The Good Life after the Narrative Turn

Review of Narrative and Technology Ethics, by Wessel Reijers and Mark Coeckelbergh. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020.

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Narrative and Technology Ethics by Reijers and Coeckelbergh (2020) is a timely and compelling contribution to recent work in ethics of technology. Attempting to help us understand "how technical practices could be organised to be conducive to the good life, with and for others, in just institutions" (Reijers and Coeckelbergh 2020, 17), the authors draw on the philosophy of Paul Ricoeur to achieve three interrelated goals. They seek to: 1) address some gaps in contemporary philosophy of technology and expand on the growing phenomenon of hermeneutic philosophy of technology; 2) engage with virtue ethics of technology, in particular Shannon Vallor's account of it, and alleviate some of its shortcomings; and 3) provide a step-by-step framework for responsible research and innovations that could be followed by practitioners in the field, such as teams of engineers and designers.

Providing a brisk, yet comprehensive account of existing currents in mainstream philosophy of technology, Reijers and Coeckelbergh argue that it lacks adequate reference to the role of linguistic, temporal, and the social dimensions of technology. In their view, contemporary philosophy technology (understood by them mainly as postphenomenology and other related theories) provides us with an understanding of how technologies mediate our relation to the world but does not account for the role of language in our interactions with technology. Moreover, they argue that philosophy of technology does not provide for changes occurring in the studied technologies across time (i.e., it focuses on a specific artifact at a given moment and extends the validity of its findings indefinitely), and that it privileges

the individual subject and their interactions with technology over the artifacts' broader societal impacts.

According to Reijers and Coeckelbergh, these gaps in the contemporary philosophy of technology can be traced back to the empirical turn, but in their view, they are symptomatic of a much more significant shortcoming of empirically-oriented theories such as postphenomenology: a lack of a comprehensive account of a (technical) practice. Although the authors briefly highlight Aristotle's, Marx's and Bourdieu's understandings of this concept, they quickly settle on MacIntyre's virtue ethical theory as a central point of their argument. By highlighting MacIntyre's notion of "narrative unity of human life and of a moral tradition" (Reijers and Coeckelbergh 2020, 37), Reijers and Coeckelbergh are able to highlight how a comprehensive account of practice could include the linguistic, temporal and social dimensions of our action (i.e., through narratives in which individuals try to integrate their actions with a larger, socially-mediated tradition).

Nevertheless, the authors observe that even MacIntyre's notion of practice is not fully adequate for their purposes. They argue that many of criteria applied by MacIntyre to practices are unclear and do not give us grounds for answering clarificatory questions about their specific aspects. Moreover, they claim that Macintyre's idealised notion of practice as something aiming at internal goods is too simplistic and makes it possible to distinguish the same activity as a non-practice or a practice if the actor's motivations change over time. Next, they argue that MacIntyre does not allow for fictionalised accounts to influence our practices, as he insists on referring to narratives concerning the lived experiences of (actually existing) individuals. Finally, Reijers and Coeckelbergh observe that MacIntyre's theory does not tell us precisely how practices are understood through narratives and how these narratives are later accepted by the moral community.

In addition to the above concerns, the authors admit at this stage that their exploration of practices has not yet accounted for the ways in which technology enters into the equation. They propose to alleviate this shortcoming, and to address the drawbacks of MacIntyre, by engaging in what they call a "narrative turn", that is, by drawing on Ricoeur to develop an account of technical practice and to outline a narrative theory of technology.

It has to be noted that the turn towards Ricoeur does not allow the authors to construct an account of a *technical* practice. Reijers and Coeckelbergh merely state what a technical practice would resemble (i.e., it involves engagement with technologies), but

considering their emphasis on heterogeneity of technologies and types of action associated with them, it is difficult to find a comprehensive understanding of the term technical practice in the book. In fact, the authors hardly provide a sufficient argument for why Ricoeur's philosophy provides a better background for understanding how technologies become a part of our practices than MacIntyre's theory does.

