



Uncovering the Political and Moral Dimensions of Technology: A Dialectic Between Classicism and Phenomenology

Wessel Reijers and Mark Coeckelbergh: *Narrative and Technology Ethics* Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2020, 214pp + index, €108,99 hdb

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In their recent book, *Narrative and Technology Ethics*, Wessel Reijers and Mark Coeckelbergh set out to develop “a hermeneutic ethics of technology by connecting and bridging philosophical discourses on narrative theory, virtue ethics, and responsible innovation” (p. 17). They seek to synthesize Alasdair MacIntyre’s virtue ethics and Paul Ricoeur’s hermeneutics, ultimately with the aim of uncovering the narrative (and hence political and moral) dimensions of technology. Reijers and Coeckelbergh wish to transcend the contradiction between matter and mind, things and words, technologies, and texts. They argue that technologies typically have “narrative qualities,” in the sense that they embody particular interpretations of reality in similar ways as written texts do. Through their narrative power, technologies are thus able to configure our understanding of the world. From this hermeneutic ethics of technology perspective, the authors argue that “humans do not only read technologies, but technologies on the other hand ‘read’ humans, insofar as what is experienced by a user must first be constructed in the technology” (p. 87). Of course, this means that misreading is possible. Given the narrative power of technology, such a possible misreading in turn influences users of technology and hence perpetuates the misconception of human reality. To minimize the risk of misreading, and hence to ensure, as much as possible, that technologies do not reconfigure human reality in an alienating way, all those involved in the process of technology development and the actual use of technologies must therefore be of high moral caliber. At this stage, Reijers and Coeckelbergh, intriguingly enough, omit Ricoeur’s philosophical anthropology and instead have recourse to MacIntyre’s classicist and Thomist version of

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virtue ethics. The authors make a classicist argument for “the cultivation of virtue” in and through the design and use of technology by engineers and users so that technologies may serve the common good in what they call “the politics of responsible innovation” (p. 200).

Reijers and Coeckelbergh present their phenomenological approach – that is, their hermeneutic ethics of technology that is inspired by Ricoeur – as a critique of critical theory and post-phenomenology. They note that “scholars in critical theory have pointed out how technology can lead to exploitation and support hegemonic social structures and relationships” (p. 27). However, they critically point out that critical theorists, including Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, too exclusively focus on societal structures and all too often provide a one-sided, bleak picture of technology and technological development as a force of enslavement. While critical theorists unmask the enlightenment myth of progress as a “fraudulent myth” that obscures the problematic power structures (like the Silicon Valley structure of big tech oligarchies) of global techno-capitalism (Ossewaarde 2019), Reijers and Coeckelbergh believe that “responsible innovation” is possible. They assume that technological development can be without domination or the trampling of humanity. Critical theorists who reduce modern technology to “Auschwitz,” “Hiroshima,” “Hollywood,” “Fortress Europe,” and so on overlook the fact that technology is an inherent part of human life. Reijers and Coeckelbergh also distance themselves from post-phenomenologists, who, unlike critical theorists, do not pay much attention to social structures and relations. The post-phenomenological approach to technology tries to transcend the subject-object divide by emphasizing the ways in which technologies merge with their users. Technologies (such as glasses and mobile phones) are not separate from their users but are instead extensions of the latter. Such an approach, according to Reijers and Coeckelbergh, is far too uncritical, and pays “insufficient attention to the role of language, including narrative” in technology (p. 28).

The authors’ emphasis on the narrative dimension of technology rests on the ontological assumption that the human being is “essentially a story-telling animal” (p. 37) who experiences and understands the world in terms of stories. Inspired by Ricoeur’s hermeneutics, Reijers and Coeckelbergh hold that narratives “should be understood as a fundamental ontological aspect of human social reality” (p. 43), which implies that also the reality of technology is experienced and understood through narratives. Technologies appeal to users through the power of embodied narratives. Narratives – myths, legends, folktales, fables, stories, policy discourses, news coverage, etc. – “mediate our experience and understanding” (p. 43) of the lifeworld. This lifeworld, of course, includes our experience and understanding of technology. Drawing on Ricoeur’s theory of narrative, Reijers and Coeckelbergh emphasize that a narrative “gathers together a heterogenous collection of events and characters, that are configured in a meaningful whole that we refer to as a ‘plot’” (p. 52). It is thus through narratives and the medium of texts (language) that activities such as technology design, political decisions, the implementation of new technologies, or citizen participation in public fora are made intelligible. Hence, the text “can be seen as a model of meaningful action” (p. 55).

