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Technology Without Ends
A critique of technocracy as a threat to being

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"...we are potentially most ignorant of the impact of technology at the very time when we are most assured that we understand it."
T.J. Rivers (1993, p. 20)

Although a lot is said about the endless possibilities and futures that technology can place at our feet, and the innovative opportunities for "identity production" that it affords the networked self, I sometimes get the feeling that technology can in fact guarantee only one possible outcome: uniformity (i.e. more of the same, as in standardized futures and homogenous identities at the service of a single driving force). How dare I say this, when we live in a period of endless innovation and relentless progress? Well, in part precisely because of the endless and relentless nature of change. Yes, it is more than obvious that the world is changing as a result of our use of technology. But is this the kind of change that signifies new horizons for humanity, or merely a continuation of changes that, since the Industrial Revolution, are predictable and (more forebodingly) unstoppable? In other words, is "Human 2.0" really a testament to the greatness of the spirit, or simply a collection of useless features that not only fail to improve on the original, but in fact bar the doors to any kind of evolution that deviates from a particular path?

Such are the concerns that, although framed differently, also seem to preoccupy Theodore John Rivers in his book Contra Technologiam (1993, University of America Press). [I had not encountered any reference to Rivers in my previous readings on technology and philosophy. Serendipitously, I stumbled upon an article by him in the journal Technology in Society, which led me to his out-of-print book.] Rivers gives us what I think is one of the most concise and thought-provoking philosophical critiques of technology for our times, devoid of the sensationalism and jargon that characterize more popular offerings of the same genre.

Specifically, Rivers attacks our liberal rationalization of technology, our defense of technology by choosing to focus on the positive even when it is outweighed by the negative, so that the good is used not to provide a counter balance to the bad, but to

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deny the existence of the bad altogether (which is necessary because a genuine assessment would lead us to the realization that to truly consider the bad in technology would render it unsustainable). It is this critique of liberalism that will make it a difficult read for most folks. The book is not constructed as a traditional scholarly work, replete with references and research data to support the arguments. If anything, it is more of a polemic, a philosophical paralogy for a society obsessed with technology; and it is because of this and its rhetorical power that I appreciate it (which does not mean I agree completely with it). In Rivers we find no superficial neo-Luddism, but an insightful analysis of how technology limits our choices even while proclaiming to expand them. In the context of our current narratives about how technology can redefine social structures and enhance our ways of knowing, I think these are critiques that need to be taken seriously. Rivers forces us to confront the Faustian bargain we have made with technology and ask: Are we in fact not accelerating our de-humanization while believing we are struggling for our freedom?

Technology as a threat to being

Rivers starts by establishing that technology exists because we "invariably see the world in need of alteration" (1993, p. 1). Our needs and desires dictate that we act upon the world in order to transform it, and for that we need technology. We should not conclude, however, that technology is 'natural' to our being (the very essence of technology implies artificiality, after all). Rivers makes an important distinction between the ontological status of our openness to being, and the non-ontological status of technology. According to him, our being is open in the sense that it is flexible and dynamic. In other words, the self is continuously undergoing change. These changes generate different demands from the world, which we seek to satisfy through the application of technology. Thus, technology "is a situation conditioned by our being" (1993, p. 9) as a result of encountering the world, but it is not a natural part of our being (which is what Heidegger would try to argue, I think). Rivers' premise is that technology can in fact threaten whatever is natural about being:

Although openness to being allows technology to come into the world, this truth does not also mean that being is aided by technology because technology inherently is an artificiality. What is natural to us is openness to being, definable by ontological freedom, which in itself cannot account for its own naturalness. The more there is technology in the world, the more this naturalness is challenged. (2005, p. 16)

Not only is being not aided by technology, but technology has a way of subverting being by demanding that our attention and efforts be placed at its service. This is because technology is concerned with action, with doing, and nothing else. "Technology inhibits deep thinking because it is concerned primarily with activity, not contemplation. Because thinking is fundamental to self-awareness, technology is an obstacle to self-identity. It is a threat to internality" (2005, p. 23).

