

AI, Alienation, and the Role of Philosophical Practice in the Digital Age

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Abstract: There is no denying that technology has had a positive impact on the evolution of mankind. From the mechanization of agriculture, to the advances in the fields of transports, communications or medicine, to those in the education sector, technology has had an impact in many areas, bringing along a number of improvements in people's lives. Nowadays, people can travel to any "corner" of the world, have running water and heat in their homes by the simple push of a button, while routine work has been more and more taken over by robots and automation. Artificial intelligence promises to take all these improvements even further and free us even more from the realm of routine work. The autonomous car assumes the role of the bus driver who drives on the same road every day countless times, cashier services, courier or home delivery services are increasingly performed by automatic machines, robots take over even some of the duties of medical staff, in areas such as radiology or neurosurgery, while content processing AIs are being used to a greater extent in journalism. However, many philosophers and scientists have warned about the negative effects of technology. In addition to the harmful effects on the environment, confirmed by multiple studies linking recent climate changes with the rise of technological activity from the dawn of the industrial revolution to present times, technological intrusion also has an alienating effect on both the individual and society. A number of negative effects of the increasing use of technology in everyday life have been identified, such as depression, anxiety, sleep disturbances or social

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isolation, that have been associated with manifestations of the individual's alienation, which subsequently are reflected at the level of society. The problem this paper raises is whether the introduction of artificial intelligence does not lead to an increase in the level of alienation felt by the individual and reflected in society, trying to propose possible solutions from the perspective of philosophical counselling and that of the transhumanist vision.

Key-words: artificial intelligence-AI; alienation; automation; philosophical counseling; philosophical practice; transhumanism;

Introduction

One cannot dismiss the huge role technology has had in the development of humankind and of our current society. The benefits brought on by technological advancements are numerous and have impacted most domains of human life, with the new developments in AI and robotics promising to make our lives even better. But there is also a downside to the extensive intrusion of technology in our lives and many philosophers and scientists have warned about the negative effects technology can also have. The main topics are those of the devastating effect our misuse of technology has had on the environment and of the alienating effect technology seems to have at both individual, and social level. The problem this paper raises is whether the introduction of artificial intelligence would not lead to an increase in the level of alienation felt by the individual and reflected in society, trying to propose possible solutions from the perspective of philosophical counselling and that of the transhumanist vision.

Technology and Its Benefits

But first we should begin by trying to have a better understanding of the problem we are dealing with and the concepts involved in it. Technology, for once, is a word that has come to be used more and more in

our present society. But what are we talking about when we say about something that it is “technology”? Etymologically speaking the word “technology” is derived from the ancient Greek *technē*, meaning “art, craft, skill” combined with *logos*, signifying “speech, study”. But as Eric Schatzberg (2018) shows in his *Critical History* on the concept of technology, in our present-day usage of the concept of technology this initial meaning has been lost, as our current significance of technology “refers more to things than ideas, to material practices rather than a scholarly discipline” (p. 8). So, in present-day times, when we talk about technology, we are rather referring to a machine or device that was produced through the use of science. The meaning we are concerned with is our current-day one that is linked to our human capacity to produce tools and machines to help us in our work. The history of this human capacity stretches a long way back into history, all the way back to the Stone Age, when humans were shaping stones into tools and weapons. But this was just the starting point, as from there on human beings proceeded in developing more and more devices that sought to aid and better humanity’s life. And, as the number of machines increased, so did their complexity. We went from shaping rocks to building bows and arrows, the wheel and the plough, irrigation systems, the printing machine, all culminating in the technological boom that is now called “The Industrial Revolution”, that saw the creation of the steam engine. From that moment on, the evolution of what we now call technology quickened its pace, as the last 200 years saw an explosion of devices and machines being developed by humankind: railways, the steamboat, the telegraph and the telephone, electric lighting, the automobile, radio, the airplane, television, the transistor, spaceflight, the personal computer and the Internet, CRISPR, big data, deep learning and artificial intelligence (Gregersen, 2019).

With all this huge number of tools and devices developed throughout the centuries, it is no wonder that technology has come to have an increasing impact on every sector of our existence. The benefits that follow are numerous, as technology has brought improvements in lots of domains, from agriculture, where manual labor has been replaced more and more by highly mechanized equipment, to transportation, as nowadays people can practically travel to any place on the face of the Earth, using cars, planes, trains, buses and so on, that are ever evolving and improving. More recently, technology has come to have a big impact on the

educational system as well. The benefits are numerous here too, as technology offers the advantage of being able to attend classes from anywhere in the world, the internet offers a lot of information available at the tip of the finger, and there are a lot of applications that can be used to create more interactive and interesting lessons for students, already considered as being “digital natives” (Sadiku, M. et al., 2017). But the sector of activity that has been the most impacted by technology is the industrial one, as more and more industries have moved from manual labor to more and more mechanized and automatized work. This has led to an increased production, which in turn has resulted in a growth in the manufacturing of goods and in their availability to the general public.

