Reading Deeply and the Self -- How the Internet may Limit our Autonomy

Traditionally, human beings and tools are thought to be in a simple relationship with one another. All agency is located in the person, consequently making the human being the sole object of power which acts on its subject, the tool. As we move forward into an era of increasingly powerful digital technologies, this model has to be re-examined. Instead of a one-way relationship in which the human agent has total control as the sole actor and the tool is merely the object acted upon -- a mere means to an end which the human agent has in mind, it would be more accurate today in the face of digital technology, specifically the internet, to recognize that tools also act on their users.[1] In fact, digital technology, particularly the internet, offers potential complications into human beings' discussion and understanding of free will; even as the internet appears to open up options and capacities for individuals to exercise increased autonomy, it also has the potential to change the very ways in which human beings think, thereby impeding on human capacities for meaningful self-reflection, a necessary if not sufficient criterion for rational autonomy.

In The Wealth of Networks, Yochai Benkler has a chapter called “Individual Freedom: Autonomy, Information, and Law” in which he argues that “the emergence of the networked information economy has the potential to increase individual autonomy” (133). Benkler claims that this networked information economy presents people with more information, allowing for more informed decisions, as well as a greater raw number of possible decisions. He also writes about the transformation of people from passive consumers of media (watching T.V.) to active participants(2) (creating YouTube videos), which in itself is an augmentation of individual autonomy, he claims.

The problem with Benkler’s analysis is that it reaches too far without addressing a more fundamental aspect of autonomy first: an agent is said to be autonomous in acting if and only if the agent can be said to be, to some extent[3], “ultimately” responsible for itself. Information networks certainly increase the available capacities for individual autonomy, but more options does not necessarily mean more freedom. Benkler should have landed here in his evaluation: “Human beings who live in a material and social context that lets them aspire to such things as possible for them to do, in their own lives, by themselves and in loose affiliation with others, are human beings who have a greater realm for their agency” (139, emphasis added). It is in this “greater realm” for agency that we can see the value of the information network economy to individual autonomy. But again, having a greater realm within which to make autonomous decision does not translate to greater autonomy since individual autonomy is contingent on an agent’s ability or lack thereof to make self-caused decisions and meaningfully reflect on the motivations for such decisions.

In an article in The Atlantic, Nicholas Carr argues that the internet is fundamentally changing how our brains work and how our minds function.[4] He attempts to demonstrate that the way in which we interact with texts is evolving as use of the internet increases, which in turn affects our ways of thinking, both at a conceptual level and a biological level, and sees these shifts in our mental lives as potentially problematic. In fact, Carr’s reasoning can be taken a step further to offer a critique to Benkler’s praise of the internet’s potential for augmenting individual autonomy.

Carr argues by moving from anecdotal accounts to social and psychological theory to empirical studies and ends at essentially philosophical conclusions.[5] This is formally speaking a valid method of argumentation: start with ordinary experience[6], offer established theories with authoritative sources as possible explanations of these experiences[7], substantiate said theories with (scientifically accumulated) empirical evidence, and form a conclusion about the nature of the experience which started the chain of inquisition. What does this form of argumentation offer us, then?

First, it seems evident that “the media or other technologies we use in learning and practicing the craft of reading play an important part in shaping the neural circuits inside our brains.” Since the brain is plastic throughout most of a person’s life, according to James Olds, as a person changes the way he or she uses technology to read, his or her brain will change as well. Carr offers the historical example of Friedrich Nietzsche to supplement this point: after buying a typewriter to assist him as his eyesight began to fail, “[Nietzsche’s] already terse prose had become even tighter, more telegraphic.”

Nietzsche’s writing – the direct expression of his thinking – had been changed as his medium of writing changed.[8] This is but a particular example of Carr’s greater argument that technology[9] affects how we think. Carr demonstrates this through an image of a philosopher and a typewriter, and we see it today through most people’s interactions with the internet. Carr cites a recently published study of online research habits conducted by scholars from University College London which found that “people using [two popular research sites that provide access to journal articles, e-books, and other sources of written information] exhibited ‘a form of skimming activity,’ hopping from one source to another and rarely returning to any source they’d already visited. They typically read no more than one or two pages of an article or book before they would ‘bounce’ out to another site.” He explains these findings through the lens of a book by psychologist Maryanne Wolf: the kind of reading promoted by the internet[10] may actually predispose us to engaging in surface-level readings rather than meaningful deep readings of texts. As a result of this, our ability to interpret text[11] for ourselves – a key component of free thought and autonomous rationality – is deadened by engaging in this peculiar kind of reading.

This is where the influence of tools on human beings becomes most apparent and most frightening. This is no longer within the realm of changing “merely” how we read and write, but it begins to get at the ways in which changes in those two processes transform the very ways we think, which in turn augment or limit our ability to meaningfully engage with reality.

It is worth quoting Carr at length: “The kind of deep reading that a sequence of printed pages promotes is valuable not just for the knowledge we acquire from the author's words but for the intellectual vibrations those words set off within our own minds. In the quiet spaces opened up by the sustained, undistracted reading of a book, or by any other act of contemplation, for that matter, we make our own associations, draw our own inferences and analogies, foster our own ideas. Deep reading, as Maryanne Wolf argues, is indistinguishable from deep thinking” (emphasis added).

