

A non-confrontational art of living in the technosphere and infosphere

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ABSTRACT

Several trends in contemporary philosophy have revived the question of the good life. This article addresses the more elaborate notion of an “art of living” in the specific context of the technosphere on the basis of recent works in philosophy of technology. It also brings ideas from Asian philosophy and from Buddhism in particular into the discussion. The focus is on the notion of non-confrontation, which could lead to a decisive change in the methods and scope of technology assessment within the humanities. The art of living in the technosphere emerges as an existential virtuosity that pertains to practical wisdom.

The art of living was originally the important question in philosophy (“love of wisdom”) but it has long been neglected in favor of confrontations about truth and domination. Things might have a chance to change in the 21st century. The question of the good life has been rediscovered in the academy (Swierstra and Waelbers 2010; Brey et al. (eds) 2012) and one of the dominant trends in philosophy is “virtue ethics” (Hursthouse 1999). Several independent movements in philosophy propose a form of *wisdom* for the present technosphere and infosphere (Herschock 1999; Tiberius 2008; Naess 2010; Spence 2011). All these approaches bring the question of an *art of living*, taken at a real existential level, back into philosophy. In a sense, they inaugurate a third period in science and technology assessment within the humanities: (1) Political critique, (2) Ethical assessment and (3) Existential awareness. This paper insists on a non-trivial dimension of modern wisdom as existential awareness in the technosphere: its non-confrontational ethos. A large part of the inspiration for this ethos comes from Asian thought. De-westernization of our approaches to technology may help to really “think out of the (technological) box” – out of its confrontational ethos.

If a new art of living is required it is because the contemporary lifeworld is disruptive. From the perspective of a sapiential technoethic, the main disruption concerns the self. The modern self is

confronted with an abundance of opportunities and a realm of facilitation, on the one hand, but on the other hand it remains ominously indecisive and lost in the midst of abundance and facilitation. Calling for a reappropriation of wisdom virtues in self-constitution and self-care concentrates the philosopher's attention on ordinary life – life in the ordinary technosphere (home appliances, cars, smartphones) and ordinary infosphere (the Web, emails and text messages, the “cloud”).

Technoethics, thus, takes the art of living seriously, but at the level of the ordinary, of everyday normal life. The art of living in technology is a sapiential question in the sense of Michel Foucault's “techniques” or “technology” of the self (Dorrestijn 2012), provided that self-constitution takes place for us in the very dense and systemic environment of technology.

I will focus here on only one characteristic of ordinary normal life: it is non-confrontational or at least it should be so. Adversarial confrontation, with other humans, with artifacts, or with institutions, cannot be the first choice in a reasonable vision of the good life and of one's art of living. Even natural-born militants and rebels are following a second-best choice, regrettably imposed by circumstances. Wisdom for the 21st century humbly suggests that this posture of an “unfortunately necessary antagonism” may not be appropriate and could even be counter-productive in the contemporary context. It means contesting the naturality of confrontation and this is disruptive – transition from Leviathans to Penguins says Benkler (2011), short-circuiting Hobbes and Linux. The ethical disruption is so obvious that it can be elusive. Yet, philosophers of technology incidentally signal that the washing machine had done more for humanity than any social law. Almost everyone would acknowledge that today the Internet brings more and means more for humanity than any existing or planned social institution. But none of them, neither the washing machine nor the Web, is the result of confrontation. The present state of the technosphere and infosphere is the result of the extraordinarily complex and systemic interaction of market actors, including at the forefront ordinary consumers on the “market” of real uses (an event on the market of uses is for instance shifting from landline to mobile phone in one's ordinary use).