Nevertheless, their reconstruction of Ricouer's narrative theory does provide a basis for dealing with some of the other drawbacks of MacIntyre's theory. Building on Ricoeur's hierarchical structure of action narrated into individual practices, comprehensive life plans and a narrative unity of life, Reijers and Coeckelbergh argue that general narratives of an actor doing x in circumstances y for the reason of z allow us to make sense of our actions and of our reasons for engaging in them. Moreover, such narrative expressions incorporate individual practices into broader structures of meaning, both on the individual-societal and the descriptive-prescriptive plane (as the elaboration of the reasons for action makes it possible to formulate general rules to be followed by actors in given circumstances). Problematising the narrative even further and focusing specifically on how technologies can play a role in our narratives, Reijers and Coeckelbergh follow Ricoeur in introducing four central concepts operating in each narrative: textuality, literacy, temporality, and distancing.

In short, the textual dimension of objects presents in our narratives allows them to create or influence meanings (e.g., as the authors argue, the existence of a bridge helps us understand that a river can be crossed). Literacy refers to the possibility of accessing the meanings and kinds of action enabled by technological objects (according to the authors, a hammer is highly accessible, while using a military drone is out of reach for most of us). Temporality directs the ways in which we perceive time in relation to technologies, either as rigid or dynamic (a technology that forces us to follow a strict succession of events locks us into a certain perception of time). Finally, distancing allows us to distinguish between technologies that give their users an active role (e.g., a video game) and those that abstract the action necessary for their operation and appear to the users as functioning quasi-independently (the authors argue that somebody trading in derivatives is oblivious of all the background operations that need to happen once a transaction is started).

While these elements of emplotment allow us to construct rich and nuanced narratives describing our engagement with technologies, the authors concede that such a narrative theory of technology cannot tell us anything about the normative dimension of our

practices – it provides no basis for determining whether a practice is morally good or not (even if makes it possible to distinguish between skilful and amateur practitioners). In fact, the authors themselves agree that this is the most significant difficulty which needs to be addressed in their work (Reijers and Coeckelbergh 2020, 109).

Although Reijers and Coeckelbergh briefly turn to Vallor to argue that reference to virtues can help us in navigating the moral dimension of our interactions with technology, they quickly reject her framework for two reasons. First, they quite rightly argue that Vallor does not sufficiently account for technological mediation and attributes much more agency to people than to the technologies that co-constitute action. Second, they argue that Vallor does not connect her list of technomoral virtues to a comprehensive account of practice, consequently failing to answer the question of what constitutes a virtue.

While these criticisms of Vallor are certainly valid, readers might find it puzzling why the authors decided to engage in her work in the first place as they quickly turn to Ricoeur's concept of the ethical aim of practice and ultimately move away from virtue ethics altogether. Reijers and Coeckelbergh argue that the normative content of our practices and the narratives we construct around them can be derived from their teleological dimension. In the moral sense, they claim, we do what we do because we want to live "the good life, with and for others, in just institutions", consequently moving across three dimensions: the individual, the interpersonal and the social/political.

At this stage, the notion of virtuous practice borrowed from MacIntyre and Vallor is still operational in their account of the good life. In the Ricoeurian scheme, virtuous practices are those that contribute to the actor's self-esteem and allow for the development of self-respect: they enable them to interpret themselves as somebody skilful in a given practice (the authors use an example of writing good computer code), they enable them to formulate a related life plan (of being a good programmer), and they can be woven into a narrative unity of life (e.g., I chose to be a good programmer rather than somebody else).

However, this account does not make it possible to distinguish between practices which ought to be pursued and those that which should not. Quite surprisingly, rather than introducing a rich notion of virtue, at which they hinted throughout the book, Reijers and Coeckelbergh argue that we should address this problem by following Ricoeur in turning towards (Kantian) deontology. According to this view, the scope of allowable practices should be limited to those that follow the principle "thou shall not be evil" (Reijers and Coeckelbergh

2020, 133). Although the authors elaborate on this claim, they fail to provide a comprehensive discussion of what is exactly entailed by it and which secondary principles should be followed by actors willing not to be "evil".

This problem is even more evident in the interpersonal dimension of their theory, which is roughly captured through a reference to the principle of respect for persons, itself quite close to Kant's categorical imperative. Although Reijers and Coeckelbergh qualify this principle by invoking Ricoeur's notion of critical solicitude, that is, the recognition that any application of principle-based ethics needs to be contextual and dependent on practical wisdom[1], they fail to provide an adequate example. Similarly, their vision of life in just institutions depends on the Rawlsian principle of justice as fairness, yet they do not discuss how this principle should be put into life. In fact, the ethical aim which should allow us to evaluate the normative content of practices and prescribe the right conduct ends up divided into three abstract notions. Individual good life should be guided by a sense of conviction, our relations with others should be informed by a critical solicitude, and a sense of justice should pervade our institutions. Of course, it would be impossible to disagree with a statement that moral action should be performed with conviction, critical solicitude and a sense of justice.However, Reijers and Coeckelbergh merely tie these three notions to abstract ethical principles and do not provide a comprehensive account of what these three notions entail.

