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Technological Exercises

Abstract:

The paper aims at setting the problem of the relation between technology, and the individual within the framework of Pierre Hadot's idea of spiritual exercises. It compares two rivaling views of technology that originated in the Weimar Republic in order to outline a problematic field for examining the present position of the individual and technology. As the approaches of Weimar philosophers call for an actualization, the conception of Michel Foucault's technologies of the self is brought forth. In the conclusion of the paper, the need for contradistinction within the very notion of technology is stressed, in an attempt to incorporate the topical issue into Hadot's theory of philosophy as a way of life.

Keywords:

technology, spiritual exercises, Weimar Republic, Hadot, Foucault

Introduction

The question concerning technology is one of the youngest in philosophy, but it was not Heidegger's famous essay that first brought it to attention.[1] The discussion on technology, that took place in interwar Germany, got some of the most renowned thinkers involved, and made a lasting contribution to the history of ideas. Among many detailed positions, taken by the participants of the debate, two large blocks emerged. In a very rough

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1) Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology."

sketch: the first praised technology as a great achievement, and chance for mankind – while the latter painted it as an alien, hostile entity, and warned, (in the pre-Heideggerian spirit), of the dangers it may pose. The emblematic figures pointing to the dark side of technology were, among others, Oswald Spengler and Friedrich Georg Jünger. Among defenders of technology, the most prominent place is taken by Ernst Cassirer. Nevertheless, this paper is not aimed at comparing the two stances. What I would like to achieve is the entry-level approach to the issue of Pierre Hadot's conception of "philosophy as a way of life" as seen in the horizon of life, that is becoming increasingly technologized.

1. Hadot's Conception

Hadot's leading idea was to reframe the modern reception of ancient philosophy. He proposed the shift from theoretical, to practical examination of the heritage of antiquity. At the core of his work lies the conviction that the strength and originality of the philosophy of ancient Greece does not consist of sets of theories that were introduced to describe and explain, in a proto-scientific way, the nature, the community, and the individual. On the contrary, Hadot argues that the modern, academic approach that to a large extent relies on acquiring knowledge, was not crucial to the thinkers of the Hellenistic era, and even to many of the subsequent philosophical endeavors. The true aim of thinking was never purely a theoretical one; rather, its goal was the transformation of oneself and others. By engaging in dialogue with others, and with oneself, a philosopher was able to achieve a conscious transformation of himself, and become a living example of a certain "lived philosophy," instead of becoming a sage-like figure, a guardian of theories, and a depositary of knowledge. Every part of philosophy was treated in a practical way. According to Hadot, not only its ethical part, but also physics and logic were treated as components of a certain way of life: "Things were very different in antiquity. No university obligations oriented the future philosopher toward a specific school; instead, the future philosopher came to attend classes in the school (*skhole*) of his choice as a function of the way of life practiced there."[2]

Hadot calls the practices attributed to each philosophical school the spiritual exercises. At the core of his conception lies the idea that the individual has the ability to transcend himself. The aim of such an operation is to gain emotional distance to the situation an individual is occupied with. That would be a short-distance goal. Ultimately, spiritual exercises ought to be incorporated in one's daily practice, and become the "way of life," and a habit that becomes the self, and transforms theoretical rules into "lived philosophy." An attempt at reconditioning this practice needs to focus on Hadot's conception first. His definition is wide, but clear: "By this term I mean practices which could be physical, as in dietary regimes, or discursive, as in dialogue and meditation, or intuitive, as in contemplation, but which were all intended to effect a modification and a transformation in the subject who practiced them."[3]

The question arises of how spiritual exercises should be treated in the highly developed world. The ancients were no strangers to technology, but at the same time they were unable to predict its future form. It was not until the Industrial Revolution that technology gained its unprecedented powers. The transforming abilities of technology were so extensive that they seemed not to have left the human itself untouched. Life with technology, and life before it are two different realities. It would not be exaggerating to say that technology has ontologically altered the shape of human existence. The inventions like the steam engine in the eighteenth-century, modern-day communication, or media technologies have made technology present in practically every aspect of human life. Technology is transforming, and altering the way we live in a way we could have not predicted.

