

A Reply to **facebook** Critics



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When I was first dating my wife, I friended her cat, Maxwell Jeremiah Orangefellow, on Catbook. Stranger yet, my cat, Wallace Beauford Neeley, friended Max as well.

Since then, Max has become my step-cat, and Max and Wallace, now living together, have become the best of friends. They spend an awful lot of time lying around together and visiting—sadly, more time than my wife and I spend lying around the house together. But, after all, *someone* needs to bring in some income around here, and Max and Wallace’s biscuit-making company has yet to see a profit.

Now, I’m sure you’d love to hear more about my wonderful step-cat and his personal and professional relationships, but I’ll get



My Stepcat, Maxwell Jeremiah Orangefellow

to the point anyhow. The point is this: The things that happen on Facebook are really pretty meaningless. Not that they *can't* have meaning, but simply that they *don't*. Or, at least, they don't until we get our collective hands on them.

Our cats friending one another must have meant something to myself and my partner. If there was a reason to do it at all, this seems to imply that the action had *some* kind of meaning or other. Did it mean that they were RL friends? Of course not. They had never met. (Cats don't tend to like going for visits in strange environments.) It had a meaning as a kind of game. Their friendship, at the time, was a kind of silly fake-relationship—a strange kind of joke between my partner and myself.

Many of our Facebook actions are like this. They might seem to mean nothing, and yet be taken to mean something. They might seem to mean something, and in fact mean something else. The 'poke' for example. What is someone trying to communicate with a poke? It can be a non-verbal 'hello', it can be flirtatious, it can be a kind of game of poke-and-poke-back, or it can be a reminder (for example: "Hey, I'm still waiting for the revised version of your book chapter!"). Or the "Which Disney Princess are you?" quiz. When a young girl takes the quiz and decides to post the result, she may be attempting to project a certain controlled image about herself—or, perhaps, she's honestly hoping that the quiz will be able to tell her something new and guiding about her self. When a not-so-young woman takes the quiz, she may be being ironic. When a male college student takes it, he might be being sarcastic. When I take it, I'm trying to make my students uncomfortable.

This is what is so valuable about Facebook: the indeterminate meaning of so much of what it is, and what it does. This indeterminacy allows us users plenty of space to make things mean what we want them to. If there's anything humans are good at, it's creating meaning through social interactions. The merest glance, a trembling of the lips, a furrowed brow: every slightest sign can mean so much and speak so many volumes—but only because each of these signs, on their own and out of context, don't mean *anything*, but are only openings of spaces of a variety of different possible meanings, depending on context, history, environment, and mood. Facebook gives us the same richness of interaction because it, too, fails to determine the meaning of our relationships and communications.

Jean-Paul Sartre claimed that our lives were meaningless in this same sense: that they have no *given* meaning. The meaning of our lives is up to us to create! This is both liberating and terrifying. How are we going to decide what has value and meaning in the world? It's hard to say, exactly, but every action we take asserts some meaning or other, some value or other, and so we build up our own versions of meaningful lives through the choices we make.

It's the same way with Facebook, except that, on Facebook, our friends play just as large a role as we do in determining what Facebook is, and what it means (if anything).

What Is facebook?—Who Are facebook?

Right around when Facebook hit a quarter of a million users, suddenly its meaning, value, and effects became the issue of the day. And rightly so! Anything with that level of global participation deserves some serious attention. But Facebook appeared to some writers as angel, and some as demon; to some as an emerging global village, and to others as isolation in disguise; to some as an opportunity for maintaining relationships, and to others as broadcast narcissism. The point from Sartre tells us why there's so much disagreement about what Facebook means: There's so much disagreement, not because there are so many ways to think about Facebook, but because there are *so many different Facebooks*.

As the Existentialists argued, my life-choices mean something to me, in large part, because I have chosen them as my own. And so too, my Facebook means something to me, in large part, because I have shared certain kinds of links, taken certain quizzes, and played certain games—and because my friends (who I have chosen) themselves have chosen to do and share what they have chosen to do and share. And I don't mean this just in the trivial sense that, of course, each of our Feeds are made up of a unique set of different user-generated content. I mean this in the larger sense that different kinds of people and different kinds of groups care and talk about different kinds of things, and in different kinds of ways. So, to the writers of articles railing against the “25 Random Things about Me” fad, I say this: Maybe the problem isn't that Facebook creates self-important triviality—maybe the problem is that you don't really like your friends!

