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Published online: 09 Dec 2025.

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Social media friendship and moral development: A Mencian (or Confucian) defense

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ABSTRACT

'Social media friendships (friends)' refer to relationships formed between users of websites and technological applications. Some studies have explored the implications of adapting this cherished and familiar concept of friendship into this new medium, focusing mainly on the Aristotelian framework and questioning whether such friendships can be considered genuine or virtuous. In this paper, I revisit the question of whether social media friendships can be regarded as morally valuable or whether they can contribute to moral development. My overarching argument is that forming morally valuable friendships on social media is possible, as such relationships can also contribute to moral development. To support this view, I draw an analogy from Mencius' assertion in *Mengzi* 5B8, which suggests that befriending the ancients through their works or texts can provide opportunities for moral development. I also discuss the implications of distant, one-directional friendships and private cultivation or learning.

Introduction

Broadly speaking, 'social media' encompasses 'websites and technological applications that allow its users to share content and/or to participate in social networking' (Leyrer-Jackson & Wilson, 2017, p. 222). The concept of friendship has also been attached to this medium, giving rise to the term 'social media friendships (or friends)'. These friends typically refer to users who have been accepted or granted permission to view one's profile, wall, posts, or updates. Moreover, the adaptation of this cherished and familiar concept of friendship into a new medium has prompted scholars to explore its implications.

Previous studies have examined social media friendships through the lens of the Aristotelian theory of friendship and other related concepts. Their inquiry focused on whether social media friendships can be considered genuine or virtuous—meaning friendships that are morally valuable or capable of promoting moral development (see *NE* 1156b7-12).[1] However, scholars still diverge in their claims despite their shared references to Aristotle. On the one hand, Shannon Vallor and Alexis Elder presented

a positive claim. Vallor (2012) argued that social media can support friendship by facilitating the four dimensions of virtuous friendship: reciprocity, empathy, self-knowledge, and shared life. However, she clarified that social media can merely supplement, not replace, face-to-face interactions. In defending social media as a potential support for virtuous friendship, Elder (2014) pointed out its role in shared life, where friends can communicate, discuss ideas, and even engage in entertainment or games. On the other hand, Barbro Fröding, Martin Peterson, and Robert Sharp presented a negative claim. For Fröding and Peterson (2012), social media or virtual friendships cannot be considered genuine or morally valuable. They suggested that the various levels of control within virtual interactions hinder the realization of Aristotelian ideals such as *theoria* or contemplation, love, and admiration, which are essential to friendship. Similarly, Sharp (2012) contended that virtuous friendship could not be attained on social media because the essential component—shared love of virtue—cannot be cultivated on such platforms. However, he stated that social media may still facilitate other types of friendship, such as those based on utility or pleasure. These aforementioned studies, focusing on the Aristotelian framework, also emphasized mutuality and reciprocity as core elements of their analyses (see *NE* 1155b32-1156a5).

In this paper, I revisit the question of whether social media friendships can be regarded as morally valuable. By morally valuable, I refer to the idea that friendship can contribute to moral development—specifically, 'the possibility of learning and increasing one's goodness or changing for the better through the influence, example, or excellence of friends' (Cabural, 2023; also see, p. 822; Friedman, 1989, p. 10). My overarching argument is that forming morally valuable friendships on social media is possible, as such relationships can also contribute to moral development. To support this view, I draw an analogy from Mencius' assertion in *Mengzi* 5B8, which suggests that befriending the ancients through their works or texts can provide valuable opportunities for moral development. In contrast to the aforementioned studies that follow Aristotle's emphasis on reciprocity, mutuality, or shared life in friendship, I focus on the implications of distant, one-directional friendships and private cultivation or learning. In the next section, I will discuss the nuances and qualifications of social media friendships. In addition to the *Book of Mencius* (孟子 *Mengzi*), I also draw significantly from the *Analects* (论语 *Lunyu*), which is the more well-known and earlier Confucian text.[2]

Exploring the types of friendship in Confucianism

The most clearly defined types of friendship in early Confucian texts can be found in *Analects* 16.4, which states:

> Confucius said, 'Beneficial types of friendship number three, as do harmful types of friendship. Befriending the upright, those who are true to their word, or those of broad learning—these are the beneficial types of friendship. Befriending clever flatterers, skillful dissemblers, or the smoothly glib—these are the harmful types of friendship'.

