

Social Media, Eating Disorders, and Ethics

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Social media sites have been criticized for illuminating and exacerbating the prevalence of mental illnesses. For instance, Instagram use has been linked to orthorexia nervosa, an eating disorder commonly comorbid with anorexia nervosa and characterized by an obsession with healthy food.¹ Eating disorder survivors cite Instagram's manipulated "perfect" reality and the commodification of oneself for a desire to strive for unattainable perfection, which in turn results in the formation of self-destructive habits and behaviors.² Some platforms like Tumblr and Twitter have garnered attention from their sizable "pro-ana", or pro-anorexia communities, which consist of a collection of users who use social media to spread content that encourages and normalizes eating disorders as a lifestyle rather than an illness.³ Social media platforms are not themselves responsible for eating disorders, but they have been used in a way that is not technomorally sound and thus has resulted in an exacerbation of the problem.

Relational understanding is characterized by three main aspects: the pursuit of an understanding of how one is linked to other members of their moral community, a continued effort to improve one's understanding of these relationships and the moral obligations and concerns that come with them, and the use of this understanding to respond morally to these obligations and concerns in particular circumstances.⁴ This is crucial to the cultivation of a technologically virtuous society because it urges us to think in a broader context of community rather than simply thinking of ourselves. Our own identities are formed through our relationships

¹ Turner, Pixie G., and Carmen E. Lefevre. "Instagram Use Is Linked to Increased Symptoms of Orthorexia Nervosa." *Eating and Weight Disorders - Studies on Anorexia, Bulimia and Obesity* 22, no. 2 (March 1, 2017): 277–84. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40519-017-0364-2>.

² Ladin, Brittany. "How Instagram Encouraged My Eating Disorder." HuffPost. Verizon Media, November 1, 2016. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/how-instagram-encouraged-my-eating-disorder_b_5818e9a6e4b01fffa751fa2b.

³ Branley, Dawn B., and Judith Covey. "Pro-Ana versus Pro-Recovery: A Content Analytic Comparison of Social Media Users' Communication about Eating Disorders on Twitter and Tumblr." *Frontiers in Psychology* 8 (November 2017). <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2017.01356>.

⁴ Vallor, Shannon. *Technology and the Virtues: A Philosophical Guide to a Future Worth Wanting*. New York, NY, United States of America: Oxford University Press, 201, 83.

with others⁵, which means that it is important to do the best we can to foster relationships that are compassionate and beneficial for all involved because, in turn, these relationships help foster a broader society in which people are empathetic and caring. Moral concern is simply the decision to do well for others.⁶ Technosocially, an individual could illustrate moral concern by making the decision not to post something that may trigger someone else's eating disorder rather than merely worrying about the posts' potential impact. If the normative social influence is for each individual to care about those aside from themselves, others will extend that same care to them. New technologies have given us the capacity for expansive and instant communication.⁷ As our community and relationships expand beyond our immediate physical vicinity, we cannot detach ourselves from the relational and social contexts of our world and must both consider the moral concerns and obligations that we have to one another.

If we care only about ourselves, we fail to cultivate other virtues that are necessary to live technomorally. Technomoral empathy requires us to be morally moved by the needs of others in our technosocial environment⁸, while technomoral care goes a step beyond: an attentive and emotionally responsive nature to personally *meet* those needs.⁹ In order to be technomorally virtuous, it is not enough to consider and take action based on how our online presence impacts us; we must also consider how we impact others and act accordingly to promote their wellbeing. Because networking platforms are social by definition, the impact of online content ripples beyond the poster. Posts that promote eating disorders have negative psychological impacts on virtually all who come across them and can be especially triggering for those with pre-existing

⁵ Vallor, 76.

⁶ Vallor, 114.

⁷ Vallor, 161.

⁸ Vallor, 133.

⁹ Vallor, 138.

EDs.¹⁰ The use of technology to promote others to engage in unhealthy behaviors and patterns is clearly *not* a way to live well in our community and reflects a lack of relational understanding and technomoral care, as these users do not consider their moral obligation to and impact on the wellbeing of others within their technosocial community.

