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Ricœur and the Philosophy of Technology

It would be a mistake to think that technology is limited in Ricœur's thinking to merely occasional references. A first complex of train of thought on technology in his work is his reflection on the system of human-made artefacts and associated modes of usage, and often specifically as it developed in modernity. A second theme is the ethical response to challenges and problems generated by technological progress. Finally, technology is more or less directly thematized whenever Ricœur explores different dimensions of human capability.

This broad view on Ricœur's philosophy of technology enables us in some measure to understand the rapidly expanding reception of Ricœur's philosophy in a range of technology-related fields of enquiry. His own thought on technology serves as one point of access, but not the only one, through which aspects of his work are received in these fields. In the last part of this article, I give an overview of various aspects of this varied reception.

1. Technology, Modernity, Cultural Plurality

Ricœur's views on modernity and his ways of approaching (or side-stepping) it in his thought are quite complex. During the early post-World War II years, Ricœur developed his initial perspective on a loosely defined contemporary era (rather than a neatly defined modernity).¹ It is within this framework that one has to approach Ricœur's first inroads into the philosophy of technology.

1.1 Technology as Part of Human Culture

The question of technology appears in "Christianity and the Meaning of History" (1951),² as part of a very generally constructed reflection on the meaning of history, which Ricœur examines as consisting of three layers: progress, ambiguity and hope. The idea of progress, which Ricœur defines as the "accumulation of acquirements [*l'accumulation d'un acquis*]" (93/81³), refers to the level at which one has to consider the history of "tools" [*outils*], in as far as it can be analytically *abstracted* from human action and thought.

Accumulation allows for progress in tools and in their usage (in other words, labour in the widest sense), but also in knowledge and know-how. Moreover, accumulation allows for a sedimentation of technology which transcends individual human beings' activities and lives. Writing and the printing of texts epitomises this point. But sedimentation has a further temporal dimension: it is irreversible (cf. 95/82).

This brings Ricœur to a curious conclusion: the consequence of accumulation and irreversible technical progress is that humanity, understood as single

¹ Cf. Ernst Wolff, *Lire Ricœur depuis la périphérie* (under review), Chapter 4, §4.1b. In the subsequent discussion I draw from this longer discussion.

² Paul Ricœur, "Le christianisme et le sens de l'histoire", in: *Histoire et vérité* (Paris: Seuil, 1964), 93–112 / "Christianity and the Meaning of History", in: *History and Truth*, transl. Charles A. Kelbley (Evanston, IL: Northwestern U.P., 1965), 81–97. On this point see already Bernard Dauenhauer, *Paul Ricœur: The Promise and Risk of Politics* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998), 30–32.

³ *Note*: where two page numbers are separated by a backslash, the first refers to the French version, the second to the English translation.

entity, is the ultimate recipient of whatever is thus transmitted. Surprisingly, Ricœur claims that this trend applies also to mental techniques (such as calculation and science) and spiritual techniques. This means that all cultural particularities of technological inventions belong to a specific group or culture only in a provisional way; in principle, cumulatively and in the long run, “tools”, or technology as a whole, belongs to humanity as a whole.

It is only when the abstraction is lifted and technology’s *embeddedness* in human interaction is reconsidered that one witnesses again the drama of decisions and crises, of growth and decay (cf. 94/84). Different people and different groups can be distinguished from one another by the ways in which they face history and the ways in which they let ethical demands and solutions weigh on their appropriation and use of technology. Hence, technology can never be separated from valuation (cf. 101/87–88). Big historical tendencies in this respect allow us to identify civilisations, each with its own history of values and challenges, its own rise and fall – in any case, we are never looking simply at a history of progress, but have to consider complex processes of emergence, maintenance, invention and decay. On the level of human interaction, technology is inseparable from the human history of power, in other words, of politics. Where value infuses the invention, use and progress of technology, something is at risk: human survival, human flourishing and harm to others. Ricœur identifies this as the risk of guilt [*culpabilité*] (cf. 105/91). On the whole, whereas technology in abstraction from action forms a history of progress, its integration in human action and evaluation reveals it as fundamentally ambiguous (cf. 107/92 and see §1.2 below).

Subsequently, Ricœur redeploys and revises this view on technology in “Universal Civilization and National Cultures” (1960/1961).⁴ Here, Ricœur spells out the ambiguity of technological developments. On the positive side, there is the spread of better material conditions for survival (food, safety, medical treatment), mass education and the means to protect human dignity (which is not to claim that everything has already been realized!). On the negative side, there is the destruction of traditional cultures, the undermin-

⁴ Paul Ricœur, “Civilisation universelle et cultures nationales” [1960/1961], in: *Histoire et vérité*, 322–338 / “Universal Civilization and National Cultures”, in: *History and Truth*, 271–284.

ing of the normative core of these cultures – aside from all the well-known forms of abusive applications of new means for exploitation and oppression. The threat to inherited cultural traditions is also a threat to the human evaluative ability in technological matters and beyond.

But one could also approach the question of the relation between technology and valuation from the angle of political intervention (already mentioned above). This is what Ricœur does in “The Tasks of the Political Educator” (1965),⁵ where he identifies three domains of the effectiveness of education, corresponding with three levels of analysis of “civilization”, namely industries [*outillages*], institutions, and values (242/272). Ricœur understands under “outillages” what he refers to as “a very vast aspect of civilization which goes beyond the level of tools [*outils*], machines, and even of techniques [*la technique*]” (242/272). Similar characteristics are attributed to the term as in the 1951 article: accumulation, conservation, innovation and acquisition (in principle) by the whole of humanity. The effect of accumulation ripples out into all forms of knowledge and the sciences, because it is captured in documents, monuments, libraries, etc. Finally, the increasing stretch and reach of technological relations have a unifying effect on humanity, and this increasingly results in an awareness among the people of the earth that they belong to a single humanity.

