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Wisdom Practices for Living with Technology

(Author copy: some minor differences may exist from the published version)

Richard S. Lewis

Review of *The Ethics of Ordinary Technology*, by Michel Puech (Routledge, 2016).
Hardback: 9781138659346; paperback: 9781138486546; e-book: 9781315620282

Michel Puech has written an illuminating philosophical book on the ethics of technology and provided a practical guide for how to interact and live with ordinary technology on a daily basis. He has combined Eastern and Western philosophies with pragmatism to create a sapiential (wisdom-based) *technoethics*. Through his list of fundamental wisdom practices and his focus on microactions, Puech explains how people can retain their subjectivity and care for the Self even while deluged by new and ubiquitous technologies.

Puech's insights draw upon a deep and varied philosophical background. His intention for the book "is to return to concrete issues, beyond the well-known discourse of technophilia, which is so natural in engineering philosophy, and the equally well-known plea for technophobia, which is so frequent in the humanities and social critique" (7). Puech illustrates his views on technology by quoting Kranzberg, who states, "Technology is not good or bad. Nor is it neutral" (2). Puech frames his book under a broad teleological framework of human, nature, and technology, where there is a co-evolution involved with all three, leading him to describe humans as technosapiens (42), the subject of his previous book. Only by becoming more aware can we move from being reactive objects that are pawns of the market to empowered (interconnected) individuals not only with agency, but also with the ability to impact those around us and be part of a larger global transformation.

Framing this book is a challenge, as the transdisciplinary nature ambitiously touches upon philosophy of technology, ethics, pragmatism, American Transcendentalism, and Eastern traditions. While drawing on this diversity, Puech deeply investigates these various philosophical concepts and situates them to answer the

fundamental ethical question of how we should live and interact with technology on a daily basis. Often, philosophical books are intellectual excursions that seem to be only dimly tied to practical, everyday materiality. Michel Puech has taken a pragmatic approach and given specific practices for how humans can ethically live in this contemporary age of technological advancements and natural crises.

Power, Command-and-control, and Wu-wei

Puech explores three tiers of power: power over things (technology); power over others (domination); and power over oneself (wisdom). He stresses that our true power, and where our focus should lie, is in the power over ourselves. This power shift from controlling objects and other people to focusing on oneself is a building block for Puech to advocate for a more sweeping revolution, one that replaces the Western engineering mindset of command-and-control to the power of wisdom. Specifically, Puech advocates replacing: the concept of progress with the concept of flourishing; actions to change the world with microactions; ethics for design with ethics for the user; competition with collaboration; and control with engagement. This comprehensive shift in mindset focuses on a ground-up revolution. For example, with reference to globalization, his point is that no one is really in charge politically or institutionally, allowing for everyone to be in charge ethically through their daily choices and microactions (123).

Puech calls for an awakening that moves us to more of a *wu-wei* way of life, allowing situations to unfold while acting as little as possible. This is the opposite of trying to dominate or engineer our way through situations, since, as he quotes Hershock, “the better we get at controlling our circumstances, the more we will find ourselves in circumstances open to and requiring control” (160).

The Ordinary and Microactions

Puech makes the case that it is the ordinary and daily technologies with which we interact that have the most impact upon us. “Our biggest global structures are driven by the microactions of ordinary citizens doing ordinary things such as traveling, eating, texting a friend, taking a shower, and surfing the Web” (17). Rather than the extraordinary, our ability to affect change within our own lives, and in the lives of people near us, takes place in our daily decisions and actions. According to Puech, the goal is to create actionable practices by focusing on the routine interactions with technology.

While he praises movements like Universal Design, which focuses on the inclusivity and openness of technology, his main focus on technoethics is on the user side; specifically, how people interact with ordinary technologies, and how our microactions with these technologies have the capacity to affect change. This is backed up by his 3-tiers of power and how the power over the self leads to wisdom, rather than focusing on the domination over things or people.

Exemplifying this, he introduces the Eastern concept of *samu*, which means the practice of meditation within ordinary activities. “The wisdom effort in *samu* is awareness or mindfulness, extending in two directions: awareness of the self and awareness of the interdependence of all things. Both these directions are essential for technoethics” (166).

Wisdom Practices

The idea of the ordinary leads into Puech’s motivation for his book, which was to create a wisdom practice for technoethics. He says,

Technoethics can only be a virtue ethics: a practice of the self, designing and using resources for its own flourishing, in harmony with an environment—which is not only nature, but also the human environment and the technological environment. . . . Technoethics contributes to this harmony as a wisdom ethics. Wisdom is one of the unaddressed affordances of the technosphere. (20)

Rather than extolling specific virtues, and in line with his pragmatic orientation, Puech describes six fundamental practices of wisdom: awareness, autonomy, harmony, humility, benevolence, and courage. These are his answers to how we can approach relating to technology everyday. It all starts with awareness, which “is the beginning of all wisdom, without which no other practice or virtue would be a self-constructing practice” (174). He warns that the “fact that we are not conscious or fully aware of the values system immanent in technology does not mean that there is no such values system” (8), and he specifically identifies *efficiency* as being one of the main value systems embedded in technology.

At first I was concerned with the appearance of *autonomy* on his list, it being close to the idea of the autonomous, rational self with roots in humanism and the Enlightenment, which serves as a foundation of the scientific/rational/engineering mindset of the modern world with its command-and-control attitude. However, part of Puech’s brilliance is his ability to place these concepts into context, staying grounded in the routine reality of the day-to-day, which is within our control. He

links the concept of autonomy to interdependence and makes clear that “autonomy no longer means solipsism or egoism” (176). Puech elevates the idea of autonomy and links it with the other virtues, so it isn’t a stand-alone concept, but rather becomes inter-related with other practices like benevolence and harmony, enabling an interdependent self. This book helped me to re-evaluate my own ideas on the concept of autonomy.

Humanism v. Posthumanism

Though Puech states that he partly builds upon European humanism (18) when he combines it with Anglophone pragmatism and Eastern tradition as foundational disciplines from which to work, he does not seem draw upon it very frequently. Rather than his inclusion of European humanism, I believe that he might have replaced it with *critical posthumanism* as envisioned by Rosi Braidotti, which in my opinion resonates much better with his arguments (see Braidotti 2012). Posthumanism is in complete agreement with the framework he proposes, which centers on interdependence that binds together

humans and nonhumans, living beings and artifacts, cultural and natural entities—infosphere, technosphere, ecosphere. . . . The problem with the humans is anthropocentrism. . . . The origin of this narrow vision is our profound difficulty with the recognition of the other. It applies to the other human person, to other genders and ethnic groups, in general ethics. But it applies here to nonhuman entities, natural and technological. (36)

While Puech justly criticizes aspects of transhumanism (as he defines it), critical posthumanism could be an interesting avenue for him to investigate.

Conclusion

This brilliant book is a key to the good life, an answer to the complexity of contemporary life, which is filled with technologies and daily choices. The answer is not something we achieve, but rather a humble practice of microactions performed multiple times every day. In the end, wisdom is not some utopian goal, but is found in our ordinary daily practice. I highly recommend this book as it epitomizes the best of philosophical writing.

References

Braidotti, Rosi. (2012). *The Posthuman*. Oxford: Polity Press.