Speaking of the general public, if we are to think from an individual’s perspective, technology has brought on countless benefits: we no longer have to live in dark, humid caves, we no longer have to work the land, hunt or fish in order to be able to survive. Now, the human being has heated water in their apartment and only needs to call a food delivery service in order to get whatever his heart desires to have for dinner. The conclusion we can draw from all this is that technology has brought a lot of advantages for humankind, along with giving man the possibility to escape routinized and monotonous work.

Artificial Intelligence, Robots and Autonomous Cars: Benefits

The latest technological developments revolve around artificial intelligence, robotics, and the autonomous car. The concept of the autonomous car practically stands for a car that does not need a driver; in its full automated mode the passenger need not have any driving skills at all. The United States Department of Transportation (n.d.) lists a number of benefits that the autonomous car will bring to the world. Among these are safety, as the autonomous car removes human error from the driving process, mobility, as it could provide services to a wider range of population, and efficiency, by cutting fuel consumption. Economic and societal advantages are also mentioned (cost reductions for car repairs, as the number of crashes would decrease), as well as environmental ones (shared rides, reduction of parking spaces, less air pollution). Among the most often listed advantages of robotics are their increased efficiency, productivity, and quality as unlike human workers, robots do not make

mistakes, they do not lose concentration doing repetitive work, they do not require sleep, vacation time, lunch breaks, sick leaves, and so on. All of these needs the robot is lacking in comparison to the human being make for an increase in productivity, as robots can work non-stop or until they break down (Kumar, R., 2020; Mitchell, R; Granta Automation, 2017). When it comes to the advantages of artificial intelligence, AI software has already proven beneficial in several fields, as in the healthcare system, where artificial intelligence helps with patient diagnosis, as well as early disease detection, or the financial sector, where AI is used to automate tasks, to detect fraud and even as Chabot assistants. Although it is not the same thing as robotics, artificial intelligence shares some of its benefits, as freeing people from the routine of repetitive work, taking on dangerous jobs in unfriendly environments, being more efficient and productive, while also offering an increase in quality and precision. But, unlike robotics, AI, being designed to mimic the human mind, can also help with tasks such as decision making, data analysis, or solving complex problems (Duggal, N., 2025; Nexus Integra; 10xDS Team, 2025). As we can see, all of these new technological advances promise to bring a lot of benefits to our lives, while taking on repetitive jobs, like that of the bus driver being replaced by the autonomous car or that of the factory worker replaced by a robotic device, the sort of work that humans seem to not have been designed for, as they lose concentration and most of them do not enjoy this type of monotonous work. But, as with most things, technology also has negative aspects, which we will take into consideration further on.

The Negative Side of Technology

The negative side of technology can be observed if we look at the detrimental impact it had on the environment and at its contribution to the global climate change crisis we are currently dealing with. Water and air pollution and the depletion of our natural resources are the main two negative effects technology has had on the environment. Digital technology is not without its negative influence upon the planet's climate, as there are issues concerning the increase of e-waste, the high electricity cost necessary to manufacture and maintain them, or their high carbon footprint (Unwin, T., 2020). But our concern in this paper is related to another phenomenon that has been linked with the negative side of the

massive intrusion of technology into humanity's life that is the phenomenon of alienation. This concept has deep ancient roots, but it has been tied up with that of technology ever since Karl Marx blamed capitalist society for the state of "technological alienation" it had put the worker in (Wendling, 2009, pp. 56-57). The Frankfurt School thinkers were in agreement with Marx, as they argued that the cause of alienation laid in the program pursued by the Enlightenment, which could have devastating consequences, rendering man to become a slave of his own technology. The same line of thought was also followed by sociologist Max Weber, who also believed the program of the Enlightenment was to blame for the lack of meaningful activity the individual was experiencing. Heidegger (1966) also associated technology's dominance in society with a certain type of thinking, that he termed "the calculative, business-like" type of thinking and that he describes as being continuous, never stopping, always rushing from one thing to another, computing "ever new, ever more promising and at the same time more economical possibilities" (p. 46). Jacques Ellul (1980) thinks, contrary to Marx's theory, that alienation is not generated by the way work is organized in capitalist society, but by technology itself, as "In reality, for most workers, technological growth brings harder and more exhausting work (speeds, for instance, demanded not by the capitalist but by technology and the service owed to the machine). We are intoxicated with the idea of leisure and universal automation. But for a long time, we will be stuck with work, we will be wasted and alienated. Alienation, though, is no longer capitalistic, it is now technological" (pp. 72-73). Numerous studies have found a series of negative psychological effects the use of technology can have on the individual. The risk of mental health issues is increased by prolonged use of technology, a study from the University of Gothenburg in Sweden showing that, in young adults, heavy technology use is linked to fatigue, stress and depression (Volpi, D. 2012). Poor quality of sleep and social isolation are also reported as negative psychological effects of technology, a study from 2017 showing that young adults with frequent social media use had a higher chance of feeling socially isolated than those who had a lower use of social media (Primack et al, 2017). All these "manifestations" have also been associated with the phenomenon of alienation, as several studies have correlated alienation with "anxiety, deviant behavior, substance abuse, poor social skills, low academic motivation, low self-esteem, psychological distress, and