However, as in the earlier discussion, this view on technology remains an abstraction. In reality, people appropriate technology through institutions and are guided by values in doing so (cf. 243–244/274–275). The analytical abstraction of technology from institutional life underscores the fact that, as dependent as politics may be on technology, it can never simply be reduced to technology or even to the economy that stimulates technological productivity (cf. 245/276–277). In addition, the real temporality of technology is not that of progress, but of ambiguity. Hence, according to Ricœur, technology experiences no real crisis: new inventions or new technical problems become crises only in so far as they are integrated in the institutional life of people (cf. 246/278).

⁵ Paul Ricœur, “Tâches de l'éducateur politique”, *Lectures 1*, 241–257 / “The Tasks of the Political Educator”, in: *Political and Social Essays*, ed. David Steward and Joseph Bien (Athens: Ohio U.P., 1974), 271–293.

Of course, this institutional life is in turn informed by values, or rather by common acts of valuation (which is Ricœur's third level of analysis of "civilization"). Values, now firmly defined as forms of practice, represent the most specific detail of people's action in history: Ricœur argues that "it is the industry [*ouillage*] which is abstract and value which is concrete" (247/279). Knowing how to use other people's physical power against their will is a technology; abolishing slavery is a historically concrete way of discarding that technology. Hence, this mediation, which started with technology, opens up the whole hermeneutics of symbols and traditions (by which valuation is exercised) on which Ricœur worked in the same period.⁶

Finally, Ricœur claims that there is no totalizing vision of the three levels of analysis of civilization. There remains a lasting tension between the three levels of analysis, which in turn intensifies the questions about the tasks of political educators. For if in modernity, more than ever before, the development of technology is subject to planning, this means that the need for collective decision-making about such developments is also increased (cf. 250–251/283–284). Political education in the broadest sense should equip the citizenry to participate responsibly in such collective decision-making. Ricœur is ultimately concerned with the increased democratization of decision-making in the economy, and thereby also the development and use of technology. Collective responsibility must assume that there is a tension between two ethics – one dominated by realism about the means to be used and the uncertainty of some outcomes, the other dominated by context-independent principles. Understanding responsibility as the prudent arbitration in practice between these two moments is a consistent aspect of Ricœur's view of responsibility (see below, §2) and it is derived, amongst others, from Max Weber.⁷ For each context, the appropriate midway between moralism and cynical realism has to be sought.

To summarize, Ricœur's point is not the theorization of technology for itself, but a recognition that it is an indispensable part of affirming the unity of humanity, the irreducibility of politics and the significance of valuation.

⁶ Cf. Wolff, *Lire Ricœur depuis la périphérie* (under review), Chapter 5.

⁷ Cf. Paul Ricœur, "Éthique et politique" [1959], and Ernst Wolff, "The place of Max Weber in Ricœur's philosophy. Power, ideology, explanation", *Journal for French and Francophone Philosophy* 28, 2 (2020).

1.2 The Ambiguity of Technology

The contradictory possibilities opened up by new technologies are thematized in “The Adventure of Technology and Its Planetary Horizon” (1958),⁸ a rare essay exclusively devoted to technology. In the face of nuclear (and other) destructive power, people ask themselves: “What happens to humanity – and to the meaning of humanity – when it acquires such power? To what extent does humanity change itself by changing its power over things?” (67). Instead of siding with military realism or a moralist rejection of modern (military) technology, Ricœur insists on the ambiguity of modern technological development, situating it within the longer history of humanity.

It is only with the industrial revolution that technology became a core aspect of how people define themselves and interpret their destiny. Only now does technology touch on “the ‘sacred’ of the human – its essential, its necessary, its primordial”⁹ and does a “technological civilization” emerge. The essay explores three dimensions of this turn: work, consumption, and self-understanding.

First, the domain of work has seen numerous changes: generally, technology has brought gradual relief regarding the arduousness and danger of work, the fragmentation of traditional arts into small, repetitive jobs with a negative impact on the experience of work as meaningful and the labourer’s self-image. But changing technologies also led to the emergence of new forms of work, ranging from the maintenance of machines to administrative services. Whereas the steadily increasing technological capabilities change people’s general view of their place in the universe, their working conditions are determined by very mundane interactions.

Second, Ricœur considers the general improvement in people’s living conditions, as far as nutrition and medical treatment, housing and basic education, etc. are concerned. At the same time, this improvement is the flip side of increasing dependency on “machines”, i.e. industrial productivity, which henceforth reshapes people’s transport and housing, household chores, transmission of culture, etc. (cf. 71). And at this point, the ambiguity of technology

⁸ Paul Ricœur, “L’aventure technique et son horizon planétaire”, my translation.

⁹ Ibidem, 68, my translation.

has an impact on people as consumers (in the largest sense of the word): widespread accessibility, coupled with a lowering of standards which Ricœur discerns in mass culture.

Third, before the industrial revolution, work was often considered unfree, in contrast to speech, be that in the service of contemplation or of political praxis. Now, thanks to new means of action, work, and more specifically the struggle with nature, has become part of human nature, a means to pursue freedom, a conquest.