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2) Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 98.
3) Hadot, *What Is Ancient Philosophy?*, 6.

Its marvel, as well as the danger, lies in its ability to grow exponentially. Every new invention opens possibilities for further discoveries.

As Hadot himself wrote, his concept is "actual and can always be reactualized."[4] The definition of spiritual exercises allows for adjusting them for the needs of an individual surrounded within technology. Before such an attempt can be undertaken, a few issues need to be examined. First, what precisely is threatening in technology? Second, why do "traditional" spiritual exercises not suffice, and why would they need reactualization in the technological era?

2. Technology in the Weimar Republic

The answer to the first question is provided by the critique of technology that originated in the Weimar Republic, especially in the work of the most skeptical authors, like Friedrich Jünger and Oswald Spengler.[5] Their view on the greatest engineering achievements of their day was contrary to dominant beliefs, and far from optimistic. Jünger did not hesitate to draw the most catastrophic metaphors of technological progress. "The industrial landscape is volcanic in its character, and thus are found, especially in the areas of heavy industries, all the companion-signs of volcanic eruptions: lava, ashes, fumaroles, smoke, gases, night clouds reddened by flames-and devastation spreading far and wide."[6]

Jünger claimed that technological progress is directed at aims, contradictory to the promises made by engineers, that technology would improve human lives. He even tended to confer upon technology demonical powers of destruction, and warned that on a certain level of progress mankind will lose control over its creation, and become subjected to technology. That idea was shared by another Weimar philosopher – Oswald Spengler. What they both feared is that humanity, like the sorcerer's apprentice, would unleash powers leading to the destruction of its spiritual, and cultural life. They also emphasized that technology is not to be judged by the positive, or negative effect that it has on various areas of people's lives, but rather every aspect of human reality is being compared to technology, and judged by technological criterion. That criterion, according to Jünger, is perfection:

> Where increased production and increased work are the consequences of a scarcity that has to be relieved, where they are due to an increase in consumption, they obviously cannot create riches. Every rationalization is the consequence of scarcity. The expansion and constant perfection of the technical apparatus are not merely the result of the technician's urge for power; they are just as much the result of want.[7]

The concerns of Jünger and Spengler do not, however, provide an easy answer to the second question: why would spiritual exercises need actualization? Could the stoic meditations, leading to acceptance that what cannot be changed not be a remedy for the oppression of technological networks? After taking Jünger's concerns seriously the answer must be negative as at a certain level of development technology actually prevents any spiritual steps taken against itself. The technological criteria of perfection forbids any activity that is not effective such as, for example, meditation – one of the spiritual exercises. According to the critics, the threat lies in the overwhelming influence that comes with highly developed technology.

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4) Ibid., 275.

5) Herf, *Reactionary Modernism*, 1–17.

6) Jünger, *The Failure of Technology*, 112.

7) Ibid., 13.

Another response was brought forth by Ernst Cassirer. The approach of the creator of the theory of symbolic forms begins with acknowledgement of the importance of technology in contemporary culture. Cassirer also argues against the conservative attack on technology.

> Even the strongest counter-forces to technology, even those intellectual forces that are the most distant from technology in their content and meaning, seem able to actualize themselves only insofar as they become conjoined with technology and, through this alliance, become imperceptibly subjected to it.[8]

The essence of technology cannot be grasped through pure refutation. The leading role of technology must be first recognized. Only then will the spirit be able to position itself on better ground in its relation with technology. The aim is not to battle technology and defeat it, but to "penetrate the core and meaning" of it. The understanding of any phenomenon strengthens the spirit and allows it to gain "new depth," by refraining from external determination. The complete denial of technology is therefore not only inadvisable, it is impossible. The emergence of technology is a fact that occurs in the history of human achievements, and needs to be understood as such.