This typology, classifying friends as either beneficial or harmful, arises from the understanding that friendships are important for moral development.[3] It serves as a reminder that friends can either support or hinder one's moral development. Additionally, it can be said that since friendship is highly viewed as essential for

moral development, individuals who negatively impact this development should not even be called friends.

In addition to the types of friendship outlined in the *Analects*, it is possible to develop another typology of friendship by drawing from both the *Analects* and the *Book of Mencius*. This typology is based on the mode of connection or interaction between friends, depending on their circumstances to approach or communicate with each other. Given the central role of friendship in moral development, this typology can also be understood in relation to or in terms of its impact on moral development. In other words, moral development also occurs within these two types of friends according to the mode of connection. I propose to refer to them as direct (or proximate) friendship and distant friendship.

Direct friendship is characterized by the physical connection, interaction, and communication between friends. Such relationships may involve living together, depending on one another, or observing each other's lives. The friendships described in *Analects* 16.4 exemplify this concept, where the primary indicators of whether friends are beneficial or harmful lie in their spoken words. This concept of direct friendship is also illustrated in *Analects* 1.1, which highlights the joy derived from having friends who come from afar, emphasizing their importance in discussing and mastering what one has learned.[4] In *Mengzi* 1B6, a scenario is recounted in which a heavy responsibility is entrusted to a friend, who is expected to care for another friend's wife and children. This demonstrates the reliance one can place on a friend. However, the passage takes a negative turn, recounting a disappointing situation in which the friend fails to fulfill this entrusted duty, ultimately providing grounds for dismissing the relationship.

The most significant aspect or purpose of direct friendship in their interactions is the mutual demand for goodness. This highlights the role of a friend as a moral guide, helping to realign one's ideals when they deviate from the right path. This concept is clearly articulated in *Mengzi* 4B30, which states, 'To demand goodness is the Way of friends'. A similar idea can also be found in several passages of the *Analects*. For instance, three passages illustrate this:

> Ziyou said, 'Being overbearing in service to a lord will lead to disgrace, while in relating to friends and companions it will lead to estrangement'.[5]

> Zigong asked about friendship. The Master replied, 'Reprove your friend when dutifulness requires, but do so gently. If your words are not accepted then desist, lest you incur insult'.[6]

> Zilu asked, 'What does a person have to be like to be considered a true scholar-official?' The Master replied, 'He must be earnest and critical, but also affable—earnest and critical with his friends, and affable with his brothers'.[7]

In these passages, demanding goodness—often expressed through criticism or reproach—is considered a fundamental duty of a friend. They also stress the importance of fulfilling this duty with gentleness, avoiding excess or overbearing behavior. Elsewhere, I have argued that this demand for goodness is connected to speech, as it entails instructing a friend through the use of words (Cabural, 2025). Thus, interaction is essential; without communication, the demand for goodness may not emerge at all.

In the *Analects*, the advice is to avoid befriending those who are not your equals. In passages 1.8 and 9.25, it states, 'do not accept as a friend one who is not your equal'.

Equality is a crucial element of friendship and plays a significant role in the mutual demand for goodness. Friends should share the same moral motivations; without this common ground, the relationship cannot thrive and will fail to promote moral development. If friends lack an equal or shared aspiration for moral development, they may misinterpret each other's demands for goodness, ultimately undermining the friendship.

Regarding distant friendship, I derived this concept from Mencius.[8] In *Mengzi* 5B8:

> Mengzi said to his disciple Wan Zhang, 'If you are one of the finest nobles in a village, then befriend the other fine nobles of that village. If you are one of the finest nobles in a state, then befriend the other fine nobles of that state. If you are one of the finest nobles in the world, then befriend the other fine nobles of the world. If befriending the other fine nobles of the world is still not enough, then ascend to examine the ancients. Recite their *Odes* and read their *Documents*. But can you do this without understanding what sort of people they were? Because of this, you must examine their era. This is how friendship ascends'.

