

FROM CYBORG TO CYBERPUNK

The Art of Living in the Cyberage

A. T. Nuyen

Department of Philosophy, National University of Singapore, 3 Arts Link, Singapore 117570

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Abstract: The World Wide Web, the Internet and other cyber technologies have changed the way we live and work. In addition to such technologies, and interwoven with them, are biological technologies, such as those in the areas of cloning and genetic engineering. Some of us welcome the technological age, some are hostile to it, most are ambivalent, and hardly anyone approaches it with the Socratic question “How should one live?” The context in which Socrates asks this question, in *The Republic*, is different, but in the context of modern technology, electronic as well as biological, the significance of the question remains the same: Not a trifling matter as Socrates puts it. Indeed, the new technologies have changed the way we conduct ourselves so drastically, and the way we think about ourselves so fundamentally, that Socrates’ question must now be asked with urgency. In what follows I offer some reflections on how one should live with the new technologies, drawing on the works of Foucault, Heidegger, Leary and Haraway.

1 INTRODUCTION

Cyber technologies have changed the way we live and work. In addition to such technologies, and interwoven with them, are biological technologies, such as those in the areas of cloning and genetic engineering. Some of us welcome the technological age, some are hostile to it, most are ambivalent, and hardly anyone approaches it with the Socratic question “How should one live?” The context in which Socrates asks this question, in *The Republic*, is different, but in the context of modern technologies, electronic as well as biological, the significance of the question remains the same: Not a trifling matter as Socrates puts it. Indeed, the new technologies have changed the way we conduct ourselves so drastically, and the way we think about ourselves so fundamentally, that Socrates’ question must now be asked with urgency. In what follows I offer some reflections on how one should live with the new technologies.

2 THE ART OF LIVING

According to Foucault, the emancipation of the self consists in efforts to construct oneself, “to promote

new forms of subjectivity” and “to build up what we could be” (Foucault, 1982: 126). Using art as a model, Foucault urges us to construct ourselves aesthetically as a response to any kind of domination. He calls on us to develop an “aesthetics of existence” consisting of a set of “arts of existence,” or “technologies of the self.” Foucault defines the “arts of existence” as “those intentional and voluntary actions by which men not only set themselves rules of conduct, but also seek to transform themselves, to change themselves in their singular being, and to make their life into an *oeuvre* that carries certain aesthetic values and meets certain stylistic criteria” (Foucault 1986a: 10-11). The point is later reinforced when Foucault calls for “the cultivation of the self ... in the form of a new stylistics of existence,” for forming oneself “as an ethical subject of his actions,” and giving oneself “a purpose to his existence” (Foucault 1986b: 95).

The construction of the self is urged by Foucault as a means to resist power in power relations. Power occurs in complex strategic situations in a society and is exercised by a free agent over another free agent, thus linking free agents in a strategic situation. Power relationships produce social realities. They make a society possible. Furthermore, it is through them that we understand ourselves. How power is exercised is a question of power politics. In

his earlier works, Foucault focuses on a particular kind of power politics, the exercise of power to discipline and to punish. What is characteristic of power in this phase of its history is that it is the power of degrading life, and ultimately of taking life away, or conferring death. Also, it is a power exercised on agents individually. But as pointed out in Foucault's later works, since the Enlightenment, there has been a shift in the nature of power politics. Governments have increasingly exercised their power to give life, or to make life better, over the population as a whole rather than individually. Foucault calls this new form of power "bio-power." It is the power to "make live" (*faire vivre*) in contrast to the old power of "giving death." Bio-power has given rise to bio-politics with a different set of power "*dispositifs*," or apparatuses of control. However, the effect on free agents remains the same as before. Thus, while bio-power takes on life as its object, exercised so as to "make live," it is still a disciplinary power in political terms.

While Foucault was prescient about bio-power, given the fact that we are now living in what one scientist calls "the age of biological control" (Wilmot 1999), he did not see the full ramifications of the power exercised in cyberspace, of "electronic control." The experience in certain countries may lead us to believe that the latter power is diffused, rested in the hand of "Net citizens" and so does not pose the same control problem as bio-power. To be sure, new power relationships have emerged – individuals have been shamed, condemned, made famous or notorious, simply because their conduct has been recorded and posted on the Net – but they seem to be benign, even egalitarian, or democratic. However, this is to ignore the fact that given the technical complexities and the costs of supporting the electronic technologies, the electronic control, exercised through the control of technological apparatuses, such as networks and servers, is really concentrated in the hands of a few. In addition, electronic control has been fused with biological control, resulting in a whole new set of power *dispositifs* and a whole new set of control mechanisms. Think of the proliferation of data bases containing medical and biological information and the technological devices that have emerged or are being planned in the name of fighting a "war on terror" or controlling pandemics. Seeing these ramifications, Foucault would regard electronic power as an extension of bio-power.