Eating disorders are characterized by denial, so those afflicted may themselves feel as though they are living well both ethically and in lifestyle and may not believe there is anything “wrong” with them, despite their overall disordered and unhealthy behaviors. Thus, they may believe that promoting their condition online is technomorally sound. However, human flourishing on social media is not curtailed by personal feelings of happiness and life satisfaction¹¹, because human flourishing is relational and requires living well with one another, not simply living well as an individual. So while those who partake in the “pro-ana” movement may themselves feel personally happy and satisfied with their condition and actions, that is not sufficient criteria to consider their use of technology to count as living well. In addition, users who engage in posting this content are failing to cultivate the techomoral virtue of self control. Technomoral self-control requires the ability to choose and desire that which will contribute most to human flourishing.¹² While one may desire to promote eating disorders online, this particular use of social media is detrimental to the overall health and wellbeing of both the poster and anyone else who may engage with the post. Since the individual in question is choosing to promote something that has a negative impact on their and others’ general welfare, they are not contributing to human flourishing and are thus not practicing technomoral self control.

¹⁰ Branley.

¹¹ Vallor, 161.

¹² Vallor, 123.

Many eating disorder survivors talk about the ways in which social media impacted their self esteem and, some believe, made them more susceptible to their illness.¹³ Social media allows people to post only the best aspects of their lives, which has resulted in a digital sphere that is distorted because it does not reflect the totality of our physical world. This distortion can artificially deflate our self-esteem because everyone else's lives seem to be perfect while we know ours are not.¹⁴ When we hinge our self-esteem and sense of well-being on "social capital", or social support¹⁵, in the form of likes and online attention, we also risk engaging in competition with others. This competition can stem from perceptions that social capital is scarce: more for others must mean that less is available for ourselves.

This competition leads to heightened individualism rather than a sense of community: we feel as though we can either meet our own needs *or* the needs of someone else, and choose ourselves rather than recognizing that our needs are intertwined with and similar to those around us. Individualism prompts us to place our own interests above all else. This poses a barrier to the cultivation of relational understanding, as relational understanding requires that one not only understands their relationships with and moral obligations to others, but that one must use this understanding to meet these obligations. Since individualism unilaterally prioritizes the individual's wants and needs over their relationships and the more robust needs of the community, an individualist would choose an action that benefits them, even if it came at the expense of others. This indicates that they would not be moved to uphold their responsibility to their greater community. This tendency toward individualism and feelings of competition are technomorally unsound because they are counterproductive to cultivating a global community in

¹³ Ladin.

¹⁴ Vallor, 173.

¹⁵ Vallor, 160.

which we feel obligated and able to live well with others. After all, how can we live well with one another if we feel as though we are pitted against one another, and are predominantly compelled to look out for our own self interests?

Our use of social media presently intensifies the prevalence of eating disorders, but that does not mean that social media is inherently technomorally unsound; it is merely a tool we can use as an extension of ourselves. In some ways, moral cultivation and ethical use of social media have already begun, and social media is used in positive and virtuous ways: the same platforms that house pro-ana movements also house pro-recovery movements.¹⁶ Many individuals have begun to promote body positivity, which encourages people to appreciate their bodies as they are rather than trying to alter them. This movement demonstrates care and empathy: the individuals involved recognized that there was an issue within their technosocial community and began to take action to improve the self-esteem and overall wellbeing of others. Some social media “influencers” exhibit technosocial honesty by admitting to the ways in which their photos are curated, which begins to shine some light on the veil that distorts online reality. These efforts are steps to undo the negative impacts of the ways the social media has been used, which demonstrates technosocial empathy and care in the form of recognizing and taking action to meet the needs of others. While technomorally unsound use of social media has exacerbated societal issues like eating disorders, it can also be a powerful tool to solve these problems through cultivation of technomoral virtues like care, honesty, and empathy.

Plainly, social media is not the cause of our societal issues: we are. We get to choose how to use social media, which reflects the importance of cultivating technomoral virtue within

¹⁶ Branley.

ourselves: if we foster the development of these virtues, we are fostering a future in which technology is best utilized to promote human flourishing. In addition to fostering relational understanding and cultivating care, empathy, and self-control-- virtues absent from competition-driven individualism and the pro-ana movement-- we must also learn to practice virtues like technomoral honesty, which requires us to respect and express the truth in online contexts. We can use social media to educate ourselves and others, to call attention to issues beyond the mainstream, and to connect with one another, just like we can use social media to spread misinformation and attack each other.

Works Cited

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