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Dr. Michel Puech, associate professor of philosophy at Paris-Sorbonne, has made a valuable and timely contribution to debates on the nature of technology and ethical life in today’s technological landscape. Puech highlights the merits and limits of contemporary positions on technology from a variety of fields, including philosophy, technoscience, sociology, and cultural and media studies — especially from France and the United States from the 1800s to the present. Within the field of philosophy alone, Puech integrates thinkers as diverse as Heidegger, Popper, Dewey, Rorty, and Ricoeur in addition to numerous present-day writers. Though encyclopedic in scope with its forty-page bibliography, *Homo Sapiens Technologicus* is far from a textbook style survey book. Puech effectively synthesizes continental and analytical concerns and highlights emerging social constellations in the information age. His goal is to help facilitate creative collaboration between individuals and conscious self-fulfillment through the networking technologies he illuminates.

Arguing that classical metaphysical distinctions are useless in accounting for existential relations within a technological environment, Puech challenges separations between humanity, technology, and nature. Puech thereby allows for an ethics of technological life that evades the extremes of technophobia and technophilia. On the one hand, he argues that technophobic discourse, which advocates returning to a pre-technological Eden, is based in resentment of contemporary life. Portraying humanity as entirely dominated by technology, such arrogant criticism is useless for effecting positive change, according to Puech. On the other hand, he problematizes technophilic
discourse’s dogmatic meta-narrative of material progress at all costs. The ethical consequence of technophilia is abnegation of responsibility to institutions and experts. Technophilia also obscures present possibilities due to the publicity-driven media’s focus on future technological promises instead of addressing potential action within existing conditions.

Puech avoids declaring what society in general should do. Instead, he combines an existentialist focus on care of the communal self with a rich phenomenological account of the potential inherent in technological relations. While Merleau-Ponty reconceived agency and social action by focusing on our immersion in things, Puech goes a step further through a discriminating account of the variety of technological things inherent in human existence today. He moves beyond the technophobic tendencies in much early-modern existentialism, centered on the alienating effects of industrialization, by clarifying new freedoms made possible by shifts in global technology and economics. Freedoms that characterize the age of information exchange in contrast to the exchange of traditional industrial goods.

Puech argues that the bilateral coevolution of humans and technology involves complex affective relations and a process of self-definition. Thus, technological developments are irreducible to simplistic utilitarian drives or top-down control through market forces. According to Puech, technological relations are inherently ambiguous. Even though technologies are associated with some of the most far-reaching forms of alienation in today’s world, technology in-itself is not to blame. The human ability to incorporate technologies also permits new ways of life to develop by overcoming rigid behavioral routines. By clarifying our relations to the material world and their potential, Puech’s solutions respond to actual conditions, supporting Merleau-Ponty’s indications that phenomenology is a tool for action. Puech provides examples of how adaptations
facilitated by opportune technologies often create more possibilities than committees, political proposals, or laws. The example that receives the most attention in his book is Internet/networking technology, which Puech explores in remarkable detail.

In a chapter entitled “Nouvelles désuétudes,” Puech argues in a Nietzschean vein that the institutions of industrial society are even responsible for lack of action and self-mastery in the present. He argues that democracy is undermined by the knowledge/power relations involved in individual submission to self-promoting experts in medical, educational, political, economic, and media institutions. His analysis of the alienating effects of institutions is nuanced and leaves readers empowered. However, some of Puech’s claims are unnecessarily reductive, reflecting limits in his perception that lead him to stray from the subtleness of his overall methodology.

Puech criticizes technophobes who blame technology for society’s problems instead of looking at background institutions that govern technology. He correctly identifies many religious sources for resentment-driven technophobia, highlighting the problematic nature of much religious discourse that merits discussion. However, Puech is overly condemning of Western religion by merely portraying it as an opponent of technology. He is just as susceptible as Nietzsche to Scheler’s counterclaim that Christianity cannot be reduced to various contemporary manifestations of dogmatic Christian discourse. Though Puech quotes insightful Buddhist thinkers on ethics, he unnecessarily excludes Christians who argue that the fundamental message of the religion is freedom from resentment. Such interpretations have arguably inspired many existentialist thinkers, including Simone de Beauvoir, whose *Ethics of Ambiguity* is one the least dogmatic and least technophobic examples of 20th-century existentialist thought.