If I look through my News Feed, I see friends talking about their orchids and pets, a post about Sunni politics from a former student,

an announcement that one of the authors in this volume just got tenure (congratulations again!), notice that someone has just baked too many batches of Chicken Pot Pie in Café World, pictures of a snowstorm in Virginia, a link to a David Sedaris story, notice that someone has found a Lonely Bull on their (virtual) farm, some silly pictures, a discussion of how Facebook is blocking users from posting links to Seppukoo.com, notice that someone has become a fan of Sleep, and a post about something boring and football-related.

Now, it's not that I really care about all of that stuff. Some things in my feed I only care about because I have a connection to the person posting it. Some things I don't care about even then—like football (sorry, Craig). But the thing is that, overall, my Facebook Feed connects me with a big, diverse group of people who I value, and who I find valuable. I'm friends with them, to a significant extent, just because they are people with passions, interests, projects, and personal obsessions that I like to hear about, and sometimes take part in. That's how I met many of them, and that's why I'm friends with most of them.

That's not what Facebook is for everyone. One friend of mine is far more ambivalent about Facebook than I am, and I think the main reasons are 1. that a large proportion of her friends are people she went to high school with, and 2. that unlike some of them, she moved away and developed a wider view of the world. She hears people talking about Obama's 'socialism', she sees anti-immigrant rhetoric, and pictures of five-year-olds posing with dead deer scroll across her screen. Of course, the friends who post these things also post things that she's glad to see, and these friends are only a portion of her set of hometown friends, and that set of hometown friends is only one of many communities which she is connected with through Facebook. Overall, Facebook is a kind of mirror of our social existence, and we do not always enjoy all aspects of the communities that we find ourselves to be part of.

Communities, Intentional and Unintentional

Facebook gets criticized for both of these kinds of experiences of it—some criticize Facebook because it allows us to create an intentional community where we can insulate ourselves from hearing views and perspectives that we don't agree with; others criticize it because it puts us in socially-obligated contact with people we, frankly, might not want to hear from, or who share more about

their personal lives that we actually want to know. Is it fair to criticize Facebook for both? Sure it is!—but not because Facebook is Facebook. It's just another instance of these much more universal problems of what it is to be an individual in community with others. And *that's* why Facebook should be criticized and questioned in these ways.

As Cass Sunstein has argued in *Republic.com*, when we absorb ourselves in intentional communities of common concerns and convictions, we risk cutting ourselves off from the challenge of relating to others. When we make our conversations into a kind of echo chamber—Sunstein adopts the phrase “The Daily Me” from Nicholas Negroponte to describe this—we lose the kind of critical opposition which allows us to question our beliefs, either to reform incorrect views or to understand more clearly why we believe what we believe, through the experience of talking it through with people we disagree with. This is bad for democracy, and the presence of ideologically-driven news sources, especially online, has certainly contributed to the breakdown of rational and respectful political debate in the United States. But, at least as worrisome, it may be bad for our sense of self. If we choose how we present ourselves, and we choose who we present ourselves to, don't we risk just falling into a collective just-so-story about who we are and what we ought to believe? This is why so many of the chapters to follow are about authenticity in various forms—authentic selves, authentic relationships, and authentic communities.

William Deresiewicz has written some very thoughtful criticism of Facebook, and one of his most insightful comments has to do with friendship as a quintessentially modern relationship.¹ Our unintentional communities once formed the entirety, or at least the greatest part, of most of our lives. As technologies have improved, we've gained increasing control over which communities we are a part of, and who we have relationships with. Before the car, most of us lived our entire lives in or very close to the communities we were born into. Before the printing press, most of our communication was with the people we knew in person and saw daily. But from printing presses to railways to cars and, eventually, to the internet, technological advances have allowed us increasing control over our associations, and more and more of our lives are lived

¹ “Faux Friendship,” *Chronicle of Higher Education* (December 6th, 2009), <<http://chronicle.com/article/Faux-Friendship/49308>>.

with those we choose to live our lives alongside—our friends—and less and less of our lives is made up of family, neighbors, and town.

