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# Is It Really Only Real Friends Who Help You Move the Body?

Joshua M. Penrod

Review of *Friendship, Robots, and Social Media: False Friends and Second Selves,* by Alexis M. Elder. New York: Routledge, 2017. 237 pp.

> "Teens Flock to New App Where They Just Enter Own Personal Data into Form"
> —*The Onion*, July 10, 2020

> "I may be synthetic, but I'm not stupid."—Android Bishop, *Aliens* (1986)

From the US Presidential election of 2016 to the specter of sex robots being the latest form of automatons using sharp elbows to replace human workers, new technology now also creates new forms of communication and, just maybe, new friends. Constantly evolving, with and without human guidance, social technologies seem devoted toward making humanity and human connection lose relevance. Every transaction, be it economic, social, or spiritual, might soon be technologically mediated in some form, if it isn't already. For some, this is a long-awaited technotopia-type novel plane of existence, while others worry that it sinks human society deeper, past dystopia, into some type of hell, where all of us are further removed and insulated from reality and, ultimately, what it means to be human. With questions of humanity, further questions arise amidst the sweeping technological change and uncertainty: what does it mean to be a friend?

Alexis Elder points out some different paths in her work, *Friendship, Robots, and Social Media*. Taking, in large part, an Aristotelian approach updated for the digital age, she constructs a vision of technology and friendship that represents a possible "third way" between the prophets of doom and heralds of salvation. Viewing one specific arena of what we might assume to be a uniquely human institution—friendship—Elder uncovers ways in which technology might best be considered as something useful, to be examined carefully and deployed prudently,

**Joshua M. Penrod,** University of Baltimore, Merrick School of Business; jpenrod@ubalt.edu.

but not something that manifests as something inherently inimical to human interests and relationships.

Why friendship? Elder begins by answering this basic question, drawing on the Aristotelian virtue tradition of defining what makes for a good life. To live well, as Elder recounts, is a complex question with complex answers developed by Aristotle, but an important aspect of the eudaimonia—the good life—is that of the relationship between people. In this specific case, the aspect is that of friendship, an element of one of the set of things which is required to live a good life. Aristotle noted that humans are social creatures; the specific element of society explored by Elder is that of friendship.

Elder's analysis follows three major areas where the lines of friendship blur between organic and synthetic. In the first part, she explores the meaning of an Aristotelian definition of friendship, bringing today's concerns into the fold and setting the stage for the interpretation of the meaning of friendship in emerging technologies. In the second part, the questions of whether a human can form a relationship with a robot, and whether that relationship is an actual friendship in the context of Aristotelian eudaimonia are analyzed and developed in the new context represented by the technology. Lastly, in the third part, Elder interpolates Aristotelian frameworks of friendship in having a look at the meaning of social media, and whether such relationships and connections between humans can be considered "authentic" friendships. In this context, technology is the intermediary.

Elder's careful analysis of the Aristotelian framework on friendship flows into a specific discussion on social robotics. Seal-like robots keep senior citizens company; other programmed automatons work with children having difficulty making and keeping relationships among their peers. Are these shared lives in the Aristotelian sense? Can one share an identity with a robot, as friends do? At what point does the artificial factor into the friendship-unit the same way that an organic human might? Elder's work here keys in on segments of society that might be especially vulnerable to feelings that friendship helps to erase—the loss of belonging, the feeling of loneliness. With an anthropomorphized social robot, a member of such a vulnerable community can feel something that looks like, and feels to them like, actual friendship. A major problematic aspect is that substituting such robots might further devalue human caregivers, perhaps shutting away the elderly into a deep corner even more distant from the rest of us. Likewise, with a special-needs child, a robot caregiver will never tire or lose patience, even when it itself might be abused. Surely, the critiques and costs of such interventions might well be real, ranging from social discounting, avoidance of responsibilities, and

the nature of deception present in friendship. The next steps in the analysis are for the non-vulnerable, non-disabled segments of society to ask—is it acceptable to have a robot friend then? Elder's work teases all of these areas apart and not only gives space to the important distinctions inhering in types of technologies and their applications, but by interpolating the Aristotelian, she also gives structure and greater understanding to the components themselves, along with relationships between and among humans.

