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Technology, Virtue and the Good Life: Between Production and Consumption*

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This paper explores recent developments in the virtue ethics approach to human flourishing in technological societies. I discuss the merits of virtue ethics in a broader context of various philosophies of technology. I propose that a distinction can be made between two broad approaches to the question of the good life and technology: the production approach that focuses on the roles technologies could and do play in production for the elimination of various forms of labour and the consumption approach that focuses on the role of technology in everyday social settings and interactions outside the workplace. Finding that the virtue ethics approach currently remains almost exclusively focused on consumption, I conclude the article with a suggestion for how virtue theory can be advanced beyond consumption using the resources of the same virtue ethics tradition.

Keywords: technology, virtue, human flourishing, production, consumption

INTRODUCTION

Much of the philosophical investigation of contemporary technologies in recent decades has focused on the applied ethics approach: using various philosophical ethical doctrines to evaluate concrete technologies. The proliferation of ethical approaches to study technologies has led some to argue that this plurality is already becoming problematic because it causes a danger of losing sight of 'more fundamental ethical insights and truths' (Saetra, Danaher 2022) and to suggest that a more comprehensive philosophical approach is needed, such that would start from a general conception of human flourishing and would deliver a critical investigation of the possibilities of good life in technological societies (Casas-Roma 2022). Sharing these concerns, in this article I seek to critically evaluate a relatively new development in the theory of technology, called the virtue ethical approach. The approach, borrowed from the ancient virtue traditions, asks what kind of capacities people should develop in order to lead flourishing lives? I therefore seek to investigate whether contemporary virtue ethics could provide a comprehensive critical perspective on human flourishing in contemporary technological societies.

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I begin with a brief analysis that situates virtue theory within a general history of philosophies of technology. After summarising the main aspects of the virtue theory approach I proceed to discuss in a greater detail two influential contributions in the philosophy of technology that employ virtue theory: P.-P. Verbeek (2011) and S. Vallor (2016). These two works are selected because they are not so much concerned with applied ethics case studies but with providing a general philosophical account of human wellbeing and technology. To critically evaluate how comprehensive are their contributions, I introduce the distinction between production and consumption and conclude that technological virtue theory so far remains limited to 'consumption focus'. I ask if technological virtue theory can also embrace the role of technologies in the domain of production? I finish the article with the suggestion that there are sufficient theoretical resources within virtue theory to embrace the realm of production and move towards more comprehensive considerations on technology and human flourishing.

APPROACHES TO THE GOOD LIFE IN TECHNOLOGICAL SOCIETIES

Philosophical investigations of the nature of technology and its impact on human flourishing have undergone important transformations. Although it is always a contested matter to offer a periodisation of such developments, it is generally agreed that at least several big shifts or several 'generations' of such philosophies can be recognised (for a comprehensive overview of different approaches to technology and human well-being see Mitcham, Briggle 2012). The early philosophies of technology in the middle of the 20th century approached technology as a force of its own, without making any serious distinctions between different technologies. The first generation had a characteristically pessimistic view on the relation between human flourishing and technology. Heidegger, for example, in making a clear distinction between pre-modern devices and modern technology, argued that modern technology reduces nature to a resource for exploitation (Heidegger 1977). As such, technology forecloses a more open and multifaceted relation to the world and therefore constitutes 'the supreme danger' to humanity (ibid. 26). J. Ellul (1964) offered a similar critique of 'technique' as an all-encompassing enslavement of humanity to instrumental efficiency.

A. Borgmann's later influential work *Technology and the Character of Modern Life* (1984) can be seen as a neo-Heideggerian work. Borgmann accepts that technology is an inescapable aspect of modern life and that the good life must be conceived within technological settings. Although Borgmann avoids the pessimistic conclusions of his predecessors, he retains a clear distinction between what he names 'focal things and practices' and 'device paradigm'. Focal things and practices sustain multifaceted meaningful relations between persons and things, while the device paradigm is focused on the provision of commodities. If focal practices are characterised by engagement, the device paradigm, by contrast, is by consumption. Although Borgmann does not reject the importance of technologies for contemporary life, human flourishing is conceived as exclusively oriented around focal practices, while technology is perceived as a force that tends to destroy such practices.

Much of the later philosophy of technology moved away from sweeping generalisations about the nature of technology and towards considerations on concrete technologies in concrete social settings. This turn has sometimes been called the 'empirical turn' (Verbeek 2011: 161–162). However, as Verbeek concludes, the empirical turn has discarded much of the critical spirit of the earlier generation and focused more on description than critique. Another shift can be identified from the start of the century with the proliferation of various ethical frameworks to analyse the relation between society and technology. Virtue theory, which is

the object of this article, appears with this shift as one of the proposed ethical frameworks for technology critique. Basing itself on a normative conception of the flourishing life for human beings, virtue theory seeks to provide a critical account of how human beings can live well in contemporary technological settings. In this regard, it constitutes a significant return to the concerns of early generation for a comprehensive understanding of human wellbeing.