Whereas in pre-modernity actions were viewed as emanating from being, nowadays being is seen as emanating from action. I do, therefore I am. Technology exists only as long as we are engaged in doing things with it, and is unconcerned with what kind of being results from the doing. As Rivers puts it: "[t]he relationship has been reversed: that is, technology is no longer an aid in the perfection of being, but rather being is now an aid to the perfection of technology (1993, p. 10)."

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Against the liberal narratives that endow technology with the power to help us re-define or re-discover the self, Rivers argues that technology in fact obstructs and distorts the most fundamental human enterprise: Know Thyself.

One assumption made of technology is that it allows us to think about ourselves, presumably because it gives us more leisure time for reflection; but it does not. Technology fails because we become dominated by its very presence, by its devices and techniques, by the complexities of its rationality and the convolutions of its methodology. Technology cannot help but drive a wedge between us and self-awareness, between us and that relational phenomenon which is grounded in inwardness, that is, in the awareness of the individual of himself [sic], of a kind of self-directedness, a reflection of the self to the self. Until we make a conscious effort to remove ourselves from technology's driving forces, it will continue to reduce our prospects of liberation. (1993, p. 110)

Technology and (a)morality

Rivers is not the first one to point out the fissure that modernity introduces between the use of technology as a means towards a specific end, and the use of technology as pure means, as action without a particular end (Simpson, 1995, comes to mind as a recent author who explored the dichotomy between praxis and techne). And the preoccupation with how this shift has affected our system of values has been an old concern with philosophers of technology. But what Rivers does particularly well is to look beyond the veil of liberal discourse and expose in no tentative terms the deficiencies of a morality based on a technology without ends, a technology whose only goal is to preserve itself:

... technology, which is never satisfied with its present state of being and continually on the way to its replacement, becomes a perfectionist's fantasy. It is so consumed by its own means that ends have become anathema to it, and thus the meaning and even the possibility of its ends are lost to itself... the absence of ends is a cause of much devastation, both to nature and to man [sic, and sic for everytime the masculine is used exclusively]. (1993, p. 7)

We are presently, according to Rivers, unconcerned with the consequences of the application of technology. All that we care about is that it works. We celebrate new technologies for their affordances, because they let us do, and we dive right into the doing without paying much attention to the absence of ends. In fact, rather than a moral system, technocracy can be best described as a system of amorality:

...[technology] has been transformed into a way of life. It must not be considered merely in its effect as a morality; whereas morality is always projected toward some end, the end of technology is forever more technique, that is, unending increase in its impact as a means, and ever-continuing augmentation of its influence in the world. (p. 12)

In what follows, I will summarize Rivers' attack on liberal discourses of technology. I will quote from his work extensively in an effort to retain as much of his voice as possible. While I tend to agree with most of his analysis, I will identify at the end some of the reservations I have about his argument, and in doing so try to suggest some way out.

Technology does not engender freedom, but curtails it

Technology's raison d'etre assumes that if we can do something, we ought to do it... It is for this reason that technology limits human choices--for if we are powerless to resist technology's latent power, we can hardly call ourselves free. (p. 30) Change that is contingent on a limited set of possibilities cannot really be said to be the expression of freedom. In River's words: "The choices that technology offers are all within the system. Any increase in technology makes the system more, not less, restrictive (p. 62)." This is because "[a]lthough in theory alterable, in practice technology is rigid because its flexibility is manifested only within the perimeters of its rationality, because it is evident only within the boundaries of its methodology (p. 55)." So if technology limits our freedom by making it irresistible to do what it affords, then more technology offers only more opportunities to act against our freedom, even while seemingly promoting it: [Technology] creates the impression that it liberates us, that it enables us to accomplish more with its aid than without it. But this is a delusion because although technology enhances possibilities on the one hand, it limits them on the other. (p. 20)

It is not simply that for every door that it opens technology closes others, but that technology, not us, determines the path to the doors to be opened. Rivers is unapologetically a technological determinist (under the grip of technology's logic, he would say there is little society can do to determine how technology develops --although there is the illusion that we are in control). Our surrender to technology is, in his view, a dangerous compromise: we may stand to gain a few things, but in return we put in jeopardy the authenticity of our being. "Technology gives us the feeling that we no longer have to be authentic in order to act authentically (p. 105)." In other words, as long as technology can help us 'fake' authentic being through action, it makes our surrender to it seem OK.