Although technology has given an unparalleled impetus to globalization and the unification of humanity, this process is far from complete – it will be completed only when (and if ever) there will be one humanity with one politics and even one culture (cf. 74). Even the view, or rather the significance, of the heavens has changed: “Heaven is becoming a domain of action, an object of covetousness, domination, possession.” (75) And thus, once again, one sees how Ricœur’s meditation on technology opens up the question of meaning and nihilism which informed his early hermeneutics. But this meditation on the new powers of technology also has a geopolitical dimension: Ricœur denounces the fact that space technology had little to do with service to people and much more with propaganda and the strategies of the two big geopolitical blocs of the world at that time. Indeed, the budget spent on the fantastic projects each time deprives the destitute of the earth of an equal amount of support.

1.3 Technology, Work and the Politics of a Labour Society

Work is a recurrent theme of Ricœur’s early post-World War II practical philosophy and political thought. Since this theme is closely related to that of technology, I review a representative text in this respect: “Work and the Word” of 1953.¹⁰

¹⁰ Ricœur, “Travail et parole” [1953], in *Histoire et vérité*, 238–264 / “Work and the Word”, in: *History and Truth*, 197–222. Cf. François Dosse, *Paul Ricœur. Les sens d’une vie (1913–2005)*. Edition revue et augmentée (Paris: La Découverte, 2008), 171. I have submitted this issue to detailed study in Wolff, *Lire Ricœur depuis la périphérie* (under review), Chapter 5, §2.

Ricœur is concerned that the social specificities of work will get lost in an overly general deployment of the term “work” and also that the centrality of work will lead to neglect of that which cannot be reduced to work itself. Consequently, he attempts to undermine an understanding of work that excludes the spheres of activity of speech and prefers to integrate them into a dialectic of work and word (cf. 238–239/197–198). I would like to focus on the context-specific socio-political diagnosis that Ricœur offers here.

He notes a number of contemporary tendencies in the relations between work and the word. A first tendency is the worker’s alienation¹¹ from his/her wage-paying labour and the humiliation and under-evaluation of manual labour (cf. 253–254/210–211). A second tendency is introduced by the technological form of work: there has been a fragmentation of the arts, but also of office work and science (hence Ricœur’s reluctance to celebrate the self-realizing potential of work, cf. 255–256/212–213) and consequently attempts to compensate for the loss of meaning in work through leisure and consumption. Thus culture (in the broadest sense) and work both experience difficulty in adapting to technological modernity. At the same time, culture contains the possibility of non-adaptation to dehumanization, openness to the future and the quest for a realistic trade-off between the new conditions and the aspiration for more humane alternatives, a quest which is firmly rooted in the task of education (cf. 257/213–214).

Next, Ricœur insists on the political participation by which people can and should be allowed to help steer the technical environment in which they work. However, he advocates a decentralized model of participation (instead of a socialist centralist model). But the “democracy of work” would have to spiral out and also have an impact on the management of the working environment and industries. Furthermore, a civilization of work has to be an economy of work, which implies that a fair redistribution of wealth and a policy of full employment should be pursued. Finally, Ricœur’s wide vision of the requirements for a fair labour society also has implications for culture – not ideological management of culture in the form of a naïve

¹¹ Elsewhere Ricœur develops his view on alienation and objectification, cf. Paul Ricœur, “Aliénation”, *Encyclopaedia Universalis I* (Paris: Encyclopaedia Universalis France, 1968), 660–664 and Ricœur, “Objectivation et aliénation dans l’expérience historique”, *Archivio di filosofia* 45, 2–3 (1975): 27–38.

celebration of industrial work, but a creative critique of labour practices and poetic reflection on solidarity between people (cf. 259–260/215–216).

Finally, language has a set of roles to play in the context of work. First, the range of linguistic functions can act as a corrective to the division and fragmentation of work. It can express frustration, open this division to a plurality of views, give access to a total view on an industry's activity and even serve as distraction. Articulation is the first step to political mobilization. Second, Ricœur thinks that forms of speech can serve as a (partial) compensation for difficult experiences at work through leisure. Third, all innovation in technology, and thus, the invention of new forms of work, passes through the practice of theory, specifically in the form of the sciences. Finally, Ricœur counts on the creative function of language to contribute to the discovery and invention of meaning, which will always be needed in all forms of work.

Hence, one gets an impression of the interrelation of two major families of human ability – work and the word, neither of which suffices on its own as a form of the pursuit of human well-being.

1.4 Urbanisation

Finally, two further traits of the modern world are dealt with, in combination, in an aptly titled article “Urbanisation and Secularization”.¹² I consider it here only in as far as it completes Ricœur's view on modern technology.¹³

The four main traits of city life that drew Ricœur's attention can be understood only if one considers the city as a technical construct. First, a city has to be understood as a colossal instrument for connecting people and enabling communication between them. The city multiplies the number of such links between people and augments the possibilities of exchange over longer distances and with greater frequency. Consequently, many exchanges are more

¹² Paul Ricœur, “Urbanisation et sécularisation [1967], republished in *Autres Temps. Cahiers d'éthique sociale et politique* 76–77 (2003): 113–126 / “Urbanisation and secularisation”, in: *Political and Social Essays*, eds. David Steward and Joseph Bien (Athens: Ohio U.P., 1974), 176–197.