VIRTUE THEORY: RESPONSIBLE AGENCY IN TECHNOLOGICAL SETTINGS

Virtue theory approach in the philosophy of technology is a recent development, gaining grounds in the last decade or so. We can distinguish between the application of virtue theory to study concrete technologies and the employment of virtue theory as a broader philosophical approach to the good life in technological societies. As for the former, virtue theory has been applied to new social media (Vallor 2011), care robots (Coeckelbergh 2012), alternate reality video games (Reijers, Coeckelbergh 2018) and artificial intelligence (Doherty 2021), to name a few examples. But there are also attempts to construct a general philosophical account of human flourishing as a normative guide for critique of technological societies. While the virtue theory approach is Aristotelian in most cases, some use a Confucian version of virtue theory as well (e.g. Morten 2021).

Virtue theory approach differs from other approaches in its refusal to reduce technology either to a force of emancipation or of enslavement. It approaches technology as a more or less ambivalent force – more or less, because it does not reject the idea that normative factors are present in technologies, while avoiding reductive claims about a general essence of technology. In other words, it does not claim that technology is purely utilitarian – itself neutral and only used for different social ends – and also distances from 'first generation' philosophers who sought to establish a single essence of technology. This ambivalence allows for a shift of attention from the object to the subject: at the centre of virtue theory is the subject acting within a technological milieu. The question then becomes: how can people live well within a technological setting? Living well is here understood in the traditional virtue ethics approach, as the capacity to consciously and responsibly shape one's life in accordance with the correct understanding of the good life. Virtues, as Aristotle understood them, are acquired states of character and mind that allow the agent to be in control of their life. Therefore virtue theory seeks to recover human agency within technological settings. A responsible agent, who has developed appropriate virtues, can retain control of the direction of one's life among emerging technologies, use those technologies appropriately for good ends and, finally, influence the direction of technological development accordingly.

Two recent contributions in the philosophy of technology have been influential for directing our attention towards the resources of virtue theory. One is Verbeek's *Moralizing Technology* (2011) which, although not resting on virtue theory directly, argues for the need to develop a virtue theoretical account of human flourishing. Another is the influential account of technomoral virtues by Vallor (2016) that develops a general virtue theory for technological societies. Comparing both is insightful as they have different conceptions of agency in technological settings, yet point towards a similar philosophical view of what it means to be a flourishing human subject amid modern technologies.

Verbeek's approach at first seems to be far removed from the virtue ethical positions of Vallor: he qualifies his approach as a type of non-humanist, post-phenomenological ethics. For Verbeek this means questioning the rigid opposition between subject and object, between human intentionality and the pure instrumentality of objects. Without fully embracing

the radical post-humanist dissolution of subjectivity, Verbeek rejects the modern account of agency as well. He seeks to recognise a certain level of intentionality and even morality in things and questions the modern Cartesian subject in favour of technologically mediated subjectivity. It is not the human subject as opposed to the technological object that forms intentions and acts, but the human–technology composite. This means that our intentions and actions are mediated by contemporary technologies: they suggest a certain course of action, nudge us in one direction or another and shape our decisions by making certain courses of action available that would not be so without technological interference.

Responding to this reality calls for a rethinking of human agency and responsibility: 'This blurring of the boundaries between humans and technologies does not make human being less responsible; rather, it opens up a new realm of responsibility' (Verbeek 2011: 108). Verbeek finds a way towards recovering human ethical responsibility in contemporary technological settings via Foucault's late analysis of power and 'technologies of the self'. Responsibility can be recovered by acknowledging all the subtle ways in which technology mediates our agency. By becoming aware of these mediations we may then actively and consciously direct them towards desirable ends (ibid. 138). As a result, we can become responsible for how humanity and technology are interwoven and thus subject technological developments to collective democratic control.

For the purposes of this article the crucial aspect in Verbeek's analysis is his continuous acknowledgment throughout the book that of three most prominent ethical currents – deontology, consequentialism and virtue ethics – it is the latter that has the best resources for application within the context of technologically mediated subjectivity. Virtue ethic's focus on how to live well makes it 'easier to incorporate the moral roles of technologies' (ibid. 63). Indeed, virtue ethics in its Aristotelian articulation does not oppose desire and reason, pleasure and the good, but acknowledges various factors shaping our agency and asks how we can be in control of them so as to remain responsible subjects. Similarly for Verbeek, we do not need to renounce technological mediation in order to save human subjectivity (ibid. 82). Virtue ethics allows Verbeek to take a step beyond Foucault's focus on the stylings of subjectivity towards conceiving various ways in which we can collectively shape the design of technology (ibid. 89). Having a conception of what it means to flourish as a responsible technologically mediated agent allows one to intervene creatively with technology design so as to allow technologies to contribute to human flourishing instead of hindering it. In the concluding section of his book, Verbeek argues for the ethics that focuses on 'developing forms of excellence in living with technology' (ibid. 156).

