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The Self, Technology and the Order of Things: in dialogue with Heidegger, Ellul, Foucault and Taylor

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Abstract

The purpose of this work is to invite reflection on questions of human identity and agency at a time of rapidly/revolutionary changing technological revolution. Falling within the field of applied moral philosophy, I will tackle questions as simple (or as complicated?) as ‘Who am I? What is the nature of the technological invasion I face every day? How do I relate to it? Where do I go for meaning? Is there any meaning left at all? Is there a center that holds? How/where do I find it?’ In other words, I will in fact ask the old question of our relationship with technology. Hence, my main thesis is that technology without a proper understanding of an order of life is a constant threat to life itself. To support my claim, I will rather briefly scan over four influential thinkers who dealt with the particular topics of the complicated relationship between technology and the self. Chronologically they are somehow grouped two by two: Heidegger and Jacques Ellul in the earlier part of the twentieth century and Michael Foucault and Charles Taylor more towards our recent days. Rather than striving to offer a final answer, my hope is that I will at least identify some more questions leading to a healthier, more consonant environment in which our shattered selves could find a meaningful space.

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1. Introduction

The question of living with technology seems to be as long as the history of humankind goes. However, the encounter we experience in our contemporary world is certainly unprecedented. The explosive developments in the area of ICT (Information & Communications Technologies) seem to have no limits. The impact is felt on virtually

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every aspect of our existence, both at individual and societal levels. Nothing is left untouched and/or unchanged, and this at an unprecedented speed. Time and space implode in and over each other. Geography is dead. Events in one place can instantly be known/seen everywhere. We can be anything everywhere at any time. Everything becomes fluid. Social relations are never the same. Facebook, Twitter, and the plethora of digital worlds compete for our ultimate allegiance. However, rather than being customers, we are expensive marketable products. Economics are global. The globe is the village and life is increasingly digital (Negroponte, 1995). Every domain of life is invaded and increasingly occupied by technology (Floridi, 2014).

Within such context of endless possibilities both for good and for bad, some crucial questions require articulated answers. What happens to being? What happens to the human subject? Where do we go for meaning? How can we handle such rapid, radical and continuously changing environment? Some already argued that we are increasingly 'homeless' in the modern world (Berger). Others invited us to celebrate the 'multiphrenic', 'saturated self' and its endless fragmentation (Gergen). Some would even claim the subject as we knew it in our post-enlightenment culture is dead; new identity is nothing but the fluid intersection point of a multitude of technologies of the self (Foucault). Being forced to live in an 'infosphere', a new type of identity recently labeled as 'onlife' is being forged, we were recently told (Floridi, 2014).

To add to the debate, in this paper I would like to argue that technology without a proper understanding of the order of life is a constant threat to life itself. In other words, technology in itself is neutral. It can be used for good or for bad. It can offer meaning or it can lead to meaninglessness, mutilation and destruction. As such, it has a certain place in the order of things and in the order of life. It can bring life and it can bring death. The ultimate answer in regard to where it goes and what it brings remains with the human subject and the human subject can only make sense of it if himself is properly located within a morally oriented order of things/life. To build my case I will shortly visit four important thinkers who dealt with similar dilemmas: Heidegger, Ellul, Foucault and Charles Taylor.