Technology does not engender democracy, but mass mediocrity

Rivers points out that population growth is "both a result of technological progress and a cause of it" (p. 67). New technologies make it possible to sustain more human lives, which in turn requires more technology, thereby securing its perpetuation. "The more there is technology, the more there are people" (ibid); not just any kind of people, but people who "contribute little out of the ordinary" (ibid). Technology requires not individuals capable of asserting their freedom, but compliant, ordinary, mediocre masses. Rivers sees the computer as the ultimate exponent of a technology for these masses:

"The computer is the universal machine of an egalitarian and civilized world, and it permits anyone to use it. It is the great equalizer, requiring neither unique talents, nor special skills, nor moral preference, nor acute wisdom. It is devised for anyone and everyone. It is the machine par excellence for the masses." (p. 18) [We should keep in mind that he is talking about using a computer, not more specialized tasks like designing software for it, which not everyone can do.]

In Rivers' mind, the kind of collectivism that technology facilitates does not lead to democracy, but to the stamping out of anything exceptional, to the erasure of the individual by the mass (a similar argument warning against Web 2.0's uncritical preference for the collective has been made recently by Jaron Lanier. I have some

reservations about framing the issue without accounting for the intersections between the individual and the collective, but I will address those elsewhere). While Rivers' views of what constitutes exceptional individualism are a bit Eurocentric, his point is that "[t]he implementation of technology is the manner by which individuals are mechanized into masses" (p. 61). Looking at the phenomenon of mass education, it would be hard to disagree. Because individuals who achieve higher levels of development are threats to the status quo, technology is about lowering everyone to the lowest common denominator, the mass.

Mechanization is the very organization of technology, so that as the whole world becomes increasingly similar, we have a greater tendency to become trite, banal and commonplace in everything that we do. (p. 20)

Technology does not foster community, it destroys it

Masses are not sites of rich social interaction. If anything, it is the norm to feel totally alone in a mass. While technology advertises new means to 'reach out and touch someone' that supposedly make distance meaningless and the world smaller, according to Rivers technology "removes the tangibility between men" (p. 58). He asserts: "Ironically, the sure numbers of the masses are not the only thing that is onerous to an age dominated by technology, for there is also the very inability of the world to bring the individuals in the mass together" (ibid). Technology inserts itself even in our most intimate interactions, becoming our intermediary and deepening our dependence on it. No form of communication is outside its scope. "We are more at a loss in a technological age than in former ages because we have rendered ourselves helpless without it" (p. 120).

Furthermore, access to technology does not guarantee equality, and does not promote tolerance according to Rivers:

[A technological age] leads to fission, not fusion. Its subjects are incapable of attaining homogeneity. It makes everyone ethnically and racially conscious, that is, technology makes us more aware of ourselves: it enhances a greater awareness of not only who one is but also who one is not. Although racism should never become respectable, it is a direct result of life in a technological age. In fact, there is an appreciable difference between racism in the past, which was based on ignorance, and today's racism, which is based on confrontation, upon a kind of face-to-face conflict. (p. 51)

Elias (1998; see this) had already remarked on how technology's propensity to shrink the world can result in conflict. But while he held out hope for an eventual "organized unification of humankind," Rivers is more skeptical: "...a politically democratic multi-ethnic and multi-racial pluralistic civilization is not a victory for mankind, but a permanent obstacle to greatness because a social egalitarianism in which all people intermingle produces a monolithic culture, a massive and uniform obstacle to man's betterment. This common civilization, this democratization, is most representative of technology in the West and a cause of its sterility."

Rivers' critique may sound aggressively insular and prejudiced to our liberal-trained ears, but what he critiques is not diversity but precisely the lack of it, the construction of a

monolithic culture in which all difference is subsumed under the logic of technology (which is, as I see it, the foundation of technocracy).