Reijers and Coeckelbergh focus on Ricoeur’s concept of emplotment to retrace the configuration of a narrative. Emplotment is “the process that defines any narrative

structure” (p. 56). It designates the organization of events according to a script or scenario by which the characters represent meaningful or motivated action in a plot. Following Ricoeur, Reijers and Coeckelbergh stress that tragedy and comedy are “paradigmatic examples” of narrative genres in which events are organized in such ways that characters like Sophocles’ King Oedipus or Aristophanes’ Makemede come to represent meaningful (tragic or comic) action (p. 82). In a similar way, emplotment can be found in all sorts of narratives, including policy discourses, news coverages, marketing stories, etc. In other words, narratives do not simply transmit information or “facts” but actively shape lifeworlds. Like the poetry of Sophocles and Aristophanes, technologies embody narrative plots and can therefore actively (re)configure a user’s understanding of the world and his/her self-understanding, Reijers and Coeckelbergh argue. Users typically follow the technology’s emplotment, and by so doing, their lived experience and understanding of the world are transformed. The authors illustrate such emplotment with the example of driving a car: “we can say that a car, as a technology, configures events such as ‘starting the engine’ and ‘adjusting the mirrors’ in a meaningful whole” (p. 89). The emplotment of driving a car is, of course, quite different from the “paradigmatic examples,” in the sense that it can be doubted to what extent car-driving constitutes a “meaningful whole” in a way that can be comparable to how the great Athenian poets created “meaningful wholes”. Driving a car is a mechanical and utilitarian activity whose emplotment is similarly mechanical and utilitarian. Strictly speaking, driving a car has no “meaning,” unless the narrative involves status, prestige, and power. The narratives of ancient tragic and comic poems as well as their contemporary counterparts are of a fundamentally different, non-utilitarian nature. They refer to different realities than the ones lived by the audience and typically embody a moral message. Or they reveal the unfathomable nature of human reality. They can also parody prevailing societal values and customs.

Reijers and Coeckelbergh construct a hermeneutic ethics of technology to uncover the narrative power of technology. A hermeneutic ethics of technology is needed, they argue, because we not only “make sense of technology and our lives in narrative ways,” but, more fundamentally, “technology also configures our actions and life narratives” (p. 44). Hence the question of how to use and design technology responsibly, in ways that do not harm the common good, but, by contrast, facilitate human flourishing understood as the “completion” or “wholeness” of human beings. This is where and why Reijers and Coeckelbergh attempt to reconcile Ricoeur’s hermeneutics and MacIntyre’s virtue ethics. For them, the key ethical question is how to use and design technology in a virtuous manner. When virtues are cultivated in practices, virtuous users, virtuous practitioners, and virtuous engineers may come to shape “responsible innovation,” that is, ensure that the plots embodied in technologies respect and enhance the common good. Technological innovation, Reijers and Coeckelbergh argue, even after Auschwitz and Hiroshima (the horrific manifestations of “irresponsible innovation”), can be made responsible, but on condition that users and designers become virtuous.

While highly interesting and relevant, the merging of particular aspects of phenomenology and of MacIntyre’s virtue ethics, respectively, is not unproblematic in *Narrative and Technology Ethics*. There are two main issues that the authors do not

address in their book, but need to be addressed when one seeks to reconcile Ricoeur and MacIntyre. One concerns the synthesis of intellectual traditions that are based on different and perhaps even conflicting premises. Ricoeur's phenomenology and MacIntyre's virtue ethics are grounded in different understandings of the world. While MacIntyre's virtue ethics is classicist (Aristotelian, Thomist) and assumes a pre-given transcendent reality, Ricoeur's hermeneutics is post-metaphysical. A second, related problem that the authors do not discuss is the loss that is incurred by omitting certain essential aspects of these intellectual traditions. An example of such omission is the phenomenological idea of epochs and hence of a technological *age*. What is thereby lost is the insight into the "spirit" or fundamental inclination of a civilization that undermines and corrupts all aspirations to reason and freedom. In an industrial-technological civilization that is mainly informed by a mastery-oriented enlightenment science, Husserl (1935) argues, industrial technologies typically impose a "mistaken rationalism". This "mistaken rationalism" is not truth-oriented but mastery-oriented, which is to say that in an industrial civilizational context in which mastery is prioritized, industrial technologies ultimately alienate us from ourselves and the world. Similarly, Patočka (1996) emphasizes that the "mistaken rationalism" of technological civilization drives us away from ourselves, from the Platonic "care of the soul". That is, in technological civilization, human existence – adapted to industrial technologies – becomes objectified to the point that we can no longer transform inwardly via Socratic questioning. A mastery-oriented technological civilization undermines the Socratic examination of life, which, for Patočka, is the precondition for, and the mark of, a European existence and a responsible life. Likewise, Gehlen (1980) notes that people in a technological age are less capable of freedom. Being dominated by technologies and the "mistaken rationalism" they enforce, people lose the taste for freedom, and therefore, become unused to carry the "burdens" of freedom. Convenience foods replace meals prepared at home; their clothes are ready-made, they get their music from records, etc. And finally, they take ready-made beliefs and opinions from the state and the media (Gehlen 1980). In contrast with such phenomenologists, Reijers and Coeckelbergh do not have recourse to the idea of an "epoch," and therefore, do not pay attention to the political and cultural context in which technological innovations take place, and which determines the nature of technologies even before they have been designed. The authors' emphasis on the narrative power of technologies insightfully corrects the misconception of technologies as "neutral" instruments. Yet, their belief in good design, the virtuous use of technologies – and hence the avoidance of "Orwellian technology" (p. 4) – and "responsible innovation" appears to downplay that narrative spell.