The authors attempt to address this problem in the sixth chapter of their book, which is an elaboration of a tripartite framework for conducting ethical assessment of research and innovation in a practical context. They argue that practitioners seeking to study the normative dimension of technologies should first proceed from description to interpretation by creating a list of practices and narratives associated with technology and then interpreting them to establish their content. In the second step, the narratives should be evaluated in order to determine which standards of excellence are invoked in them, what life plans can be associated with them, and whether they can be woven into a narrative unity of life. On this basis, it should be possible to move to the third step, which involves the prescription of norms and principles which should be followed by practitioners in relation to the good life, with and for others, in just institutions.

[1] The authors insist on using the term practical reason rather than practical wisdom. While their justification for this choice has its merits, for the sake of clarity this review refers to the more commonly used rendering of *phronesis*.

Much like Reijers' previous ethical framework, the Ethics Canvas (Reijers et al. 2018), this approach has the advantage of involving real users and designers of technology in the ethical assessment. However, unlike the Ethics Canvas, the framework presented in *Narrative and Technology Ethics* seems to require an in-depth knowledge of ethical theory and competence in deciphering philosophical jargon. While it is certainly more systematic than simpler frameworks (and moves beyond the evaluations of pros and cons by involving a notion of good life, interpersonal relations and politics), I am afraid that it might remain rather inaccessible even for professional philosophers, let alone technology experts and policymakers.

Moreover, I am not convinced that as a practical application of narrative ethics of technical practice, this method manages to alleviate the theory's most significant shortcomings. I must agree that it can certainly render the authors' guiding principles more concrete by sourcing the rules and norms surrounding the technology (both currently and in an ideal world) from real-world users and developers. However, the successful application of the method requires a great deal of practical wisdom – the narratives surrounding a technology need to be gathered and interpreted, while the principles and norms need to be extracted from the narratives and related to real-life situations. The theoretical discussion found in the book makes it clear that *phronesis* is an idea pervading the whole method, but the authors do not adequately explicate how it should be applied to concrete situations or how it could be developed (the explanations presented in the sixth chapter are much too abstract and general). This weakness of their argument can be at least partially attributed to the authors' move away from virtue ethics, and is applicable also to their more concrete renderings of practical wisdom as conviction, critical solicitude and a sense of justice. In this sense, the method and theory developed by Reijers and Coeckelbergh might be useful only to those who should no longer need it, since they already possess the skills that are presupposed by the authors.

The application of narrative ethics of technical practice also betrays a problem with the descriptive part of the theory. The abstraction of complex narratives necessary for the extraction of applicable rules and norms raises the question of what is understood by the authors as a narrative. The concept of emplotment and its four devices shows how rich and comprehensive narratives surrounding technology can be constructed and subsequently analysed. However, the idea of a minimal narrative, which through the practical application

of the authors' method can be reduced to "I applied principle x in circumstances y for the reasons of z", might seem rather thin and is in no way representative of the ways we tell stories in the thick of life, colouring them with cultural tropes, emotions, desires and other significant factors. While the authors' reference to hermeneutic philosophy allows for a richer interpretation of narratives, the normative dimension of their work might refer to a much too narrow and simplistic idea of a narrative.

Nevertheless, *Narrative and Technology Ethics* remains a much-needed initial step on the way towards a comprehensive hermeneutic ethics of technology. Reijers and Coeckelbergh provide an in-depth account of the role narratives play in our engagement with technology, and present an interesting, if flawed, method for incorporating these narratives in normative discussions. Successful application of narrative ethics of technological practice proposed by the authors could indeed contribute to "the good life, with and for others, in just institutions" and I look forward to seeing how this important work will be picked by other philosophers and practitioners in the field of technology ethics. In this sense, the criticisms raised in this review should be seen as an identification of avenues for further research, rather than steadfast objections.

References:

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