> If Hegel is correct when he states that the philosophy of an age is nothing more than that very age "grasped in thought," and if this philosophy, understood as the idea of the world, only appears after reality has completed this process of formation and so "finished itself," then we would have to expect that the incomparable development of technology over the course of the past century corresponds to a change in the way of thinking.[9]

Technology can no longer be seen as a realm entirely external to the creative force of the human spirit. It is not a mere extension of science, nor a tool that makes industrial and engineering endeavors possible.[10] The key to understanding the essence of technology is not to be found outside in the world transformed by it. Rather, the very act of transformation should be investigated. That is why Cassirer claims that we will be unable to grasp the sense of technology, as long as we treat it as "applied science."[11] "The world of technology remains mute as long as we look at it and investigate it from this single point of view. It begins to open up and to divulge its secret only if we return from the *forma formata* to the *forma formans*, from that which has become to the very principle of becoming."[12]

Cassirer's variation on Spinozian notions of *natura naturata* and *natura naturans* fits in his neo-Kantian agenda of seeking the "conditions of possibility" for various subdomains of culture. The concept of *form* is crucial here and can be understood within the horizon of the philosopher's structural realism. There is no ready-made world. Reality is given shape thanks to culture, as understood in its broadest sense. The cultural world is being *formed*. Reality is therefore a task that should be accomplished through a meaning-making process. This is also the path that should be followed, in order to understand technology.

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8)   Cassirer, *Form and Technology*, 18.

9)   Ibid.*,* 16.

10)   Hoel and Folkvord, *Ernst Cassirer on Form and Technology*, 1–12.

11)   Schatzberg, *Technology*, 174–93.

12)   Ibid., 18.

If, instead of beginning from the existence of technological works, we were to begin from the form of the effective action of technology and shift our gaze from the mere product to the mode and type of production – and to the lawfulness revealed in it – then technology would lose the narrow, limited, and fragmentary character that otherwise seems to adhere to it. Technology adapts itself – not directly in its end result, but with a view to its task and problematic – into a comprehensive sphere of inquiry within which its specific meaning and original spiritual tendency can be determined.[13]

By granting technology the spiritual component, Cassirer hopes for leaping a gap between human spirit and its creations. The gap is created by the "chaotic forces" in the human himself. Technology is presented here as a force that is able to tame the "I," as it appears in the mythical consciousness. Technology comes as the replacement for magic. The difference between the two is that magic operates on the *desire* to make a change in the world. The desire does not recognize between subjective and objective reality. The whole of nature is the area of the "I." Magic tries to use desire as the psychic force that is able to somehow transform a part of the external world. When technology comes to the scene, the desire is replaced by *will*. The will is able to set its goal, so to say, "in front" of the individual spirit and "let it stand there." The recognition of independence of the external world is becoming possible, and the goal can be distanced from the consciousness, to become achievable. As a result the consciousness becomes individualized to a larger extent.

It should be noted, however, that Cassirer's analysis is not only of historical importance. The mythical consciousness, and the magical thinking are not entirely a matter of the past, but manifest themselves in every era.

All "organization" of nature, however, remains questionable and sterile if it does not lead to the goal of the formation of the will to work, and the real and fundamental work attitude. Our culture and our present society are still far from this goal. Only when this is understood as such and methodically and energetically grasped, however, will the real relationship between "technology" and "form," its deepest form-forming force, be able to prove itself.[14]

Cassirer asserts that humanity is far from grasping the true meaning of technology and reconciling with it. However, he remains reluctant in giving clues on how this goal should be accomplished. It seems that the goal itself is "let-stand in the distance," since a set of tools for reaching it, has not yet been forged. In order to come to terms with technology another "technology" is needed. One can have the feeling that the right program is already present in Cassirer's essay, but it has to be defined. What his approach lacks is the differentiation within the area of the notion of technology. In Cassirer's view, technology as the "meaning-making force" and technology as "applied science" are indistinguishable. The fusion of spiritual and physical aspects of various phenomena of culture lies at the core of his philosophy, but the goal of understanding technology "left at the distance" calls for additional operations. A promising candidate in the task of bringing closer the still-unknown "spiritual" part of technology is Hadot's idea of spiritual exercises.