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1 *Désuétudes*: Roughly translatable as, “things that have fallen out of use / have no more useful purpose.”
Moreover, his accusations of technophobia against even the most dogmatic and potentially resentment-prone Christian groups may be too condemning. To solidify his argument, Puech would need to address counterexamples that suggest that not all “fundamentalist” religions merely use the Internet to condemn technology. As many Latin-American sociologists of religion remark, Evangelicals often advocate technology-oriented development programs, and the technologies they commonly oppose—perhaps too dogmatically—are television, cosmetics, and name-brand clothing, the same types of technologies that Puech finds problematic. Regardless of dogma or resentment, Puech might recognize many fundamentalist practitioners for actually practicing what they preach. They cannot be thrown in the same category as other critics of consumer society whose consumption habits often make them complicit in the very structures they criticize, as Puech notes.

Puech’s own critique of television is arguably one-sided. He criticizes the top-down nature of television broad-casting, sharply distinguishing television’s hypnotic flux of publicity-driven images, inviting passive submission, and active Internet writing. In contrast to the repetitive content of television, he says that Internet writing increases possibilities for inter-subjective debate. Puech does remark that television has interesting content once in a while amidst much empty self-promotion necessary for television programs to remain on the air. To make his discussion less one-sided, however, Puech could address claims that the positive educational effects of public and even commercial television have been extensive. Many visual theorists argue that television has expanded global perceptions and understandings of human relationships beyond the capacities of the print medium.

Puech rightly observes that the Internet allows anonymous individuals more power to seek meaningful content and to determine content itself. Consequently, the
negative effects of television could be diminished by incorporating video into the more
democratic and less commercialized structure that the internet offers. However, Puech
limits his analysis to the power of writing alone. Though his interesting comments on
Internet writing are valid, his analysis would be strengthened by also recognizing sites
likes YouTube. People can now access and post images from around the world, initiate
complex video dialogues, and learn about aspects of human behavior beyond the
conscious use of written language.

Finally, in critiquing the limited content of publicity-driven media, Puech offers
a restricted vision of what counts as substantial culture. Puech refers to Mozart both
times he contrasts more meaningful musicians to the pop celebrities that the media
market promotes. Though Mozart is arguably a musical genius that merits recognition,
Puech never clarifies that his choice reflects the culture that he has personally been
exposed to. Consequently, he never suggests that readers might provide other examples
beyond his experience. Everyone lacks cultural exposure since there is even less media
access for culture that falls outside what television at least sometime promotes as high
culture, such as Mozart. By not broadening his range of examples, Puech misses an
opportunity to show just how restricting television culture is compared to YouTube,
which allows concrete individuals to access a broad range of culture.

For instance, some rap (rhythm and poetry) artists may be comparable to the
poet René Char, the only other example of artistic culture that Puech provides. The most
inventive hip-hop dancers might be compared with famous modern dancers, and the
works of the best graffiti street artists could be likened to the murals of great Mexican
painters. Puech’s overlooking today’s hip-hop artists and philosophers throughout the
world is particularly unfortunate since they are making similar critiques of bureaucratic
institutions and are even constructing effective alternative social networks, such as MV
Bill’s Centro Única das Favelas (CUFA) in Brazil. Nevertheless, MV Bill and other rappers are suffering the same fate as composers and performers of classical music whose talents are suppressed from public view by the content-reducing mass media.

Puech fails to recognize important examples of positive potential in today’s religions, imaging-technologies, and popular culture, thus offering a reductive view of each. These jarring points where Puech betrays his overall phenomenological precision are also the points where Puech’s socialization as an academic writer from a privileged background is most apparent. What makes these moments problematic is not Puech’s background in itself, which the writer of this review shares with the author in many respects. Though Puech effectively highlights the positive potential in his situation, he never indicates that his particular socialization might limit the reach of his perception. One root of the problem is Puech’s disregarding of all social classes besides the only two he claims are important today: celebrities and experts who have access to broadcast media and the anonymous who do not. Consequently, Puech never suggests that his proposals, though highly relevant to the problems affecting his social class, might only be partial solutions for other social classes.