Technology prevents critical thinking and political action

The recent trend to simply number new movements sequentially (e.g. Web 2.0, Life 2.0, Learning 2.0, etc.), following software naming patterns, is probably an indication that innovation has become incredibly constrained and predictable. "No irony is meant by saying that a technological age fosters change so long as things remain the same (p. 46)."

To Rivers, it follows that a process of surrendering difference to the logic of technology would result in anything but the loss of critical thinking: "Certainly the last thing that would result from mechanization is the development of a critical, acute and refined discrimination (p. 20)." While technology has increased the amount of measurements we can derive from reality, and given us new ways of absorbing that information, Rivers does not equate that with an increase in self-knowledge per se. If anything, the fragmentization of knowledge prevents us from seeing the big picture:

Because the rapid and seemingly endless proliferation of information has led to the fragmentation of learning, more and more areas of information have resulted in a greater ignorance of all of reality. Although we know more today than we did yesterday, we also know these things from a more limited point of view, as from the perspective of a microscope... (p. 94)

In opposition to techno-liberal discourse, Rivers argues that an increase of specialized knowledge does not signify a transition to a better future when all of that information will suddenly mean something, but is an indication of immobility and impermanence (information without end, and therefore, without meaning): "Indeed, a technological age is not in the least transitory even though it strives to be both current and fashionable. It is an age that produces nothing lasting, marked by ideas which have no chance of introducing truly meaningful changes into the world." (1993, p. 23)

This inability to introduce 'truly meaningful change into the world' is perhaps technology's most dehumanizing effect. We live in an age, according to Rivers, when political action is increasingly seen as unnecessary. Not only does technological doing occupy our minds and distract us from the need to act politically, but in its perverse logic technology represents itself as a tool for political action. Hence, we have started to see the act of doing with technology as satisfactorily political (the premise behind e-democracy). Technologized politics becomes endless means without substantive political ends. This undermines any challenge to the status quo by free-thinking individuals:

"Nor is it surprising that there is so little real political struggle in an age that surrenders itself overwhelmingly to technology because politics on the grand scale, when individuals organize and oppose the established order, are rendered meaningless, since technology proposes to do everything for us. Above all, it becomes the spearhead of the democratization of the world; that is technology becomes the agent of the world's mediocrity." (p. 70)

In this context, even direct challenges to the system become perfectly circumscribed by technology's logic. "In our present condition, deliberate acts of defiance and their concomitant confrontation rarely happen, except if they conform to technology's manner of doing things, that is, if they adhere to technology's methodology or conform to its democratization" (p. 120). Web sit-ins, e-mail petitions, online voting, echo blog journalism, and open source disaster recovery are a few examples of the new form of activism that has replaced meaningful action while presenting the illusion of progress. "[T]echnology promotes the illusion that it is able to respond to changing situations, that it is able to take emergency measures in an endangered world, but in fact, technology is slow to act and slow to remedy problems, and slower still to remedy problems directly caused by it" (p. 55).

Conclusions: Philosophy before programming

"To put it simply, we have forgotten how to say no. Because technology is compulsive, we feel driven to do whatever [it makes] possible." (p. 30)

River's critique is useful only if we acknowledge that he is not talking about technology per se in some reifying manner, but about how we use technology in a particular way. That is, his critique is not of technology but of technocracy (a social system dominated by technology and where everything must give way to the advancement of technology, c.f. Postman 1992). It is technocracy that brings about the kind of homogenization and mediocrity that Rivers describes by subsuming all human agency under its needs. It is technocracy that needs to be challenged in all fronts because its impact is truly global: it knows no ideological or geographical boundaries (democracies, oligarchies and theocracies can be equally technocratic).

It is important to make this distinction between critiquing technology and critiquing technocracy because otherwise technological determinism (i.e., the idea that technology shapes us, not the other way around) becomes too much of a metanarrative, an immutable given. In order to critique technology, Rivers gives technological determinism too much credence, setting it up as a process that applies to all technologies at all times across all situations. This approach gives us the possibility of rejecting technology wholesale on moral grounds, but reduces our agency and limits our opportunities to act, and in the end this paralysis allows technology to take over. Yes, technology robs us of critical agency, but it does not eliminate the possibility that, once aware of this process, we can re-assert our will over technology. So while determinism allows for the opportunity to discursively oppose technocracy, it prevents a more active engagement that can actually contest or rival it (this insight was inspired by a recent post by Tim, who cites Badiou's remark that "anti-capitalists are not simply opponents of capitalism, but more importantly rivals"). In short, to rival technocracy we might very well have to use technology, something which Rivers' version of technological determinism would leave us little moral grounds to do. The master's tools in the hands of a freed slave are no longer the master's tools (if the latter is acting as a subject, not an object, of history -- to paraphrase Freire).

