

**SUGGESTION:** Read in connection with: <http://www.philosophy-religion.org/living/index.htm> *Living Issues In Ethics* Chapter 6 “Love and Friendship.” Might Dr. Deresiewicz’s analysis anger the many fans of Facebook, et al.? If so, why? According to Ch. 6 “Love and Friendship,” what is genuine friendship?

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## **FAUX FRIENDSHIP**

*By William Deresiewicz, The Chronicle Review* (December 6, 2009)

<http://chronicle.com/article/Faux-Friendship/49308/>

We live at a time when friendship has become both all and nothing at all. Already the characteristically modern relationship, it has in recent decades become the universal one: the form of connection in terms of which all others are understood, against which they are all measured, into which they have all dissolved. Romantic partners refer to each other as boyfriend and girlfriend. Spouses boast that they are each other's best friends. Parents urge their young children and beg their teenage ones to think of them as friends. Adult siblings, released from competition for parental resources that in traditional society made them anything but friends (think of Jacob and Esau), now treat one another in exactly those terms. Teachers, clergymen, and even bosses seek to mitigate and legitimate their authority by asking those they oversee to regard them as friends. We're all on a first-name basis, and when we vote for president, we ask ourselves whom we'd rather have a beer with. As the anthropologist Robert Brain has put it, we're friends with everyone now.

Yet what, in our brave new mediated world, is friendship becoming? The Facebook phenomenon, so sudden and forceful a distortion of social space, needs little elaboration. Having been relegated to our screens, are our friendships now anything more than a form of distraction? When they've shrunk to the size of a wall post, do they retain any content? If we have 768 "friends," in what sense do we have any? Facebook isn't the whole of contemporary friendship, but it sure looks a lot like its future. Yet Facebook—and MySpace, and Twitter, and whatever we're stampeding for next—are just the latest stages of a long attenuation. They've accelerated the fragmentation of consciousness, but they didn't initiate it. They have reified the idea of universal friendship, but they didn't invent it. In retrospect, it seems inevitable that once we decided to become friends with everyone, we would forget how to be friends with anyone. We may pride ourselves today on our aptitude for friendship—friends, after all, are the only people we have left—but it's not clear that we still even know what it means.

How did we come to this pass? The idea of friendship in ancient times could not have been more different. Achilles and Patroclus, David and Jonathan, Virgil's Nisus and Euryalus: Far from being ordinary and universal, friendship, for the ancients, was rare, precious, and hard-won. In a world ordered by relations of kin and kingdom, its elective affinities were exceptional, even subversive, cutting across established lines of allegiance. David loved Jonathan despite the enmity of Saul; Achilles' bond with Patroclus outweighed his loyalty to the Greek cause. Friendship was a high calling, demanding extraordinary qualities of character—rooted in virtue, for Aristotle and Cicero, and dedicated to the pursuit of goodness and truth. And because it

was seen as superior to marriage and at least equal in value to sexual love, its expression often reached an erotic intensity. Jonathan's love, David sang, "was more wondrous to me than the love of women." Achilles and Patroclus were not lovers—the men shared a tent, but they shared their beds with concubines—they were something greater. Achilles refused to live without his friend, just as Nisus died to avenge Euryalus, and Damon offered himself in place of Pythias.

The rise of Christianity put the classical ideal in eclipse. Christian thought discouraged intense personal bonds, for the heart should be turned to God. Within monastic communities, particular attachments were seen as threats to group cohesion. In medieval society, friendship entailed specific expectations and obligations, often formalized in oaths. Lords and vassals employed the language of friendship. "Standing surety"—guaranteeing a loan, as in *The Merchant of Venice*—was a chief institution of early modern friendship. Godparenthood functioned in Roman Catholic society (and, in many places, still functions) as a form of alliance between families, a relationship not between godparent and godchild, but godparent and parent. In medieval England, godparents were "godsibs"; in Latin America, they are "compadres," co-fathers, a word we have taken as synonymous with friendship itself.