Puech asserts that alienation through the publicity-driven media, involving voluntary submission to dogmatic images, has replaced past forms of domination. His extreme claim that all terrorism is merely based in technophobia further suggests that Puech does not recognize other forms of alienation besides the negative effects of advertising and consumerism. Technophobia is arguably a factor in some terrorism, and especially in the Unabomber’s terrorism, which he discusses, but he would have hard time proving that the motivations for most Palestinian suicide bombings in response to the Israeli occupation, or for suicide bombings in Iraq’s marketplaces, can be reduced to technophobia.
The media is certainly pervasive in all forms of domination today, especially due to the pacifying effect of media discourse that Puech correctly identifies as a significant existential effect of publicity media. However, Puech unnecessarily claims that the logic of a perpetual flux of self-promoting micro-discourses has possibly replaced the structural logic of power that Foucault analyzes in his 1971 “Ordre du discours.” To further the collaborative and synthetic spirit of Puech’s book, his “micro-discourse” analysis could be viewed instead as a rich supplement to Foucault’s work that explores forms of alienation that escaped Foucault’s analysis of power. Consequently, Foucault’s analysis may require adjusting despite its enduring relevance for understanding the operation of power in certain areas, like in mental health and criminal-justice institutions. Puech would remain faithful to his overall phenomenological sensitivity if he avoided talking in terms of replacement and overtly acknowledged that multiple influences and forms of alienations can coexist in a complex world. A complex world calls for a variety of creative resolutions, including those that Puech proposes.

Puech’s analyses resonate with the situation of most people, and the book’s value crosses class and racial lines in the sense that everyone, because of the globalization of technologies, is affected in varying degrees and manners by their relation to experts, their level of anonymity within the media, and their access to the Internet. If Puech avoided unnecessary reductions and addressed the limitations in his perspective, Puech could further the reach of a book that is already ripe with creative potential.

In the style of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, whom Puech cites repeatedly, Puech writes in the service of life and action by speaking as a concrete individual to other concrete individuals without ever saying what existing “institutions-in-general” should. Consequently, his writing style is more welcoming than that of
much critique when he explores the potential of information technologies that allow communication and action outside of bureaucratic and publicity-driven institutions. Individuals no longer need to blindly submit themselves to experts who, besides a few dissident voices, primarily say what institutions need to say to perpetuate themselves financially. Anonymous non-experts can share authentic content directly through information technologies and develop alternative networks to flourish as a community of concrete individuals.

Reflecting his existentialist focus on responsible authentic action, Puech emphasizes that people’s micro-actions perpetuate many of the institutions that alienate them and that micro-actions are often more effective than bureaucratic measures. Conscientious consumerism, his primary example for micro-action that has the potential to regulate what technologies are promoted, could be effective in overcoming voluntary submission to the publicity-media’s agenda. However, such micro-action is too narrowly individualistic as a resolution for all forms of alienation. Swiping your credit card in a responsible manner probably will not have much effect on racial discrimination within the Prison-Industrial Complex, to borrow Angela Davis´ term, a persisting form of domination in many countries.

The concluding chapters transcend this limitation by discussing concrete forms of networking in the information age that could have more profound effects. Puech argues that the Internet has facilitated possibilities for more participatory forms of economics. Among others, he discusses the microcredit site www.lamicrofinance.com, the service bartering site www.selidaire.org, and the collective wise consumption site www.actionconsommation.org. He observes that sites like www.debatpublic.fr could even allow collective regulation of the design and application of technologies, instead of
delegating the task to unelected experts with limited perspectives, since technologies have far-reaching effects on our behavioral possibilities.

One of Puech’s most remarkable achievements is his linking institutional critique, an existential phenomenology of technologically mediated relations, and emerging scholarship on human decision-making. In the spirit of Jame Surowiecki’s *Wisdom of the Crowds*, Puech cites cases of collective decision making that has had better results than decisions by restricted groups of experts. For example, Linux, the open-source operating system that allows users to alter, debug, and distribute it, not only offer users more freedom than Microsoft Windows, but is also more reliable. Puech makes a strong argument that the micro-actions of concrete individuals could be facilitated by group decision procedures and that Internet technologies could even facilitate collective action.

