

**PAMELA HAAG**

## **Your Social Life: Are You a Fox or a Hedgehog?**

A writer with a wide range of interests, Pamela Haag graduated from Swarthmore College and earned a Ph.D. in history from Yale University and an M.F.A. from Goucher College. She has written about feminism, American culture, relationships, and transportation issues, as well as autobiographical subjects. She has also been the Director of Research at the American Association of University Women and has held fellowships from the National Endowment for the Humanities and other institutions. In addition to the books *Consent: Sexual Rights and the Transformation of American Liberalism* (1999) and *Marriage Confidential: Love in the Post-Romantic Age* (2011), Haag has written articles for many publications, including the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, the *Washington Post*, and the *American Scholar*.

**Background on the fox and the hedgehog parable** As Pamela Haag writes, the Greek poet Archilochus is credited with creating the parable of the fox and the hedgehog. In the twentieth century, however, it became associated with the philosopher Isaiah Berlin, who began his 1953 analysis of the Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy with the following line from Archilochus: “The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing.” Berlin then went on to explain this distinction: “For there exists a great chasm between those, on one side, who relate everything to a single central vision, one system less or more coherent or articulate . . . a single, universal, organizing principle . . . and, on the other side, those who pursue many ends, often unrelated and even contradictory, connected, if at all, only in some de facto way. . . .” In other words, some writers and thinkers understand the world—and pursue the truth—by means of a single central insight or coherent idea. In contrast, others see the world in complex terms and do not seek a universal organizing principle. Berlin viewed his classification in the context of intellectual playfulness: “I never meant it very seriously,” he later said in an interview. “I meant it as a kind of enjoyable intellectual game. . . .” Nevertheless, the distinction endures, probably because the parable of the fox and the hedgehog can be applied to so many different kinds of people and practices—for example, entrepreneurial technology moguls (Steve Jobs as the fox vs. Bill Gates as the hedgehog) and baseball players (versatile, light-hitting foxes vs. home-run-hitting hedgehogs).

The ancient Greek poet Archilochus said that the fox knows many 1 things about a little, but the hedgehog knows one big thing. Philosopher Isaiah Berlin used the fox and hedgehog distinction in his brilliant essay about Leo Tolstoy’s view of history and his longing for a unifying insight and understanding.

The hedgehog and the fox is also a good parable for social life today. 2  
 The hedgehog social life, which is what I think I grew up with, is one where  
 you know a lot, and deeply, and intimately, about a few friends. You might  
 count four people as close friends, if that many, but you know the nooks  
 and crannies of each other's lives, and you'd be comfortable sharing any-  
 thing with them. If they call you at 3:30 A.M. and need help, you feel obli-  
 gated to help them.

The fox social life, which is what I think social media is selecting for, is 3  
 one where you know a million little things about a lot of people. The fox  
 might have an active social life and many acquaintances, but doesn't know  
 much about them.

The hedgehog probes deeply and nar- 4  
 rowly; the fox skims lightly and broadly.

Obviously, both the hedgehog and the 5  
 fox social lives have their virtues, and they're  
 not mutually exclusive. Most of us probably  
 have both, and are fox-ish or hedgehog-ish,  
 but not exclusively one or the other.

Just as Nicholas Carr questions how 6  
 Google is affecting our brains and cogni-  
 tion, in one of two new book projects I have  
 underway, I'm questioning (among many other things) how Facebook and  
 social media are affecting our hearts.

On the surface, although I'm not wedded to this hypothesis, it seems 7  
 to be inclining us toward the fox social life.

Our attention is dispersed quickly and pithily across hundreds if not 8  
 thousands of people; we know a little about an awful lot of people. Emotions  
 are more shallow than deeply plumbed. Sadness and grief are certainly  
 expressed, but in delimited ways that are intuitively suitable to the  
 medium.

Facebook can satiate my social appetite in ways that somewhat trouble 9  
 me. It can feel like the equivalent of filling up on bread before dinner.

I've gotten some social calories in me—some kind of social interac- 10  
 tion—and it has the benefit of being unencumbered, the ultimate in no  
 strings attached, and usually affirmative, even effusive, and light. But it is  
 pure fox.

This happened to me just the other day. I had a social “things to do” 11  
 list on my desk—people whom I wanted to contact for dinner dates. But I  
 spent two hours Facebook-mesmerized, scrolling up and down my wall,  
 liking random comments, reading others, writing some, and then seeing  
 who might have liked mine and all the rest. I actually participated in an  
 intellectually substantive conversation, too. I only knew the original poster,  
 none of the others, but it felt like a first day in a good college seminar.

The “things to do” social list didn't get done. I didn't feel the need. I'd 12  
 filled up on bread.

My point is that the fox social life might corrode the imperative of hav- 13  
 ing the hedgehog social life, assuming a zero sum game of social energy.

“The hedgehog  
 probes deeply and  
 narrowly; the fox  
 skims lightly and  
 broadly.”

What constitutes a “friend” relationship in social media spaces also may (or may not) influence fashion standards for friendships that aren’t predominately online. Emphasis is on the curation and presentation of the self. It’s not just that we’re updating or communicating with friends about random goings-on in our lives; we’re managing a presence in a media space. The two processes are inextricable. I wonder if in that old warning from mom, the online friends might be a “bad influence” on the non-online ones. It’s hard to say right now, but hedgehogs, beware.

