
Identity as an Issue of Constraint and Recognition: a Question of Fundamental Ethics

1.1. Introduction

We have a strong feeling that technological innovations that are spreading throughout our individual and collective lives, in our most basic everyday lives, raise ethical questions about who we are and what we want to become. This is the case, for example, with the expansion of connected objects that create significant risks of the dissemination and exploitation of personal data. On another level, if we think about the progress made in the field of biotechnology, we know that humanity can be the subject of increasingly bold interventions. Such possibilities of intervening in biological reality are likely to transform our ideas of the human, amplifying their capacities exponentially, thus renewing the modern dream of self-mastery. In this respect, we recall that, for René Descartes, the desired mastery of nature (of which it was a question of “making oneself master and possessor”) had to follow the movement of an ego becoming ever more self-confident. The destiny of modernity was deeply marked by the idea that the mathematization of nature and the coronation of the subject would be mutually reinforcing (Waldenfels 2005, p. 329).

Resonating with such an ideal, the advent of transhumanism would allow humanity, according to some ideologues, to free itself from its limits by increasing its potentialities, almost to infinity. A major challenge for the representatives of this current – which has attracted considerable scientific, industrial and financial investment – would be, no more and no less, to free humans from changes in their bodies, their organs, aging and even death itself (Besnier 2009; Benasayag 2016). If we seem to be referring in this way to the great modern utopias that have advocated the principles of controlling and controlling the hazards of the human condition and nature, these are now overwhelmed by fantasies – even extrapolations – that call into question the ideal borne by the spirit of the Enlightenment. Because this ideal had as its horizon the harnessing of technology to the service of a project of emancipation and societal realization. Technoscientific advances were indeed supposed to serve political and social progress. In the alliance between scientists and industrialists, freedom of research was supposed to “satisfy a principle of social utility” (Taguieff 2001, p. 92).

However, there is a current tendency to favor technological progress that is devoid of any extrinsic purpose. It tends to act outside any regulatory norm that would be able to intervene to promote the common good or living together¹. Transhumanism generates an outdated conception of humanity, its identity being itself susceptible to being reduced to a set of digital traces and information. While the clearly ideological dimensions of these extrapolations are beginning to be well identified and analyzed, the fact remains that the development of digital technologies as a whole sometimes gives rise to this kind of fetishism of progress.

1.2. Digital ethics in context

In view of the multitude of questions raised by our hypermodern environments, a whole set of social representations, visions of man and discursive logics must be interpreted. This is in relation to the

¹ Juliette Faure shows in this respect that we are witnessing a major epistemological rupture between humanist positivism and that of transhumanism (Faure 2018).

moral values that are supposed to guide our actions, on the assumption that not everything that is technologically possible is always humanly or socially desirable.

Such an exercise requires, on the one hand, questioning the societal, political and industrial contexts in which these representations emerge. On the other hand, it requires identifying criteria for evaluating new technologies – along with the ideals that support them – without making any unambiguous reference to what the “authentic” human being or “human nature” should be. This is because the impasse of essentialism or any kind of moral panic must be avoided. It is therefore up to us to ask ourselves what values we intend to preserve at a time when the term “intelligence” is flourishing in many spheres of industrial innovation. Our homes, cars or cities are referred to as “intelligent”. A city that is designated as such, for example, ideally makes it possible to have better control over information at the same time as a more fluid and predictive flow of urban traffic. As Fabio La Rocca has pointed out, the image of the hypermodern metropolis is therefore analogous to the world of the Web. Metropolitan territoriality is no longer experienced by creating a separation between physical space and Web space:

“On the contrary, this vision becomes a single feature, a co-fusion, a constellation of lines of flight that intertwine and erase the barriers, the borders erected between the Real and the so-called Virtual”. (La Rocca 2013, p. 271)

The benefits of digital deployment across cities are important from an informational and ecological point of view.