This movement seems essential to democracy—as Deresiewicz points out “it is no accident that ‘fraternity’ made a third with liberty and equality as the watchwords of the French Revolution.” But isn’t there a limit to this? If we’re not forced, in some way, to get along with and respect those that we would rather have chosen not to be associated with, isn’t there a risk that we will enter this ‘echo chamber’ and lose our own voice in the din? As Deresiewicz asked in another article of his, without a bit of real *isolation* in life—freedom from the constant social availability of Facebook, Twitter, text-messaging, and cellphones—how can we develop the capacity to have a sense of self separate from the community we’re constantly in touch with?²

As Georg W.F. Hegel argued, freedom is not simply doing whatever you wish. That’s just meaningless whim and caprice. Human lives are never lived alone, and so any true form of human freedom must be about choosing and taking action along with others. And so Hegel claimed that the ‘freedom’ of the emperor or despot is really just a form of slavery to individual desire. True freedom, he argued, can only be found in a representative republic—only here does the individual choose what she does within a society made up of people who have chosen the limits of what anyone can choose. Freedom and determinism, in his view, are reconciled in the republic, for here we choose what we do, but within the bounds of the necessity of choosing along with others.

These problems—either being caught up in the echo chamber of the Daily Me, or alternately being unable to escape the accidental communities of family and hometown—these problems did not begin with Facebook, and they will not be resolved by Facebook. What Facebook does is it makes this dialectical challenge more explicit. And that’s a good thing, even though the problem itself, for its part, is still a problem.

Why I Care about Your Sandwich

So, if you think Facebook is full of uninteresting narcissistic trivialities, maybe it’s because you don’t like your friends. And, if you

² “The End of Solitude,” *Chronicle of Higher Education* (January 30th, 2008), <<http://chronicle.com/article/The-End-of-Solitude/3708>>.

don't like your friends, maybe that's a good thing. But what if you do like your friends? Is that a good thing? If you have a great time browsing around through your News Feed—hearing about this person's dinner, finding out which *Sex and the City* character your former band teacher is most like, hearing about a childhood friend's daughter's first 'big girl' poo, and hearing about new medals in Bejeweled Blitz—is it possible that this actually says something *bad* about you? Again, I'll play the devil's advocate here, and say: Of course not! It might be silly, trivial, and meaningless—but what isn't, when viewed objectively?

When we try to take an objective, 'outsider'-view on our lives, everything starts to look a bit silly. You got a raise. So what?: you can buy more crap. Is that going to make you happy? For that matter, why does happiness matter? Is that really the most we can hope for in life—making it pass away pleasantly? Plato called a society oriented towards happiness 'a city fit for pigs'. As humans, shouldn't we aim towards more than just satisfying our instincts and desires? Friedrich Nietzsche, similarly, asked us to imagine the 'Last Man', who has discovered happiness, and is satisfied with this. This is the best the species can achieve? Quieting the soul so that we can pleasantly endure life until we're free of it? For them, what we should really pursue in life is not mere dull comfortable satisfaction, but knowledge, truth, and beauty! Humanity, Nietzsche wrote, is still capable of giving birth to a dancing star! Add to this another consideration: Studies consistently show that having children results in a net loss of self-reported happiness. I don't take this to mean that, as Arthur Schopenhauer would have it, our instinct to breed makes us suckers who are tricked into serving the interests of the species over our own interests. I take it to mean, instead, that happiness is not the most valuable thing in our lives, for many of us at least.

So why are we driven towards knowledge, truth, beauty, creativity, and family? Do they make us happier? No. Are they important 'in the end'? Well, as John Maynard Keynes put it, "in the long run we are all dead." All of these things, I'd be inclined to say along with Nietzsche, just aren't objectively important. They're only important from within our lives as we live them—they are only important subjectively.