The classical notion of friendship was revived, along with other ancient modes of feeling, by the Renaissance. Truth and virtue, again, above all: "Those who venture to criticize us perform a remarkable act of friendship," wrote Montaigne, "for to undertake to wound and offend a man for his own good is to have a healthy love for him." His bond with Étienne, he avowed, stood higher not only than marriage and erotic attachment, but also than filial, fraternal, and homosexual love. "So many coincidences are needed to build up such a friendship, that it is a lot if fortune can do it once in three centuries." The highly structured and, as it were, economic nature of medieval friendship explains why true friendship was held to be so rare in classical and neoclassical thought: precisely because relations in traditional societies were dominated by interest. Thus the "true friend" stood against the self-interested "flatterer" or "false friend," as Shakespeare sets Horatio—"more an antique Roman than a Dane"—against Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Sancho Panza begins as Don Quixote's dependent and ends as his friend; by the close of their journey, he has come to understand that friendship itself has become the reward he was always seeking.

Classical friendship, now called romantic friendship, persisted through the 18th and 19th centuries, giving us the great friendships of Goethe and Schiller, Byron and Shelley, Emerson and Thoreau. Wordsworth addressed his magnum opus to his "dear Friend" Coleridge. Tennyson lamented Hallam—"My friend ... My Arthur ... Dear as the mother to the son"—in the poem that became his masterpiece. Speaking of his first encounter with Hawthorne, Melville was unashamed to write that "a man of deep and noble nature has seized me." But meanwhile, the growth of commercial society was shifting the very grounds of personal life toward the conditions essential for the emergence of modern friendship. Capitalism, said Hume and Smith, by making economic relations impersonal, allowed for private relationships based on nothing other than affection and affinity. We don't know the people who make the things we buy and don't need to know the people who sell them. The ones we do know—neighbors, fellow parishioners, people we knew in high school or college, parents of our children's friends—have no bearing on our economic life. One teaches at a school

**in the suburbs, another works for a business across town, a third lives on the opposite side of the country. We are nothing to one another but what we choose to become, and we can unbecome it whenever we want.**

**Add to this the growth of democracy, an ideology of universal equality and inter-involvement. We are citizens now, not subjects, bound together directly rather than through allegiance to a monarch. But what is to bind us emotionally, make us something more than an aggregate of political monads? One answer was nationalism, but another grew out of the 18th-century notion of social sympathy: friendship, or at least, friendliness, as the affective substructure of modern society. It is no accident that "fraternity" made a third with liberty and equality as the watchwords of the French Revolution. Wordsworth in Britain and Whitman in America made visions of universal friendship central to their democratic vistas. For Mary Wollstonecraft, the mother of feminism, friendship was to be the key term of a renegotiated sexual contract, a new domestic democracy.**

**Now we can see why friendship has become the characteristically modern relationship. Modernity believes in equality, and friendships, unlike traditional relationships, are egalitarian. Modernity believes in individualism. Friendships serve no public purpose and exist independent of all other bonds. Modernity believes in choice. Friendships, unlike blood ties, are elective; indeed, the rise of friendship coincided with the shift away from arranged marriage. Modernity believes in self-expression. Friends, because we choose them, give us back an image of ourselves. Modernity believes in freedom. Even modern marriage entails contractual obligations, but friendship involves no fixed commitments. The modern temper runs toward unrestricted fluidity and flexibility, the endless play of possibility, and so is perfectly suited to the informal, improvisational nature of friendship. We can be friends with whomever we want, however we want, for as long as we want.**

**Social changes play into the question as well. As industrialization uprooted people from extended families and traditional communities and packed them into urban centers, friendship emerged to salve the anonymity and rootlessness of modern life. The process is virtually instinctive now: You graduate from college, move to New York or L.A., and assemble the gang that takes you through your 20s. Only it's not just your 20s anymore. The transformations of family life over the last few decades have made friendship more important still. Between the rise of divorce and the growth of single parenthood, adults in contemporary households often no longer have spouses, let alone a traditional extended family, to turn to for support. Children, let loose by the weakening of parental authority and supervision, spin out of orbit at ever-earlier ages. Both look to friends to replace the older structures. Friends may be "the family we choose," as the modern proverb has it, but for many of us there is no choice but to make our friends our family, since our other families—the ones we come from or the ones we try to start—have fallen apart. When all the marriages are over, friends are the people we come back to. And even those who grow up in a stable family and end up creating another one pass more and more time between the two. We have yet to find a satisfactory name for that period of life, now typically a decade but often a great deal longer, between the end of adolescence and the making of definitive life choices. But the one thing we know is that friendship is absolutely central to it.**