Verbeek, however, does not provide a more detailed account of such 'forms of excellence' in technological societies. His work is focused on providing a conception of agency appropriate to technological societies that would open up possibilities for technologically mediated collective responsibility. Vallor's work can be seen as a next step towards developing a virtue ethical approach to technology. Vallor abstracts from various virtue ethics traditions – Aristotelian, Confucian and Buddhist – to construct a general virtue theory. Showing that there is a central core to all virtue traditions, Vallor proceeds to reimagine virtue ethics for new technological social settings. The virtue ethical approach, argues Vallor, is necessary because of what she terms 'acute technological opacity' (Vallor 2016: 6): we cannot predict and control the course of technological development as it remains to a significant degree contingent. Because of this opacity attention is redirected towards the subject and to the question of what capacities an agent must develop and exercise in order to be able to

act and flourish in the face of technological unpredictability. Virtue ethics seeks to prepare the subject to act in various situations where it cannot be foreseen in advance what a correct course of action should be.

The strength of Vallor's approach lies in the fact that she correctly recognises – referencing the work of A. MacIntyre – that virtue theory can only make sense if it can retain some kind of objectivity: in other words, virtues are not simply desirable character traits, but they are necessary elements for the flourishing of human practices and achievement of human goods. To realise this Vallor develops an account of 'technomoral practices' which describe various technologically mediated collaborative activities (ibid. 45–46). Human flourishing in contemporary societies is understood increasingly through such practices: contemporary technologies create new forms of communication, mobility and cooperation. Virtues find their place within such practices as those qualities of character and mind that sustain the goods such technologically mediated practices provide.

Vallor develops a set of virtues for technological societies: honesty, self-control, humility, justice, courage, empathy, care, civility, flexibility, perspective, magnanimity and technomoral wisdom (ibid. 120). She proceeds to discuss in detail – using the classic Aristotelian scheme – that every virtue is situated in relation to two vices, signifying an excess and defect in relation to which a specific virtue is an appropriate middle, guiding actions of the agent in a concrete situation. This is not to say that contemporary technologies only produce the goods of technomoral practice, on the contrary, Vallor is aware of a variety of destructive effects of many contemporary technologies. The point is this: we must at first know what kind of people we want to be and what it is to flourish as a human being if we want to be able to resist the negative aspects of emerging technologies and direct technological change in a desirable course.

PRODUCTION AND/OR CONSUMPTION?

Virtue theory so far remains limited to what I propose to call a 'consumption focus'. It provides a critique of how we engage with technologies in our everyday lives, how our individual lives and social interactions are shaped and mediated by various contemporary technologies. Yet, technological virtue ethics rarely question the workplace. Opposing this consumption focus, we can distinguish a production focus, which engages with the technological mediation of the relations of production: on how technology transforms both the power relations in the workplace and the patterns of production.

The works in technological virtue ethics discussed above remain within a consumption focus that is clear from the examples they employ. Verbeek focuses on the influence of technology in medicine and on 'persuasive technologies' that shape our decisions and actions. Vallor's examples are new social media, surveillance techniques, smart devices, robotisation of warfare and human enhancement technologies. The disregard for the sphere of production therefore limits the applicability of virtue theory as much of our engagement with technology happens in the workplace. Technological innovations transform production patterns, eliminate certain types of work, deskill certain productive activities, open new skills and practices, change the relation between work and free time. Clearly all those factors are essential for inquiring about human flourishing in technological societies. Furthermore, what Vallor presents as acute technological opacity must be questioned. Technological development is not driven by some kind of internal techno-logic, nor is it completely contingent, but is shaped by concrete economic interests and power relations (Frey 2019). The types of values expressed

in concrete technological devices are the result of social struggles (Feenberg 1999). While directing our attention to the subject facing technology, virtue theory should not lose sight of the real processes shaping technological development.