The allegation, or observation, that mainstream culture is now a celebrity culture rings true for me in some important ways. We collect fans, both literally and informally; our social life unfolds through a medium of display—like graffiti on a wall or, to be highbrow, a piece of art hanging on a wall; our self and self-image are ever more conflated, much as they are with Hollywood celebrities.

My intention isn’t to sound like a Luddite crank, although I’m always susceptible to technology nostalgia. In many respects Facebook is a life saver for me. I work alone, and it’s a way to make a fast but positive connection to people during the day, and to find out about stories that are trending. I can connect with readers on Facebook, which I always enjoy, and get compliments that they wouldn’t bother to send in a letter.

But current research on loneliness finds that a not insignificant percentage of Americans (although not a majority) do not have a single friend—not *one*—in whom they would confide honestly and fully about meaningful things going on in their lives. They might have a work colleague with whom they share mutual office frustrations. Or they might have acquaintances with whom they share undemanding news of work, or their lives. Some might see their spouses as friends, but others lie, deceive, and/or withhold from their spouses, too, so they can’t count them as true or full confidants, either.

Some might be hedgehogs, and have a life with lots of acquaintances. They might hang out with the other parents in their children’s school, or on teams. But others in the group don’t even have that.

I wonder how Facebook will affect this sort of social isolation generally. Ironically, could it make it even worse, while appearing to expand the lonely, disconnected person’s friends by the scores, or even hundreds?

Meanwhile here’s my quiz to see if you’re more fox-ish or hedgehog-ish:

**YOU’RE A HEDGEHOG IF ...**

you gave your friend a hug  
 you have actually visited the home of your friend  
 it would be impossible for one of your friends to be impersonating a man, or a much younger person  
 you talk to a friend and feel filled up for days afterward

**YOU’RE A FOX IF ...**

you gave your friend a like  
 you don’t actually know who all your friends *are*  
 some of your friends might really be inmates or precocious ten-year-olds, and you wouldn’t know  
 you talk to a friend and feel hungry for updates a minute later

• • •

### Comprehension

1. Generally speaking, how are hedgehogs different from foxes?
2. Why does Haag think that the hedgehog and the fox is “a good parable for social life today” (2)?
3. According to Haag, does Facebook incline people toward a fox or a hedgehog social life? Explain.
4. What does current research into loneliness suggest about Americans? Does Haag think that Facebook makes this situation better or worse? Do you agree with her?
5. What does Haag mean in paragraph 9 when she says, “Facebook can satiate my social appetite in ways that somewhat trouble me. It can feel like the equivalent of filling up on bread before dinner”?


### Purpose and Audience

1. Do you think Haag expects readers to be receptive or hostile to her ideas? How can you tell?
2. Where does Haag state her thesis? In your own words, summarize this thesis.
3. Why do you think Haag wrote her essay? To persuade? To inform? To enlighten? For some other reason? Explain.


### Style and Structure

1. This essay’s title is a question. Why do you think Haag chose this title? What other titles can you suggest?
2. Haag’s introduction consists of two paragraphs. What do each of these paragraphs accomplish?
3. In comparing her two subjects, Haag relies mainly on a point-by-point comparison. What are the advantages and disadvantages of this kind of organization?
4. Underline the transitional words and phrases in this essay. Should Haag have used more transitions to emphasize the contrast between her two subjects, or does she have enough? Explain.
5. Haag ends her essay with a quiz. Is this an effective conclusion? Should she have ended differently? Explain.
6. **Vocabulary Project.** Haag uses several words that might be unfamiliar to many readers—for example, *parable* (2), *cognition* (6), and *Luddite* (16). Go through the essay, and underline any unfamiliar words. Look them up in a dictionary, and then think of some synonyms for each word. Would any of your substitutions improve the essay? Why or why not?

### Journal Entry

 Haag uses the parable of the fox and the hedgehog to contrast two different kinds of social lives. Use this parable to contrast two other things – for example, types of teachers, students, or parents.

### Writing Workshop

1. Expand your journal entry into a comparison-and-contrast essay. Make sure that you explain the difference between the fox and the hedgehog in your introduction and that your thesis statement identifies the two things you are going to contrast.
2. **Working with Sources.** Write a comparison-and-contrast essay in which you answer the question posed by Haag's title. Be sure to refer specifically to some of the points that Haag makes and to document references to her essay. Don't forget to include a works-cited page. (See Chapter 18 for information on MLA documentation.)
3. Decide which of your friends is like the fox in the parable and which is like the hedgehog. Then, write an essay in which you compare your two friends, making sure that you explain the parable in your introduction and identify the major differences you are going to discuss in your thesis statement. 

### Combining the Patterns

Paragraph 11 of this essay is a **narrative** that tells what happened to Haag “the other day.” What point does this paragraph make? What does this paragraph add to the essay?

### Thematic Connections

- “No, I Do Not Want to Pet Your Dog” (page 224)
- “I’m Your Teacher, Not Your Internet-Service Provider” (page 415)
- “Sadie and Maud” (page 428)
- “I Want a Wife” (page 502)