

Charles Taylor's Critique of Technopoly

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We live in a society absorbed by the media. The individual loses himself by interacting with society and its members through technology. Neil Postman critiqued this kind of society by creating a new concept: Technopoly, showing the hegemony of the media in society. Similar critiques have been made by philosophers such as Charles Taylor, who explains the alienation of the individual from moral principles in this technopoly. Man has been unconsciously manipulated by the media ruled by the State. Released from natural laws, man depends on the media to frame his reality, his values, his norms. The individual loses the meaning of everything around him, and this makes him the center of the universe and considers himself "the measure of all things." The aim of this paper is to analyze the impact of technology in man from the perspective of philosophical anthropology and Charles Taylor's works in the Ethics of Authenticity and Neil Postman's Technopoly. We will analyze how man has tried to find his freedom and this search has chained him to technology and media. Man's scope of reality is shaped by these means. That is to say, man has lost his freedom while looking for it. He is no longer able to think or to speak his own words. Rather it is the media that think and speak through him.

Keywords: Taylor, ethics, technology, Postman, Modernity.

Introduction

Technology has developed vertiginously in the last forty years. New tools are created to help man interact with the world, reach his goals or simply make his daily tasks easier. Man has thrived to adapt himself to his biosphere. World is our environment where man must survive, solve his needs and reach his goals. Man accomplish these by creating tools and technology. The world is a place for man and man is a being for the world, therefore, man requires certain rules to put him certain limits to his actions so that the world will not be destroyed by man or man by man himself.

It is in this way that Ethics arises, as natural principles that allow us to value the action of man as good or bad towards the world and towards himself. These rules of action, if broken, would lead man to chaos and destruction of himself, we would speak of a man without limits, a being that develops without rules in a world that is not his but has been given to him, in which there are natural, unconventional rules that must be followed for the good of all. In this paper I intend to show the criticism made by the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor¹ and the American communication theorist Neil Postman,² who show

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¹Charles Taylor, in full Charles Margrave Taylor (born November 5, 1931, Montreal, Quebec, Canada), Canadian philosopher known for his examination of the modern self. He produced a large body of work that is remarkable for its range—both for the number of areas and issues it addresses as well as for the breadth of scholarship it draws upon. His writings have been translated into a host of Western and non-Western languages. Taylor was raised in a bilingual bicultural family with an

the path that man has taken through technological progress and his respective departure from the ethical norms that guide him to his good.

Overviewing Charles Taylor's Critique of Modernity

The media have always been important for man's development. Since the beginning of man, he has used technology to face obstacles to survive and have a better life. Man has also used technology to broad his scope and hand in both knowledge and traditions to the following generations. Technology is the greatest connector, and man has connected to the world by media. Through these new tools and technology man has dominated nature, extending his senses through it. Marshall McLuhan (2009) sustains that these media provoke a loss in man, for the dependency of the action man executes and the media he requires for this. This dependency has taken man to lose himself gradually, giving technology a greater extent of importance. Man shaped the technology and then technology shapes man. Charles Taylor restates this critique, as we will see later. We must say this trend is observed in the beginning of man.

To prove the latter, I will start with a story to show the importance of the individual before the media surrounding him. This story has been used by Neil Postman in his book *Technopoly*. It is the platonic myth about the beginning of writing as explained in the *Phaedrus*:

It is said that Theuth was the first human to discover the number, calculus, geometry, astronomy and above all writing. In that time, a great king named Thamus lived in a city of the Upper Egypt; to him came Theuth, who showed him his arts and claimed that they should be made widely known to Egyptians. But King Thamus inquired into the use of each of the arts and, as Theuth went through them, he expressed approval or disapproval to each one. But when it came to writing, Theuth declared to the king: Here is an accomplishment my lord the King, which will improve both the wisdom and the memory of the Egyptians, as it has been invented as a remedy (*pharmakon*) of both memory and wisdom. Thamus replied: "...you, who are the father of writing, have out of fondness for your off-spring attributed to it quite the opposite of its real function. Those who acquire it will cease to exercise their memory and become

English-speaking Protestant father and a Francophone Roman Catholic mother. After completing an undergraduate degree in history (1952) at McGill University in his native Montreal, Taylor earned a second bachelor's degree in politics, philosophy, and economics (1955) at Balliol College at the University of Oxford. He was awarded a doctorate in philosophy at Oxford in 1961. Most of Taylor's academic career was spent at McGill and Oxford; at the latter institution he held the Chichele Professorship of Social and Political Theory. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Charles-Taylor>. Accessed 12/04/2019.