This passage shows two types of friendship: direct friendship, formed through interactions within one's village, state, or the wider world, and distant friendship, where connections are established through a medium. Mencius affirmed the possibility of befriending the ancients by engaging with their texts, illustrating how literature can serve as a medium for forming such relationships. He also maintained the importance of equality in both direct and distant friendships, specifically noting that only those who possess virtue or goodness can truly befriend one another. In another passage, Mencius further elaborates, stating, 'One does not become someone's friend by presuming upon one's age or social status or family relationship. One befriends the Virtue of another person. There may not be anything else one presumes upon' (*Mengzi* 5B3).

The primary distinction between direct and distant friendships is that direct friendship allows physical connection, interaction, and communication, while distant friendship rely solely on a specific medium. Because of temporal and physical separation, distant friends are unable to meet. Furthermore, communication in this context is one-sided: one can read or observe but does not receive responses or engage in dialogue. The notion of reciprocity, which is central to direct friendship, will be discussed in more detail later.

Social media friendships bear a resemblance to the concept of distant friendship derived from Mencius. Just as ancient texts serve as a medium for forming friendships with the ancients, social media enables individuals to befriend others by viewing their profiles, walls, posts, or updates. It is important to clarify what I mean by social media friendship. While it can facilitate friendships that begin in the physical world and continued online, social media also allows for the possibility of befriending individuals one has never met—and may never meet—in real life. Although it is possible to interact with others both online and offline, my focus here is on the more limited connections formed through merely befriending, following, or subscribing to someone in the virtual realm. For example, on platforms like Instagram, YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter, users can become mere spectators or followers rather than active participants in a friendship. This similarity is what interests me: both the concept of distant friendship derived from Mencius and social media friendships share the capacity to form connections without direct interaction. Just as one can befriend an ancient through their texts, one can also befriend others through their social media presence.

Despite their resemblance, there are notable differences between distant friendship and friendships formed through social media. First, in distant friendship, one can befriend historical figures or well-known individuals from the past, while social media allows for connections with living individuals who may or may not be famous. Furthermore, in distant friendship, there is no possibility for interaction or response, as those who can be befriended are from the past. In contrast, social media enables potential interactions such as sending likes or comments that both parties can see. However, my focus here remains on the dynamic of one party simply observing the other. Additionally, those who can be befriended in distant friendship are often moral exemplars recognized for their credibility, while social media friendships may not involve individuals of such moral stature. As we delve into the topic of morality, the next section will examine how moral development occurs in both distant and social media friendships. Throughout this discussion, further differences between the concept of distant friendship derived from Mencius and social media friendships will emerge.

Private cultivation: Moral development in distant and social media friendships

Distant friendships also contribute to moral development, but in a different way than the demand for goodness found in direct friendships. Unlike direct friendships, where one can directly criticize, reprove, or remind a friend to do good, distant friendships lack this interactive component. As *Mengzi* 5B8 affirms the possibility of befriending the ancients through their texts, moral development occurs through the study of these texts. This form of learning is referred to as private cultivation, as there is no opportunity for direct communication or criticism. In *Mengzi* 7A40, private cultivation is identified as one of the ways a gentleman can impart learning or instruction to others.[9]

In Confucianism, learning is said to consist of two aspects: learning or *xue* (学) and reflecting (thinking) or *si* (思). This is illustrated in *Analects* 2.15, where Confucius states: 'If you learn without thinking [or reflecting] about what you have learned, you will be lost. If you think [reflect] without learning, however, you will fall into danger'. This passage suggests that both aspects are essential for true learning to take place. Karyn Lai (2008, p. 97) describes these two aspects in the following: 'While *xue* relates to observing, gathering, and collating of details of past and current practices and beliefs, *si* is reflective, requiring a person to stand back, as it were, from received information'. In her discussion, Lai references *Mengzi* and *Xunzi* (荀子), in addition to the *Analects*. *Xue* can be considered passive, as it involves learning from others or external sources, while *si* is proactive, requiring the learner to actively reflect on what they have learned and how it affects them.

My contention here is that the private cultivation that occurs in distant friendship requires both aspects of learning to ensure moral development. In other words, as Mencius highlights the importance of moral development in friendship through learning from the texts and excellence of the ancients, both *xue* and *si* are necessary for this process.