However, it is necessary to make it possible to question these trends in terms of ways of life, as well as their existential meanings, which come into play through these dynamics of innovation which are never without a backlash. New constraints are always likely to emerge. As Mark Hunyadi has said in this regard, we are, for example, accustomed in our daily lives to having to respond to machines

in most areas of life, follow their instructions and acquire the multiple cognitive and practical skills that enable us to interact with them:

“There is in this development an inextricable combination of systemic factors – economic, technical, industrial, commercial – all of which result from individual initiatives without any agreed plan in advance”. (Hunyadi 2014, p. 42)

In this way, we are collectively engaged in ways of life that we do not choose, nor do we comprehend the technical constraints that these entail. These constraints are all the more insidious because they do not say their names and are often even perfectly undetectable.

In addition, we are dealing with modes of technological development that are most often accompanied by discourses of valorization (“techno-discourses”) that most often act to extinguish our critical vigilance. We are told about intelligent environments, “open data”, the “Cloud”, search engines in “natural language”, etc., all terms that suggest that we would now have access to absolutely fluid, flexible and open universes, capable of offering us ever more comfort, well-being and security. We are thus confronted with systems of representation and discursive logics that do not encourage the development of critical thinking, that is, thinking that would have the task of questioning the symbolic, social and existential challenges of our technological environments.

Several analyses of the social consequences of modern technology have highlighted how individual freedoms, in the context of hyperindustrial societies, can be reduced to symbolically controlled lifestyles, helping to create a form of habituation, such that we do not experience our progressive loss of freedom as the work of a “hostile” or “foreign” force (Marcuse 2008). By following such an angle of analysis, we can admit that if, for example, the so-called “intelligent” city poses (among other things) important problems in terms of transparency, traceability and respect for privacy, an instrumental rationality tends to prevail in the acceptance of such a model of urban development. The dominant order, once instituted, blurs our perception of technological innovations and their consequences, by

making any criticism inappropriate: “Nothing nowadays discredits someone more quickly than to be suspected of criticizing machines” (Anders 2002, p. 17). Above all, there is a current tendency to equate criticism with reaction. However, by presenting from the outset any such criticism as “reactionary” or “reactive”, we limit the scope of analysis of the ways of life entailed by our hypermodern environments.

Another factor restricting the development of a “techno-critique” is the fact that in our daily lives we increasingly deal with devices that would probably seem unacceptable to us in their material forms. Critical analysis of a dematerialized device, such as a biometric technology, is by no means obvious and immediate. The digital age accentuates an experience of undetectability while at the same time producing completely paradoxical dynamics:

“Digital technology creates contradictory injunctions on all sides, which consequently have specific ethical implications for information and communication technologies”. (Béranger 2016, p. 25)

What emancipates us is at the same time what constrains us, especially in complex technological environments that are beyond our immediate understanding. We thus often see ourselves returned to the Promethean shame once described by Günther Anders to emphasize the powerlessness that we often feel in the face of the “*omnipotence*” of machines, which causes us to be subjugated by them, without giving us the means to question them:

“No expression more clearly expresses what shame is than ‘*I can do nothing about it*’. For what ‘I can do nothing about’ is what I cannot do, that is, what escapes my freedom, the dimension of *fatum*, that of things that are ‘fatal’ in every respect, that of ‘powerlessness’ in the broadest sense of the word. Shame arises from the contradiction between the claims of freedom and what is ‘fatal’, from the contradiction between power and lack of power. It is the shame of not being able”. (Anders 2002, p. 88)

Even though, to return to this example, the functions of anthropometry and those of biometrics are not the same, the impression of reification of the human being is much more likely to be induced by the sight of an anthropometric identification measure, by consulting archival photos of judicial anthropometry for example. On the contrary, a critical approach to a less visible device (such as a biometric identification technology of which only the interface is perceptible) is not self-evident. We are dealing with a device that is difficult to understand from a phenomenological point of view. In addition, biometrics is also helping to make everyday life more comfortable. At the very least, this is what the *doxa* (common opinion) most often reveals when we talk to users about it. For example, biometrics provides more instantaneous – and supposedly more secure – access to certain features or sectors (e.g. on a company's premises). However, the more comfort becomes a pre-eminent criterion in guiding our technological choices, the more vigilance must be increased as to the effects of such an imperative on the exercise of our reflexive judgment. Indeed, the reflexive judgment tends to diminish as the criterion of comfort is emphasized.