2. Martin Heidegger: Modern Technology, Efficiency without Truth

The advance of technology in the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries prompted some of the greatest philosophers to question its impact on human life. Heidegger dealt with this issue early in the 1950s and the main resulting texts were collected in *The Question Concerning Technology and other essays* (Heidegger, 1977). One can quite strongly argue that from his perspective, modern technology is, in his own words, 'purely anthropological, instrumental' and driven solely by the quest for efficiency (Heidegger, 1977, p. 5). As such, it lacks any ethics and any concern for truth. Modern technology has no connection with 'revealing', with 'truth telling'. It is a purely instrumental intervention of the Cartesian rational subject over nature. The propensity for self-development inherent in nature, its principle of change found within itself is being manipulated through the intervention of the human rational agent to serve functional ends. Take the stone as an example. It has the potential to become many things. Through human rational intervention it can be turned into a bridge. The only guiding principle in doing so is its efficiency. No ethical questions are being raised. It is a mere means towards a functional, efficient end. Efficiency is the only guiding principle in modern technology. The rational, Kantian subject is its sole creator. However, instead of being its controller, Heidegger warns us that humanity is being 'enframed' by technology, becoming mere 'standing-reserve in waiting' to be used by it (p. 36f). The self, instead of gaining a higher status of being through technological production, instead of owning it and controlling it and thus reaching further out for/towards truth, is being turned into technology's own 'raw-material'. As another observer rightly notes, 'Today all things are being swept together into a vast network in which their only meaning lies in their being available to serve some end that will itself also be directed toward getting everything under control. Heidegger calls this fundamentally undifferentiated supply of the available the "standing-reserve"' (Lovitt in the Introduction to Heidegger, 1977, p. XXIX). We are all "raw-material" in waiting to be sooner or later used by technology. The order of things, the order of life it's being reversed, turned upside-down. From creator, man becomes the slave.

Heidegger explains such dramatic reverse of the order of things/the order of being, by showing how, with the birth of the Cartesian self-referential rational subject capable of turning all reality in objects to be controlled, Western thought and action took a purely anthropological, functional and therefore instrumental path. Life was gradually depraved of meaning, the only guiding principle being the Nietzschean will to power which took over the

self-reflexive Cartesian rational subject. The search for truth-revealing, for goodness and beauty were lost and this is best reflected in the ways we both understand and make use of modern technology.

In other words, according to Heidegger modern technology based solely on human instrumental reason and driven by the will to power and efficiency is far removed from what the ‘essence of technology’ really is or it should be. To find such essence, in other words to find what was lost, as one would expect from Heidegger, we are invited to see what the term meant for the ancient Greeks. Answering the question ‘what is the essence of technology?’ he points us to the Greek concept of ‘*techne*’ showing how it encompassed three different layers of meaning. Hence, ‘*techne*’ was a mixture of *poiesis* (bringing-forth) and *episteme* (knowledge, science) and as such it had the power to reveal the inner truth (*aletheia*). In other words, science, knowledge has always served the higher purpose of letting nature’s ontological capacity to bring-forth meaning, truth. Such meaning was valid only in as much as it was morally oriented and therefore leading to truth-revealing. Technology was a form of truth-revealing, not a means to another, merely functional end (Heidegger, 1977, p. 12). In other words, technology was man’s intervention in order to assist nature in bringing-forth truth. It was an end in itself and it had the capacity of truth-revealing. It was never instrumentalised and thus hindering truth-revelation. It was rather placed within the right order of being, never seeking to turn the human being or any kind of being into its servant. In Heidegger’s terms, technology outside the quest for moral orientation ‘blocks the shining forth of truth,’ ‘enframes reality’ and turns us all into mere ‘standing-reserves’ ready to be used.

How relevant is Heidegger for us today? One can suspect that such danger of being enslaved by technology is even more obvious in our days marked by the fast-speeded ICT revolution than it was in his time of technological revolutions. Take Facebook as an example. We all think we are its happy customers benefiting of the possibilities it offers us. Despite such benefits, we are in fact its mere products sold at high costs and very high speeds. All our habits, desires, dreams and failures, our deepest longings, the essence of who we are are nothing but mere products hunted by endless corporations interested to invade our lives and benefit from us. We are products not customers. Our Google searches ‘sell’ us to corporations interested in exploiting us within fractions of seconds. And these are only the very benign examples of how technology controls us turning each one of us into its own very raw-material. From Heidegger we learn that technology without a quest for truth-revealing changes the order of things, it changes the order of life leading to the very possible nullification of life itself. The Christian thinker Jacques Ellul concerns himself with similar questions as Heidegger, and therefore we will briefly turn to his views next.