Deep thinking is a necessary component of true rational autonomy. According to many defenders of free will and/or moral responsibility,[12] if an agent is to be truly rationally autonomous[13] it must be able to engage in critical introspection. This is because an agent must be able to identify the source of its own actions and decisions and reflect on its own motives, changing them according to choice rather than allowing them to be formed and shaped exclusively by social, biological, psychological, or other determinative forces.[14] In order to truly and meaningfully engage in introspection, an agent must be capable of deep thinking, since such a performance requires immense reading skills due to the multitude of psychological barriers many human beings put up between their capacities for self-perception and their understandings of their inner selves in order to avoid possibly painful revelations that they are not ready to hold.[15] The internet changes how we read and thereby impedes our ability to engage in meaningful deep reading, thus hampering our ability to engage in meaningful introspection. This makes it enormously difficult to claim significant degrees of rational autonomy, and therefore difficult to claim to be deserving of “Kantian Respect.”[16]
The internet, then, offers us an opportunity to re-configure our understanding of the relationship between human beings and their tools. When we create things to use for our own purposes, these tools can and do indeed act back on us, in some cases changing the very ways we think. It is especially poignant to make this observation in the face of the development of the internet because of information technology's potential to dramatically augment or infringe on human autonomy. While views like Benkler's are certainly valid, the extent to which digital technology increases our freedom can be overestimated in the face of such tempting optimistic conclusions, and the risks involved are easily neglected.[17] While the internet may indeed open up choices and opportunities to people that were never there before, it also has the potential to degrade individuals' deep reading capacities, which is a dangerous threat to these individuals' claims to free will since deep reading is necessary for meaningful introspection which is necessary to claim rational autonomy.

[1] It is clear, as will be seen in the example of Friedrich Nietzsche, that for generations, tools of all kinds – not just contemporary digital tools – have exercised a certain kind of "agency" on the humans who use them. This paper does not argue that digital technology has re-shaped the dynamic between humans and their tools, merely that digital technology must force us to finally explicitly consider the dynamic as reciprocal due to the impacts that these technologies can have on our autonomy.

[2] Of course, Benkler does not mention cultural productions such as the numerous types of theatre, including Augsuo Boal's "Legislative Theatre" which are designed for active participation rather than passive consumption.

[3] While I have written elsewhere against Galen Strawson's argument against moral responsibility, he does correctly point out that it is impossible for any agent to be completely the cause of itself: total causa sui impossible. The form of metaphysical libertarianism implicit in this paper, however, acknowledges this and only seeks partial self-causation as a justification for autonomy.

[4] Throughout this paper is an implied assumption of mind-body dualism as opposed to mind-body identity, and so the words "mind" and "brain" are not always necessarily interchangeable. There is not sufficient space here to fully explain how the thesis that technology changes the brain which changes thinking is compatible with the kind of substance dualism which the argument implicitly assumes, so it must be left at a simple acknowledgement that while the mind is considered non-physical here, it is still inextricably linked to the brain insofar as the physical structures of the human brain set the parameters which determine the capacities of a given mind. This just happens to be how the human organism and should therefore be understood as a functionalist-like relationship, not an identity-like relationship.

[5] Though his presentation does not always follow the order of his argument.

[6] Which is the starting point of many philosophers, most famously Socrates in Plato's dialogues.

[7] A step which is always prone to the fallacy of simply seeing what you want to see, as evident by the over-extension of the limited explanatory power of the theory of evolution by scientists who wish to get in on discussions of moral philosophy and ethical theory.

[8] Of course, it is possible that his writing changed because of age or poor eyesight, or any number of things. There is not a direct, discernable, provable causal relation between Nietzsche's use of a typewriter and his stylistic change in his writing, but Carr sights theory from Marshall McLuhan and Maryanne Wolf which serve to buster his inferential leap, thus why the example receives credence here.

[9] And not just digital technology! Cf. 1

[10] Carr cites Wolf as describing this kind of reading as "a style that puts 'efficiency' and 'immediacy' above all else."

[11] The pervasiveness of the paranoia of some who make claims such as this is more evident when one interprets the word "text" literally to mean anything which can be "read" or interpreted as having meaning, such as a book, poem, movie, person, etc.

[12] See Carlo Filice's account of "reflective dynamism" in "On the Autonomy of the Divine" or his account of intrinsic motives in "Libertarian Autonomy and Intrinsic Motives." Also, see Michael Smith's account of "reflective equilibrium" in "A Defense of Moral Realism."

[13] And therefore deserving of "Kantian respect" as a being which must always be treated as an ends in itself and never merely as a means!

[14] Many of the staunchest metaphysical libertarians will concede that complete autonomy is impossible, but will maintain that a significant partial autonomy is still meaningful and worthy of respect.

[15] I have written elsewhere about ways in which such psychological defense mechanisms such as stereotyping and performances of surrogation can be understood to be analogous to insurance policies. Basically, people don't want to learn unfavorable stories about themselves, so simplified narratives (stereotyping) and substitutions (surrogates) offer powerful buffers between a person and potentially psychologically painful accounts of his or her own self and/or the culture and/or society in which he or she lives. As a literary example, consider Shakespeare's Othello. He has one story of what Desdemona is – a faithful lover. Once the seed of a potentially painful counter-narrative is planted in his head by Iago, he literally becomes a violent agent of destruction, ultimately killing himself in the face of the realization of his own erroneous judgments.

[16] Cf. 9

[17] Since the argument presented here relies on a particularly obscure movement of logic if one is not "in the conversation" of free will and determinism among professional philosophers.