¹³ I will not discuss the theological implications discerned by Ricœur, nor the way he borrows (extensively) from Harvey Cox, *The Secular City: Secularization and Urbanization in Theological Perspective* (Princeton: Princeton U.P., [1965] 2013), Chapter 2.

abstract or anonymous, requiring a renegotiation of the public-private relation. Also, the sheer mass of information implies intensification of the decisions to be made.

Second, the city is a place of multiple and accelerated mobility and “internal migration”, which can be seen in the act of commuting. The movement between a person’s home and workplace corresponds with a more marked differentiation of people’s social roles and, in turn, with the impact of psychological stress or opportunities. This requires tolerance and adaptability.

Third, the city is a place of concentrated technology and organization, a technopolis, as Cox called it. It concentrates health systems, bureaucracies, commerce, etc.¹⁴

Fourth, the city is also an image to people of what a “city” really is. Such images range from the religious construct of the “City of God” to the political “polis”. In recent history, the changing material city has changed people’s view of themselves as urbanites. Now the city becomes an image of modernity, of energy and initiative.

Whereas the city opens many opportunities and freedoms, it is also a space of specific suffering. Each of the four points of urbanization corresponds to a number of urban pathologies. Anonymity, traffic congestion and information saturation all figure among the pathologies corresponding to the first point above. Being uprooted, a multiplication of conflict and the degeneration of inner cities correspond to the feature of mobility. Between under-administration and over-bureaucratisation, the concentration or organization is also subject to pathologies. Even the view of the city can succumb to pathologies: directedness at a vague, distant future, which may lead it to be experienced as a locality dominated by a senseless technological logic.

And thus, the city too reflects that essential characteristic of all modern technological developments: their two-sidedness, their ambiguity.

¹⁴ This point is taken up, albeit only briefly, as late as *Le juste* 1 (Paris: Esprit, 1995), 36 / *The Just*, transl. David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 6–7 and *Parcours de la reconnaissance* (Paris: Gallimard, 2004), 318 / *The Course of Recognition*, transl. David Pellauer (Cambridge: Harvard U.P., 2005), 204.

2. Ethics With and Among Changing Technological Means

In Ricoeur's work, philosophical reflection on the ethics of technology is concentrated in his later texts, and is focused mostly on dilemmas in the bio-medical professions. Yet the link between ethics and technology in Ricoeur's work is quite old, as I will now first demonstrate.

2.1 Responsibility Requires Efficacy

Initially, this link emerges in Ricoeur's political thought in relation to the question of the *efficacy* of one's ethical stance. A first example of this point is Ricoeur's reflection on Gandhi's anti-colonial politics in the 1947 article "Non-violent Man and his Presence in History". Ricoeur attributes the efficacy Gandhi's movement to the fact that it is a good combination of a "technology [*technique*]" and a "spirituality",¹⁵ in other words, of operative strategy and a legitimate normative stance. A second example is found a decade later in the first formulation Ricoeur gave of "The Political Paradox". People aspire to relations of political self-realization, but can ultimately achieve this only through a state. But the state, understood as the ultimate instrument of power (following Weber), can instead of realizing the will of the people, turn against people. Whence the need "to devise institutional *techniques* [*techniques*] especially designed to render possible the exercise of power and render its abuse impossible".¹⁶ Thus, Ricoeur refers to technology in many of his political essays, but on a more profound level, the question of technologies of action emerges from reflection on ethico-political efficacy.

Furthermore, these two briefly presented cases¹⁷ contain, in outline, the structure of Ricoeur's later understanding of responsibility as a practical choice between two opposing ethical claims. This is best seen in the way Ricoeur explains responsibility in the ethical chapters of *Oneself as Another*.

¹⁵ Ricoeur, *Histoire et vérité*, 273 / *History and Truth*, 230.

¹⁶ Ricoeur, *Histoire et vérité*, 311, similarly 314–315 / *History and Truth*, 261–262, similarly 264–265.

¹⁷ I have studied them in more detail elsewhere – see Ernst Wolff, *Between daily routine and violent protest* (forthcoming 2021), Introduction, §3.

Any responsible or practically wise action is here presented as the outcome of a difficult, *prudent* trade-off between two equally valid, but contradictory claims: the *ethical* claim of pursuing the good life with and for others in just institutions, and the *moral* claim which seeks to filter out all non-universalizable principles of action. Hence Ricœur's view of responsibility is also constructed on the tension between points of view that may be held simultaneously when one considers them *theoretically*, but calls for final arbitration *in practice*.¹⁸

2.2 New Technological Conditions, New Ethics?

From the perspective of this broad understanding of ethics, changes in the technological environment do not alter the essential structure of responsibility, but rather change the specific ways in which people may want to strive for the good life, the series of new practical possibilities which they may want to prohibit from the point of view of a moral principle, and the kinds of trade-off that may be relevant in practice. All of these changes are represented in the Preface Ricœur wrote for Frédéric Lenoir's volume *Le temps de la responsabilité*.¹⁹ Here, technological changes are seen as inducing a shift in what it means for people to act. These changes are played out in six domains: the life sciences, the environment, economics, industry and development, the media and communication, and politics – for all of which Ricœur catalogues salient aspects and the concomitant dilemmas as they appear in this book.²⁰ Moreover, Ricœur observes that the catalogued dilemmas can be approached either through an appeal to stable commonly held convictions from the normative tradition, or through new forms of ethics, of which responsibility would be an example (cf. 282).

