telling line of objection might go like this: our objection to a virtual world dominated by voluntary self-presentation and interactions, largely targets certain kinds of individuals – namely, those who would exercise their heightened choice and control to obscure, down-play or altogether omit those aspects of self about which they feel disapproval, or discomfort, or would, in one way or another, neglect to voluntarily present. This isn't a problem, however, for Net "friendship" and interaction *as such*. It is a problem, or set of problems, facing certain sorts of individuals. In the normal run of cases of Net "friendships", it should be admitted, there is, in the ways outlined above, a lack of relevant disclosure to the other, and so a lack of some of the importantly relevant interaction and self-development that features in friendship. But this thesis depends on facts about our psychologies. It is not a conceptual claim about a virtual world dominated by voluntary self-presentation and interactions. Indeed, it might be argued we could imagine certain individuals who do *not* suffer the sorts of pitfalls mentioned earlier of diminishing, denying, and omitting relevant character cues given by non-voluntary behaviour in the non-virtual case. Such individuals would seek

to compensate and overcome these problems. They would, e.g., voluntarily disclose their failings, and what they feel uncomfortable about, and they would be careful to not block or filter, say, their spontaneous thoughts and reactions to others. They would diligently and carefully report on those aspects of character which ordinarily, as they well know, play a crucial role in the interactive process of self-creation in friendship. Of course not every tiny detail is worthy of disclosure, but only those salient aspects of physical appearance, manner, habit, belief, intention, interest and the rest which, but for the Net, might well be manifestly available to the other, and crucially relevant to the other's interpretation of character as it effects the shaping of the self in friendship. So let us imagine two people – the *diligent disclosers* – who with a meticulous and painstaking effort attempt to overcome the internet barriers to friendship in the way described. Would the relationship so formed be a counterexample to our position?

We have sketched various commonplace ways in which non-voluntary behaviour and interaction is crucial to the nature and value of close friendship and the self within it. The non-voluntary relations include those aspects of myself I am aware of – but for a variety of reasons do not volunteer to my friend – and those aspects of myself which I am incapable of revealing, yet my friend nevertheless picks up because of their external perspective; the case where my friend picks up on my self deception is a paradigm of this. We think each of these aspects of non-voluntary behaviour and interaction provide reason to reject the alleged counterexample of the diligent disclosers. Consider first, those aspects of non-voluntary disclosure of which I am not aware.

There is much that even the most accomplished diligent disclosers must necessarily miss here. I might not, for instance, be aware that I may be interpreted as paranoid about my personal safety or overly competitive or ambitious; it is my friend who interprets me in this way, when, say, she notices me obsessively looking over my shoulder, or that I'm driven to pull my own recent journal publications off the shelf and wax lyrically about them on being told of a competitor's forthcoming book. This also holds for some clear cases of self-deception. My friend sees non-voluntary cues that betray claims that I do not have a philandering partner, or a gambling or health problem. She notices, for instance, I am too insistent on my claims – something she knows I normally do when I'm particularly serious about kidding myself. Such interpretations between close friends are both everyday and significant features of the normal expression of friendship and of the self within it, and necessarily are not available to the diligent disclosers in the quite global way present in the non-virtual case. Of course, our response here admits the very weak claim that Net relationships approaching the standards of ordinary close friendships are *logically* possible; sure, there might be invisible web-surfing Martians with hyper-psychological analytic skills and quick reflexes who can pull it off. However, since such possibilities are so removed from the world of our own psychologies, they are of no real interest at all.

Our second ground for rejecting the diligent disclosers case, refers to those aspects of myself of which I am aware but do not voluntarily present. This aspect of self also provides significant input into the character and development of close friendships. Those wielding the diligent disclosers case

would claim it deals with the apparent failure of virtual relationships to capture this. However, if we imagine quite everyday real life cases involving even very simple character and interpretation cues, any process of compensation applied in the virtual case, would not only seem difficult and tedious, but would seem very likely *itself* to corrupt and undermine the non virtual interaction. So, for instance, in the non-virtual case my friend makes an overly sarcastic remark – I pick up the sarcasm from its tone – and I roll my eyes in dismissal; my friend, not having realised the extent of her sarcasm blushes meekly in response, and then averts her gaze as I smirk at this minor victory: her sarcasm has been the subject of playful criticism of late. Or imagine, alternatively, that I have not been completely forthcoming with my friend about his partner who has been making advances towards me; but I am now resolved to come clean. I know this will be a blow to him and my nerves are showing – shortness of breath, perspiration, a slight quiver in the voice. And my affectations here influence how he receives the news; he recognizes my distress and concern at the blow this is to him.

Now consider how the process of attempted compensation for these interactions through the most diligent disclosing realistically imaginable, would distort, rather than effectively replace these interactions. There might well be, for example, crowding effects, where I try to disclose too much information. And so the playfulness of my criticism of my friend's sarcasm, or my friend's feeling that I genuinely share his distress over the problem of his partner, might get lost in all the information I am now voluntarily disclosing. And even if important interactions are not simply lost in all the voluntary disclosing, the perception of sincerity in various non-voluntary responses, such as those showing my distress in passing on disturbing news to my friend, may not well survive the transmission to purely voluntary disclosure.[9] Moreover, the very fact that I am now voluntarily disclosing hitherto undisclosed material – my anger for example – might well create in me unseen characteristics – perhaps I will now have contempt for myself. Similarly, for instance, my usual reserve, might not sit at all well with my newfound role of assiduously reporting all of those traits of character required by diligent disclosure. Thus, it seems reasonable to expect that, in such ways, the compensating strategy of the diligent dislcosers would distort and pervert the character of the non-voluntary behaviour and interaction it seeks to replace.

Conclusion

We think that to the extent that the virtual case provides a context of communication dominated by *voluntary* self-disclosure, enabling and disposing me to construct a highly chosen and controlled self-presentation and world of interaction, I altogether miss the kind of interaction between friends that seems a striking and commonplace feature of close friendship. We claim that what is lacking here is

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[9] In his "Moral Behaviour and Rational Creatures of the Universe", *Monist* 71, July 1988, pp. 59-71, Laurence Thomas – arguing for the significance of *non-verbal* behaviour to our moral assessments of others – says our emotional displays are 'indispensable barometers by which we assess a person's motivations and judge the sincerity of his utterances', p. 65. While we think Thomas might overstate his case for the non-verbal, we do think that sincerity losses are, at least, a real problem for the imagined loss of the non-voluntary to purely voluntary interaction.

not merely a partial, or marginal set of factors, but a significant global loss and distortion of the real case. What is distorted and lost, in particular, are important aspects of a person's character and of the relational self ordinarily developed through those interactions in friendship which, as we have argued, are precisely the kinds of interactions largely weakened or eliminated by the dominance of voluntary self-disclosure found in the virtual world. These are interactions which clearly provide *proper and appropriate* focuses of our interest and concern in our non-virtual friends.

And finally, a promissory note. We have used relations with others on the Net as our foil to highlight the everyday importance of non-voluntary behaviour and interaction to the nature and value of friendship and the self within it. We see, however, various ways in which our concern here might be of quite broad significance. Thus, there may be other communication contexts, or cultural changes to individuals' self-presentation within current communication contexts, which similarly negate or seriously diminish the character of either our close relationships, or other sorts of relationships, such as, e.g., the pedagogic relationship in various modes of distance education. Such broader implications we hope to explore elsewhere.

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