First, *xue* is evident in the advice of Mencius to befriend the ancients through their texts —whether by reciting (颂 *song*) or reading (读 *du*) the texts—or more broadly, by learning from the past. In Confucianism, the past plays a very important role. For instance, in *Analects* 7.1, Confucius states, 'I transmit rather than innovate. I trust in and love the

ancient ways. I might thus humbly compare myself to Old Peng'. Mencius also upheld this trust and love for the past or the ancient ways, frequently referencing it to elucidate how to govern wisely. In *Mengzi* 4A1, for example, he asserts: 'No one has ever gone wrong by honoring the laws of the Former Kings . . . If one governs but does not follow the Way of the Former Kings, can one be called wise?'

What is particularly noteworthy is that Mencius specifically mentioned the *Odes* (诗经 *Shijing*) and the *Documents* (书经 *Shujing*) as texts or classics that one must study in order to befriend the ancients. These two classics are part of the Five Confucian Classics or canon (五经 *Wujing*). Michael Nylan aptly describes their significance in the following: 'These texts associated with the Supreme Sage, Confucius, were thought to set the pattern of what it was to become a fully developed human being, and also the principles that allowed for the complex and interrelated processes of political, social, and cultural reproduction' (Nylan, 2001, p. 2). Hence, they are indispensable to the holistic development of individuals. Mencius utilized the *Odes* and the *Documents* to illustrate correct political and moral behavior, providing guidance on how to live one's life, how to interact with others, and cultivate oneself.[10] For the *Odes*, he referred to it to give advice on how to be a benevolent ruler and effectively engage with people.[11] He also used the *Odes* to discuss the path of a gentleman as well as ideas related to human nature and virtue.[12] In terms of the *Documents*, Mencius referenced historical narratives to provide examples for rulers or to serve as warnings.[13] Additionally, there were instances where he cited passages from the *Documents* to guide individuals, such as the example of the filial son Shun and principles of gift-giving.[14] In a nutshell, Mencius demonstrates how one can learn, or *xue*, from the past by drawing upon examples and insights from earlier texts to become a better person and enhance relationships with others.

Second is regarding *si* or reflection. In *Mengzi* 5B8, the reflection aspect is implied in the latter part of the passage, where Mencius advised caution in reading ancient texts or, in general, in befriending the ancients. To reiterate, he states, 'But can you do this without understanding [*zhi*] what sort of people they were? Because of this, you must examine [*lun*] their era'. Being critical is an essential part of reflection.[15] The terms *zhi* (知) and *lun* (论) imply a critical approach: *zhi* means to 'appreciate' or 'rightly recognize and value true quality', while *lun* means to 'discuss critically, debate or weigh the merits of' (Kroll, 2015, pp. 604, 289). Being reflective, or critical, involves not simply accepting information at face value but contemplating a subject more deeply.

There seem to be two main reasons why we need to reflect or critically assess the texts, the past, or any received information. On the one hand, the past or any material as a source of information must not be accepted uncritically, as it may contain faults or need to be re-evaluated in light of the present context. This requires the active engagement of the reader or learner in approaching the text, making the process not merely passive as in *xue*. It is important to understand that, despite their reverence for the past, the Confucians did not view it as infallible or perfect. The past, therefore, does not have to be followed in its entirety. Even Confucius, who sought to transmit the wisdom of the past, allowed for innovation (*Analects* 7.1). In *Analects* 2.11, he states, 'Both keeping past teachings alive and understanding the present—someone able to do this is worthy of being a teacher'. Here, Confucius emphasized the need to balance the past with the present. As Lai (2008, p. 114) puts it, the *Analects* 'draws from the past so that its useful aspects may be integrated into current situations'. Furthermore, there can be faults in ancient texts, as

Mencius pointed out regarding the *Documents*. In *Mengzi* 7B3, he says, 'It would be better not to have the Documents than to believe everything in it'. Not everything contained in the *Documents* should be trusted, which presupposes a critical attitude towards sources. This caution applies not only to the texts or records but also to the exemplary figures of the past, the sages, who, despite their wisdom, were morally fallible. In his recent article, Thorian Harris (2023, pp. 56–58) highlights the moral fallibility of the sages and discusses that the ideal is not moral perfection but the 'love of learning' (好学 *haoxue*). This love of learning is what should be emulated.

On the other hand, reflection is not solely about evaluating the accuracy of what is stated in texts or identifying faults, but also about understanding how it affects or influences oneself and others. As Lai (2008, p. 114) notes:

> *Si*, reflection, is an integral concept in early Confucian philosophy. The concept expresses the importance of reflective contemplation and critical thinking in ordinary life. In reflecting on one's experiences and those of others in the past, one engages in the ethical life of society at the meta-ethical level, and not merely at the normative level. For an individual to engage in reflection of this sort is to establish some critical distance from prevailing norms.