Given the combination of electronic and biological control, given what might be called bio/techno power, the question is whether there is

room for the construction of the self, whether there can be an effective resistance to the new power relations. Many commentators have gone so far as saying that there is not enough freedom left for the task of self-construction, that resistance to bio-technological power is useless. For instance, Hardt and Negri contend that a global "Empire" is emerging, wielding an omnipotent and all pervasive bio/techno power that "regulates social life from its interior" (Hardt and Negri, 2000: 23). This is an empire consisting of gigantic multi-national corporations, many of which operate in the areas of bio-technology, logistics and security, and all are capable of controlling the life of the population. Just as pessimistic is Giorgio Agamben. Unlike Hardt and Negri, who locate the new power relations in the business empire of multi-national corporations, Agamben locates it in the alliance between the State and the experts, the latter consisting of the technical experts (doctors and engineers) and the legal and moral experts (jurists and priests) (Agamben, 1998). In support of Agamben and Hardt and Negri, in the case of the Internet, one might cite the "alliance," or the co-operation, between the Chinese Government and corporations such as Google and Yahoo! in controlling Net communication. Indeed, there have been cases in which political activists have been identified and subsequently incarcerated by the government with the help of such corporations. The modern power of "giving life" has not really displaced the old power of "taking life."

Clearly, in the age of bio-techno control, Foucault's call for an art of living is all the more urgent. How do the new power relationships affect the free agent, who, as a subject, must defend the subject's freedom in establishing relationships, with oneself and others, in all strategic situations, which is for Foucault the "very stuff of ethics"?

Foucault's answer is not to free oneself of power relationships but rather to engage in power relationships in a particular way, i.e. aesthetically. That means, in turn, to engage in resistance. There is little evidence to show that Foucault would go as far as Agamben and Hardt and Negri. For Foucault, resistance is certainly neither impossible nor useless, even in the most disciplinarian state. It is true that in the new bio/techno-political environment, resistance is *practically* much more difficult. This is so because Hardt and Negri are certainly right about the growing power of multi-national corporations, and Agamben about the growing alliance between the State and the experts. How then is one to live, as a free agent, in the age of bio-technological control?

How does one make resistance into an art of living, or an ethical response to the Socratic question?

3 LIVING IN CYBERSPACE

One way of living in the age of bio-technological control is to live stoically in the face of modern technology, i.e. avoiding anything technological. Another is to go over to modern technology in a manner that effectively means giving up all resistance. However, both of these ways would be inauthentic, to borrow a term from Heidegger. In a well known essay, Heidegger argues that we must not succumb to “a stultified compulsion to push on blindly with technology or, what comes to the same thing, to rebel helplessly against it and curse it as the work of the devil” (Heidegger, 1977: 25-6). Rather, we need to confront technology decisively and reflect constantly on its essence. To accomplish this, we have to wrench ourselves away from the dazzling effects of technology and turn to something else. That something else, this realm, is art, or the art of living. This is the meeting between Heidegger and Foucault.

Returning to Foucault, the art of living must exhibit resistance, and in the electronic age, it is resistance to bio-technological control. However, it has to be much more than resistance. To resist is to say no, and to resist bio/techno-power is to say no to certain forms of conduct encouraged by the new technology: “You have to say no as a decisive form of resistance” (Foucault 1997: 168). But to say no is only to make half a step. Without going further, it is an inauthentic moving of “rebellious helplessly” against technology that Heidegger speaks against. The other half is to create. Foucault argues that “resistance is not solely a negation but a creative process,” that to “create and recreate ... is to resist” (*ibid.*). Against bio/techno power, it is to create a life that is not dictated by technology. For Foucault, such a life will have to be unique, a product of art. Free agents can remain free by creating for themselves forms of life that “affirm themselves; not merely affirm themselves in their identity, but affirm themselves insofar as they are a creative force” (*ibid.*). What forms of life? I will now discuss two suggestions.