Inevitably, the classical ideal has faded. The image of the one true friend, a soul mate rare to find but dearly beloved, has completely disappeared from our culture. We have our better or lesser friends, even our best friends, but no one in a very long time has talked about friendship the way Montaigne and Tennyson did. That glib neologism "bff," which plays at a lifelong avowal, bespeaks an ironic awareness of the mobility of our connections: Best friends forever may not be on speaking terms by this time next month. We save our fiercest energies for sex. Indeed, between the rise of Freudianism and the contemporaneous emergence of homosexuality to social visibility, we've taught ourselves to shun expressions of intense affection between friends—male friends in particular, though even Oprah was forced to defend her relationship with her closest friend—and have rewritten historical friendships, like Achilles' with Patroclus, as sexual. For all the talk of "bromance" lately (or "man dates"), the term is yet another device to manage the sexual anxiety kicked up by straight-male friendships—whether in the friends themselves or in the people around them—and the typical bromance plot instructs the callow bonds of youth to give way to mature heterosexual relationships. At best, intense friendships are something we're expected to grow out of.

As for the moral content of classical friendship, its commitment to virtue and mutual improvement, that, too, has been lost. We have ceased to believe that a friend's highest purpose is to summon us to the good by offering moral advice and correction. We practice, instead, the nonjudgmental friendship of unconditional acceptance and support—"therapeutic" friendship, in Robert N. Bellah's scornful term. We seem to be terribly fragile now. A friend fulfills her duty, we suppose, by taking our side—validating our feelings, supporting our decisions, helping us to feel good about ourselves. We tell white lies, make excuses when a friend does something wrong, do what we can to keep the boat steady. We're busy people; we want our friendships fun and friction-free.

Yet even as friendship became universal and the classical ideal lost its force, a new kind of idealism arose, a new repository for some of friendship's deepest needs: the group friendship or friendship circle. Companies of superior spirits go back at least as far as Pythagoras and Plato and achieved new importance in the salons and coffeehouses of the 17th and 18th centuries, but the Romantic age gave them a fresh impetus and emphasis. The idea of friendship became central to their self-conception, whether in Wordsworth's circle or the "small band of true friends" who witness Emma's marriage in Austen. And the notion of superiority acquired a utopian cast, so that the circle was seen—not least because of its very emphasis on friendship—as the harbinger of a more advanced age. The same was true, a century later, of the Bloomsbury Group, two of whose members, Woolf and Forster, produced novel upon novel about friendship. It was the latter who famously enunciated the group's political creed. "If I had to choose between betraying my country and betraying my friend," he wrote, "I hope I should have the guts to betray my country." Modernism was the great age of the coterie, and like the legendary friendships of antiquity, modernist friendship circles—bohemian, artistic, transgressive—set their face against existing structures and norms. Friendship becomes, on this account, a kind of alternative society, a refuge from the values of the larger, fallen world.

The belief that the most significant part of an individual's emotional life properly takes place not within the family but within a group of friends began to expand beyond the artistic coterie and become general during the last half of the 20th century. The Romantic-Bloomsburian prophecy of society as a set of friendship

circles was, to a great extent, realized. Mary McCarthy offered an early and tart view of the desirability of such a situation in *The Group*; Barry Levinson, a later, kinder one in *Diner*. Both works remind us that the ubiquity of group friendship owes a great deal to the rise of youth culture. Indeed, modernity associates friendship itself with youth, a time of life it likewise regards as standing apart from false adult values. "The dear peculiar bond of youth," Byron called friendship, inverting the classical belief that its true practice demands maturity and wisdom. With modernity's elevation of youth to supreme status as the most vital and authentic period of life, friendship became the object of intense emotion in two contradictory but often simultaneous directions. We have sought to prolong youth indefinitely by holding fast to our youthful friendships, and we have mourned the loss of youth through an unremitting nostalgia for those friendships. One of the most striking things about the way the 20th century understood friendship was the tendency to view it through the filter of memory, as if it could be recognized only after its loss, and as if that loss were inevitable.