1.3. Identification, corporality and recognition issues

In the current context of the development of identification technologies, it is the body that often expresses itself for the subject. The latter is no longer considered only as a speaking being, but is identified in the disclosure of their social and political behavior (Chardel and Périès 2009, p. 37). Remote facial recognition systems make permanent identification possible, which puts us at risk of freezing identity in its very essence. All the devices that allow an ever-tighter profiling of our activities have the characteristic of integrating the act of signifying in a very specific way: they “signify” for us, at a distance, without us having to manifest ourselves through speech, as beings endowed with language.

Between RFID chips and the data collected by connected objects, many industrial developments are currently moving in this direction on a massive scale. We can also easily mention the fascination generated by technological progress, which leaves us overall without

any control. It goes without saying that deciphering our information machines and the normative systems that organize them is particularly difficult to grasp. This is particularly what justifies, among other things, a detour through the history of the devices themselves to contribute to developing a sufficiently adequate and creative critical apparatus, by committing ourselves to questioning the worldviews and conceptions of identity at stake through digital technologies. In this respect, the desire to introduce a single identifier to simplify certain administrative procedures is far from being insignificant from an existential point of view. Armen Khatchatourov will return to this point in Chapter 2.

Ethical questioning of our digital age is generally made difficult by the very fact that these technologies bring us ease in our activities, bring us speed, and bring us immediacy. As we have been able to point out, a new formal landscape, in the hypermodern era, seems to be promised to us, that of the disappearance of technological materiality, where everything would become a vector of the digital environment and where our smallest actions would be digitized (Avenati *et al.* 2016, p. 13). Thus, in the futuristic film *Her* (2014), Spike Jonze imagines that each person is able to develop an intimate and privileged relationship with the digital environment:

“In the film, everyone enters into a verbal dialogue with a global computer entity that manifests itself in the form of a voice (in this case, in the film, Scarlett Johansson’s voice), an intelligence, which is bought as a product and personified according to one’s desires, with the feeling of having the other always at hand, as close as possible to oneself. This intelligence, in this scenario, then observes each individual, becomes attentive like a mother, available like a friend, devoted like an assistant, loving like an ideal companion”. (Avenati *et al.* 2016)

In this situation described by Spike Jonze, humanity in a digital environment can no longer clearly distinguish the boundaries between our thoughts, the self, the other, the imaginations we produce and the digital operations by which we are stimulated. Humanity seems to have merged with the digital space to which we are subjected without

being fully aware of it, at least in the first part of the film (Avenati *et al.* 2016). From a more global perspective, the uncertainties that thrive at different levels of our social, moral, economic and political lives mean that the devices with which we interact, and which identify us, provide us with a certain sense of recognition. We feel that these devices are integrated into a large system, which is all the more reassuring in times of crisis of the reference points of meaning as we know them (Agamben 2012, p. 79).

Forms of recognition and integration into the social norm are clearly at stake. A simple way to illustrate this is that we cannot do without our smartphones, even though we know, to varying degrees, how they “never shut up”. We no longer think about abandoning our personal tools in order to restore some autonomy and protection from the supervisory authorities. The fascination of individuals in “democracy” for technology, our blind trust, the fetishization of our prostheses, the approval of the submission of our very body to the machine realize and embody the “docile body” that Michel Foucault used to describe radical forms of social control (Chardel *et al.* 2016). However, this possible control is the “unspoken” part of our digital societies, which justifies engaging in a process of revealing the structural effects that intervene in the functioning of technologies: there are standards and architectures at work in any technology, which are not without impact on the process of subjectivation.