²Neil Postman (1931–2003) was an American critic and educator. He wrote seventeen books. His most famous (and controversial) was *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, a screed against television and how it turns everything into banal entertainment – including education and news. Just imagine FOX News during an election cycle and you'll get the idea. His interests were all over the place. He wrote on the disappearance of childhood, reforming public education, postmodernism, semantics and linguistics, and technopolies. He also wrote essays and lectured about lots of other things that you can find here if you scroll down long enough. He was a professor of media ecology at New York University and died in 2003. <http://neilpostman.org/>. Accessed 12/04/2019.

forgetful, they will rely on writing to bring things to their remembrance by external signs instead of by their own internal resources" (Yunis, 2011, pp. 274c-275a).

Technology has been important for men since it was made. It is useful for mankind development and eases our lives in many ways, but it has never been more important than today, as we live in a society worried about media, and considers media as ends and not as means. We think the media can solve the problems we face, we have enhanced and promoted the use of technology to a metaphysical level, that is, media has become the aim of the human life. As Postman stated:

"What problem does the information solve?" the answer is usually "How to generate, store, and distribute more information, more conveniently, at greater speeds than ever before." This is the elevation of information to a metaphysical status: information as both the means and end of human creativity (1933, p. 61).

This is the reason why my purpose in this paper is to show the importance of media in men's behavior, the way individuals have modified their Ethics from being sustained by nature to one whose only principles are individualism and instrumental reason that is pragmatism.

Today, men have a new value and this is a medium not a message. As Postman declared, people are looking for a new aim and this is guided by the values technopoly shows; so this is an end with no end.

But this is not a new situation; it has been a process developed in time. We are living a new age, in which men are eternally unsatisfied, and this is what Taylor calls "The Malaise of Modernity" (1994, p. 25).

As civilization develops, people experiment diverse losses or declines, the first Malaise of Modernity, according to Charles Taylor, is individualism and even though at present it may seem as the most important achievement in modern society, it has caused us many problems, as it is because of this principle, that it is considered that people have the right to choose anything by themselves under their own rules, to decide what beliefs to follow, as they seek to determine their lives without the rules upon which their ancestors did not have control, they forget any ethical mindset because they are sure they are in control. And so, law has acknowledged these rights and has turned them into values to protect. There are no more sacred principles rooted by our ancestors for us to follow, today the only principle is freedom to choose the convenient according to my circumstances. There are neither chains nor moral norms graven in the past; the only lasting thing in time is the individual. In accordance to Taylor:

The change in the meaning of the word "identity" –people now talk of "my identity," "your identity," "respecting identity" and so on– is very interesting. I think it's something to do with what I define as the ethic of authenticity, which is widely taken up during the Romantic period. It's the idea that everyone has their own way of being human (2016).

Today, we consider we have reached our freedom at the precise moment we escape from past moral standards. We think so because in the past, according to

Taylor, people thought they belonged to a major order; man was not the beginning nor end, there used to be something or someone higher, a cosmic order where human beings occupied a place they belonged to, just besides angels, celestial bodies and the irrational beings we share the world with. This hierarchy, this order, was reflected in human society. The elderly used to be the most important in ancient world, today roles have swapped.

Taylor has called this discredit of values: the malaise of the world, because the world has already lost part of its magic (1994, p. 39).