The culture of group friendship reached its apogee in the 1960s. Two of the counterculture's most salient and ideologically charged social forms were the commune—a community of friends in self-imagined retreat from a heartlessly corporatized society—and the rock'n'roll "band" (not "group" or "combo"), its name evoking Shakespeare's "band of brothers" and Robin Hood's band of Merry Men, its great exemplar the Beatles. Communes, bands, and other 60s friendship groups (including Woodstock, the apotheosis of both the commune and the rock concert) were celebrated as joyous, creative places of eternal youth—havens from the adult world. To go through life within one was the era's utopian dream; it is no wonder the Beatles' break-up was received as a generational tragedy. It is also no wonder that 60s group friendship began to generate its own nostalgia as the baby boom began to hit its 30s. *The Big Chill*, in 1983, depicted boomers attempting to recapture the magic of a late-60s friendship circle. ("In a cold world," the movie's tagline reads, "you need your friends to keep you warm.") *Thirtysomething*, taking a step further, certified group friendship as the new adult norm. Most of the characters in those productions, though, were married. It was only in the 1990s that a new generation, remaining single well past 30, found its own images of group friendship in *Seinfeld*, *Sex and the City*, and, of course, *Friends*. By that point, however, the notion of friendship as a redoubt of moral resistance, a shelter from normative pressures and incubator of social ideals, had disappeared. Your friends didn't shield you from the mainstream, they were the mainstream.

And so we return to Facebook. With the social-networking sites of the new century—Friendster and MySpace were launched in 2003, Facebook in 2004—the friendship circle has expanded to engulf the whole of the social world, and in so doing, destroyed both its own nature and that of the individual friendship itself. Facebook's very premise—and promise—is that it makes our friendship circles visible. There they are, my friends, all in the same place. Except, of course, they're not in the same place, or, rather, they're not my friends. They're simulacra of my friends, little dehydrated packets of images and information, no more my friends than a set of baseball cards is the New York Mets.

I remember realizing a few years ago that most of the members of what I thought of as my "circle" didn't actually know one another. One I'd met in graduate school, another at a job, one in Boston, another in Brooklyn, one lived in Minneapolis now, another in Israel, so that I was ultimately able to enumerate some

14 people, none of whom had ever met any of the others. To imagine that they added up to a circle, an embracing and encircling structure, was a belief, I realized, that violated the laws of feeling as well as geometry. They were a set of points, and I was wandering somewhere among them. Facebook seduces us, however, into exactly that illusion, inviting us to believe that by assembling a list, we have conjured a group. Visual juxtaposition creates the mirage of emotional proximity. "It's like they're all having a conversation," a woman I know once said about her Facebook page, full of posts and comments from friends and friends of friends. "Except they're not."

Friendship is devolving, in other words, from a relationship to a feeling—from something people share to something each of us hugs privately to ourselves in the loneliness of our electronic caves, rearranging the tokens of connection like a lonely child playing with dolls. The same path was long ago trodden by community. As the traditional face-to-face community disappeared, we held on to what we had lost—the closeness, the rootedness—by clinging to the word, no matter how much we had to water down its meaning. Now we speak of the Jewish "community" and the medical "community" and the "community" of readers, even though none of them actually is one. What we have, instead of community, is, if we're lucky, a "sense" of community—the feeling without the structure; a private emotion, not a collective experience. And now friendship, which arose to its present importance as a replacement for community, is going the same way. We have "friends," just as we belong to "communities." Scanning my Facebook page gives me, precisely, a "sense" of connection. Not an actual connection, just a sense.

