In the age of the Internet, we seek friendship in ways never imagined in the time of Aristotle. Is it possible that two people connected only by digital signals and the urge to kill ogres could ever really be virtuous friends? First I will explore what Aristotle describes and defines as the lesser friendships of utility and pleasure, and continue on to the good or virtuous friendships. Then I will discuss the possibility of such friendships existing over the Internet, and conclude with my answer to the question above.

For a relationship to be considered a friendship, “men must feel goodwill for each other…be aware of each other’s goodwill, and the cause of their goodwill must be one of the lovable qualities…” (Aristotle 1996, p. 206). The lovable qualities are that which are “lovable, and that… is either what is good, or pleasant, or useful” (p. 206). “Nothing is more characteristic of friends than that they seek each other’s society: poor men desire their friends’ assistance, and even the most prosperous wish for their companionship… but it is impossible for men to spend their time together unless they give each other pleasure, or have common tastes” (p. 211). To be more specific, Aristotle adds a qualification to his definition above: “the feeling of goodwill must be known to its object” (p. 207). Friendships “…require time and intimacy… and so you cannot admit him to friendship or really be friends, before each has shown the other that he is worthy of friendship and has won his confidence” (p. 209). By qualifying this requirement as such, Aristotle eliminates the possibility of unintended or one-sided friendship, where an individual A is “friends” with another individual B, despite the fact that B has no intention of being so with A. Also, even if A feels that he and B are friends, it is not an active friendship unless B is equally engaged in the friendship. “[P]ersons who wish another good for his own sake, if the feeling is not reciprocated, are merely said to feel goodwill for him; only when mutual is such goodwill termed friendship” (p. 207). Friendships are thus further limited to relationships in which two people are reciprocally sharing active goodwill, which is taken a step further to remove the possibility of friendship with inanimate objects: “the term Friendship is not applied to love for inanimate objects, since here there is no return of affection, and also no wish for the good of the object” (p. 207).

Aristotle also distinguishes the possibility of two people who could be friends because of their goodwill status, but are not so because neither has initiated an active friendship:

For a man often feels goodwill towards persons whom he has never seen, but whom he believes to be good or useful, and one of these persons may also entertain the same feeling towards him. Here then we have a case of two people mutually well-disposed, whom nevertheless we cannot speak of as friends, because they are not aware of each other’s regard (p. 207).

Of the two non-virtuous species of friendship, utility is the least similar to the virtuous relationship:

Friends of this kind do not indeed frequent each other’s company much, for in some cases they are not even pleasing to each other, and therefore have no use for friendly intercourse unless they are mutually profitable; since their pleasure in each other goes no further than their expectations of advantage (p. 208).

Due to their shallow, and sometimes tumultuous nature, friendships of utility operate more like exploitation, whereas a virtuous friendship resembles a cooperative effort: “the friends associate with each other for profit,
If the prosperous do not need useful friends in the traditional sense of sharing resources, isn’t it true that they need pleasant friends as a matter of utility? Aristotle qualifies pleasant friendships as requiring “enjoying each other’s company” (Aristotle 223), and utility friendships “in some cases they are not even pleasing to each other” (p. 208).

Nor again are complaints likely to occur between friends whose motive is pleasure either; for if they enjoy each other’s company, both alike get what they wish for; and indeed it would seem ridiculous to find fault with somebody for not being agreeable to you, when you need not associate with him if you do not want to do so (p. 223).

The goal of those who seek a friendship which is perfect, balanced, and of the “good” seek what Aristotle refers to as a virtuous friendship.

“The perfect form of friendship is that between the good, and those who resemble each other in virtue. For these friends wish each alike the other’s good in respect of their goodness, and they are good in themselves; but it is those who wish the good of their friends for their friend’s sake who are friends in the fullest sense, since they love each other for themselves and not accidentally” (pp. 208-209).