Here it is where we find the second Malaise of Modernity, the loss of sense of the world and its rules, there is not a clear basis for my behavior because, it is the man who puts the rules, the new rules. This malaise is due to the prevalence of reason as superior to any previous order, able to judge based on reality, to determine any hierarchy in accordance with its interests. However, it seems reason was not always important for man, it was after several events in history that man put reason at the top. Luciano Floridi³ points out, in his *Four Revolutions* (2014), man has had to grasp the idea that his rationality is his most important faculty, through it, man is capable to elevate himself above all beings, therefore man dominates and configure nature for his convenience. Three relevant facts in history have marked this vision. The first one or, the first revolution as Floridi names it, was with Nicolaus Copernicus (1473–1543), he claimed the planets moved around the sun, contrary to the past beliefs about the Earth as the center of the Universe. This affirmation makes people to think about their position in the Universe because before Copernicus everybody thought the Earth was the center, so were the people. Historically, this discovery marked the general thought of the people of the Middle Age, because science showed them the minor value they had in their position as well the position of the Earth in front to other planets. We were no longer the center of the Universe but, at least, we have something else, we are humans, the highest and smart creature in Earth thanks to reason. Then, after this first revolution, humanity lost their faith in the external world and believed in their intelligence. We lost our center or maybe we had to change it. In this age, also Descartes (1596–1650), spoke about the importance of our mind to know the world and the primacy of it in front of the world. The famous phrase: "Cogito ergo sum" (I think therefore I am) original from St. Agustin but famous with Descartes, express the importance of the mind versus the world. With this theory, it happened what was called the "Copernican Revolution" in philosophy because then, the center of everything was the human mind.

The second stage or revolution was Charles Darwin's (1809–1882), with the publication of his *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favored Races in the Struggle for Life*. Here, Darwin showed how the different life species had evolved through time to become a new specie.

³Luciano Floridi is a professor of Philosophy and Ethics of Information at Oxford University, member of the Oxford Internet Institute; Fellow of St Cross College. He is a member of Google's Advisory Council which considers issues of free speech and privacy, and the right to be forgotten. He has also served as chairman of the European Commission's expert group on the impact of information and communication technologies on European society. <http://www.ox.ac.uk/news-and-events/find-an-expert/professor-luciano-floridi>. Accessed 01/04/2019.

Of course this study showed the fragility of men, after this revolution there are a lot of questions to make as, Where do we come from?, Where do we go?, Who are we really?, in this stage, we were no longer the center of the species, men was only an evolved specie. This idea changed the way we saw humanity because we were no more an advanced animal by nature, but we are only evolution species. Although, not everybody has accepted this theory until now, many people have changed the way to see themselves, because it looks like everyone in the origin are the same, animals, alive beings, and nature is in charge to define the form or essence of each being in accordance to their adaptation to the world. It is also interesting to look back to the theories that emerge in this age, one of them was the feminism, the idea that women should be allowed the same rights, power, and opportunities as men and be treated in the same way, or the set of activities intended to achieve this state. Also, Existentialism, with Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855), claims the importance of the subject in himself, his life and his individual actions. In fact, Kierkegaard criticized the universal theories versus the study for each human being because we were not a whole but an individual life with specific necessities.

All of these theories could give us an idea about the affection in man because this second revolution and the importance of our thinking in front of our nature. The reflection and the possibility to generate new ideas became the most important thing in this age.

The third revolution became with Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), for him, men have an unconscious and a conscious mind, we regularly repress feelings and thoughts, so sometimes we think we are something we are not.

We also find in Freud some ideas of Schopenhauer and, mainly, Nietzsche about the glorification of the vital thing against the rational, the concepts of libido and sublimation, etc.

What we called ours I (affirms G. Groddeck) is conducted passively in the life and that, instead of to live, "we are lived" by unknown and invincible powers. All we have undergone sometimes this sensation (Freud, Torres, & Tognola, 2006).

Thereafter, in accordance to Freud, the proper feature of man is not the rational but the irrational. His definitive being is in darkness and the unconscious-ness. His true nature consists of that deep substrate, unattainable for the reason.

The unconscious is psychic the truly real thing: its internal nature is not known to us as the reality of the outside world and it is given to us by the testimony of our consciousness as incomplete as the outside world by our sensorial organs (Freud, 1986, pp. 616-617).

That nature does not ascend to its total accomplishment through the elevation of the rational plane. The reason is, in fact, the consequence to have executed violence to or to have repressed the natural instinct. The perfection consists of maintaining the natural thing - that Freud identifies with instinctive and the unconscious, the irrational. The reflective reason does not dominate the nature, but forces and corrupts it.