I suggest that when Mencius cautioned to reflect and critically engage with the texts or classics, it served a deeper purpose beyond mere analysis—the ultimate goal being how they can aid in moral development. For example, recognizing that even the revered ancients, known for their goodness or virtue, were morally fallible can be encouraging. Like them, we can emulate their love of learning, understanding that the pursuit of a morally good life is an ongoing process. Being reflective and critical also involves discerning what is appropriate in specific circumstances. Take the case of Shun: although the *Odes* prescribed a particular course of action, he carefully weighed his situation (*Mengzi* 5A2). Mencius reflected on this, explaining Shun's decision not to follow the ritual, implying the wisdom in knowing when to adapt tradition to personal or specific circumstances (also see Van Norden, 2024).

In the previous section, equality—i.e. having the same moral sentiment or shared goals for moral development—is central to direct friendship, as it plays a crucial role in the mutual demand for goodness that drives moral development. The question arises whether this kind of equality also applies in distant friendships. However, it is first important to distinguish the contexts in which Confucius and Mencius mention equality in friendship. In *Analects* 1.8 and 9.25, Confucius seems to suggest that the advice to seek equal friends is meant for everyone, regardless of status. In *Mengzi* 5B8, however, this advice appears to be directed more specifically toward nobles or scholars (士 *shi*). I propose that even though Mencius' advice is aimed at a particular group of people— i.e. fine or virtuous nobles should seek out others of their kind—it seems possible that this guidance could also apply more broadly. Friendship is considered one of the fundamental human relationships, suggesting that all people should be discerning in choosing their friends (*Mengzi* 3A4). Therefore, everyone must seek friends who are equally virtuous or share the same goals for moral development. In distant friendship, no matter how good or virtuous the distant friend (e.g. a text or a historical figure) may be, if one does not possess the goal or disposition toward goodness, moral development will not be achieved. Hence, as long as there is a shared commitment to moral development, even distant friendships can be powerful enough to foster such development.

Thus far, moral development in distant friendship involves not only learning from the past or from distant others but also empowering the self as the ultimate arbiter of what is learned. This emphasizes the individual's ability to reflect, be critical, and discern what can contribute to personal moral development, a process that takes place in private cultivation. Additionally, the concept of equality is considered: while individuals may differ in their level of goodness, or some may be morally superior, everyone has the potential and capacity to pursue goodness, provided there is a willingness to do so. These insights help us understand how social media friendships, similar to distant friendships, can also foster moral development.

On social media, people can learn from the posts and insights shared by others. When individuals share their experiences and thoughts, they provide material that others can learn from. Some social media content is specifically aimed at inspiring or teaching valuable lessons. As one study confirms, 'social media is an educational tool for people in societies to teach each other about social norms, moral standards, and ethical behaviors' (Neumann & Rhodes, 2024, p. 1097). However, unlike the ancients to be befriended through their texts, those sharing on social media are not presumed to be morally superior. In fact, some are prominent simply because of their large followings, not necessarily their moral integrity. Despite the fact that people often curate what they post, these posts are not guaranteed to offer moral guidance in the same way ancient texts might. This means that a critical and discerning attitude is essential for the social media friend, viewer, or follower. Moral learning on social media involves not only learning from the good things shared but also from observing the negative aspects. Filtering contents with a critical mindset is crucial.

The idea of equality is prominent on social media. In fact, the Internet is viewed as a platform that provides equal opportunities for people to express themselves and engage with others. As Kaliarnta (2016, p. 70) describes, 'the Internet becomes "leveling field" factor'. Bülow and Felix (2016, p. 23) also point out 'that people who are not equals and so cannot be genuine friends in the physical world can be genuine friends and equals within a purely virtual context'. In my above discussion, I explored the importance of having equal or shared goals in moral development between friends. It is also important to note that Mencius emphasized the goodness of human nature (*Mengzi* 6A6). While it can be argued that all social media users share the same human nature or disposition to be good, we cannot always trust their goals or motives. This is why being critical or carefully filtering information gathered from social media is crucial in private cultivation or learning.