So, why do I care about what my friend is having for dinner? For the same reason I care about what I'm having for dinner—not because it's important, or meaningful, or noteworthy, but because I'm viewing it *from the inside*. My dinner matters to me because I'm

the one who goes through the experience. My friend's dinner matters to me (although admittedly much less) because it's my friend who goes through that experience, and, since I enjoy spending time with her, I'm interested in being able to be virtually invited to be with her in her life when we can't actually spend time together. Why do I enjoy this? You might just as well ask why we enjoy *actually* going out to dinner. Is what we talk about face-to-face important? Objectively—no, at least not to any significant extent. It's important to us because it's about our lives. And we care about our own lives because we see them from the inside, and to be friends with someone means, to some extent at least, to see their lives from the inside as well.

Arthur Schopenhauer wrote that

If we turn from contemplating the world as a whole, and, in particular, the generations of men as they live their little hour of mock-existence and then are swept away in rapid succession; if we turn from this, and look at life in its small details, as presented, say, in a comedy, how ridiculous it all seems!³

He compares our individual lives to those of cheese mites seen bustling about through a microscope. They all seem terribly busy with lots of activity, but as soon as we take our eye away from the magnifying scope, we see what it all amounts to: not much to post a status update about. He says that it's the same with our lives as well—"It is only in the microscope that our life looks so big." The microscope we have is this "I" that undergoes our experiences. It makes us focus in on *our* dinner in a way that we don't focus on anyone else's. It makes us care about *our* friends' trivial status updates too. Of course, Schopenhauer wanted us to take the 'big view', and to take our eye away from this particular microscope. But Schopenhauer also said that boredom is "direct proof that existence has no real value in itself," and that "Human life must be some kind of mistake." I want to defend the microscope. I want to defend our absorption in our own fleeting interests, peculiar obsessions, and momentary concerns—for the same reasons I want to defend happiness and the pursuit of truth, beauty, creativity, and family. And I want to defend the value of sharing them with

³ "On the Vanity of Existence," in *Studies in Pessimism*, <<http://librivox.org/studies-in-pessimism-by-arthur-schopenhauer>>.

friends, and sharing in the similarly arbitrary and possibly unimportant interests, obsessions, and concerns of our friends. What else than this is life?

facebook Is People

In *On Photography*, Susan Sontag wrote: “Boredom is just the reverse side of fascination: both depend on being outside rather than inside a situation, and one leads to the other” (p. 42). When we approach our Feed as a source of amusement or fascination, we are, indeed, likely to quickly find that its kaleidoscopic richness is nothing but colored beads and mirrors. But this is not as likely when we invest in it; when we actively seek to build connections between ourselves and others; and to encounter our friends in the very process of life, in the tumultuous teapot-tempests of our average everydayness.

Facebook, for the most part, is people. People we know well. People we don’t know well. People we’re related to, and have known all our lives. People we just met. People who were our best friends in fifth grade and moved to Texas and had a bunch of children. People who we work with. People who we met online. The fact that Facebook is people—*all* these people—means that some of us will love Facebook and some of us will hate Facebook. People are not always great fun. People are sometimes difficult and frustrating. And if we expect people to be a source of interesting and meaningful discussion, we might be disappointed, unless we’re willing to start those conversations ourselves. It’s not fair or appropriate to enter a room and say ‘this room is boring, the people here aren’t already having conversations that I want to be a part of’.

Perhaps, as Sartre would have said, we each have the Facebook we deserve. When we look at friends as sources of a desired fascination, we demand of them: ‘I am bored; entertain me’. Surely, this perspective can help us make anything boring. But when we look outward from inside the situation, when we say instead: ‘I am interested; tell me what’s on your mind’—then we are there along with the friend, and what they share is something we find ourselves viewing along with them.

Is it important? Is it meaningful? We would only ask these questions if we view the status update from the outside, as if Facebook were a television. But the feed is not a broadcast. The feed is our friends.

In person, if we constantly asked ourselves whether our friend is telling us something significant or interesting while we're talking to them, we would be failing to be a friend in a very basic way. Is it so different just because our friend is writing it down, and sharing with many people at once?

So is Facebook a colossal waste of time? Well, are people? Is friendship? To be fair—sometimes, yes. Some people are a waste of time, and some friendships are valuable and important, while others aren't. But none can be valuable unless we invest ourselves in the relationship. And with Facebook as well, some people and parts and aspects of the feed may be challenging and exciting and intimate, and some won't be. But none can be without our caring investment in the members of our own personal communities—by choice, by circumstance, or by birth.