So, as we can see, after this third revolution, the mind, the rationality is not as good as we thought. Because it seems that to be irrational or more animal is better than acting rationally. Then, where is the right position for the human being now? We have some choices to make, be irrational animals and let our instincts to act (and maybe we will be more humans) or act rationally, to put limits in our instincts (and then we will be less human).

Nevertheless, we have thought and this is a special condition of men and we are the only being capable of reasoning, maybe this function is not clear for us but at least we are the only animals which can have smart thinking. "Whenever a task required some intelligent thinking, we were the best by far, and could only compete with each other" (Floridi, 2014, p. 91).

These important facts, in accordance with Floridi, have forced man to elevate his rational faculty over reality, for this, man considers himself superior to everything on Earth. This has derived into what Taylor calls *The Instrumental Reason*, useful to calculate the most cost-effective solution of means to a given end. Maximum efficiency, the best cost/output ratio is its measure of success (1994, p. 40). We want everything fast, perfect and free. Everything is means to an end, and it all starts in the first stage where tools have a higher value than men. If the end is efficiency, performance, then the end is the medium and not the message. Hannah Arendt agrees to this preeminence of the means, as she affirms: "The reality and reliability of the human world rest primarily on the fact that we are surrounded by things more permanent than the activity by which they are produced" (1959, p. 83).

Finally, the third Malaise of Modernity arrives to the world based on the Instrumental Reason, for this we lose our freedom. Man desperately tries to live by society, influenced by pragmatism, utility and economy. The most important thing is not man himself, from an Aristotelian point of view with a virtuous life. New criteria arise, productivity, efficiency and pleasure even stepping on others. Taylor sustains that man has got rid of traditions; he has left his ancestors behind. Man is God by reason, he is the only to write the rules of the world, guided by subjectivism and pragmatism. Society is focused only on consumerism; importance is to have, not to be. If every man owns himself and feels capable to face any challenge through his rational faculty, it is also possible for him to establish new moral rules or avoid all of them. The only rule to follow is what Modernity commands. This is an issue Neil Postman brings out in his *Technopoly* (1933).

The Malaise of Modernity is *Technopoly*

Man has created society in accordance with his needs, these are superfluous, practical. Man wants to favor industrial development, to improve economy, to have a "better" life. Sirens of society sing strongly to allure them to relativism, consumerism, totalitarianism, hedonism and pragmatism. Postman warns about this, man has created his *Technopoly* and this has become a state of culture, which is also, a state of mind just as Postman (1933, p. 71) declares. It consists in the deification of technology, opposite to the human race, which means that the

culture seeks its authorization in technology, finds its satisfactions in technology, and takes its orders from technology. For Postman, technology is now the value's foundation, because a lot of people do what the media mandates to do. So morality reverts to a new god who comes from us, because we create technology and are enslaved by it. The development of a new device, computer, has generated unexpected changes in education "The schools teach their children to operate computerized systems instead of teaching things that are more valuable to children" (1933, p. 11). Maybe that is the reason why in 1982 the Time Magazine called the computer "Man of the Year." This was the first time the individual was put aside from the same society. The reason looks simple: the computer is the first media machine serving as a mode of production (you can make stuff), means of distribution (you can upload stuff to the network), a site of reception (you can download stuff and interact with it), and locus of praise and critique (you can talk about the stuff you have downloaded or uploaded) (Lunenfeld, 2011, p. xiii). This is what we have done.

