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ETHICS OF DESIGN FROM THE ESSENCE OF TECHNOLOGY: TOWARDS A PRACTICE OF GELASSENHEIT (SERENITY)

*Hernán López-Garay*¹

Abstract

Inspired by the work of the philosopher Martin Heidegger on the essence of Modern Technology ---as a particular mode of bringing-forth (re-vealing) which is constitutive of our time--- we propose in this paper to reflect on the ethics of technological design. The background of this reflection is the idea that technology is a particular mode of revealing reality that puts to Nature the unreasonable demand that it supply energy which can be removed and stored as such. At the same time orders reality as a grid system or device always ready to be used, and commands man to be the orderer of such a system. But the greatest danger of Technology, its greatest threat to humankind, lies in that man soon will become a mere device --- uprooted from the earth (physically and spiritually) --- denying to him a more original way of revealing reality. Said from another angle, man with his current technological designs falls under the belief that he is on his way to become master and lord of the land. This belief reinforces the appearance that everything that comes to pass is there only to the extent that it is an artifact created by man. This delusion is devastating because it does not let him see that is becoming a mere device. It is against this backdrop that has emerged the question for the ethics of technological design. From a Heideggerian point of view, we know that the answer to this condition can not be to try to curb technology (something it would only exacerbate more technological control of man). Nor is the answer to continue giving in blindly to technology's demands. What is needed is to develop a **practice of indifference** to the technological, a **practice of serenity** (Gelassenheit). We intend from the perspective of modern technological design explore the theme of the concrete realization of this **practice**. As we will see that means starting to practice a way of life that allows us to live again as beings rooted to the earth. This is the basis of the new ethics of design that we will propose, an ethics of liberation.

¹ Profesor Investigador Centro Investigaciones Sistemología Interpretativa (CSI) Universidad de Los Andes, Venezuela. Investigador Asociado Centro Nacional de Desarrollo e Investigación en Tecnologías Libres (CENDITEL), Mérida, Venezuela. Fundador Escuela Latinoamericana de Pensamiento y Diseño Sistémico (ELAPDIS), www.cenditel.go.ve/elapdis.



1. INTRODUCTION

Following the participation of some of my former students in the sabotage to the oil industry in Venezuela in 2002, which caused incalculable human and economic damage to the nation, my immediate reaction, full of a sense of guilt was the following: I "taught them the technological tools but not ethical ones to accompany the first." At that moment I was not aware of a number of assumptions underlying such judgement:

S1: Technology is neutral. It can be used for good or for evil.

S2: Technology is a set of techniques, tools, procedures and skills (usually scientific), which are used to design and build objects that meet human needs.

S3: Ethics is also a tool (a kind of "soft" technology), useful to guide human action.

S4: Just as in the university techniques are taught to design systems, using as pedagogical devices courses, workshops, laboratories, workshops, and conferences, also one can teach codes of ethics.

S5: Technology is one thing, Ethics is another. The former has to do with the means of action and the latter with the ends.

The former crisis in my academic life, fired a concern that led to the present investigation of the relationship between ethics, Technology, Design.

2. ETHICS

Today, *ethics* has been reduced to a matter of codes and standards of behavior specified in a given situation as to how to proceed morally right in that situation. Such codes tell us what is right and wrong. But it is necessary to understand that ethics was not always a matter of rules. Originally, the word *ethics* makes reference to a *way of life* in coexistence with other human beings with whom I hold a joint transcendental project. In ancient Greece that project was the common pursuit of the Good in the context of the polis. The Good was conceived in terms of cultivating a community in which the pursuit of excellence in every art and every human chore found a fertile ground and special care in that community. In the context of this collective project every individual sought to realize his/her potential as a creative human being. So, for instance, blacksmiths were looking for excellence in their art --- to become an excellent blacksmith --- but at the same time they sought to contribute to the good of the polis (e.g. the art of the blacksmith was to the service of the military inasmuch as he sought to contribute to the defense of the polis, by making good bridles for the horses of the generals). In *Ethics to Nichomaco*, Aristotle tells us about ethics as a practical science that enables men to grow that particular way of life that is driven by a continuous search of excellence. In this sense ethics literally means the science that takes man as it is in his original state and develops its potential to become man as he should. So the science of ethics focuses on the problem of understanding the transition from "seed not yet flourished to flowered seed". And the *virtues* are the skills of character and the intellect needed to flower.

But as the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre points out, this conception of ethics as a way of life founded on a transcendent plane has been relegated to oblivion and replaced by an ethics of rules and codes of conduct. This goes hand in hand with the gradual imposition in Modern times of a form of fragmented society, made up of individuals who have no conception of human good, and no desire to embark on the quest for the common good. Everyone then seeks to undertake its own project of individual life.



There is however a very powerful illusion of unity in modern life: The Market. In effect, the market is supposed to be that institution that unites us because through it we can all get the basic resources to carry out our personal life projects. But such an independent life is mere illusion, because ultimately the individual ends up being put to the service of the Market and its calculative rationality, impersonal in its endless search for effectiveness and efficiency. And to the extent that the market mentality extends itself to all areas of human life, so it does its calculative rationality to those areas. Other possibilities to understand life ---other than the market--- are then overshadowed and therefore human existence is impoverished as a whole.

3. TECHNOLOGY

The picture that begins to emerge from the above reflections is one in which an instrumental rationality determines the conditions for the deployment of the modern world. This rationality embodies itself in the Market. In the latter, and as if it were his favorite laboratory for experimentation and refinement of their "strategies", the instrumental rationality seems to have focused its deployment, animated by a spirit of control of space-time that allows not only globalization but the reduction of distances and time to zero.