In contrast, focusing on the role of technologies in production, some have recently argued for the need to embrace the possibilities of universal human flourishing opened by contemporary technologies. Thus, N. Srnicek and A. Williams (2015) argue for automation as a precondition for universal emancipation and the need to direct technological development to create flourishing life for all. Similar statements in a more radical fashion are advanced in A. Bastani's manifesto (2020). This literature generally does not reference virtue theory when discussing human flourishing – with an interesting exception of P. Mason. In his *Postcapitalism* (2015), Mason produced arguments in a similar fashion to the above-mentioned works, arguing for the emancipatory promise of much contemporary technology by focusing on their impacts for the patterns of production. However, in his later work (2019), Mason argues that some contemporary technologies pose a threat for human agency and acknowledges the importance of the Aristotelian conceptions of human flourishing and virtue for technology critique. The question remains whether or not technological virtue theory can be extended so as to embrace both production and consumption realms?

RESOURCES FOR OVERCOMING THE DIVISION

In this section, I want to suggest that the resources to unify both production and consumption perspectives under a more comprehensive virtue-theoretical account of human flourishing in technological settings can be found within the Aristotelian virtue tradition itself. I have observed that the virtue-ethical approach to the good life in technological society for the most part tends to leave the question of the material reproduction of society unexamined. However, it would be wrong to conclude that this is the general limitation of the virtue ethics approach. At least the Aristotelian tradition – at this point I must leave aside the Confucian and the Buddhist virtue ethic traditions due to the lack of expertise – has the necessary resources for a more comprehensive approach that unites both realms.

Aristotle himself conceived the good life as being outside the realm of production: human excellences are pursued only when the agent is free from material necessities (*Politics* 1328b36–1329a1). Aristotle advanced these arguments for reactionary political purposes in order to disenfranchise the working majority. But as I have suggested elsewhere (Mardosas 2020), we can transform these arguments for progressive purposes to question contemporary productive practices. Furthermore, many authors in technological virtue theory mentioned in this article have built their analysis referencing the Aristotelian works of A. MacIntyre. And it is precisely in MacIntyre's version of Aristotelianism that the question of the good life in technological society can take its radical form as a means of questioning both production and consumption realms. Although MacIntyre himself has only very rarely commented on the subject of technology, in his *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity* he argues that cooperative enterprises create more opportunities to exercise virtues in productive practices (MacIntyre 2016: 131). Furthermore, there is a large and growing interest in MacIntyre's account of virtues in the business ethics discipline, with some authors employing virtue ethics to conceive what good work might look like and to question the contemporary mode of production and division of labour (Sinnicks 2021; Breen 2007).

Virtue theory in the philosophy of technology therefore has much to learn from these developments in virtue theory in other disciplines. There is no reason inherent in the virtue

theory approach why Vallor's concept of technomoral practice should not be applied to consider productive practices.

CONCLUSIONS

The importance of the recent turn to virtue theory in the philosophy of technology lies in its ability to radically question the role of technologies in both production and consumption realms. Compared to the empirical turn, virtue theory has a much stronger intention in questioning technological societies. As opposed to the early 'fathers' of the philosophy of technology, virtue-theory embraces the possibility of technologically mediated human flourishing. An account of technological excellences and technomoral practices allows one to not only conceive what kind of person one must become in order to responsibly use emerging technologies, but also provides normative criteria to influence the trajectory of technological innovation. However, refusing to engage with the critique of technologies in production and the power relations shaping the process of technological innovation, virtue theory so far remains limited to the consumption realm. The main argument of this article was that this is not the general limitation of virtue theory. It has theoretical resources for a comprehensive view of human flourishing in technological societies that can extend the same theoretical scheme to both production and consumption realms. Moving beyond consumption towards questioning production is key for the fruitful development of virtue theory for technological societies. If virtue theory would embrace the critique of technology at the realm of production, technological opacity may prove to be not as acute as is sometimes assumed.

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Technologijos, dorybė ir geras gyvenimas: tarp vartojimo ir gamybos

Santrauka

Straipsnyje aptariama dorybių etikos prieiga filosofiškai svarstant gero gyvenimo technologinėse visuomenėse klausimą. Dorybių etikos reikšmė įvertinama platesniame technologijų filosofijos lauke. Straipsnyje siūloma atskirti du būdus, analizuojant santykį tarp technologijų ir žmogiškojo klestėjimo: gamybos prieiga, kuri kreipia dėmesį į technologijų gamybinį vaidmenį ir įvairių darbo formų panaikinimą, ir vartojimo prieiga, kuri analizuoja technologijų vaidmenį socialiniuose kontekstuose ir santykiuose už darbovietės ribų. Daroma išvada, kad dorybių etika technologijų filosofijoje kol kas neperžengia vartojimo prieigos ribų. Straipsnio pabaigoje pateikiamas siūlymas, kaip dorybių etika savo pačios filosofiniais ištekliais gali sujungti abi – vartojimo ir gamybos – sritis.

Raktažodžiai: technologija, dorybė, geras gyvenimas, vartojimas, gamyba