

## Ethics, friends, 'social networks'

Sep 8, 2013 by Daniel J. Bauer

I taught “professional ethics” for several years at my university, and in my classrooms made no bones about a fundamental truth, which is that the line between professional and personal ethics may be very thin.

In my courses, I always offered an overview for a week or two of something I called “friendship ethics.”

This past week, local media covered a story about a male student in Taiwan who posted racy photographs of a woman student at his university on Facebook (FB) (TT 9 – 3 – 13, p. 5). He had tagged the pictures. For readers not familiar with FB, to “tag a picture” means to identify someone in a photo by name. Put simply, tagging offers viewers who are “FB friends” access to a range of information about themselves and their so-called friends.

The use of “so-called friends” is not accidental. A so-called friend is of course not the same as a true friend.

The woman student, it turns out, had earlier requested the male student to take photographs of her. The photos included some of her without clothing.

This tale takes a variety of twists and turns, but we need to stay focused on the question of some common sense about ethics and social utilities (FB being only one of them). I can't help but feel we also need to save room here for a little straight talk about the meaning of friendship in life.

Well, all right. Let's not argue the pros and cons of “consenting adults” engaging in tomfoolery such as the taking of racy pictures. Clearly, the young woman was unwise. She put herself in a vulnerable position the moment she allowed someone to take those pictures with a camera that did not belong to her. Putting it practically, how was she to keep the photos under her own control? How was she to protect herself and her own interests? The only thing she could do was trust. And trust is only possible when we're dealing with true friends, not so-called friends.

The touchy problem of definition raises its head here. What is a friend? Friends look out for the good of their friends. Friends do not take advantage of their

friends for unreasonable self-benefit. Friends do not seek revenge when relationships go sour. Real friends respect the dignity, the privacy, and the autonomy of their friends. These words, in a nutshell, are the framework for friendship ethics.

I am saying that when we speak about the meaning of right and wrong in life, which is to speak of ethics, in addition to ethics and business, or ethics and advertising, or ethics and academia, we ought to also talk about ethics and friends.

The end of the media report is quickly told. The female student was, understandably, greatly upset at the posting of the pictures and at the tagging. She convinced the photographer to remove the tags. She could not convince him to remove the pictures. (Authorities handled that later.)

The male student claimed because he had taken the pictures with his own camera, he had intellectual property rights over those pictures and could do what he wanted with them. A disciplinary committee at his university put a demerit on his record, ordered that he surrender the photos, sign a statement releasing right to ownership of the pictures, attend a gender equality workshop, and apologize to the female student. The committee said his conduct was tantamount to sexual harassment.

I perk up my ears whenever I hear talk of “rights” and ethics. The photographer here takes a stand on the side of property rights. Deeper scrutiny helps us to see, however, that it is never right to only prioritize a right we claim for ourselves. If we want to be ethically right, we must consider first the feelings and well being of whomever it is we may harm by our actions.

There is so much more to say about foolishness on FB and the like, and more as well about ethics in a world of instant communications and high-tech conveniences. Consider today's offering a simple attempt to scatter a few simple seeds that may one day sprout and bear fruit.

I like to believe that we can be wise enough to enjoy our social utilities and, at the same time, grow in friendship with those who mean the most to us. (Father Daniel J. Bauer SVD is a priest and associate professor in the English Department at Fu Jen Catholic University.)

## Talking points :

1. This column says in part that tagging people in FB pictures may sometimes not be a good idea. When is tagging OK in your opinion and when not?
2. The column hints that T. KIND OF PICTURES we post on FB may be a problem or may cause discomfort over time. Have you ever experienced 'trouble' over a pic on FB?
3. The term "friendship ethics" may appear to be strange, BUT . . . if "ethics" means a concern to do the right things in life, not wrong things . . . isn't it logical that there are 'right' ways for a friendship? What 4 U are examples of right and wrong in dealing w.our friends?

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