depression”, while others have shown that alienation “can affect emotional health, self-esteem, and the self-image of the person and lead to psychological symptoms” (Safipour et al., 2011, p. 2).

The Risks and Disadvantages of Artificial Intelligence, Robots and Autonomous Cars

The implementation of artificial intelligence and robotics brings with it a lot of ethical issues, such as who should take responsibility for the damage that might be caused by AI? Or who is responsible for the damages caused in an accident that involved an autonomous car? The usage of AI and robotics in warfare is also a concern these new technologies bring along. Another disadvantage they pose (at least for now) is the fact that they lack emotions and empathy in their interaction with humans, so their extensive use could lead to “depersonalized services”. But the biggest concern that comes up related to artificial intelligence and robotics is that of the impact this will have on the job market available for human workers. And, even though, we showed in the benefits of technology part, that this is not necessarily a bad thing, as more routine jobs will be replaced by robots, while humans will have available jobs for maintenance and management of the “working robots”, there are also downsides, as these workers will have to be trained for their new jobs and so on. But the bigger problem here, as two studies on artificial intelligence and alienation from 2017 (Wogu et al.) and 2018 (Wogu et al.) show, is that AI could come to replace the human worker in any job, that would bring about a “jobless future” for humankind leading humanity into a state of total alienation, situation for which the governments of the world are not at all prepared. Bill Wilkerson, in his article from 2019 on the damaging effects of AI on mental health, seconds this opinion, as he states that, unless both governments and employers are ready by “creating replacement jobs that demand distinctly human traits and forging new education and career models, social unrest and alienation will intensify in a world already fractured by income inequality”. He shows that the psychological effects this could have on the human being range from deep stress, depression, frustration, fear, anger and uncertainty, loss of sense of personal identity and self-awareness, to self-destruction in the case of chronic stress. The concern of the authors of these studies seems to be somewhat justified, as

we can already currently notice that even some jobs that are considered as being creative, such as writing, can be automated and replaced with narrative-writing machines. In light of these concerns, we bring a few possible solutions from the area of transhumanism and philosophical counselling, that we will present in the final part of the paper.

Possible Solutions

Our proposal of possible solutions revolves around the so called Philo-café, a philosophical counselling group method that was developed as a means to bring philosophy closer to the general public, built on concepts and texts from transhumanist literature. We believe that the transhumanist vision of the human being, described by Nick Bostrom (2005) as a "work in progress", can be useful in the fight against the phenomenon of alienation, by transforming the alienating relationship that man has with technology, by helping humanity to come to the realization, in Nick Bostrom's (2005) words, that "it does not have to be the end point of evolution" and that "through the responsible use of science, technology and other rational means, we will eventually succeed in becoming posthumans, beings with far greater capabilities than human beings have today."

„To have always been posthuman requires that humans have always been part of gradual evolutionary processes that have allowed us to develop from our common ancestors, the great apes, to the people we are today. As posthumans we have always been dependent on technology, and there is no clear categorical distinction between nature and culture, body and soul, or genetic and environmental influences.” (Sorgner, S. L., *On Transhumanism*, p. 39)

The *Philo-café* will follow the structure below:

1. Topic: technological evolution in relation to human welfare
2. The philosophical counsellor requests participants to give examples where technological developments have made a positive contribution to their lives or the lives of those close to them

3. The facilitator asks a general question related to the topic: “Could we view technology as intertwined with the evolution of humanity? How could this help us in reaching a more responsible use of science and technology?”

4. The facilitator encourages participants to come up with answers to this question and to also provide arguments supporting their replies.

5. Followed up by an open discussion on the topic.

Short conclusion

We believe that such philosophical cafes, illustrating the transhumanist conception, could have the effect of changing humanity's attitude towards technology and its relationship with it. Being a method that aims at the idea of making philosophy accessible to all, we consider the philosophical café method to be ideal in this endeavor.

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