According to Heidegger such has been the case in Modern times because a historical process has been going on for the last few centuries, namely "... a revolution in all cardinal representations... {and as a result} now the world appears as an object to which calculative thinking directs its attacks which nothing should be able to resist. "(ibid. Pag.7).

In the Question concerning Technology, Heidegger tells us that the essence of this rationality is first and foremost, a way of re-vealing. Technology is not a mere tool available to man to transform the world.

In ancient Greece *techné* was a revealing "...of something that does not occur of itself and is not yet there-ahead, and that, therefore, may appear and happened in one way or another The key of *techné* ... is not at all in the making or in the manipulating of things, nor is in the use of means to achieve some ends but in disclosing, bringing-forth from the Invisible... Such revealing is also a challenging-forth of Nature which demands from her the supply of energy that can be removed and stored for use at the touch of a push button". Such revealing constitutes a net of devices in which man is not only the network builder but also a device himself in the net. Everywhere, everything is ready to be used to the touch of a push bottom. Hence in our times things are not objects anymore but mere devices. The world is revealed not as a set of objects but as a network of devices always ready to be used!

4. DESIGN AND "LIBERATION "

The central ethical challenge of our time is the "liberation" Equivalently, the challenge is to regain our human essence that, as Heidegger says, is to dwell poetically in the world. But first is necessary to understand how technology constitutes us. Using the metaphor of the Weberian iron cage, it is necessary to understand the shape of the cage, which now has arguably the form of a mesh or net. We are literally caught in a network, of which we are nodes and weavers at the same time.

Here is the unifying transcendental liberating project that lies ahead and which serves as the basis for a new ethic in the present.

In the following we will illustrate with some simple ideas what such a liberating project would mean in the area of Design Software. It's easy to imagine the implementation of these ideas to other areas of design in general, for example the field of architecture. The field of software has been chosen because of the vital role the Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) are playing in the constitution of large scale NETWORKS OF RELATIONSHIPS such as INTERNET. We refer to the INTER-NET as the great metaphor that is absorbing and replacing the Market.



The starting point of the new design approach that is required to contribute to the liberating project is to understand what it means "liberation" in this context. In this regard Heidegger warns us: "Everywhere we remain unfree and chained to technology, whether we passionately affirm or deny it. But we are delivered over to it in the worst possible way when we regard it as something neutral; for this conception of it, to which today we particularly like to do homage, makes us utterly blind to the essence of technology." (Http : / / [www.heideggeriana.com.ar / textos / tecnica.htm](http://www.heideggeriana.com.ar/textos/tecnica.htm), pag.1.) The right attitude to deal with technology is called Gelassenheit or Serenity. "We can say 'yes' to the inevitable use of technical objects and 'no' to the extent that we refuse to be required so uniquely by them as to devastate our essence {i.e. dwelling poietically}. I would call this attitude that simultaneously says yes and no to the demands of technology with an ancient word: Gelassenheit. [Serenity]."²

The software designer, orientated by these ideas would have to start his/her design process by making a first attempt at disclosing the network within which his/her design is to be inserted. This has to be an exercise of the imagination. It will have to look for a **break** in the situation. A **break** occurs for instance when one is working with a computer, and after a while one forgets one is using it. Man and tool become one. All of a sudden the computer stops working and such a unity **breaks** down. At that moment one becomes aware that all the time one had been part of something greater than oneself or the computer

In the context of the design of a software systems for a given organization, the designer has to look for such **breaks**: what would happen if this system cease to function? What roles, tasks, which activities, what individuals, what institutions would be affected? Which seems to be the networks that are both helped to be created and affected by this **break**? What one is looking for is to get a picture of how our device --- inserted into the network of devices which is part of the institution or organization in question --- contributes to that institution and at the same time makes it dependent?

This first imaginative step of the designer may not lead him very far but it is a beginning. The following step is to start the design of the software system, as usual, putting the outcomes of the first step in stand by. Once the designer develops the concept of the system and has it in terms of a functional design, one could repeat the exercise of looking for the **breaks**. With this knowledge gained, one can begin to ask how to re-design the system in a way that is **dispensable**, meaning try and imagine what it would mean in that specific situation to follow Heidegger's advice concerning the right attitude to technology (Gelassenheit).

CONCLUSION: LIBERATING ETHICS, LIBERATING DESIGN

"When Gelassenheit (Serenity) towards things wakes up in us and openness to the mystery, then can we hope to reach a road leading to a new ground and foundation. This attitude is called opening to the mystery because we remain open to the hidden essence of the technical world. But the Serenity to things and openness to mystery not ever fall from the sky... Both only grow from a vigorous and unrelenting thinking [a meditative thinking]."³

We call a **liberating ethic** a conception of life that is guided by the telos to "liberate" humankind from the technological cage and allows man to return to dwell poetically this world. It is an ethic that is grounded in the oldest meaning of the word **ethics**, the one that comes from the Greek root meaning dwelling, **ethos**, or 'place of living. A liberating design is one that is guided by this telos and propels building a virtuous liberating practice. A **virtuous practice** is a guided, coherent and complex human activity that seeks to achieve cooperatively internal goods with excellence, through the exercise of the **virtues** (The **virtues** are the qualities that enable us to achieve higher goods).⁴

² Segmento extraído de su discurso SERENIDAD <http://www.heideggeriana.com.ar/textos/serenidad.htm>..

³ SERENIDAD. Verlo en <http://www.heideggeriana.com.ar/textos/serenidad.htm>

⁴ Definición basada en la noción de práctica de Alasdair MacIntyre. Ver su obra **After Virtue**.