A major problem with identification technology such as biometrics (to take just one example) is that identity is reduced to something objective. What emerges in the case of a biometric identification device is that it is the constancy of the body that is in play. On an anthropological level, as Antoine Garapon and Michaël Fœssel have clearly shown, the inertia of the body is required as a defense against strategies of dissimulation. However, what is questionable in the generalization of control procedures to all movements “is the temptation to construct *dynamic* parameters (the identity of an acting subject) from *stable* data (that of its objective body) as if the future were always deduced from the past” (Garapon and Fœssel 2006, p. 172). And this, despite the very nature of the human which is to become, to be oneself as another. Because an individual’s history does

not stop at their objective and objectified traces: because if a body refers to stable biological characteristics, a subject cannot be reduced to unalterable data, but essentially refers to the fact that one is always likely to change, to advance in time, having the feeling that our history does not stop at our objective traces. Jean-Luc Nancy proposes in this respect to consider identity as an inscription from which leads a trail that can open up the most distant, the most bypassed, tangled and blurred paths, even though it is always traced beginning from a point:

“A point and a labyrinth: this is the secret of an identity. From one to the other, permanent contact and permanent dehiscence. We are therefore doomed either to lose one or to lose ourselves in the other. Undoubtedly, there is no shortage of landmarks that mark out a continuity, that make it possible to speak of an ‘identity’ – but it is understood *a priori* that we will never reduce the infinitesimal character of the point or the rigorously figurative character of the trail”. (Nancy 2010, p. 43)

Identity can be said to have holes in it; it is constantly being built and deconstructed by the very fact of not keeping everything in memory, thus assuming a right to be forgotten. In this respect, it is possible to identify an ambiguity of the hypermodern era based on the fact that the digitization and development of databases could quite quickly prevent us from forgetting, by forcing us to remember, by forcing us to confess by the traces we leave behind as we carry out our activities. However, from a fundamental ethics point of view, we can formulate the following questions: what kind of memory does our digital identity cover? Basically, from what memory is our identity digitized in all but name?

1.4. Digital metamorphosis, subjectivation and liquid societies

The processes of the construction of subjectivity are subject to major changes in the digital age. This is a metamorphosis stemming from the very fact that digital technologies produce new ways of being with oneself and others, new worldviews and new social norms.

What the term *metamorphosis* strongly expresses, particularly in its biological sense, is the idea of a process: metamorphosis is a change in shape that an animal undergoes before reaching an adult stage (it is the story of the larva that becomes a caterpillar, then becomes a chrysalis). That which resonates in the idea of metamorphosis is a process. In regard to our object of reflection, we are talking about a process of subjectivation, that is, the production of a way of life that “cannot be confused with a subject, without depriving it of any interiority and even of any identity. Subjectivity has nothing even to do with the ‘person’: it is an individuation [...]. This is a specific dimension without which we could neither go beyond knowledge nor resist power” (Deleuze 1990a, p. 135). With online social networks, we tend to develop our subjectivity (which refers to the character of what is personal, what is unique to a person), not only according to stable criteria, established once and for all, but also according to the possibilities offered by digitization that multiply our ways of being in the world (Khatchatourov and Chardel 2016, pp. 3–10). If we think, for example, of the various identities that we are likely to maintain through online social networks, we do see this trend at work:

“From the personal Web pages mobilized during the 1990s up to the most recent blogs and social networking sites, the development of the Internet has been accompanied by the emergence of devices more specifically dedicated to the production of the self and whose ordinary uses have provided fertile ground for the study of what is commonly called digital identity”. (Denouël 2011, p. 75)

We are thus living in an era of fragmented and multiple identities, a time of multitudes.

From a sociological point of view, we note that digitization means that we are increasingly exposed simultaneously to a multitude of communities of ideas and principles: “A coherent, unified and stable identity would be a burden, a constraint, a restriction on freedom of choice” (Bauman 2010, p. 75). It is this fact that motivates Zygmunt Bauman to interpret our modernity as “liquid”, as opposed to previous modes of social organization that were more defined by permanent

anchors. Nowadays, an entire economy of affect is organized around the valuation of what does not last, individuals being constantly encouraged to prefer change to constancy, evanescence to sustainability: “In the liquid state, nothing has a fixed form, everything can change” (Bauman 2010, p. 78). In describing this trend, Zygmunt Bauman intends to encourage us to question the evolution of a world where our positions, decisions and responsibilities are perpetually susceptible to devaluation, in favor of change and innovation. These trends would be accentuated over time by undermining the frameworks of modernity known as “solid”. This was because modernity referred – for better or for worse – to a world of principles and firmly anchored objects:

“All identities, as well as differences, contradictions and antagonisms, were *glebae adscripti*. They all displayed, either as a sign of honour or as a shameful mark, fixed and registered addresses, themselves inventions of the emerging modern idea of administration”. (Bauman 2005, p. 311)

However, our time is dominated by a valorization of the passage from one place to another, from one mode of being or appearing (of presenting oneself) to another.