Many commentators on technology have offered arguments for resistance consistent with Foucault’s call for the construction of the self, and have given examples that manifest the art of living in the face of bio-technological control, an art that manifests creative resistance. For Timothy Leary, the

cyberpunk embodies such art (Leary 1996: 355-363). Leary reminds us that the word “cyber” comes from the Greek word “*kybernetes*,” meaning one who steers a boat or a vessel, a pilot. A “cyberperson” is “one who pilots his/her own life, [who] continually searches for theories, models, paradigms, metaphors, images, icons that help chart and define realities that we inhabit” (Leary, 1996: 355). The word “punk” refers to a rebellious youth who engages in what appear to be anti-social practices, such as wearing outrageous hairdos, body-piercing, playing or listening to “punk rock” etc. For Leary, in the age of bio-technological control, the cyberpunk is someone who offers resistance in a creative way: “Cyberpunks use all available data input to think for themselves ...” (*ibid.*). They are like the “heroic legends,” the “strong, stubborn, creative individuals who explore some future frontier, collect and bring back new information, and offer to guide the human gene pool to the next stage” (*ibid.*). Leary distinguishes two types of people living in the cyber society, the “good person” who is a cyberpunk and “the problem person ... who automatically obeys, who never questions authority, who acts to protect his/her official status, who placates and politics rather than thinks independently” (Leary, 1996: 356). We may add to these two types the Heideggerian inauthentic person who either avoids anything technological or goes over to it in a slavish way.

For Leary, while the term “cyberpunk” seems risky, it is a perfect term to describe the good cyberperson, one who understands cyberpolitics and offers up a creative, self-constructing resistance. He reminds us that the Latin translation of the Greek word “*kubernetes*” comes out as “*gubernetes*,” formed from “*gubernare*,” which does mean to steer, but also to govern, to direct, to regulate, etc., i.e. to control (Leary, 1996: 357). On the other side of the coin, the direct Latin word for “to steer” is “*stare*,” the past participle of which “produces ‘status,’ ‘state,’ ‘institute,’ ‘statue,’ ‘static,’ ‘statistics,’ ‘prostitute,’ ‘restitute,’ ‘constitute’” (*ibid.*), all of which refer to the state of being controlled. The two faces of the word “cyber,” freedom (to steer one’s life) and control, are reflected in the history of the Internet, originally a tool of control set up by the U.S. military, now vulnerable to cyberpunks. Using the word “cyberpunk” is a deliberate act of “liberating the term [“cyber”], teasing it free from serfdom to represent the autopoietic, self-directed principle of organization that arises in the universe in many systems of widely varying sizes, in people, societies, and atoms” (Leary, 1996: 358). It

represents a return to the “Hellenic concept of the individual navigating his/her own course, ... an island of humanism in a raging sea of totalitarian empires” (Leary, 1996: 359). The cyberpunk, then, is the hero we need in the struggle against the Hardt-Negri Embrace, the grand Agambenian alliance of the State and the experts. He or she is a person who embraces and personalizes information technology in the process of constructing his or her self.

While Leary sees the cyberpunk as “an island of humanism in a raging sea of totalitarian empires,” Donna Haraway goes further in advocating what might be called a post-human form of life, that of a cyborg, a hybrid being that combines human elements with non-human ones (Haraway, 1996). Haraway has in mind a human-machine organism, but recent advances in stem cell research, in which human-animal chimeras are created, may be seen as ushering in the post-humanistic age populated with human-animal-machine cyborgs. With the technology in our hands, we can break free from biological constraints and create, or recreate, humans from the physical ground up. The cyberpunks will no longer have things done to their bodies, or wear them as accessories: they can have them genetically engineered into them. They will in turn perform one of the tasks that Leary has envisioned for them, namely “guid[ing] the human gene pool to the next stage.” As is well known, Foucault himself went from the structuralist phase characterized by anti-humanistic views (declaring the “death of man” in one of his structuralist works), to the post-structuralist phase characterized by the talk of self-constructing resistance. The kind of post-humanism that Haraway speaks of seems to be the political end-point of the Foucauldian trajectory.

In a language that is distinctly Foucauldian, Haraway gives her own account of power, domination and resistance in the cyberage. For Haraway, the bio-technological age has a new “informatics of domination” (Haraway, 1996: 384) and a new “microelectronic and biotechnological politics” (Haraway, 1996: 385). In the new politics, “[C]ontrol strategies will be formulated in terms of rates, costs of constraints, degrees of freedom” (Haraway, 1996: 386). We have already seen that “robotics and related technologies put men out of work in ‘developed’ countries and exacerbate failure to generate male jobs in third-world ‘development’ and as the automated office becomes the rule even in labor-surplus countries, the feminization of work intensifies” (Haraway, 1996: 390). A new economic underclass has emerged, the new subjects of modern bio-technological control. Microelectronics has

worsened the situation insofar as the controlling agencies, the “states, multinational corporations, military power, welfare-state apparatuses, satellite systems, political processes...” etc. all “depend intimately upon electronics” (Haraway, 1996: 387). As if agreeing with Agamben and Hardt and Negri, Haraway presents a catalogue of the controlling effects of the new technologies, presenting a bleak “image of the informatics of domination” (Haraway, 1996: 392): “a massive intensification of insecurity and cultural impoverishment, with common failure of subsistence network for the most vulnerable” (Haraway, 1996: 394). The Socratic question is now desperately relevant and Foucault’s call for the resistance in our art of living is now desperately urgent.