In *Oneself as Another*, Ricœur clarifies his understanding of responsibility with reference to a set of exemplary ethical dilemmas in bio-medical ethics (cf. 313–318/269–273). Ricœur's aim is, however, rather to suggest a general

¹⁸ For a discussion of the conflictual constitution of responsibility in Ricœur, see Wolff, *Between daily routine and violent protest* (forthcoming 2021), Chapter 8, §1.

¹⁹ Reprinted as Paul Ricœur, "Postface au Temps de la responsabilité" [1991], in: *Lectures 1*, 271–294.

²⁰ The discussion derives from Lenoir's systematization and spans *Lectures 1*, 272–278.

approach to such dilemmas than to make a contribution to specific points of debate.

Let us summarize the main points of this approach. First, one should have a sound understanding of the dilemma *as* a dilemma. One's most intimate convictions and professional ethics may inform one's interpretation of these dilemmas. Second, a good technical and scientific grasp of the problem at hand is required. In both points, the contradictions (between different ethical claims and between different expert opinions) are an integral part of ethical decision-making. Finally, it is more prudent to come to a collective decision than to rely on the judgement of a single individual.²¹

This interest in bio-medical issues is taken up again in the "exercises" in practical philosophy, indeed, in practical wisdom in *Reflections on the Just*.²²

A last point to observe is that the general way in which Ricœur approaches dilemmas in bio-medical ethics could be redeployed in any other field of human action, in any technological context.

3. Capabilities

In the first two sections of this exposition, I have mostly spoken about technology in the way it is most often used in everyday parlance, namely as the evolving set of artefacts and procedures. A third point of this exploration of technology in Ricœur takes us to the idea of "technology" as an aspect of human abilities to act. I highlight only a few important moments from this decades-long development.

²¹ Ricœur, *Soi-même comme un autre*, 318 / *Oneself as Another*, 273, and Paul Ricœur, *Le juste 2* (Paris: Esprit, 2001), 252–253 / *Reflections on the just*, transl. David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 219–220.

²² Ricœur, *Le juste 2*, 40–46, 215–256 and 289–297 / *Reflections on the just*, 31–36, 187–197 and 249–256, but also Ricœur, "Préface à Médecins tortionnaires, Médecins résistants", in: *Lectures 1*, 399–404.

Let us go to the heart of Ricœur's understanding of action, as he elaborates on it in the first volume of his *Philosophy of the Will*.²³ Every action has to be understood by means of a complement (the *pragma*) (263–264/209–210). Different *pragmata* can be identified: to be distinguished, to be used, to be manipulated, each time directing the inceptive action to that which is to be done:

This eminently technical character of the human milieu and of human action depends, as we know, on the fact that humans *work* with tools to produce the “artificial” objects of their civilizational needs and even of their vital needs. This is why humans' action is typically “artificial”: it is *techné*, mother of arts and techniques. (266/211–212, translation modified)

This means that the whole of human action directedness at fields of practice is shaped by the technical environment and the corresponding technical formation of the agent.

A number of consequences can be derived from this point. First, the body of the agent is a shaped “organ” through which action is realized, indeed, the body and the tool may even become a single practical unit. But Ricœur insists rather on the ambiguity in the chain of action: will-organ-tool-work – an ambiguity which consists in the fact that the chain lends itself to a phenomenology of the will (seen from the start) or a study in physics (seen from the end) (cf. 268/213).

But, to act, the body must be fed. Feeding inserts the human organism into a natural environment whence technological processes also draw their energy (cf. 119/87). The same body also has inborn instincts to defend or attack, but, lends itself to increasing “artificialization”, which is part of the wider acquisition of bodily techniques (*techniques du corps*). Thus emerge the automatisms of action (cf. 380/302), which are clearly instantiated in some actions performed by a good sportsperson, artisan or worker. A derivative of automatisms is machine-like actions which, formerly acquired and mastered, are somewhat of a misfit with a new context of action (cf. 383/304).

²³ Paul Ricœur, *Philosophie de la volonté 1. Le volontaire et l'involontaire* (Paris: Point, [1950] 2009) / *Freedom and Nature: The Voluntary and the Involuntary*, transl. Erazim Kohák (Evanston: Northwestern UP, [1966] 1979).

Ricœur deepened this understanding of the technical dimension of action when he passed from a pure phenomenology of the will to an exploration of human fallibility in the second volume of his *Philosophy of the Will* (1960)²⁴. Nothing is as revealing of the conflictual nature of human fallibility than the three kinds of feeling (“sentiment”, *thumos*, 153/106) involved in inter-human relations: the desire for possession, for domination and for worth (cf. 158/111). Each of these leads to a positive quest, but risks being distorted into a perverted pursuit. Each of these quests and pursuits is in turn realized in a different part of social life: economics, politics and culture, by which relations between people are mediated by object systems (160–161/113). Strictly speaking, possession, domination and worth all three apply to human technical ability and to the human relation to technology. But I single out domination for closer scrutiny, since Ricœur touches directly on technology here (cf. 164–169/116–120).