3. Ellul and the Technical Self

Concerned with similar questions about the essence of modern technology and its impact on our lives, Ellul, writing at about the same time as Heidegger, argues that in our modern times we live through a ‘technical invasion’ (Original in French, *La technique ou l'enjeu du siècle*. Paris: Armand Colin, 1954, translated into English, 1964). For him, *modern technique* is ‘The totality of methods rationally arrived at and having absolute efficiency in every field of human activity’ (Ellul, 1964, p. xxv). Moreover, ‘*Technique* has taken over the whole of civilisation. Death, procreation, birth, all must submit to technical efficiency and systematization’ (Ellul, 1964, p. 128). Everything is technical. Modern technique seeks to reduce the multiplicity of means to one: the most efficient with the least effort (Ellul, 1964, p. 21). As such, technique refuses the question of good and evil: ‘Everything which is technique is necessarily used as soon as it is available, without distinction of good or evil. This is the principal law of our age, the primary law’ (Ellul, 1964, p. 99). Hence, Ellul goes further than Heidegger and states that there is no neutrality involved in modern technology, it is naïve to think it is.

How does this affect the human subject and our modern life? ‘Technique ... aspires to take over the individual, that is, to transform the qualitative into the quantitative’ (Ellul, pp. 286-287). Quality is turned into quantity. Reflexivity is turned into reflexes. ‘The individual is broken into a number of independent fragments’ (Ellul, p. 389). In the technological society, men talk to machines, no more face to face dialogue: ‘Men become accustomed to listening to machines and talking to machines.... No more face to face encounters, no more dialogue’ (Ellul, p. 379). Moreover, ‘We are rapidly approaching the time when there will no longer be any natural environment at all’ (Ellul, p. 79). Nature disappears. In regard to culture and the sacred, ‘It is useless to appeal to culture or religion’ (p.

84). Cultural differences melt and collapse into each other. The sacred is redefined: technique replaces God and the technological society becomes sacred.

If such observations were made in the early part of the twentieth century, how much more relevant they are today, when living within the ICT revolution means living most of our lives connected to technology and through technology? Ellul's conclusion is quite radical: 'There is no place for an individual today unless he is a technician' (p. 84). The self is a technical self or there is no self at all. The efficient ordering of things governed by the technical society leads to a life based on statistics and reflexes with no moral concerns. It leads to the birth of the fragmented, technical self. In other words, like in Heidegger's case above, for Ellul too, living within an order of things which replaces reflexivity with reflexes and meaning with statistics can be the equivalent of not living at all. If Ellul sees the result of our encounter with modern technology as leading to the appearance of the technical self, Michel Foucault takes things further, arguing that in fact we are not technical selves but products of technologies of the self. To his work on our encounter with technology we will briefly turn next.

4. Foucault: From the Technological Self to Technologies of the Self

Foucault, like his predecessor Heidegger, identifies and highlights the major shortcomings of the Cartesian and consequently Kantian rational autonomous subject, of what Foucault labels as 'man'. As Dreyfus has put it, 'This understanding of man is an understanding of the subject, not just as lucid and autonomous, but as the substitute for God, as the self-certain source of all meaning. The essence of subjectivity after Kant is to be the ground of all intelligibility' (Dreyfus, 2002). Rather than being able to rationally objectify and subsequently dominate every aspect of being through self-referential instrumental reason, the Cartesian/Kantian subject ends up lost within an ever-changing web of meanings which are beyond its reach. In *The Order of Things*, Foucault quite rightly shows us why the Cartesian subject cannot be at the same time self-sufficient and ultimate meaning giver. Hence, the rational autonomous subject was declared 'dead'. The rational subject who declared God dead had the same fate. In an interview in 1965, Foucault stated: 'The death of man is nothing to get particularly excited about. It's one of the visible forms of a much more general decease, if you like. I don't mean by it the death of god but the death of the subject, of the Subject in capital letters, of the subject as origin and foundation of Knowledge, of Liberty, of Language and History' (Quoted in Dreyfus 2002). How did modern technology contribute to this state of affairs? What are the new perspectives on subjectivity and the self according to Foucault? These are the questions we will briefly turn next.

According to Dreyfus' assessment, as another observer rightly noted, Foucault also dealt with Heideggerian notions of *techne* and technology: 'Dreyfus points out that for both Foucault and Heidegger it is the practices of the modern world and modern technology that produce a different kind of subject – a subject who does not simply objectify and dominate the world through technology, but who is constituted by this technology' (Besley 2005).