Responsible innovation requires virtues, the authors argue. Drawing on MacIntyre's virtue ethics, Reijers and Coeckelbergh define virtue "as a disposition to act in accordance with a sense of completion of a human being, called *eudaimonia*" (p. 118). *Eudaimonia*, often so problematically translated as "happiness," is the given purpose of life. For humans, that given purpose is human flourishing, which consists in being wholly or completely human. *Eudaimonia* is an existential condition of being in the world that may be attained via the classical philosopher's way of life to make oneself and other people better. As a classicist or Aristotelian ethical theory, MacIntyre's virtue ethics is grounded in a teleological worldview, and

is therefore essentially metaphysical. Teleology indicates that everything in nature, including humans, communities, and states, is endowed with a given due end, natural purpose, or proper station (*telos*) that can be potentially fulfilled. For humans, such metaphysics means that to become wholly or completely human, and thereby come to flourish, they must cultivate themselves towards their due end (which is *eudaimonia*). Humans can only fulfil their due end through the exercise of classical virtues like courage, moderation, magnanimity, and prudence (p. 62), by which they cultivate the ability to resist the lure of bodily pleasures and the ability to tolerate physical pain. For Aristotle and MacIntyre, such virtues can only be exercised in certain political and moral communities, like the Athenian city-state. According to Aristotelian virtue ethics, *eudaimonia* can only be potentially achieved in a political and cultural context that is truth-oriented. Aristotle's virtue ethics is, accordingly, a quest for the best regime, which is the regime that makes *eudaimonia* achievable for citizens. The best regime exists for the purpose of making citizens better.

The main and unfortunate omission *Narrative and Technology Ethics* is therefore the failure to realize that the modern civilizational inclination to mastery cannot be transcended by merging phenomenology and classicism. The authors overlook the modern reversal of political priorities so that material, technological mastery is valued more highly than classical (republican) citizenship and moral (and spiritual) excellence. Reijers and Coeckelbergh's call for a "politics of responsible innovation," while highly interesting and relevant, is different from MacIntyre's Aristotelian or Thomist virtue ethics. The "politics of responsible innovation" is not a politics organized within moral and political communities, by and for citizens, but, instead, is a politics without political context. That is, the "politics of responsible innovation" consists of the exercise of the virtues by designers and users of technology in a contemporary context of global techno-capitalism. Given that technologies, particularly the new technologies, have such a major impact on the lifeworld of people, Reijers and Coeckelbergh emphasize, it is those who make and use technologies that have come to hold the keys for shaping worlds – beyond political and moral communities – for achieving *eudaimonia*. In moral and political communities like ancient Athens, the purpose of philosophy is to teach the virtues, to make oneself and other people better, based on the metaphysical premise that, for the health of the soul and its ascension to the good, beautiful, and truthful life, it is better to suffer injustice than to be unjust. The authors' "politics of responsible innovation" – shaping virtuous designers and users of technologies in the context of global techno-capitalism – comes with a transfer of the examined life from philosophers to laymen, that is, the designers and users of technology. As Reijers and Coeckelbergh put it, "practicing philosophy and ethic of technology inescapably takes place in everydayness, in the public realm of research labs, teams of engineers working on research and innovation projects, and political interference in innovation processes" (p. 63).

Reijers and Coeckelbergh seek to "rescue" virtue ethics, not for the sake of the care of the soul but for ensuring that, in a context of global techno-capitalism, technologies do not come to harm humanity. Such redefinition of virtue ethics comes with a redefinition of the virtues (as well as a redefinition of the interrelationship of the virtues), given that, for Aristotle and for MacIntyre, the virtues cannot be exercised outside a political and moral community like the Athenian polis. They are

ultimately political or civic virtues. For instance, for MacIntyre (1981: 202), “justice, on an Aristotelian view, is defined in terms of giving each person his or her due or desert”. To deserve well, MacIntyre argues, is to have contributed in some substantial way to the realization of the common good, to “the sharing of which and the common pursuit of which provide foundations for human community” (1981: 202). To make virtue ethics relevant beyond the polis, to make the politics of responsible innovation possible in a context of global techno-capitalism, Reijers and Coeckelbergh divorce virtue ethics from the Aristotelian (metaphysical) worldview. They redefine justice as the ability “to address the increasing unjust distribution of resources and power through technological communication channels” (p. 121). And courage, for MacIntyre, is a virtue that refers to “the capacity to risk harm or danger to oneself” (MacIntyre 1981: 123). “To be courageous is to be someone on whom reliance can be placed,” MacIntyre argues, which is fundamental as an expression of friendship and care and concern for others and for communities (MacIntyre 1981: 192). The politics of responsible innovation requires a redefinition of courage, beyond Aristotelian metaphysics. Reijers and Coeckelbergh redefine courage as the ability “to overcome the challenges humans face of existential proportions (e.g., climate change) that correspond with technological progress” (p. 121). In other words, Reijers and Coeckelbergh’s politics of responsible innovation comes with a redefinition of virtue ethics that constitutes a radical break with MacIntyre’s Aristotelianism/Thomism.

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