1.5. Narrative identities and self-expressions

For many researchers, the devices of production of the self, of content and of publics have fully contributed to the “expressivist movement of the Web”, by promoting the emergence of a plural and fragmented self (Allard and Vandenberghe 2003).

We also see the development of what Serge Tisseron calls the “desire for extimity”², defining it as the process by which each person

² As Serge Tisseron explains: “While Jacques Lacan gave a topical definition of this word, using it to mean that nothing is private or public, and that everything depends on the point of view we adopt, I proposed to consider it as a process that enters a dynamic.” (Tisseron 2001).

is encouraged to present to others certain facets of themselves, hitherto kept secret, in order to make themselves “validated” by those around them, and to re-appropriate these facets in a way that strengthens their self-esteem. Thus, if the right to privacy is essential to lay the foundations of self-esteem, it is constantly nourished by the desire for extimity:

“The desire for extimity has always existed, but the Internet has considerably broadened its scope and challenges. It has opened up spaces for expression and exchange on subjects previously reserved for conversations in quiet corners, or even totally taboo. On the Internet, subjects that circulated very poorly in the traditional public space find spaces of expression in which it is possible to share and discuss”. (Weaver 2017)

What emerges from the construction of online public spheres is an openness to a more horizontal way of being, which tends to thwart territorial and symbolic boundaries. The intersubjective links that develop there even create modes of socialization for populations that may have been marginalized before the rise of digital technology. This is the case, for example, for people with eating disorders (EDs)³ who find in social networks a way to create bonds of solidarity and thus maintain a bond with themselves. Networks have something in common with the culture of the self, insofar as they act as modes of subjectivation in which virtuality participates in a certain construction of the self. The radicality that characterizes the practices of the communities studied should not prevent us from discerning the fact that with technological mediations, we are dealing with elements of the virtual that intertwine in real life, and thus recompose it. Beyond the “pro-ana” and “pro-mia” communities, we realize that the Internet does not impoverish or deteriorate social relations, but it does, as Antonio Casilli points out, offer them new modalities, and it also makes them more complex. In general, people who are granted access

³ We were able to clearly identify this as part of the ANR Anamia research project, available at: <http://www.anamia.fr/>.

privileges to a social network, such as MySpace, are also people from whom content is solicited:

“Comments, suggestions, updates. In establishing this relationship, the focus is on an element that may seem eminently utilitarian (appropriating other people’s input). But behind this ignoble attitude lies in reality a common work of adding, sorting and classifying the information which is shared. The aspect of social cooperation towards a common task, which is not always present in offline friendship, is essential here”. (Casilli 2011, p. 273)

The strength of online social networks is in accentuating horizontal dynamics in the construction of identities. For example, in the development of children and adolescents, it is no longer only family values that immediately reveal themselves as structuring, nor even the relatively more direct and immediate influence of educators. The expansion of digital culture makes it possible to assume phenomena of decentralization in the constitution of subjectivities; it tends in this sense to question established orders. With social networks, as Dominique Pasquier noted, “peer influence is increasing, while parental transmission and influence on the cultural tastes of children is declining” (Pasquier 2011, 2013). The number of young generations reached by digital social networks suggests that the expansion of these devices is a social phenomenon that is almost “total”.

However, if dynamics of horizontality are undeniably accentuated, by allowing subjectivities to be built through affinity communities, by engaging regimes of sensitivity as well as the pooling of affects, the logics of data capture and centralization operate on a massive scale.