However, Puech’s argument becomes suspect when he celebrates the disembodied nature of Internet communication for not allowing the prejudices provoked by perceptual differences in sex, race, class, and age interfere with one’s listening to the content of another’s statement. At first, he merely suggests that critics of Internet communication should take into account positive possibilities for non-face-to-face anonymity. Though intentionally hiding differences when submitting a job résumé could be advantageous, since racial and sexual discrimination often operates by targeting suspicious names, this form of anonymity becomes problematic when Puech advocates it as a tool for general social decision making.

Like Rawls, Popper, and other liberal rationalists, Puech argues that merely eliminating perceptual “accidents” will allow one to focus on the “logos” that another is actually communicating. This assumes that mere blindness to perceptual differences will prevent someone from discounting a statement even though the speaker might lack
important experience necessary to understand the other’s statement. By not
acknowledging limits to what disguising differences can achieve, Puech leads readers to
believe that no differences exist between anonymous speakers besides superficial
perceptual differences that have been associated with purely arbitrary stereotypes.
Puech’s proposal also suggests he is unaware that his writing would reflect his middle-
class academic socialization even if no name were attached to it. As a result, Puech
momentarily appeals to the classical metaphysical ideal of disembodied rational
discourse that is arguably “désuet.” He betrays his commitment to a non-reductive
existential phenomenology, missing implications for speaking as a concrete individual.

Being mortals of flesh and blood implies differing class, racial, sexual,
educational, and cultural habituations, leading to perceptual differences that can never
be fully disguised, even across the ethereal digital universe of Internet chat-rooms.
Anonymous chat-rooms might force even the most-prejudiced to seriously entertain a
statement from someone that they might have immediately disregarded if their differing
background was apparent. However, the most-prejudiced are also the most likely to
disregard statements coming from differing backgrounds, regardless of whether the
background remains unknown or becomes apparent through the content of the
statements alone. Thus, hiding personal details might not be the most effective approach
to promote genuine dialogue and experience-sharing. A greater possibility for dialogue
occurs when people recognize limits in their perception by explicitly recognizing how
their words reflect personal experience that might not always overlap with everyone’s
experience. Collaboration involves recognizing differences in socialization and making
them explicit in order to allow an authentic integration of perspectives.

Imaging technologies might have some advantages over writing in this respect.
The wide-spread use of cameras by anonymous individuals who engage other
anonymous through YouTube is allowing people to show experiences to others who would normally distrust their words. Thus, video dialogues could potentially change people’s perceptions of those who look different and who they normally would not come face to face with in the streets. Video dialogues could even change perceptions in ways that could affect how people interact with people who look different when they are back on the streets.

Nevertheless, writing still has its place for its capacity to offer nuanced analyses and extensive references and resources in a short amount of time, as Puech’s book does. Internet writing and Puech’s own writing would be more effective for certain purposes, however, if authors explicitly acknowledged where they are coming from and recognized that the scope of their perception and examples are limited as a result. Such writing promotes a deeper level of dialogue with other concrete individuals. People might be more inclined to read people from different backgrounds when these differences are made explicit, thus allowing individuals to collectively identify limits in their individual perceptions. In Puech’s case, readers would be given more room to identify his limits and expand the range of his exposure through dialogue if his writing no longer suggested that the essence of religion, imaging-technologies, or substantial culture is already evident.

What is certain about Puech’s book is its stimulating originality. By engaging North American and European thought simultaneously, Puech has developed his own style and strategy that does not resemble stereotypes of French philosophy. Nevertheless, Puech’s book is alive with a refreshingly French spirit. His exploration of the collaborative potential of information technology, and his use of writing to promote further communication and collaboration, is reminiscent of massive groups of individuals in the streets of Paris in May ’68. Like Puech, these individuals challenged
traditional social definitions and the media industry through alternative networking and through their use of short-wave radios, a form of horizontal communication preceding the world-wide web. *Homo Sapiens Technologicus* offers creative outlets and up-to-date technological resources to realize the possibilities glimpsed decades before.