A non-confrontational art of living is exerted in the prose of ordinary life by the adoption and adaptation, sometimes a radical reappropriation, of the artifacts that are supplied by industrial actors but also by non-profit enterprises. In this art of living enters for instance one's skills with a word processor. It can be a Microsoft product (legal copy or not) or an open-source software program (LibreOffice for instance). In this instance, using LibreOffice does not mean necessarily “fighting” Microsoft – but it damages the company and *de facto* breaks its monopoly. Opting for LibreOffice is normally a non-confrontational and not a militant choice: because the software is available for free and instantly (typical *market* superiority), because it is highly customizable, easier to use in certain

aspects, and so on. Watching personally chosen videos on YouTube is not “fighting” traditional TV networks and advertisement corporations, just bypassing them, for positive reasons again, largely identical to the previous ones. Using white vinegar for house cleaning and as an anti-scale product (an information retrieved from the free Web) is not “fighting” industrial corporations but simplifying one's life, wisely, as the technosphere and infosphere afford it. Bypassing the “system” instead of confronting it, to phrase it as a slogan. The appropriation of mobile phones for texting (originally a very marginal function destined for technicalities only) is the paradigm of this creative reappropriation by users – called *generativity* by Zittrain (2009). This last case is paradigmatic because it consists neither in bland adoption (“buying” the phone and with it its prescribed use, its “script” says the sociology of technology) nor in flat rejection. Selection and appropriation of artifacts and uses in the flow of (relative) abundance are the skills of the new art of living. These activities are judgments, practical judgments, for which there may be no set of ideological predetermined rules in the 21st century.

In his last lessons and publications, Michel Foucault suggested that an ethics of the self may be the most urgent *political* task: “If it is true that after all there is no primary and ultimate point of resistance to political power but in the relation of the self with the self” (Foucault 2001:241, my translation). A technique of the self that consists in the reappropriation of technological artifacts has an ethical dimension which is typically acquired and improved in the micro-events of ordinary life, exactly as ethical skills and even “ethical expertise” comes from the natural learning processes of the human organism (Varela 1999). The constitution of the moral self belongs to the same learning process as the acquisition of language and communication skills. Digital natives, then, are not only acquainted with technological competence but they are also acquainted with the ethical significance of technology – a conclusion resulting from Danah Boyd's survey of teenagers' online “social networking” (Boyd 2008).

Several theories of the critical appropriation of technology have been proposed in the 20th century but they had a background of social critique and a political agenda. Both are honorable concerns but they are also confrontational approaches. It remains possible to engage existential analysis of technology in a deliberately constructive and possibly non-confrontational style. The inspiration comes from the contemporary infosphere more than the industrial technosphere of the two past centuries. One of the main tenets is that life in technology is essentially a *mediation* with artifacts (Van Den Eede 2012). This mediation is most of the time described in non-confrontational terms, even if this feature is not explicit. To understand what we do with our smartphones and what happens on Facebook, mediation is a far more interesting structure than domination,

instrumentalization, and of course confrontation.

In an ethic of technological mediation, resistance can take place in the non-confrontational but “critical and creative accompaniment of technological developments” suggests Verbeek (2013, 72). Verbeek gives a strong motivation for his move: “An exclusive focus on the dialectics of oppression and liberation leaves crucial social and cultural aspects of technology untouched” (Verbeek 2013, 78). An ethically aware and resistive art of living, then, could take over the confrontational practices of the public debate about technology, with a substantial benefit. Political resistance thus largely becomes ordinary resistivity in everyday life.

Non-confrontation is an ideal larger and deeper than non-violence to characterize the optimal form of moral resistivity. The core affirmation is that confrontation is not the standard procedure to deal with the world in general and with other human persons in particular. Our prehistoric brain is apparently acting under the opposite instruction, it perceives confrontation and triggers confrontation far too easily for what culture and civilization allow in the present world. The “level of normality” of confrontation may vary according to contexts and persons, but we still are in a world where confrontation can appear in every exchange or conversation, and it reigns in the “regrettably necessarily confrontational” style of social critique.