Such an operation is all the easier as we become increasingly accustomed to delivering parts of ourselves at all moments of our daily lives, with the social approval that such exposure often entails. We know, for example, that Google’s data servers store user search histories that can make it very easy to identify the people who produced them. Therefore, as Zygmunt Bauman expressed it when talking about online social networks: “We voluntarily do many things

that totalitarian powers sought to impose by force and violence or fear”. (Bauman 2013a, p. 76).

Beyond this observation, it can be said that while a culture of plural identity is now well analyzed sociologically, what is less so is the practice of digital identities in terms of the questions they raise for us from an ethical and socio-philosophical point of view: what demand for meaning can be seen in these new forms of expression of self? What values are at stake in these experiences? Finally, what are the effects of these practices on the processes of subjectivation?

1.6. Identity as an ethical issue

Digital practices are social practices that are often based on very strong demands for autonomy, freedom of expression and recognition. Existential values are in play through these practices, which are far from being systematically reduced to modes of self-disclosure that would be totally naive and unconsidered. As Dominique Cardon has shown, digital identity is less about unveiling than about projecting oneself. Users produce their visibility through a set of masks and filters, taking account of the diversity of contexts of exposure:

“Thus, very different elements are revealed on a Meetic profile designed to seduce, on a student profile on Facebook, in Pinterest’s patchwork of taste or through the imaginative iconography of Second Life’s avatars”.
(Cardon 2015a, p. 115)

Some users also multiply anonymization strategies to create distance between their real person and their digital identity, as far as removing all reference to “real life” (Cardon 2015a). Nevertheless, these distances remain variable according to the level of sensitivity to the subjective sphere that individuals have been led to cultivate during their lives. Sensitivity to the personal nature of the data, and to what they may say about us, is far from homogeneous. A variety of practices are revealed at this level, involving a multitude of factors (the digital culture of users, their age, their individual history, etc.). That being said, a fairly constant element emerges: the opportunities

for informed development in complex technological environments are still very limited overall. In this respect, the philosopher Paul Mathias insists on a strong tension that thrives in the hypermodern era: in our uses of the Internet, for example, our practices are above all intellectual practices of reading and writing, which mobilize complex codes. However, the paradox of this “literacy” is that we are mostly “ignorant of all its morphology, syntax, grammar and rhetoric” (Mathias 2011, p. 82). The modes of individuation entailed by digital technologies are therefore still often blocked off, subject to levels of constraint that users are not inclined to decrypt. A central theme here is therefore the exercise of our free will. How can we preserve it, not only in environments where we are quite poor, but also despite the multiplication of identification and monitoring devices in our day-to-day realities? How can we develop a more lucid and demanding relationship with technological innovations, so that they can really be emancipating?

The dissemination of technological objects in our lives makes these questions as important as they are delicate insofar as we realize, from a sociological point of view, that in the era of the multitude, there is a strong demand for normativity on the part of individuals. In conjunction with the need for horizontality reflected in online social practices, there is a strong need to be identified and recognized in most moments of social life. In the very fact of identification, there is a need for recognition. Therefore, if forms of “voluntary servitude” (de La Boétie 1995, written in 1574) are involved in the acceptance of technologies that make it possible to create forms of global surveillance, these do not necessarily refer to the category of submission. This evolution of the forms of surveillance and its acceptance therefore deserves to be analyzed again with additional effort. However, for the time being, it is appropriate to formulate a set of questions in context to reflect the various ethical issues entailed by digital identity.

Why ethical issues and not moral? As the history of ideas reminds us, just as morality is prescriptive (it tells us what is considered good or bad to do according to values that are supposed to be shared by the greatest number of people), so ethics is reflective in the sense that it

invites us to reflect on the meaning of our actions according to the values we value:

“Morality is presented as a set of constraining rules of a special kind, which consists in judging actions and intentions by relating them to transcendent values (it is good, it is bad...); ethics is a set of optional rules that evaluate what we do, what we say, according to the way of life that it implies”. (Deleuze 1990a, p. 135)

In this experience, among the values that we can easily invoke in the context of digital innovation, trust is, in many respects, essential at a time when the generalization of a whole economy of personal information is familiarizing us with the idea that our dematerialized exchanges can be captured and even exploited at any time. The industrial logic that is spreading in favor of the exploitation of personal data is nowadays of considerable importance, even though new forms of regulation on a European scale are gradually emerging, in particular with the GDPR⁴. The dominant logics still largely refer to an instrumental rationality based on the quest to define the most effective means to achieve a given end. The objective in the case of data analysis is not only to predict behavior, but also to anticipate consumer desires.