Today, we have arrived to the limit of the media, the Artificial Intelligence the medium of the media because, we can do through this technology almost everything we want, as it name say it, it is an intelligent medium which can be "almost" like a man, it can interact with other people, look like a human being, memorize a lot of information in just seconds, analyze thousands of data, get faster results, etc. This new technology has put aside the man again placing technology in the first place. Likewise, Floridi explains we have given so much power to the technology, it is changing what we are and the way we see the world. When a new media is developed, we see the world in a different perspective. For example, before the arrival of the printing press, we paid more attention to what we saw, after it; we look more at the visual, because we are able to read. With the arrival of the computer, nowadays we can paste and cut text, search for anything that interests us in unimaginable times before the arrival of it. Reality is more accessible to us and at the same time, more distant as we will see. This stage is what Floridi calls the fourth revolution, where the computer can make intelligent statements as the human and can "liberate us" from some intellectual work. With this, he states, "We have been forced to abandon a position that we thought was unique: to use our intelligence" (Floridi, 2014, p. 93). In this case, what should the man do now? If our activities can be replaced so, which is our special condition that makes us better than other being in the world? It looks like our place in the world is to be "informational organisms" (Floridi, 2014, p. 93), because, we are connected each other consuming and producing information. Our value has to be with our place in the internet, "if we are not in the net, therefore we do not exist," "I tweet, and therefore I am." We like to share everything. As social beings, we tend to be part of communities and now they are not necessarily physical but virtual. Also,

We are increasingly delegating or outsourcing to artificial agents our memories, decisions, routine tasks, and other activities in ways that will be progressively integrated with us (Floridi, 2014, p. 94).

This is putting us aside because we are making us more dependent of the media for any activity we do. It is impressive how many times we use our media. This is the

Technopoly. Not only computer have put men aside, but also mobile devices. "A recent study by Deloitte found people in the United States check his smartphone 46 times per day in average that number varies depending on users' age group. Those between the ages of 18 and 24 look at their phones more often, with an average of 74 checks per day. Americans in the 25–34 age bracket look at their devices 50 times per day, and those between 35 and 44 do so 35 times each day" (Eadicicco, 2015). What does it mean? Our media now are more part of our nature, we are in a *Media Ecology* era where the media are exceeding human beings.

Also, technology limits and permeates everything that surrounds us, our creation has turned against us to give us its rules, which are not always ethical since, technological development often demands the sacrifice of a few by millions and the question is: where are we going? What should guide us and where? In accordance to Postman (1933, p. 13-14):

This is what Marshall McLuhan meant by his famous aphorism "The medium is the message." This is what Marx meant when he said, "Technology discloses man's mode of dealing with nature" and creates the "conditions of intercourse" by which we relate to each other. It is what Wittgenstein meant when, in referring to our most fundamental technology, he said that language is not merely a vehicle of thought but also the driver. And it is what Thamus wished the inventor Theuth to see. This is, in short, an ancient and persistent piece of wisdom, perhaps most simply expressed in the old adage that, to a man with a hammer, everything looks like a nail. Without being too literal, we may extend the truism: To a man with a pencil, everything looks like a list. To a man with a camera, everything looks like an image. To a man with a computer, everything looks like data. And to a man with a grade sheet, everything looks like a number.

Both Media and Technology is our creation, through them we express ourselves, our feelings, our arguments, our information. But they also shape us, therefore we lose freedom because we are framed by media and technology. We wanted to free ourselves through technology and it has put ourselves into a cage, a media cage.

By putting our traditions, our ancestors, our moral values aside, man configures himself before the world, but his image is not clear, it has no ends, and dangerously there is no return.

We have arrived, according to Postman, to a Technocracy, where man no longer commands, it is technology transforming what we call civilization. We have reached what Tocqueville named "the illness of work." This has alienated us and has put a false idea of progress in our minds. Technocracy gave us the idea of progress, and of necessity loosened our bonds with tradition - whether political or spiritual. Technocracy filled the air with the promise of new freedoms and new forms of social organization.

The Malaise of Modernity is what Neil Postman calls Technopoly. Here man has created media and these have taken him to lose himself, lose his freedom. You can only be free if you own yourself. This "freedom" man has found in technology is a ghost framed by moral values and ends established by technology and media. Postman has a very clear position about this. Real

freedom shows itself when man searches for his best version, strives to live by virtues, to search for the common good. To be more rational and less animal as the theory of Charles Taylor, who makes it very clear that the end of man corresponds to a virtuous life in the Aristotelian way, man must give his place to man as a priority in the world and secondly his creations, technology, progress, etc. Likewise, nature marks us with very clear rules of acting, we must "be" in the world and for the world, because somehow we have the capacity to transform what surrounds us but up to certain limits, we must not go beyond, because we are in danger of destroying not only the world but also ourselves.