The quest for domination is rooted in the human desire to exercise power, which is ingrained in action as such. Working is a first way by which people exercise their power over things, and labour relations is a form of the exercise of power over other human beings. Already this simple observation opens up a wide view on technological realities: from the energy of human labour and the natural resources on and with which people work, to the organization of labour and the pursuit of efficiency. The latter point also indicates the intersection of the economic sphere with that of labour, in the form of management.²⁵ Labour relations are maintainable as power relations, because they are instituted, which makes them dependent on another kind of power relation, namely that of politics (cf. 166/118). Ultimately, political power cannot be reduced to the availability of the powerful instruments of the state, but it does require the use of the mechanisms of the state.²⁶ What needs to be highlighted here is how Ricœur integrates, in principle, the whole breadth of technological artefacts and systems in an encompassing view of human

²⁴ Paul Ricœur, “L’homme faillible”, in: *Philosophie de la volonté 2. Finitude et culpabilité* (Paris: Edition Points, [1960] 2009) / *Fallible Man*, transl. Charles A. Kelbley (New York: Fordham U.P., 1986).

²⁵ I have already touched on this point above in relation to Ricœur’s “Travail et parole” / “Work and the Word”.

²⁶ Just as Ricœur argued in “The Political Paradox” – see §2.1, above.

action, from the most intimate affects, through mediated interaction, to the largest political scale.

Ricœur himself gives an example of developing some of his hermeneutic insights for technology, when in “Architecture and Narrativity”²⁷ he takes up central tenets of his *Time and Narrative 3* and argues for a strong parallel between architecture and narration. In *Oneself as Another* (1990), technology does not feature as a major theme. However, it is worthwhile to consider the ways in which this hermeneutics of human capabilities – and hence most of Ricœur’s philosophy up to *The Course of Recognition* (2004) – constantly presupposed the technical constitution of action and the exercise of action in a technical milieu. Thus, each category of action has a technical dimension.²⁸

4. Reception in Philosophy and Ethics of Technology

I have now given an overview of the theme of technology in Ricœur’s work. In recent Ricœur scholarship, there has been a steady increase in interest in the potential Ricœur’s thought for thinking through technology-related problems.

The first explorations of Ricœur and technology approached this relation from a very broad perspective. David Kaplan²⁹ offers an overview of technology in Ricœur’s oeuvre which he embeds in his own reconstruction of Ricœur’s “critical theory” to offer a view on the contributions that Ricœur’s work and the philosophy of technology can have for each other. From a more

²⁷ Paul Ricœur, “Architecture et narrativité”, *Études Ricœuriennes / Ricœur Studies* 7, 2 (2016): 20–30 / “Architecture and Narrativity”, *Études Ricœuriennes / Ricœur Studies* 7, 2 (2016): 31–42.

²⁸ This claim is developed in Wolff, *Between daily routine and violent protest* (forthcoming 2021), Chapters 3 and 4.

²⁹ David Kaplan, *Ricœur’s Critical Theory* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2003), 164–173, and “Paul Ricœur and the Philosophy of Technology”, *Journal of French Philosophy* 16, 1/2 (2006): 42–56.

interdisciplinary perspective, Ernst Wolff³⁰ examines the possibility of deploying Ricœur's textual and narrative hermeneutics to clarify the relation between human agents and technology in general. Quite different is David Lewin's³¹ attempt to demonstrate that Ricœur contributes to the question of the nexus of technology and being (in the sense of Heidegger's later philosophy).

A new line of enquiry is the deployment of Ricœur's hermeneutics in the domain of information technology. Jos de Mul³² has already argued for an extension of Ricœur's understanding of narrative identity in the face of the massive social changes in the use of new media. Much impetus to this new enquiry has subsequently been given by Alberto Romele.³³ He explores the interpretive value of Ricœur's narrative hermeneutics for processes of identity formation in the use of social networking sites and he examines the ethical and juridical implications of digital traceability and the right to be forgotten.³⁴ Elsewhere, Romele argues that emerging media technologies are characterized by new forms of imagination, drawing on Ricœur's understanding

³⁰ Ernst Wolff, "Transmettre et interpréter", *Médium* 6 (2006): 30–47, expanded in "Mediologie en hermeneutiek", *Tydskrif vir Geesteswetenskappe* 47, 1 (2007), 81–94, and "Habitus – Means – Worldliness. Technics and the Formation of 'Civilisations'", in: *Shaping a Humane World – Civilizations, Axial Times, Modernities, Humanisms*, eds. Oliver Kozlarek, Jörn Rüsen and Ernst Wolff (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2012), 25–53.

³¹ David Lewin, "Ricœur and the Capability of Modern Technology", in: *From Ricœur to Action. The Socio-political Significance of Ricœur's Thinking*, eds. Todd S. Mei and David Lewin (London and New York: Continuum, 2012), 54–71.

³² Jos de Mul, "Von der narrativen zur hypermedialen Identität. Dilthey und Ricœur gelesen im hypermedialen Zeitalter", in: *Dilthey und die hermeneutische Wende in der Philosophie. Wirkungsgeschichtliche Aspekte seines Werkes*, eds. Frithjof Rodi and Gudrun Bertam-Kuhne (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008), 313–331.

³³ Alberto Romele, "Narrative Identity and Social Networking Sites", *Études Ricœuriennes / Ricœur Studies* 4, 2 (2013): 108–122, Alberto Romele, "Digital Traceability and the Right to be Forgotten: Ricœurian Perspectives", *Tropos. Journal of Hermeneutics and Philosophical Criticism* 8, 2 (2015): 105–118, and Alberto Romele, "Imaginative Machines", *Techné: Research in Philosophy and Technology* 22, 1 (2018): 98–125.