If we set ourselves the task of historically inscribing ourselves in the course of the development of the digital age, it is certain that we are more towards the beginning of a process; and we are now even closer to a state of nature than a state of culture. By “state of culture” we mean a stage that makes possible a certain refinement in intersubjective relationships, the affirmation of certain values in the construction of oneself and in our relationship with others, as well as the demand for responsible action. But what about our ability to act in the digital age, that is, our ability to act in an *informed manner* with the systems and those who use them? We ask this question with reference to the work of the American philosopher Andrew Feenberg, who develops the idea that users should in the future be better able to interact with technological systems, thus developing their ability to

4 Available at: <https://www.cnil.fr/fr/comprendre-le-reglement-europeen>.

intervene in the process. This will require every effort from a philosophical, educational and political point of view in order to promote more emancipatory, contributory and democratic technological practices (Feenberg 2014). However, the challenge remains in an era where the majority of citizens and users do not have the tools to decipher their high-tech environments (smartphones, connected objects, RFID chips, etc.). According to Andrew Feenberg, some of the democratic interventions we can see in the world of technologies and the creative uses of the Internet would be a first step towards a re-appropriation of sensitive rationality in our technological environments:

“In the world of technology, these examples of action focus on the *design of* artifacts and systems. Human beings are no longer under the passive domination of the technical mediations that govern them: now they interact with them”. (Feenberg 2012, p. 64)

While struggles for the environment have brought about technological changes that reflect the emergence of respect for nature, changes observed in the fields of communication technologies reflect the shared ambition of many people to take a more active role in their lives under the banner of technical mediation:

“The effect of these interventions goes beyond simple practical improvements: we see the creation of a technological universe, objectifying human concerns. This is not a reduction of meaning to technology, but a transformation of technology which then reflects what is considered important and how we live our lives”. (Feenberg 2012, p. 64)

But despite these arguments, which may lead us to consider the emergence of more effective modes of appropriation in the coming years, the observation we can make today still reveals a strong inability to act in full knowledge of the facts. The exercise of free will in the digital environment remains particularly weak.

While the question of the complexity of systems is of course relevant here, a certain state of social apathy is also not independent of political contexts that aim to establish regimes of exceptionality. Such regimes encourage us to integrate the idea that securing our lives requires enhanced surveillance procedures:

“The pressure of security is pushing citizens to want to be protected from terrorists and, to this end, to prioritize identification over the protection of personal data. Since terrorists often hide under deceptive banal appearances, it is essential to use detection methods that encroach on privacy in an attempt to identify them”. (Arnaud 2015, p. 155)

The norm of security thus tends to prevail in the structuring of our political spaces, while at the same time helping to lessen the role of other principles that should always be able to intervene in the construction of genuinely democratic spheres, including respect for privacy and freedom of expression.

1.7. Traceability and fetishism of form

Another problematic aspect of how we envisage ourselves as subjects is that logics of continuous data analysis suggest serious confusion between the information we may have left behind as we navigate the Web (or our online transactions) and what we are *ontologically*, that is, by the constant invention of ourselves. Because it is change that defines us. As Henri Bergson forcefully pointed out, not only does “the body change form at any instant”, but the same goes for the spirit: “That which is real is the continuous change of form: form is only a snapshot taken of a transition” (Bergson 2013, p. 302). However, if we take account of such instability defining the human being, to what corresponds the will to capture personal data and predict the future based on present and past actions? Doesn’t it simply reflect an ideology of capture as well as a fetishism of form?