If the physical world is most important, it looks like, we have lost the metaphysical references over which we have founded human order, then technology has emerged as the ground of human action. The principles that construct the basis of our behavior are subjectivism and the media that in some way affect our actions without us noticing.

Conclusion

As we continue to shape ourselves according to the tools we use, to the ideals others had and we adopted, then we really continue being attached to certain chains. However, it is not possible to separate ourselves from everything and shape ourselves from solipsism. We are social animals, and what we do is to seek the truth and good from dialogue, as Socrates did in the olden days. Little by little, with the instrumental reason's influx, we have lost the notion of who we are and where we are headed. We are inserted in a golden cage that we ourselves have built from fake ideals of a few. For Taylor, Van Leeuwen B., and Van Leeuwen F. (2003), the rejection of mediation implied the rejection of both the social hierarchy and the role of the sacred in society (namely as an external point of contact with God). Cities are places made more for machines than for individuals, every day we find ourselves with less places to talk and think peacefully. Every day there are more Malls, in which people meet, but not to chat, but to shop and so once more this prioritizes media, this means things over people, even over ourselves. We need to understand that we can only find ourselves in the gaze of the other, we can get to know each other stepping out of subjectivity that chains us under our own prejudice, so we need an objective vision of what I am, what I do, and this can only be given to me by someone like me. We can also go to bars or other places of entertainment, in which the aim is different as the one we really need, because there the aim is to prioritize the pleasure over rationality, and this is what our society prioritizes.

Technology, the media that Floridi presents us, shows us a new vision of man, where we have lost sight of our end, our route. Since modernity, we have focused on man himself but in an individualistic sense, in an egocentric sense, we seek the best for one in spite of others and this idea has reached our time in which, as we mentioned earlier, our creation, technology is the one that has the power over man. If we can develop more a technology we do it, not because it is necessary for the

good of man, necessarily, but because, we can do it. The power of man becomes an idea that marks the direction where, but at the same time, there is no clear course, there is no moral, an ethic that sees man as the center, does not seek his happiness or a life according to virtue but, the possibility of reaching everything without measure. Already Aristotle in the fourth century BC announced the difficulty of man to achieve his ultimate goal, his happiness, there are many paths to vice and one for virtue, and that path is unique, the right measure in action and passion, the one that is not exceeded, the only one that can take us towards a clear goal and according to human nature, towards happiness. Separating ourselves from this path will only lead us to follow other routes created by man himself, by his self-centeredness, towards a world of isolated and lost beings in his world.

However, not everything is lost, as human beings; we have the necessity to develop in a society, to create better conditions for our life to become better human beings. But, this task has been so difficult because we have not been able to distinguish what is better or worse, our intelligence fails us or we fail to our intelligence. We are trying to make a world with better conditions, with more accurate tools and at the same time, we are losing ourselves because we underestimate our imperfect nature to pursuit technology's perfection. This is a call to take care about what we are doing with our tools and what they are doing with us. The purpose of an ethical person is to warn people about the media and their effects in human nature because the "Medium is the Message" and it shapes and controls the scale and form of human associations and works (McLuhan, 2009, p. 32). As Marshall McLuhan (2009, p. 46) said, media shape our consciousness and experience. We are building ourselves through the media we use and we are losing our capacities when we use an extension. We have to take care about the world we live in because we are transforming our nature to a more technological humanity.

We have to say also, that the media is very useful for us, but as the myth of Teuth and Thamus says, it also brings us adverse situations. So it is our duty as rational beings to set ourselves free, but not from the world and its rules, because we are part of the world and from it we have rules. But we are limited beings enabled to choose that, which is best for us, that is, the objective good. However, we have to consider that being free means to rebuild the conditions of our own existence, when we can dominate the things that dominate us (Taylor, 1994, p. 128). We do not have to get rid of media; instead, we have to know how to use them, to achieve the aim to which they were created for. We need to have a clear vision of what we are and what we are looking for, and for that, we have to know ourselves better so; we can identify our needs to distinguish the utility of media.

We have to recover the rules we have forgotten, those which enable us to live our humanity fully. It is very important for us to be free from the golden cage in which we are imprisoned.

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