Foucault's major contribution to the debate on the influence of technology on human identity is that the self is not merely constituted by one set of technology, i.e., the one based on hard science and which would include, in our more contemporary terms, the ICT revolution. This is only one aspect of it, it is what he calls "technologies of production," our capacity to produce and manipulate things. In fact, Foucault sets out a typology of four inter-related 'technologies' that shape, influence and finally define the self: technologies of production, technologies of sign systems, technologies of power (or domination) and technologies of the self. 'Each is a set of practical reason that is permeated by a form of domination that implies some type of training and changing or shaping of individuals. Instead of an instrumental understanding of technology, Foucault used 'technology' in the Heideggerian sense as a way of revealing truth and focused on technologies of power and technologies of the self' (Besley 2005, p. 78).

In Foucault's own terms, technologies of power 'determine the conduct of individuals and submit them to certain ends or domination, an objectivizing of the subject' (Foucault 1988, p 18). 'Technologies of the self' are thus the various 'operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being' that people make either by themselves or with the help of others in order to transform themselves to reach a 'state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality' (Foucault 1988, p 18). The subject is therefore a moving reality, 'not one but split, not sovereign but dependent, not an absolute origin but a function ceaselessly modified' (Foucault's interview quoted in Dreyfus, 2002). The self is a 'variable and complex function of discourse' (ibid), a decentered, fluid and evasive reality resulted from the continuously changing intersection of myriads of technologies of power (Nietzsche's 'will

to power'), signs and systems of meaning (Wittgenstein's 'language games') aiming to produce its 'state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality.' The individual is a mere product of relations between power and knowledge.

What is Foucault's solution? In his latest work he deplores the West's loss of care for the self, characteristic of the ascetic Greek and Christian traditions (*The Care of the Self*). The solution for Foucault is a need to rediscover the art of taking care for the self, for the interior well-being of the self. As Dreyfus puts it, 'Once he acknowledges the need for an ethics, Foucault hopes to break out of the regime of subjectivity by reappropriating the ancient practices of care of the self' (2002). With his untimely departure, the project of defining what would a healthy approach to identity in the late modernity mean was left unfinished. It could be a return to the asceticism of the Western Greek and Christian tradition, without necessarily searching for a generic 'deeper truth' but rather working towards building the self as a work of art.

Concluding our brief encounter with Foucault, we can safely state that when dealing with our contemporary notions of identity (particularly in *The Order of Things*), as Dreyfus puts it, Foucault 'undermines our tendency to think that each of us is a self-sufficient, meaning-giving cogito' (Dreyfus, 2002). What Descartes and from him the whole Western tradition was hoping to achieve through the reversal of the traditional order of things, led in fact to the opposite. Instead of producing a free, self-referential rational agent capable of making History, giving meaning and bringing ultimate freedom and peace, our contemporary world dominated by its ever expanding technologies leads to its opposite. In fact, Foucault is quite radical stating that *this* Subject is dead. Under the myriad forms of technologies of power, the self remains 'a function ceaselessly modified.'

If there is a red thread line running through the works of Heidegger, Ellul and Foucault visited so far, it is the fact that technology without a proper understanding of an order of life is a constant threat to life itself. Each of them had their own way of reaching to this conclusion and each had possible answers. In closing my work, I would like to draw attention to another contemporary thinker whose contribution can offer us what I consider to be a proper answer to the identity dilemmas with which we are faced in our over-technological world. Hence, let us briefly focus on what Charles Taylor teaches us about our own quest for meaning in the late modernity in which we all live.