Daoist non-action helps to understand the paradox of non-confrontation as a transformative engagement. The seminal reference is Lao Zi's principle of victory without fight (without confrontation): “It is the way of Heaven not to strive, and yet it skilfully overcomes” (Lao Zi 500 BCE, §73). The Dao prevails without fighting, the sage can and should do the same. This notion of non-confrontation is recurrent in Chinese (both Daoists and Confucians) and Buddhist (mostly Zen) classics. In his adaptation of Buddhist doctrines to modernity, Peter Harvey emphasizes the transformative power of non-confrontation. He quotes the *Dhammapada*: “Enmities never cease by enmity in this world; only by non-enmity do they cease” (Harvey 2000, 239). Harvey suggests also that non-enmity, non-violence and non-confrontation consist in just *non accepting* the confrontation (Harvey 2000, 246). This formulation expresses the logic of self-defense in aikido and similar techniques: confrontation is “proposed” by the other, but there is no necessity to “accept” it (contrary to the immediate reaction of our prehistoric brain). Aikido suggests that this proposition for confrontation can be reinterpreted from the point of view of harmony: perceiving the global situation (oneself, the opponent, the environment) as a global harmony, with varied internal potentials for evolution toward a preferable state through the mediation of a minimal action at the appropriate place and moment (Ueshiba 2007). In wise self-defense, the lower level of resistance and opposition (ideally: pure non-action) is the best means to realize the desired state – which is not

directly the defeat of the opponent but the end of the opposition situation, and it can take very diverse forms.

A key instance of non-confrontation is offered by the “implicit resistance” to marketing pressure in the case of electronic tablets (like the iPad). Living with or without a tablet impacts the art of living and this impact can be seen as an ethical and sapiential concern. Although they have been heavily promoted by the medias (there is no need to distinguish information and advertisement media in this matter) since 2010, independent observers may think (as I do) that tablets are largely a marketing manipulation, destined to compensate the decreasing sales of personal computers, which itself is primarily due to the saturation of the market by sufficiently performing devices. The tablet promoted as the obligatory successor of the laptop PC is technoethically questionable because it tries to pull the user away from the human and social flourishing possibilities of (connected) personal computers, in the direction of media consumption and proprietary network dependency (Zittrain 2009; Wu 2011). The wise reaction is perhaps not an outburst against the capitalist and corporations conspiracy, but rather the non-controversial patience to let it die by itself. Just do not feed the beast by buying a tablet to do as the others do. The sage is confident enough in his or her comparative evaluation of the uses and affordances of both systems to resist buying the new device. The awareness of the significance of a micro-computer as a generative tool, the courage not to follow the consuming hordes, and more generally the authentic appropriation of technology in one's life project, allow an ethics of constructive resistance but not of opposition. Tablet sales are plummeting and one could advance the hypothesis that it is because of an informal wisdom (common sense) of users more than as the effect of any confrontational “critique”.

The “one more turn after the ethical turn” (Verbeek 2011, 160) will be here a sapiential turn. The central practice of modern wisdom could be described as a responsive virtuosity that remains non-confrontational. I borrow from Peter D. Herschock the term *virtuosity* that he introduced in the context of a Buddhist response to the modern predicament (Herschock 1999, Herschock 2006). I somewhat expand its meaning, to designate this existential prowess consisting in always reinventing wisdom in perfect tune with the infinitely diverse features of real world encounters. It is of course an acquired and not a given capacity. More exactly it is by essence a capacity that constitutes and perfects itself by practice. The best analogy is with the virtuosity of a musical instrumentalist, a *virtuoso*, the second best one probably with the martial art master. Both of them are “art” forms that can inspire an art of living. Practitioners, in music as in martial arts, possess a technique but transcend it. They possess it to a degree that sets them free from the technique. The notion of virtuosity is thus predisposed for technoethical wisdom as an art of living. Importantly, virtuosity is

not expertise, in the domain of knowledge, but belongs to the domain of practical wisdom and pragmatic action.

Beyond the (already sane) idea that “lifestyle matters”, the practice of an existential virtuosity in the ordinary technosphere would be the core practice of a non-confrontational contemporary wisdom. Its specifically interactive nature, in appreciative and creative performances, allows an *existential conversation* with material life. Life talks to us and we talk to it, in response and in anticipation, as in any conversation. The skills of conversation are acquired slowly and by practice, in parallel with language learning and ordinary ethics learning. Virtuosity in the art of conversation, perhaps an idle useless talent now, remains an interesting paradigm for practical wisdom today because the technosphere and infosphere address us intensely.

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