Several challenges are emerging around the reconfiguration of the horizons of meaning in which our contemporary societies are embedded, especially at a time when we feel collectively caught up in the whirlwind of progress that *necessarily* seems “assimilated to realisations of the best” (Balandier 2001, p. 59). However, the more we tend to experience novelty frantically and naively, the more it seems imperative to find a rhythm that is faithful to the requirements of a serene and creative critical approach. A major task for present and future generations is to evaluate as carefully as possible the forms of heteronomy or social acceptance regimes that technological mediations still generate on a massive scale. This is in the knowledge that there is never such a thing as technology in itself, but always different contexts that invite us to clarify our view of the ethical problems that technologies pose to us, with their share of paradoxes and tensions. If an understanding of the new digital geographies therefore appears necessary for the expression of an “enlightened” citizenship, what new modes of representation can be implemented to contribute to it? If there are tools and technical means that make it possible to interact with the vast quantities of digital traces collected daily by states and economic actors, what perception and control do we have of the new rules of the game that are deployed? What about our privacy, our freedom as citizens, our access to information?

Even though many ethics committees are being set up nowadays, they are generally not often attended by researchers with a real background in moral philosophy or the ethics of technology, at a time when technologies have never been so widespread in most moments of our individual and collective existence. They are involved in our ways of being in the world, in our ways of perceiving, seeing, feeling it, and in our awareness of things and beings. At the same time, we have the intuition that the technological world in which we live is a world in constant redefinition, which must commit us to constantly renewing our questions about digital technologies as well as the interactions we have with them, because the best and the worst can happen to us. It is therefore up to us to ask ourselves now what kind of society we want for tomorrow, by developing specific attention to the evolution of our ways of life and the meaning we intend to give to living together. To this end, not only should it be possible to mobilize

knowledge in fundamental ethics much more systematically than in the spheres of technoscientific innovation, but it should also be possible to re-examine the very notion of progress:

“The fictitious necessity of Progress could then be replaced by the will to progress, more precisely the modest will to achieve such or such progress in a defined field, implying the free evaluation of opinions and the free choice of possibilities”. (Taguieff 2004, p. 323)

The very notion of progress would thus lose the unity and uniqueness that it still too often entails in dogma, so as to attain the pluralism that should constantly come to nourish it: “We must think in pluralist terms about the need for progress” (Taguieff 2004). From this perspective, making the voice heard of that which cannot be reduced to instrumental rationality is a major ethical challenge for the future of subjectivities.

Empowering individuals to think of themselves as autonomous and creative subjects is a way of reminding them that the experience of action is based on a certain ability to assume lines of flight, as well as normative and existential changes in direction. There is no possible commitment without decentralization, nor without the possibility of exploring modes of action. However, the increasingly systematic use of identity profiling responds to a strategic shift in the management of uncertainty (Rouvroy and Berns 2010). The aim is to define risk profiles (economic, financial, etc.) based on a predicted possibility and not a real one. The result is not only a new conception of power (based on prediction), but also a violation of the very conditions of any ethical commitment. Because the very possibility of ethics lies in an ability to face a certain impossibility to rely on pre-established frameworks or on stable data. The moment of ethical decision, as Jacques Derrida has shown, can never be resolved solely through constituted knowledge. It is at the moment of the *I don't know what the right rule is* that the ethical question is most acutely raised (Derrida and Nielsberg 2004)⁵. And the fact of assuming a case of

5 I develop these points in the book: *De l'écrit aux écrans. Pour une sociologie herméneutique du temps présent*, CNRS Éditions, forthcoming.

conscience always supposes, more or less, the possibility of opening a line of flight, going beyond any formal framework. The moral subject is in no way reducible to a series of information that would be deductible from its digital traces; the subject must above all be able to assume some measure of inventiveness in its relationship with itself and to others. This is an important issue for reflection on the construction of identities in the digital age, as well as a major societal challenge. Thus, that which technological devices make possible today, namely the identification of stable data, should not make us neglect the heterogeneous elements that contribute to defining a person's (always plural) identity. It is such a conception of identity that we must certainly continue to cultivate, by constantly questioning what is at stake in the technological architectures of identification, through the many ambiguities they entail as well as the ethical and ontological risks to which they imperceptibly expose us.