³⁴ See also Alberto Romele and Marta Severo's study applied to the Ricœur reception "From Philosopher to Network. Using Digital Traces for Understanding Paul Ricœur's Legacy", *Azimuth* 4, 7 (2016): 113–128.

of productive imagination through narrative mimesis.³⁵ Marck Coeckelberg and Wessel Reijers³⁶ argue for the “narrative capacity” of technology in general, and specifically how technology mediates of language and people’s self-understanding. Ricœur’s narrative hermeneutics plays a key role in this study. The same authors also advanced an interpretation of block chain technologies, in particular of cryptocurrencies. Johan Fornäs³⁷ also draws insights from *Time and Narrative*, but develops insights on “third-time” technologies which mediate the lived experience of time and objective time in historically and culturally specific ways.

Again drawing on Ricœur’s philosophy or narrative, a couple of authors³⁸ have worked on the heuristics and simulation of the possible future impact of technological inventions and interventions.

A whole series of studies follow directly from Ricœur’s own writings on bio-medical ethics.³⁹ They demonstrate the value of Ricœur’s understanding of ethics and responsibility in a sensitive and changing technological milieu.

³⁵ Alberto Romele, “From Registration to Emagination”, in: *Towards a Philosophy of Digital Media*, eds. Alberto Romele and Enrico Terrone (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 257–273. Since Romele’s essay publications were followed by a recent monograph (see below), I will not cite all of them here.

³⁶ Mark Coeckelberg and Wessel Reijers, “Narrative Technologies. A Philosophical Investigation of the Narrative Capacities of Technologies by Using Ricœur’s Narrative Theory”, *Human Studies* 39, 3 (2016): 325–46, and Wessel Reijers and Mark Coeckelbergh, “The Blockchain as a Narrative Technology: Investigating the Social Ontology and Normative Configurations of Cryptocurrency”, *Philosophy & Technology* 31, 1 (2016): 103–130.

³⁷ Johan Fornäs, “The Mediatization of Third-Time Tools: Culturalizing and Historicizing Temporality”, *International Journal of Communication* 10 (2016): 5213–5232.

³⁸ E.g. Montagu Murray and Ernst Wolff, “A Hermeneutic Framework for Responsible Technical Interventions in Low-income Households – Mobile Phones for Improved Managed Health Care as Test Case”, *Journal for Transdisciplinary Research in Southern Africa* 11, 3 (2015): 171–185, and Bruno Gransche, “Narrative Hermeneutik”, in: *Vorausschauendes Denken. Philosophie und Zukunftsforschung jenseits von Statistik und Kalkül* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2015), 241–311, and Bruno Gransche, “The Art of Staging Simulations: Mise-en-scène, Social Impact, and Simulation Literacy”, in: *The Science and Art of Simulation I*, eds. Michael Resch, Andreas Kaminski, and Petra Gehring (Cham: Springer, 2017).

³⁹ E.g. Byung-Hyu Kong, “A Philosophical Inquiry into Caring in Nursing Based on Ricœur’s Narrative Ethics”, *Taehan Kanho Hakhoe Chi* 35, 7 (2005): 1333–1342 (my reference is based on the English abstract); Jérôme Porée, “Expliquer, comprendre et vivre la maladie”, *Revue d’Histoire et de Philosophie Religieuses* 92, 1 (2012): 5–20;

A more surprising development is an ethics and hermeneutics of the environment by means of Ricoeurian resources. By looking at technologically advanced ways to destroy the natural environment, these studies are directly or indirectly relevant to the field of technology studies.⁴⁰

Focusing more directly on the human-made and built environment, in particular city life and dwelling there are several studies that explore and elaborate on Ricoeur's texts on the city,⁴¹ or engage with Ricoeur's understanding of capabilities in relation to dwelling.⁴²

Gaëlle Fiasse, "Ricoeur's Medical Ethics: The Encounter between the Physician and the Patient", in: *Reconceiving Medical Ethics*, ed. Christopher Cowley (New York: Continuum Press, 2013), 30–42; Theo Hettema, "Autonomy and Its Vulnerability: Ricoeur's View on Justice as a Contribution to Care Ethics", *Medical Health Care Philosophy* 17, no. 4 (2014): 493–498; Eoin Carney, "Depending on Practice: Paul Ricoeur and the Ethics of Care", *Les ateliers de l'éthique / The Ethics Forum* 10, 3 (2015): 29–48; Corine Mouton Dorey, "Rethinking the Ethical Approach to Health Information Management Through Narration: Pertinence of Ricoeur's 'Little Ethics'", *Medicine, Healthcare & Philosophy* 19, 4 (2016): 531–543; and Philippe Svandera, "Rethinking Ethics with Paul Ricoeur. Nursing: Between Responsibility, Care and Justice", *Recherche en soins infirmiers* 124 (2016): 19–27.

⁴⁰ E.g. David Utsler, "Paul Ricoeur's Hermeneutics as a Model for Environmental Philosophy", *Philosophy Today* 53, 2 (2009): 173–178; Nathan M. Bell, "Environmental Hermeneutics with and for Others. Ricoeur's Ethics and the Ecological Self", in: *Interpreting Nature: The Emerging Field of Environmental Hermeneutics*, eds. Forrest Clingerman, Brian Treanor, Martin Drenthen, and David Utsler (New York: Fordham U.P., 2014), 141–159; Jean-Philippe Pierron, "Ecologie et herméneutique. Le franciscanisme de Paul Ricoeur", in: *Ricoeur: Philosophe à son école* (Paris: Vrin, 2016), 187–208; and Thiago Souza Silva, Nádia Sampaio, and Monique Jesus Bezerra Dos Santos (de) Monique, "Environmental Ethics and Theory of Responsibility in Paul Ricoeur and Hans Jonas: An Approach on Sustainability in Postmodernity", *International Journal of Development Research* 9, 12 (2019), 32396–32400.