Aristotle defines a friend as “one who wishes and promotes by action, the real or apparent good of another for the other’s sake... [and] one who wishes the existence and preservation of his friend for the friend’s sake” (p. 238). A virtuous friendship begins at friendly relations, but requires more to be considered a friendship. “People who enter into friendly relations quickly have the wish to be friends, but cannot really be friends without... knowing each other to be [worthy of friendship]; the wish to be friends is a quick growth, but friendship it is not” (Aristotle 209).

“All for perfect friendship you must get to know a
qualities are rarely found in combination” (p. 211). Thus, he has differentiated between the random and rare combination of friendship of pleasure and utility which is not shared between good men, such as if two bad men used one another’s resources to more effectively act badly, while at the same time genuinely enjoying each other’s company, this rare combination of pleasure and utility does not a virtuous friendship make, since they are not possibly “slow to believe anybody’s word about a friend who he has himself tried and tested for many years, and with them there is mutual confidence, the incapacity ever to do each other wrong” (p. 210), as both are bad men and cannot be trusted.

Thus the friendship of inferior people is evil, for they take part together in inferior pursuits, and by becoming like each other are made positively evil. But the friendship of good is good, and grows with their intercourse. And they seem actually to become better by putting their friendship into practice, and because they correct each other’s faults, for each takes the impress from the other of those traits in him that give him pleasure…” (p. 251).

Finally, friendships are necessary for happiness. “[It] seems strange that if we attribute all good things to the happy man we should not assign him friends, which we consider the greatest of external goods” (p. 246).

Aristotle realized that a friendship based on pleasure, especially between children, can appear similar to virtuous friendship. He addresses this issue as such:

“Of these two inferior kinds of friendship, the one that more closely resembles true friendship is that based on pleasure, in which the same benefit is conferred by both parties, and they enjoy each other’s company, or have common tastes; as is the case of friendships of young people. For in these there is more generosity of feeling, whereas the friendship of utility is a thing for sordid souls” (p. 213).

To prevent confusion about the difference between
goodwill and friendship, I will now highlight some differentiations made in book nine. “Goodwill appears to be an element of friendly feeling, but it is not the same thing as friendship; for it can be felt towards strangers, and it can be unknown to its object, whereas friendship cannot” (Aristotle 240). This clarification harkens back to the requirements of friendship being intentionally shared in both directions by two parties, neither of which can be an inanimate object. “Well-wishers are not necessarily friends; they merely desire the good of those whose well-wishers they are, and would not actively assist them to attain it, not be put to any trouble on their behalf” (p. 240). I believe what he should have written was “and [perhaps] would not assist them to attain it, [perhaps] not be put to any trouble on their behalf,” as even wishing well and putting themselves through a bit of trouble, or helping one to attain good, does not necessarily constitute friendship assuming the one who is wished well doesn’t return the attention or effort.

Two further points on goodwill I would like to highlight are:

“Hence, extending the meaning of the term friendship we may say that goodwill is inoperative friendship, which when it continues and reaches the point of intimacy may become friendship proper – not the sort of friendship whose motive is utility or pleasure, for these do not arouse goodwill” (p. 241).

By defining goodwill as inoperative friendship, he is essentially calling goodwill the stem cell or perhaps the diving board of friendship, whereas you must either have present the “stem cell” of goodwill from which friendship will grow, or you must climb onto the “diving board” of goodwill before taking the leap towards friendship. Each metaphor has its own value; stem cells illustrate an open beginning, and the diving board represents the figurative “leap” required to enter friendship. Finally, by asserting that, generally, “true goodwill is aroused by some kind of excellence or moral goodness: it springs up when one person thinks another beautiful or brave or the like…” (p. 241), Aristotle addresses the age-old problem of attention-getting. I, for example, might make great friends with Herm Edwards, coach of the Kansas City Chiefs, given our similar characters, but sending him a letter and asking him to be my friend will very likely end without result. I have to get his attention, and arouse his goodwill with an excellent display. Perhaps by approaching Mr. Edwards at a restaurant and displaying a depth of football knowledge rarely seen by a normal fan, I have at least demonstrated my deservingness of his goodwill. I at least got a picture to commemorate the event.