As mentioned above, a spiritual exercise is every operation undertaken in a regular regime in order to transform the subject. We have seen from the works of Jünger and Cassirer, that such a transforming force is present also in technology. Although both authors differ radically as to the evaluation of that transformation, they nevertheless agree that change through technology does occur. In the technological horizon the aim of

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13) Ibid., 20.

14) Ibid., 48.

spiritual exercises would consist in giving that transformation a certain direction. This task can be shortly described as transforming oneself.

3. Foucault's Appropriation

If that sounds like the ancient maxim similar to the one in Delphi, then yet another thinker, concerned with the issue of the construction of the self, should be brought forward. Michel Foucault has an interesting take on Hadot's spiritual exercises. In his approach they are called technologies of the self. They are to be understood as tools of gaining knowledge of oneself. "Technologies of the self … permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality."[15]

Foucault stresses that, apart from the well-known rule "know yourself," there is another one crucial for understanding the world of ancient Greeks: "take care of yourself." As Foucault's thinking is framed by the issues of constructing subjectivity, it is the second rule that determines perspective for the theory of technologies of the self. His main idea is that "there are different forms of care" as "there are different forms of self." The techniques of self can be technically very similar to the spiritual exercises. They can take a form of platonic dialogue, or stoic strategies, like writing journals, sending letters to friends, or examining one's conscience. They are a way of establishing the relation of dominance of the self over itself. The true meaning of this task does not lie in the prohibition or holding back from something. Rather, it is directed at gaining something. It is the acquisition of truth coming from the performing of technologies of self that makes them especially valuable.

There is a significant difference between the two rules of antiquity. The call to knowing oneself assumes that there is a ready-made subject awaiting for uncovering through a careful examination. It relies on the conviction that a vast area of the content that constitutes the subject is unknown to it. The task is to uncover the truth, which is not visible. Even with less direct interpretations of the Delphic inscription, like "do not suppose yourself to be a god," or "be aware of what you really ask when you come to consult the oracle," there is always a shadowy area of unrecognized subjectivity waiting to be explored. The rule of "taking care of oneself" assumes something contrary to the idea of the finished subject whose only aim is to take a close look at, and into, itself. In this approach, the subject is a processual entity that constructs itself through various exercises, or techniques of self. The task should be undertaken consciously, possibly with the help of others. The subject must also recognize the need to begin the process of structuring itself, which means the necessity of recognizing its own incompleteness in the first place. That is the problem Alcibiades faces, when Socrates introduces him to the idea of taking care of himself. Alcibiades becomes confused. His real problem is the very notion of the *self*.

> The rest of the text is devoted to an analysis of this notion of *epimelesthai*, "taking pains with oneself." It is divided into two questions: What is this self of which one has to take care, and of what does that care consist? First, what is the self (129^b)? Self is a reflective pronoun, and it has two meanings. Auto means "the same," but it also conveys the notion of identity. The latter meaning shifts the question from "What is this self?" to "What is the plateau on which I shall find my 'identity'?"[16]

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15)   Foucault, *Technologies of the Self*, 18.

16)   Ibid.

At the very core of Foucault's thought lies the idea of personal freedom. As F. Testa stresses "Foucault investigates the possibility of a subject that is not informed by exterior governmentalities, a subject able to constitute, by means of regular exercises, a relationship to the self."[17] Foucault's main concern is the effect every authority has on the individual. The authority uses all of the available means in order to project power. In the view of Jünger the prominent place among such means is occupied by technology. If technology can be conceived as authority, then the aims of the subject would be to construct itself against it. Such an account converges to a large extent with Foucault's concerns about how biopower is a way of controlling individuals. Similar tropes can be found in Jünger's critique of the medical industry.