Given the rather bleak picture painted by Haraway, is resistance to bio-technological control possible and if so how is it effected? Indeed, believing that the time has come to go beyond even Foucault, Haraway claims that the answer lies in the cyborg: “The cyborg is not subject to Foucault’s biopolitics; the cyborg simulates politics, a much more potent field of operations. Discursive constructions are no joke” (Haraway, 1996: 386). The cyborg thus resists by means of discursive constructions. What does this entail? If I understand Haraway correctly, we can say that in the post-humanistic age, distinctions, particularly binary ones, such as human-animal, human-machine, animal-machine, natural-artificial, will be crossed, or transcended. They will no longer serve to restrict or circumscribe creativity. Instead, the crossing of boundaries allows infinite flexibility in the construction of the self. For Haraway, binary distinctions, or dichotomies, are the tools of domination, and the cyborg, embodying the crossing of binaries, takes advantage of the blurring of distinctions in its resistance to domination. The cyborg takes advantage of the fact that “[H]igh-tech culture challenges ... dualisms in intriguing ways” (Haraway, 1996: 399): “Cyborg politics is the struggle for language and the struggle against perfect communication, against the one code that translates all meaning perfectly, ... [It] insist(s) on noise and advocate(s) pollution, rejoicing in the illegitimate fusion of animal and machine” (Haraway, 1996: 398). In cyborg politics, the “machine is us” (Haraway, 1996: 402). Insofar as we are “responsible for boundaries,” machines “do not dominate or threaten us ... [for] we are they” (Haraway, 1996: 402). Haraway will no doubt agree that the “they” includes animals and animal-human-machine hybrids.

I have discussed two responses to Foucault's challenge to resist bio-technological control, to construct the self creatively so as to live well in the bio-electronic age, or the cyberage. Whether they are the right answers to the Socratic question remains to be seen. What we can say is that it is certainly not Socratic wisdom to "put up with or evade" bio-electronic technologies, to borrow Heidegger's words. It is not to give in to the empires of bio-technological multi-national corporations, or the grand alliances of states and experts.

It may be said, however, that there is something missing in the suggestions made by Leary and Haraway. What limits are there on the creativity of cyborgs and cyberpunks? It seems that what is missing is the ethical dimension. Foucault himself does not lose sight of this. His art of living consists in the building of relationships with others, which are for Foucault the "very stuff [*matière*] of ethics" (Foucault, 1986a: 95). The new technologies can greatly assist a free subject in living an ethical form of life. The Foucauldian subject, who resists and constructs itself in resisting, is also an "ethical subject." The image of the cyberpunk, or the cyborg, is Foucauldian only if it is the image of an ethical cyberpunk, or an ethical cyborg. Haraway may be right in saying that "discursive constructions are no joke," but unethical discursive constructions most probably are. Foucault would certainly say that constructing an ethics for the cyberpunk, or the cyborg, to live by is "the very stuff of ethics" in the bio-electronic age. To do so is beyond the scope of this paper, although I have argued elsewhere that Lyotard's postmodern ethics of just gaming, the imperative of which is to let games proliferate, seems to be eminently suitable (Nuyen, 2004).

Where to go from here? What games are to be created? What would be the content of the art of living? The answers to these questions can only, at best, be gestured at. The idea of specifying content, of constructing a "model" for living, contradicts the idea of living creatively. Foucault himself speaks merely of "certain stylistic criteria" without specifying them. Here again, art serves as an analogy: there is good art and bad art, the former satisfies "certain stylistic criteria." However, to specify the criteria that an artist must satisfy is almost certain to produce bad art. The cyberpunk creates his/her own criteria; the cyborg transcends existing ones. Yet, there have to be criteria, without which what we have is randomness, not art. Criteria, but they will have to be what Kant calls "regulative." They cannot be what Kant calls

"determinant." The art of living is regulated, but not determined by anything.

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