Moreover, the sense of equal opportunity that individuals find on social media is often lacking in traditional societal structures due to hierarchical relationships. This equality plays a vital role in the learning process. On social media, individuals not only have an equal chance to learn from others but can also contribute their own knowledge. This dynamic fosters confidence by reinforcing the idea that everyone has the capacity to learn and develop with the support of others, while also having the potential to influence them. In contrast, in hierarchical face-to-face settings, power dynamics can stifle learning, causing individuals to accept information passively rather than engage in reflective thinking. Therefore, the sense of equality in online platforms provides an opportunity to reflection and critical engagement.

Distant friendship as a one-directional relationship

Elsewhere, I have argued that friendship in Confucianism is a reciprocal relationship, drawing on Sor-hoon Tan's discussion of friendship in relation to learning or *xue* (Caburai, 2025). Tan explains that learning and teaching are complementary, suggesting that in friendship, one not only teaches but also learns from the other (Tan, 2001, pp. 118–119). This reciprocity in Confucian friendship may apply primarily to direct friendships, where mutual exchange is essential. Reciprocity facilitates the flow of the relationship, as both friends benefit from it. In such relationships, friends can demand goodness from each other as part of their duty toward mutual moral development.

In the case of distant friendship as described by Mencius, it is not a reciprocal relationship but a one-directional one. This is because there is no way for the mutual demand for goodness to emerge. When one befriends or reads the works of the ancients, one can improve oneself but not the other or the ancient author. In private cultivation, while the texts may demand or inspire one to become a better person, they cannot inspire the deceased author to improve.

One might say that distant friendship is reciprocal in the sense that, through interpretation or the hermeneutic process, readers expand the meaning of the text, giving it new life as they engage with it. However, this does not make the relationship truly reciprocal. While the text may be expanded, the author, who is befriended, cannot be influenced, as they are already deceased. The text merely serves as a medium for this friendship, creating a one-directional relationship.

I further suggest that distant friendship is a secondary form of friendship, subordinate to direct friendship. However, this does not imply that people of the present or current generation are morally superior to the ancients. In fact, Confucians often regarded people of the past as moral exemplars, superior to those of their own time. This, however, is a separate issue. What I aim to emphasize here is that distant friendship is considered secondary due to the physical distance between friends. The reciprocal engagement or direct exchange of demanding goodness, which is essential to direct friendship, is absent in distant friendship. Moreover, the structure of *Mengzi* 5B8 suggests a progression in friendship: one should first befriend those who are near and approachable, and, when seeking further moral guidance, turn to the ancients through their works.

Hall and Ames (1998, p. 268) argue that 'for Confucians, friendship is a one-directional relationship in which one extends oneself by association with one who has attained a higher level of realization'. They also mentioned that Confucius can only be friends with historical figures and no one else (Hall & Ames, 1998, p. 266). This interpretation, however, risks oversimplification, and the broader generalization may be unwarranted. While I acknowledge that there are instances of one-directionality in Confucian friendship, not all concepts or discussions of friendship within Confucianism are one-directional. For example, befriending the ancients through their texts exemplifies a one-directional friendship. Similarly, there is a passage in which a friend must bury another who has died and has no family to fulfill this duty. This act is not reciprocated by the deceased friend, making it one-directional; however, it can certainly be carried out by another friend if the situation calls for it (*Analects* 10.15). In contrast, one-directionality does not apply to direct friendship, which entails

reciprocity in the demand for goodness, trust, and the complementary relationship between teaching and learning.

Social media friendships can be both reciprocal and one-directional. Reciprocal friendships involve interaction through the medium, such as using messaging applications to communicate without meeting in person. This dynamic can also manifest when social media serves as an extension of real-life friendships, allowing friends to maintain their connections. On the other hand, one-directional social media friendships, which are the primary focus of this paper, occur when individuals befriend others on social media by passively observing their posts or content. This relationship is considered one-directional because it involves merely spectating and learning from the online friend without any active engagement.