> In medicine, technical progress aims at transforming all medications into technical preparations, and to establish mechanical theories about the human body and about the treatment of diseases. In like manner, in the realm of food, technical progress tries to transform all animal, plant, or mineral products that serve as human food into technical products, and where this is not feasible, to give them the uniform appearance of standardized technical products by means of sorting, packing, coloring, and labeling.[18]

The power is present in the technology, and when technology – in the view of Jünger – becomes autonomous; meaning it becomes a criterion for judging the actions of individuals and a life-organizing force, power and technology become equal to each other.

The technologies of self, designed as means undertaken by the individual to shape himself in response to the external power, need to take into account the technological nature that the power adopts. Such power is to be perceived as the external domination, and the technologies of the self are responses – consisting of "individual domination." They, in a sense, have a task of outrunning this external power. This feature of the technologies of the self becomes crucial when personal freedom interferes with technology. In the Foucaultian perspective, Jünger's and Spengler's rejection of technology would be counterproductive. The power of technology cannot be opposed by pure denial. It must be processed by the self so that the self can preserve its independence. At this point Foucault's thinking is becoming confluent with that of Cassirer, when he states that "even where [the spirit] entrusts itself to a foreign power, and sees its progress determined by it, the mind must at least attempt to penetrate the core, and meaning of this determination."[19] The forming force of technology must be recognized, as ultimately originating from the individual itself. In order for such a recognition to occur, the technologies of the self, or spiritual exercises, must become something that can be named *technological exercises* – a set of strategies that encapsulates technology within daily life practice.

Such an idea may seem worthless, as technology is most certainly already present in daily life. However, what is at stake is the mode of its presence. That mode can be either restrictive, or emancipatory. Let the two passages serve here for illustration. First, concerning television, comes from yet another theoretician of technology, Marshall McLuhan:

> The TV screen just pours that energy into you which paralyses the eye; you are not looking at it; it is looking at you… Television is profoundly and subliminally introverting, [creating] an inward

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17) Testa, "Towards a History of Philosophical Practices in Michel Foucault and Pierre Hadot," 174.
18) Jünger, *The Failure of Technology*, 92.
19) Cassirer, *Form and Technology*, 15.

depth, meditative, oriental. The television child is a profoundly orientalized being. And he will not accept goals as objects in the world to pursue.[20]

Technology in this account is overpowering. It captivates the individual to the point when he is unable to undertake any genuine action that would follow his own will. He becomes a pawn in the game of technology.

Another passage concerning technology offers just an antithetic view. As paradoxical as it may seem, it comes from a radical opponent of technology, F. G. Jünger. The passage placed in one of the footnotes of *The Failure of Technology* praises the bicycle as an emancipative invention. "The bicycle is one of those almost perfect mechanisms that can hardly be improved upon, and that as a mechanical tool must be operated continuously. For this reason it is well adapted to the human body: the handlebars correspond to arms and hands, the pedals to the feet, and it is entirely controlled by the balance of the human body."[21]

Two radically different visions of technology emerge here. One of them can be described as a centralized network, while the other has certain emancipatory potential. First, the collectivizing mode of technology is present in mass media, and all kinds of bureaucratic and production systems. A human being is automatically subjected to such emanation of technology, once he steps into it. It is also a mode that is unavoidable. The second mode needs to be chosen, in order for the self to relate to the technology, without being subjected to it according to the principle that could perhaps be summarized in the words: *transform yourself, not to be transformed.*