⁴¹ E.g. Franco Riva, "Langoscia dell'abitare. Ricoeur, Lyotard e la città postmoderna", in: *Leggere la città. Quattro testi di Paul Ricoeur* (Roma: Castelvecchi, 2013), 7–49; Anna Borisenkova, "Reading the City: From the Inhabitant to the Flâneur", in: *Poetics, Praxis, and Critique: Paul Ricoeur in the Age of Hermeneutical Reason*, ed. Roger Savage (Lexington Publishers, 2015), 86–98; Jean-Philippe Pierron, "Entre habiter et politiser: urbaniser", in: *Ricoeur: Philosophe à son école* (Paris: Vrin, 2016), 171–186; and Jérôme Porée, "Le philosophe, l'architecte et la cité", in: *Existence vive. Douze études sur la philosophie de Paul Ricoeur* (Strasbourg: Presses Universitaires De Strasbourg, 2017), 147–163.

⁴² E.g. Marc Breviglieri, "L'espace habité que réclame l'assurance intime de pouvoir. Un essai d'approfondissement sociologique de l'anthropologie capacitaire de Paul Ricoeur", *Études Ricoeuriennes / Ricoeur Studies* 3, 1 (2012): 34–52; and Ernst Wolff, "Hermeneutics and the Capabilities Approach: A Thick Heuristic Tool for a Thin Normative Standard of Well-being", *South African Journal of Philosophy* 33, 4 (2014): 487–500.

A number of scholars have taken up one of Ricœur's earliest concerns, namely work. Todd Mei⁴³ elaborates on Ricœur's coordination of the word and work in an examination of the poetic moment in each. This double poetics holds on to the productive and literal meaning of work, while seeking to open up new possibilities through the figurative dimension of such a poetics. In a follow-up study he reflects on meaningful work as analogous to meaningful speech acts. Marcel Hénaff⁴⁴ tries to show numerous ways to reengage with Ricœur on the problem of work, in its relation to social justice, through a critical reading of Ricœur's evolving stance on work. Likewise, Nicolas Smith⁴⁵ attempts to consider the contemporary relevance of Ricœur's project in "Work and the Word", but only through a critical engagement with the tension between the anthropological and phenomenological commitments at work in that text.

I know of two authors, to date, who have worked out the scholarly projects discussed above to a full monograph. Alberto Romele⁴⁶ offers a hermeneutic investigation of the digital technical milieu and the corresponding digital culture and Ernst Wolff⁴⁷ develops an interpretive theory of the technical dimension of all human action, that is, of embodied capabilities and the mediation of action by technical means. Both authors integrate a critical appropriation of parts of Ricœur's work in a broader interdisciplinary framework and both are concerned with the political implications of their study.

⁴³ Todd Mei, "Form and Figure: Paul Ricœur and the Rehabilitation of Human Work", *Journal of French Philosophy* 16, 1 and 2 (2006): 57–70; and Todd Mei, "The Poetics of Meaningful Work: An Analogy to Speech Acts," *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 45, 1 (2019): 50–70.

⁴⁴ Marcel Hénaff, "Labor, Social Justice, and Recognition: Around Paul Ricœur," in: *Poetics, Praxis, and Critique: Paul Ricœur in the Age of Hermeneutical Reason*, ed. Roger Savage (Lexington Publishers, 2015), 21–33.

⁴⁵ Nicholas H. Smith, "Between Philosophical Anthropology and Phenomenology: On Paul Ricœur's Philosophy of Work", *Revue internationale de philosophie* 278, 4 (2017): 513–534.

⁴⁶ Alberto Romele, *Digital Hermeneutics: Philosophical Investigations in New Media and Technologies* (New York: Routledge 2020).

⁴⁷ Ernst Wolff, *Between daily routine and violent protest* (forthcoming 2021).

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Abstract

Although technology is not a major theme in Paul Ricœur's philosophy, there are a number of texts in which he explicitly examines aspects of the relation between

humans and their technical environment. The first aim of this article is to provide an overview of the main themes on which Ricœur touches in these texts, as well as a number of less direct contributions to the philosophy of technology. Accordingly, Ricœur's early reflection on technology as part of human culture is examined, underscoring the ambiguity of technology, as Ricœur sees it. This ambiguity is then demonstrated with reference to technology-related issues, notably work and urbanization. Ricœur's understanding of the impact of (new) technology on ethical dilemmas is explored – this time in relation to his later philosophy. Finally, the technical dimension of the human capability to act is presented as a line of enquiry spanning almost his whole work. The second aim of this article is to give an overview of the reception of Ricœur's thought in fields of philosophy related to technology, focusing on the nature of technology, information technology, medical ethics, the environment, the heuristics of technological change, work and city life.

Keywords: Paul Ricœur, hermeneutics, technology, capabilities, responsibility, work, urbanization, modernity



Ministry of Science
and Higher Education
Republic of Poland

“Studies in the History of Philosophy” – publication of two foreign language issues of the magazine financed by Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Republic of Poland on the basis of agreement no. 655/P-DUN/2019 (dated 7/05/19).