5. Charles Taylor: Identity, Technology and the Quest for Moral Frameworks

Charles Taylor's seminal work on the self, initiated by his ground-breaking *Sources of the Self*, is complex and it generated tremendous amounts of academic debate (Taylor, 1989). What I would only briefly bring to our attention here is his central thesis that one's identity is directly and inextricably connected to one's moral orientation and subsequently one's actions are not possible outside a commitment to 'inescapable' moral frameworks formed by some 'higher goods'. In his words, 'To know who I am is a species of knowing where I stand. My identity is defined by the commitments and identifications which provide the frame or horizon within which I can try to determine from case to case what is good, or valuable, or what ought to be done, or what I endorse or oppose. In other words, it is the horizon within which I am capable of taking a stand' (Taylor, 1989, p. 27). 'We are only selves in so far as we move in certain space of questions, as we seek and find an orientation to the good' (ibid, p. 34). Meaningful life can be conceived as such only in as much as we crave to be rightly related to what we call good (ibid, p. 44). It is only 'commitment to some higher goods [that] provides us with the capacity to locate ourselves, to establish an identity'. Taylor calls such goods 'hypergoods' or 'constitutive goods' which surpass contingency, being universally valid/recognizable. Such 'constitutive goods' are external and for some they can be the traditional higher goods established by the Judeo-Christian tradition while for others a Kantian type of rational agency, a moral law emanating from a generic rational will. Moreover, even those who see no meaning in the universe, still have this 'something relation to which defines certain actions and motives as higher, viz., our capacities as "thinking reeds"; and our contemplation of this can inspire a motive which empowers us to live up to that which is higher' (Taylor, 1989, p. 95).

Constitutive goods, therefore, represent the moral sources which in turn, if observed, define the moral frameworks within which a consonant and ordered life can be conceived. Within such framework an order of things is being shaped, or in other words, things fall into their rightful place within a morally ordered framework. Hence, returning to our own topic, which is the predicament we face from the encounter with modern technology, we can

safely argue that, as it has been aptly shown throughout Taylor's seminal work, there is hope. The fate of the contemporary human being in late modernity is not 'mutilation or destruction'. Taylor's own last words of *The Sources of the Self* are worth quoting *in extenso*: 'The dilemma of mutilation is in a sense our greatest spiritual challenge, not an iron fate. ... There is a large element of hope. It is a hope that I see implicit in Judeo-Christian theism (however terrible the record of its adherents in history), and its central promise of a divine affirmation of the human, more total than humans can ever attain unaided. But to explain this properly would take another book' (ibid, p. 521). It is here, where Taylor left his argument that I would venture to add my own few concluding remarks, aware that such claims will need further substantiation.

6. Conclusion

As it was shown throughout this work, our encounter with the invasive, ever changing and seemingly endless technical revolution can be a dramatic, mutilating and destructive experience. Our core being, life itself can be in danger. We can be transformed in mere 'standing-reserve', 'raw material' in waiting to be used (Heidegger). We can lose our reflexive capacity and have it turned into automatic reflexes; our search for meaning can be reduced to statistics: we are at risk of becoming mere technical selves (Ellul). Moreover, not only we risk having to adapt and become technical selves, we are at risk of being mere products of technological processes. We run the risk of becoming 'ceaselessly modified functions' of such processes (Foucault). Despite all the differences between the thinkers presented in this paper, as it was seen, there is a red thread linking them all. It is the assertion that, regardless of the magnitude of the technological advancements and despite any good intentions, without a proper grasp of the order of things, life itself seems to be in danger. In order to avoid such 'mutilation and destruction', we must never cease asking the fundamental question 'who am I' and do so within a larger moral framework (Taylor). This will place us rightly within an order of life that could enable us relate to our technological world in ways that will not only protect us but have us benefit from it to the full.

If we are to take Taylor's final remarks any further and apply it to our encounter with modern technology, we shall state that the Judeo-Christian's 'central promise of a divine affirmation of the human' first of all perhaps means understanding that there is an ultimate order of Creation. Within this order, we are creatures and not the ultimate Creator. It may also mean that although created, we are the Crown of creation. This means there is no higher value than the human being, regardless of gender, social status, religion, or anything else. The giver and the taker of life is God the Creator not man the creature. Technology should be created and used in order to protect life, to support life, to enhance the quality of life. It should never take life; it should never destroy life as well as not replacing life. Being created in the Image of God the Creator, we are also called to be both creative and good stewards of creation. It means taking good responsibility in regard to the environment, resources and so on. Moreover, we are called to be the keepers of our fellow human beings, again regardless of who they are. We have a calling to serve not only ourselves but others too; we are called to serve the stranger and even our enemy. Placing ourselves within such an order of things given by a proper understanding of the order of creation, can be a warrant that the technology we produce is being located in its own proper place. This is technology should remain a mere tool serving to protect life in whatever form it is given to us.

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