Conclusion

It would be beneficial to take a look into Hadot's views on technology to brighten this idea. In his work, *The Veil of Isis*, Hadot presents two possible attitudes toward nature: the Promethean and the Orphic attitude. The Orphic attitude consists of "aesthetic perception, discourse, poetry and art." Such a stance is not to be associated with any technological endeavor. It approaches nature in a non-invasive way, being receptive rather than expansive. The Promethean attitude, on the contrary, is characterized by curiosity, exploratory drive and the extensive use of various tools, and technical procedures "to tear Nature's secrets from her in order to dominate and exploit her." The Promethean attitude appeared in three forms: mechanics, magic, and the experimental method – being all attempts at taking control over nature. The first of them is crucial from the point of view of the critique of technology. Hadot defines ancient mechanics as a form of struggle between man and nature. The character of this struggle comes into view with the inspection of the word "mechanics," which – as Hadot states – derives from *mekhane*, meaning "trick." All mechanics consist then of tricking nature in order to harness its forces in favor of human purposes. Such framing of the concept of technology aligns with concerns of Jünger and Spengler whose works, stressing the dangers of exploitation and mechanization of nature, may be seen as the critique of the Promethean attitude.

It is however worth mentioning, that there are applications of technology that could have an Orphic element in them, making possible what Hadot called a combination of these two attitudes.

By opposing the Promethean to the Orphic attitude, I do not mean to oppose a good and a bad attitude. I simply want, through this recourse to Greek myths, to attract attention to these two orientations that can be manifested in the relations between man and nature – two orientations

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20)   McLuhan, *Essential McLuhan*, 284.

21)   Jünger, *The Failure of Technology*, 55.

that are equally essential, do not necessarily exclude each other, and are often found united in the same person.[22]

The similar conceptual intersection can be found in the invention of the bicycle, praised by Jünger. The other invention, which contains both of these strategies, is photography. The Promethean element is present in the technological nature of the medium, while the Orphic component – in its artistic purpose. The ability of photography to realize an Orphic ideal through a Promethean way was first hinted at during Germany's interwar period, as far back as Walter Benjamin published his remarks on photography. He noticed that the medium has a certain property, he called aura that resists technical reproduction: "In the fleeting expression of a human face, the aura beckons from early photographs for the last time. This is what gives them their melancholy and incomparable beauty."[23]

The space for binding spiritual exercises with technology opens up here. Let us briefly evoke yet another idea associated with Benjamin, a *flâneur*. Half an intellectual, half an outcast, *flâneur* aimlessly roamed the streets of nineteenth-century cities alienated from their hasty lifestyle, but paying close attention to the details omitted by others. When a *flâneur* is equipped with a camera, he becomes a meditative-like figure. The experience of walking with a camera and taking pictures differs from that on a regular walk. It requires keeping an even more focused attitude toward the surrounding reality, and thus fulfilling an ideal of one of Hadot's spiritual exercises. A support from technology would allow such a wanderer to be critical as well as reflective. The "technologized" version of a *flâneur* maintains his emancipatory potential and even strengthens it. He becomes not only a sharp observer of society, but is also capable of registering and recording his impressions and thus telling a story through photographs, which is an act that can be a spiritual exercise in itself.

In the three mentioned time intervals – antiquity, the Weimar period and the present day – technology wields growing influence over the way of life. It also affects philosophical reflection which gradually shifts in order to grasp this new phenomenon. As a result, the connection between philosophy and way of life weakens. Although the program of spiritual exercises did not initially assume the application of advanced technology, it left such possibility open through the act of "reactualization." It follows that in order to become fully efficient, the spiritual exercises need to take historical and cultural circumstances into account. The purpose of the practice is not of escapist nature, but consists in supporting the participatory undertakings. What comes here to light is the relation between the spiritual exercises, and the notion of actuality. They become significant, when they are performed in accordance with other current actions. If the motives and aims of actions taken by certain groups or individuals differ over various time periods, they can alter the shape of spiritual exercises. The characteristics of any activity, in a given time period, may differ due to technological progress, state of knowledge, and other factors while its goal can remain unchanged. The conditions under which the spiritual exercises can undergo the process of adjusting, require finding a stable ground, as the notion of actualization itself assumes change, as well as permanence.

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22) Hadot, *The Veil of Isis*, 97.

23) Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility*, 27.

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