Turning now to the problem of the Internet relationship, and whether or not such a pairing of two individuals connected only by electronic pulses of 1 and 0 could ever grow into a true virtuous friendship. Aristotle limits virtuous relationships, and as such arguably prevents such friendships from existing online, without human-to-human contact.

...friends when in each other's company derive pleasure from and confer benefits on each other, whereas friends who are asleep or parted are not actively friendly, yet have the disposition to be so. For separation does not destroy friendship absolutely, though it prevents its active exercise. If however the absence be prolonged, it seems to cause the friendly feeling itself to be forgotten... (p. 211).

As with pen pals, or two great friends of virtue separated by miles, email communication cannot prevent the loss of active exercise. To share words, ideas and goodwill over any medium other than face-to-face communication can cause the loss of friendly feeling described above. All is not lost however, as in the case of online games, where friends actively participate in team work to complete an objective, all the while able to communicate in real time and witness almost firsthand the actions of the other, it is possible yet that friendship can continue in earnest.

Another serious limitation put down by Aristotle is on the number of friends possible:

“It is not possible to have many friends in the full meaning of the word friendship, any more
in real time. To dissolve this idea, I point to SmarterChild, a user who appears and discusses anything like a regular AIM user. SmarterChild is a “bot,” a computer controlled automated messenger, who can interact based on context clues and hold a conversation with a user, never letting on that the person is in fact, talking to a computer. While “bots” in online games obviously lack human characteristics of play and communication, text-based AIM bots are as human as any user when communicating via text chat. Aristotle requires that friendship occur between two humans, “the term Friendship is not applied to love for inanimate objects, since here there is no return of affection, and also no wish for the good of the object” (p. 207). Thus, because the only way to truly verify that this person you have never met is human is to indeed meet them in person, it is impossible to have a virtuous friendship via AIM or other instant messaging services without having met the person prior. Internet gaming is another matter entirely.

“Suppose one friend to have remained the same while the other has improved, and become greatly the superior in virtue: ought the latter to keep up the friendship?” (p. 238). Aristotle answers that “without [enjoying each other’s company] intercourse and therefore friendship are… impossible” (p. 238). While intercourse is more possible in online gaming than in general Internet activity, the inherent nature of the gaming society online is what distinguishes the relationships formed there as utilitarian and not virtuous.

I look to my great friend in real life, who plays such games online as Kornja. He had what appeared to be a quite close relationship with many members of his guild in World of Warcraft, where he and 39 of his closest friends would join to fight together. He was close friends with three or four members, and friendly to the rest, but in time as the best members of the group got better at the game, a chasm began to form between the top 5 players (Kornja included) and the other 35 members. Unwilling to cut ties with his friends in the lower segment, Kornja stayed with the group despite the other four greats threatening to leave. When the four best left, Kornja realized that his two friends in the top four were only his friends when he could help them achieve victory, and were perfectly willing to leave...
him behind. “…differences between friends most frequently arise when the nature of their friendship is not what they think it is” (p. 237). Despite his loyalty, the guild collapsed beneath him as other less skillful players attempted to fill the power vacuum left by their departed leadership, and now, months later, Kornja has lost contact with all of his Warcraft friends. Luckily, his new-found free time has allowed him to reconnect with the real world, and build better friendships with real people. It seems the only true virtuous friendships exist in reality, as it is impossible to realize another’s intentions online. Many of the requirements for friendship, such as shared experience, shared character, and goodwill are perfectly possible online, but because you can never be sure that both parties share in the matter similarly, as is required, Internet friendships remain utilitarian or for pleasure, as Kornja has learned. Luckily for Kornja, he has my friendship in reality… until he finds out I’m only using him for his bulldogs.

References