What purpose do all those wall posts and status updates serve? On the first beautiful weekend of spring this year, a friend posted this update from Central Park: "[So-and-so] is in the Park with the rest of the City." The first question that comes to mind is, if you're enjoying a beautiful day in the park, why don't you give your iPhone a rest? But the more important one is, why did you need to tell us that? We have always shared our little private observations and moments of feeling—it's part of what friendship's about, part of the way we remain present in one another's lives—but things are different now. Until a few years ago, you could share your thoughts with only one friend at a time (on the phone, say), or maybe with a small group, later, in person. And when you did, you were talking to specific people, and you tailored what you said, and how you said it, to who they were—their interests, their personalities, most of all, your degree of mutual intimacy. "Reach out and touch someone" meant someone in particular, someone you were actually thinking about. It meant having a conversation. Now we're just broadcasting our stream of consciousness, live from Central Park, to all 500 of our friends at once, hoping that someone, anyone, will confirm our existence by answering back. We haven't just stopped talking to our friends as individuals, at such moments, we have stopped thinking of them as individuals. We have turned them into an indiscriminate mass, a kind of audience or faceless public. We address ourselves not to a circle, but to a cloud.

It's amazing how fast things have changed. Not only don't we have Wordsworth and Coleridge anymore, we don't even have Jerry and George. Today, Ross and Chandler would be writing on each other's walls. Carrie and the girls would be posting status updates, and if they did manage to find the time for lunch, they'd be too busy checking their BlackBerrys to have a real conversation. *Sex* and *Friends* went off the air just five years ago, and already we live in a different world. Friendship (like activism) has been smoothly

integrated into our new electronic lifestyles. We're too busy to spare our friends more time than it takes to send a text. We're too busy, sending texts. And what happens when we do find the time to get together? I asked a woman I know whether her teenage daughters and their friends still have the kind of intense friendships that kids once did. Yes, she said, but they go about them differently. They still stay up talking in their rooms, but they're also online with three other friends, and texting with another three. Video chatting is more intimate, in theory, than speaking on the phone, but not if you're doing it with four people at once. And teenagers are just an early version of the rest of us. A study found that one American in four reported having no close confidants, up from one in 10 in 1985. The figures date from 2004, and there's little doubt that Facebook and texting and all the rest of it have already exacerbated the situation. The more people we know, the lonelier we get.

The new group friendship, already vitiated itself, is cannibalizing our individual friendships as the boundaries between the two blur. The most disturbing thing about Facebook is the extent to which people are willing—are eager—to conduct their private lives in public. "hola cutie-pie! i'm in town on wednesday. lunch?" "Julie, I'm so glad we're back in touch. xoxox." "Sorry for not calling, am going through a tough time right now." Have these people forgotten how to use e-mail, or do they actually prefer to stage the emotional equivalent of a public grope? I can understand "[So-and-so] is in the Park with the rest of the City," but I am incapable of comprehending this kind of exhibitionism. Perhaps I need to surrender the idea that the value of friendship lies precisely in the space of privacy it creates: not the secrets that two people exchange so much as the unique and inviolate world they build up between them, the spider web of shared discovery they spin out, slowly and carefully, together. There's something faintly obscene about performing that intimacy in front of everyone you know, as if its real purpose were to show what a deep person you are. Are we really so hungry for validation? So desperate to prove we have friends?

But surely Facebook has its benefits. Long-lost friends can reconnect, far-flung ones can stay in touch. I wonder, though. Having recently moved across the country, I thought that Facebook would help me feel connected to the friends I'd left behind. But now I find the opposite is true. Reading about the mundane details of their lives, a steady stream of trivia and ephemera, leaves me feeling both empty and unpleasantly full, as if I had just binged on junk food, and precisely because it reminds me of the real sustenance, the real knowledge, we exchange by e-mail or phone or face-to-face. And the whole theatrical quality of the business, the sense that my friends are doing their best to impersonate themselves, only makes it worse. The person I read about, I cannot help feeling, is not quite the person I know.

As for getting back in touch with old friends—yes, when they're people you really love, it's a miracle. But most of the time, they're not. They're someone you knew for a summer in camp, or a midlevel friend from high school. They don't matter to you as individuals anymore, certainly not the individuals they are now, they matter because they made up the texture of your experience at a certain moment in your life, in conjunction with all the other people you knew. Tear them out of that texture—read about their brats, look at pictures of their vacation—and they mean nothing. Tear out enough of them and you ruin the texture itself, replace a matrix of feeling and memory, the deep subsoil of experience, with a spurious sense of familiarity. Your 18-year-old self knows them. Your 40-year-old self should not know them.