While Rivers' analysis accurately describes the ways in which we surrender our agency to technology, some of his solutions appear simplistic because a deterministic approach leaves little room for nuanced analysis. Given that a world without the technologies we already have is impossible, Rivers suggests that we should pick and choose from these

technologies according to the values they espouse: "We must not look at technology's values, but through them, questioning every aspect of their manifestation. If they promote well-being, we should keep them. If they do not, we should discard them" (1993, p. 120). But this ignores the complex entanglement of technologies in our world. Almost always, to choose a technology that promotes well-being we must make use of other technologies that do not, oftentimes even without our awareness. This is what makes Actor-Network Theory, with its tracing of complex associations between human and technological actors, such a valuable but difficult exercise.

More practical than the 'keep the right technologies' argument is Rivers' call for a paralogical space to think outside technology (a notion I have been exploring lately in my attempts to re-conceptualize the digital divide). I think Rivers and I agree on the need to secure a (psychological, if not physical) space to take a break from the impulse to act with technology and experience being without it:

"It is only when at rest that we have the optimum opportunity to think. In fact, what mobility demonstrates is that an age always in motion makes little substantive progress. Despite high speed travel, we are an age going nowhere fast." (p. 46)

Ubiquitous computing, in other words, is the worst idea in the world. Reclaiming a space without technology does not mean rejecting technology, but exercising the only chance we have to estimate its true meaning and potential. Those outside the grip of technology are best qualified to discern its effects. We must strive not for universal access to technology, but for universal freedom from the all-pervasive influence of technology. The latter jihad is more difficult than the former. But it is also more important because it seeks to foster what technology, by its nature, ends up blocking: a deeper understanding of ourselves. In Rivers' words:

"Because many of our actions can be unconscious, it is imperative that the world in all its diverse forms, including technology, be filtered out by us when we need to understand ourselves. Not that we should say no to the world (how could we do otherwise?), but that we should say no to an automatic, unthinking response to technology's eternal presence in the world. Otherwise, we may never allow ourselves the opportunity to do so because we will never be alone with ourselves. Since technology is possessed of systems and rationalities already devised and set in place, which in turn are augmented by instantaneous gratifications and self-deceptions, we are at a great risk. But technology posits a threat in other ways because it gives us a course of evasion. It gives us an excuse when we wish to live inauthentically." (p. 108)

Nonetheless, technology is our creation, and although it acquires agency of its own we gain little by demonizing it. Technology should be viewed for what it is: and expression of our openness to being that reflects our historical and cultural conditions:

"... the essence of technology is linked with ontological freedom, which means that what we build and create is the result of what we choose. How we choose and act is defined within specific historical and cultural situations that vary over time and place. Technology reflects and augments these situations. If we change present conditions and the demands they make upon us, then we can change technology." (Rivers, 2005, p. 3-4)

The way to proceed, then, is to discontinue the search for technologies that will supposedly liberate us (a search which technology conducts on its own behalf, with us merely as its enablers). Instead, we should begin in earnest the search for ourselves. We should become philosophers before programmers (or even users). We need to take stock of where we have surrendered our agency to technology, and figure out how to transform unconscious surrender into intentional delegation. We need to give technology an end; or to put it differently: we need to counter technology's bias for means-without-end with our own formulation of ends, ends which are beyond the scope of technology but which may benefit from the application of technology when it's approached as a delegation, not a surrender. This is very much a task that reflects the ongoing process of becoming, the openness of being, and as such it is always an unfinished exercise. To paraphrase Rivers (who is channeling philosophers across time): one is not what one is, but is what one is not yet (Rivers 1993, p. 106).

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