Similar to the secondary status of distant friendship as described by Mencius, one-directional social media friendships are also secondary to real-life or direct friendships. They are considered secondary due to the absence of reciprocity and the distance that separates individuals. Additionally, they can be viewed as supplementary. This means that online friends can help fill the gaps left by direct friends, which should not be seen negatively; rather, it acknowledges that everyone has limitations and may not be able to provide every form of support or learning to a friend. Online friendships can also benefit individuals who are hesitant or uncomfortable with real-life interactions, allowing them to connect with others and expand their knowledge. In this sense, social media friendships supplement the fundamental human need to learn from others.

Conclusion

In this paper, I affirmed the potential value of social media in fostering distant friendships that contribute to moral development. This claim, however, does not overlook the problems that arise within social media, such as its misuse for online deception and hate speech, which hinder the very moral purpose I described. Much still needs to be discussed about how to ensure that, while social media serves the betterment of humankind, it does not compromise morals or diminish the opportunities for learning it can provide. By analyzing the concept of distant friendship as presented in Confucianism—particularly in the text of Mencius—and in line with the Confucian understanding of friendship as a means to moral development, I showed that it is also possible to learn from online friends, though this may require careful filtering and critical reflection.

While both distant friendship and social media friendship are secondary or supplementary, they can nonetheless play a significant role in achieving the broader goals of friendship. I emphasized how social media users can leverage these platforms to improve themselves and become better individuals. Alongside the responsibility of users, it is equally important to stress the role of social media designers and creators in shaping these platforms into spaces that cultivate meaningful human relationships. Finally, while there are mixed sentiments about the impact of social media on our lives, it is crucial to remember the benefits that these tools and new mediums can offer—especially their potential to support the very moral purpose I have described.

Notes

1. In this article, I used W.D. Ross's translation of *Nicomachean Ethics* in Aristotle (2001).
2. I used the following translations in this article: for the *Book of Mencius*, Van Norden (2008); for the *Analects*, Slingerland (2003).
3. In Confucianism, friendship is closely linked to moral development. This connection is, for instance, evident in how friendship is associated with *ren* (仁), the most important or fundamental Confucian virtue. As *Analects* 12.24 states, 'The gentleman acquires friends by means of cultural refinement, and then relies upon his friends for support in becoming Good [*ren*]'.
4. See Edward Slingerland's commentary on this passage in his translation, where he cites or alludes to Li Chong. It is also noteworthy that one of the characters associated with friendship, *peng* (朋), is explained to 'refer to people coming through the "same door" of a school' (Wang, 2017, p. 32).
5. Analects 4.26.
6. *Analects* 12.23
7. *Analects* 13.28
8. Hall & Ames (1998, p. 266), citing the same passage from the *Mengzi*, describe this type of friendship as 'friends in history'.
9. *Mengzi* 7A40: 'There are five means by which a gentleman instructs others. There is transforming them like timely rain. There is bringing their Virtue to completion. There is developing their talent. There is question and answer. There is private cultivation. These five are the means by which a gentleman instructs'. In his commentary on this passage, Bryan W. Van Norden describes private cultivation as an indirect form of learning from the teachings and examples of a gentleman. He further relates private cultivation to how Mencius learned from Confucius, whom he did not have the opportunity to meet in person, citing *Mengzi* 4B22, which states: Mengzi said, 'A gentleman's influence lasts five generations and is cut off. Likewise, a petty person's influence lasts five generations and is cut off. I did not succeed in being Kongzi's disciple. I was improved by others'.
10. The *Odes* was also explicitly described by Confucius as an important text in moral development. In *Analects* 17.9: The Master said, 'Little Ones, why do none of you learn the Odes? The Odes can be a source of inspiration and a basis for evaluation; they can help you to come together with others, as well as to properly express complaints. In the home, they teach you about how to serve your father, and in public life they teach you about how to serve your lord. They also broadly acquaint you with the names of various birds, beasts, plants, and trees'.
11. For examples, see *Mengzi* 1A2, 1A7, 1B3, 1B4, 1B5, 2A3, 2A4, 3A3, 3B1, 3B9, 4A1, 4A2, 4A4, 4A7, 4A9, and 4B21.
12. For examples, see *Mengzi* 5B7, 6A6, and 6A17.
13. For examples, see *Mengzi* 1B11 and 3B9.
14. For examples, see Mengzi 5A4 and 6B5.
15. As Lai notes, the past, as referenced in the texts or classics, serves as 'material to reflect on in one's development of critical and reflective skills' (Lai, 2008, p. 115; also see pp. 107, 114).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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