Facebook holds out a utopian possibility: What once was lost will now be found. But the heaven of the past is a promised land destroyed in the reaching. Facebook, here, becomes the anti-madeleine, an eraser of memory. Carlton Fisk has remarked that he's watched the videotape of his famous World Series home run only a few times, lest it overwrite his own recollection of the event. Proust knew that memory is a skittish creature that peeks from its hole only when it isn't being sought. Mementos, snapshots, reunions, and now this—all of them modes of amnesia, foes of true remembering. The past should stay in the heart, where it belongs.

Finally, the new social-networking Web sites have falsified our understanding of intimacy itself, and with it, our understanding of ourselves. The absurd idea, bruited about in the media, that a MySpace profile or "25 Random Things About Me" can tell us more about someone than even a good friend might be aware of is based on desiccated notions about what knowing another person means: First, that intimacy is confessional—an idea both peculiarly American and peculiarly young, perhaps because both types of people tend to travel among strangers, and so believe in the instant disgorging of the self as the quickest route to familiarity. Second, that identity is reducible to information: the name of your cat, your favorite Beatle, the stupid thing you did in seventh grade. Third, that it is reducible, in particular, to the kind of information that social-networking Web sites are most interested in eliciting, consumer preferences. Forget that we're all conducting market research on ourselves. Far worse is that Facebook amplifies our longstanding tendency to see ourselves ("I'm a Skin Bracer man!") in just those terms. We wear T-shirts that proclaim our brand loyalty, pique ourselves on owning a Mac, and now put up lists of our favorite songs. "15 movies in 15 minutes. Rule: Don't take too long to think about it."

So information replaces experience, as it has throughout our culture. But when I think about my friends, what makes them who they are, and why I love them, it is not the names of their siblings that come to mind, or their fear of spiders. It is their qualities of character. This one's emotional generosity, that one's moral seriousness, the dark humor of a third. Yet even those are just descriptions, and no more specify the individuals uniquely than to say that one has red hair, another is tall. To understand what they really look like, you would have to see a picture. And to understand who they really are, you would have to hear about the things they've done. Character, revealed through action: the two eternal elements of narrative. In order to know people, you have to listen to their stories.

But that is precisely what the Facebook page does not leave room for, or 500 friends, time for. Literally does not leave room for. E-mail, with its rapid-fire etiquette and scrolling format, already trimmed the letter down to a certain acceptable maximum, perhaps a thousand words. Now, with Facebook, the box is shrinking even more, leaving perhaps a third of that length as the conventional limit for a message, far less for a comment. (And we all know the deal on Twitter.) The 10-page missive has gone the way of the buggy whip, soon to be followed, it seems, by the three-hour conversation. Each evolved as a space for telling stories, an act that cannot usefully be accomplished in much less. Posting information is like pornography, a slick, impersonal exhibition. Exchanging stories is like making love: probing, questing, questioning, caressing. It is mutual. It is intimate. It takes patience, devotion, sensitivity, subtlety, skill—and it teaches them all, too.

**They call them social-networking sites for a reason. Networking once meant something specific: climbing the jungle gym of professional contacts in order to advance your career. The truth is that Hume and Smith were not completely right. Commercial society did not eliminate the self-interested aspects of making friends and influencing people, it just changed the way we went about it. Now, in the age of the entrepreneurial self, even our closest relationships are being pressed onto this template. A recent book on the sociology of modern science describes a networking event at a West Coast university: "There do not seem to be any singletons—disconsolately lurking at the margins—nor do dyads appear, except fleetingly." No solitude, no friendship, no space for refusal—the exact contemporary paradigm. At the same time, the author assures us, "face time" is valued in this "community" as a "high-bandwidth interaction," offering "unusual capacity for interruption, repair, feedback and learning." Actual human contact, rendered "unusual" and weighed by the values of a systems engineer. We have given our hearts to machines, and now we are turning into machines. The face of friendship in the new century.**