In the third part, Elder capably extends Aristotle's analytical course to something that he himself likely never contemplated; are friends really friends when only connected by social media? And what of something synthetic? Is it possible to form a bond of friendship with a robot? If so, is that something that would still constitute the good life, the eudaimonia that is the highest and best principled flourishing of one's life? Elder tackles the issues with the same disciplined approach in the earlier sections, starting with defining excellence in friendship. She works methodically through a set of objections mounted against the "reality" of electronically mediated friendships and notes that things, states, and reactions that we have with friends can be no less real when coming through electronic media as opposed to standing next to someone. Such friends can meet in secret, or they can be an open group searching for more friends to join; deception in such contexts may be a cost, but apparently no less and no more than deceptive practices in physical-proximity friendships. The human side of friendship, exchanging information, feeling emotion, and the sharing of lives all would indicate that the electronic friendship can be considered a "real" one in the Aristotelian sense; such a sense also seeks, as a line of thinking, to be the one most thoroughly grounded in real-life, the practical experience, and the truth of human nature.

Elder's focus on friendship is an important one; many of the scholars she cites expressed concern, and sometimes dire warnings, about the possible lack of meaning in relationships either supplied or conveyed by technology, and a perceived growing distance between humans. Outside of the family, friendship is the most basic form of close society that humans have. It is, however, relatively unexplored and especially unexplored in the context of technology. Elder's work in this space should be welcomed as new scholarship.

Given the focus on friendship, Elder notes that there are some areas that are left unanswered and unexplored. To my eye, one of these areas can be the cost of social media that occurs despite connections that may occur. We now live in an era where social media has an effective dominance in the news cycle, and even

represents, for many, the single stream of information contributing to viewpoints on how to live life. This can become dangerously narrow.

In the scheme of such ideological echo chambers, the fact that a friendship sprouts from it, no matter how authentic, one does wonder what the uncounted cost might be. Elder certainly notes the possibility of unhealthy and non-virtuous friendships in the work, but there also seems to be a greater, unspoken social cost hitching a ride. This doesn't happen in every case, of course, but there is likely a limit to the upside that technologically intermediated friendships possess (no different, really, than most other phenomena we might call a friendship). But in the electronic sphere, the very nature of the system which encourages friendships—real or imagined—might be smuggling in costs that are largely unaccounted for when looking just at the trees rather than the forest. The multiplying nature of the medium itself carries with it certain concerns that need also be considered.

Indeed, in terms of her analysis of the social robots, Elder notes several areas of deep concern with regard to the potentially vulnerable users of such technology; going beyond the merely lonely, there is the decrepit, the senile, the troubled, the autistic. While the book doesn't answer all of these questions, it certainly paints the arrows in some of the directions we should move in terms of thinking about these important topics.

It seems unlikely, however fervently desired by the critics of social media, that electronic instrumentalities of friendship are going to disappear. Specific applications, such as Facebook, may fade or change, but the connections made and these electronic categories of relationship are trends and phenomena unlikely to reverse themselves. Given the increasing shift of the world's population to that of an old population, new solutions will have to appear, either in the form of senescence and aging reversal, or technological artifacts and systems that can assist us all either as caregiver or receiver. This is no longer a solely Japanese issue; the inverted pyramid of the dropping fertility and aging of the population is a global one. Recent projections suggest that in less than half a century, we will have reached the tipping point of a rapid change moving toward the old outnumbering the young by a considerable margin.

Elder's work helps us understand what the meaning of these changes could be. This work is clearly written and solidly argued, not merely contrarian for the sake of argument alone. Elder's arguments tie Aristotle's thinking tightly to trends that we see today and is a strong showing of continued relevance not just in academic philosophy, but in considerations for policies, and for the reality of the world today and, likely, of tomorrow as well.