

Philosophy at the crossroads. Is it possible to love wisdom in the information age?

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1. Introductory remarks

Every time we reflect upon the specific features of the times we live in, we encounter an interesting phenomenon. We cannot be sure to what extent the description we are going to give shows the characteristics of the entity described, and to what extent the very description makes the entity look more as it is described. We are faced with the limits of the description process whenever we have to catch too many dynamic factors in one flash. So, I would prefer to say, we tend to create (the description of) the entity according to the assumptions we have already taken and which make our goal easier to achieve. The situation with the famous notions of the information age or the information society is not different. We are trying to define them, and we are still not sure if there are such things as we are talking about in our theories (there are probably just as many theories devoted to characterizing the information age as the critics of them who point out that these theories are inadequate) (Webster 1995). Moreover, any attempt at doing classification, enumerating features, defining wrongly suggests that the study of the problem has been closed and that we already solved it. The most famous researcher of the media, Marshall McLuhan himself has taught us that instead of classifying we should explore (McLuhan 1997). So let me explore here the problem of philosophy and its place in our contemporary culture: the question of the role it can or cannot play in information (not wisdom) oriented age. According to well established conceptions in therapeutic psychology, which I admire, in order to improve things, we should start from ourselves. Therefore I am not going to complain about the way the world is. I am not able to change the world in a dramatic, revolutionary or structural way, so complaining would bring only psychological, not cognitive, relief. However, I am going to complain about philosophy and philosophers, because I am convinced that I can change the way I understand philosophy.

There are many theses which I must take for granted here. Firstly, my thesis which remains implicit is that philosophy plays (as it indeed should play) an important role in our culture, creating the ways of thinking and the ways in which we treat values. I am well aware that I follow this thesis without giving any arguments in favour of it. I know, too, that one can find many good reasons for giving up such a view of philosophy; still, in a short text such as this one, there is not enough space to defend it. Secondly, presenting a certain view of the information age, I have to skip all the interesting country-specific differences, hence to ignore different historical and cultural backgrounds, assuming that a more or less unified treatment can embrace all European countries and the USA. The differences we are talking about are crucial when we consider the cultural role of philosophy in different areas of our globe. Finally, I have chosen to present the core of the features of the information age which can be found in the literature. I am going to enumerate these features and characterize some of them, being aware of the fact that the thinkers dealing with the characteristics of the information age or the information society have not managed to work out a broader consensus in this matter.

2. What is the information age?

There are six factors which are usually mentioned when one tries to give the description of the information society or the information age. They are not normally all used in a single theory, but frequently they are combined in many different ways. These factors are the following: technological innovations and the changes they cause, occupational change and its social results (predominance of work connected with the transfer of information), economic values, information flow (with new, faster media being used and with the growth of information networks which change the spatial relations in society and culture), the expansion of symbols and signs (entering immaterial age) (McQuail 2005: 108). Technological metaphors include all innovations which have been brought along by technology and are seen in almost every corner of social and individual life of humans. The way people deal with the information source, value technological facilities and treat new technological innovations is seen as something which has turned the industrial society into the information society. The occupational and economical factors are often seen as mutually related. The emergence of the information society is measured by occupational change and the percentage of people whose occupation is connected with the so called information jobs. What is more, each national economy is valued more when the percentage in question is higher. When – as in my home country – a considerable proportion of the society works as farmers, the country's economy is less competitive and advanced. Nowadays, it is the information industry that is responsible for the bulk of a country's economic output. Let me say a few words about the idea of networks as a main feature of the information society. The network society has transformed the description of space and time. The limitations arising from the physical distance in space have been largely removed by the advent of communication via computer or telecommunication. Again, there are plenty of consequences of this process for social (economic, political, ethical) and personal (within the families, marriages etc.) relations. The metaphor of entering the immaterial age is connected with the conviction that there is an enormous increase of the information accessible in social circulation nowadays. The way information is transferred (via internet, telecommunication, advertisements, television, radio etc.) changes the organization of our everyday life – hence the quality of it as well. Additionally, almost everything can be a vehicle for information, for example the clothes that we wear, the cars that we drive, the apartments that we live in, etc. The philosophically interesting result of that process is the lack of traditionally understood meaning. Some thinkers claim that the effect of too much information is its meaninglessness or the act of communication that does not communicate any content (Baudrillard 1983). With other words, the information we are talking about here is not referential, but digital, and that is its crucial feature.

3. Philosophy at the information age. Possible concerns.

What are the possible consequences of the changes the information age brings for philosophy understood as a part

of Western culture with a historically established past? Are we as philosophers going to get some good or some bad news from the age we live in? I suppose both. Given the difficulties with making a correct diagnosis of our age, we can only speculate about it, which is what I am going to do now.

The story of philosophical writing has its roots in the idea that there are some people who are in a privileged position relative to others with respect to conveying important messages. What is more, philosophy could develop as a product of Gutenberg's invention, because philosophical theories could really spread only once they are written. The information age has changed the situation on both sides: the writer and the reader. The access to something that comes in written form is now easier than ever. People do not have to use publishers with their long, expensive, time-consuming and frequently selective process in order to transmit some information to others. Anyone who is able to use the internet can write her books, poems, stories and theories on the websites. Written words are more accessible to ordinary people. They do not have to look for expensive books or articles, which are sometimes difficult to find; instead they can simply use Google to read something which interests them. The effect is obvious: too much information with no comfortable tool that could help arrange it according to its quality. What is more, the time people have is highly limited. The information providers have to fight for consumers who would be ready to spend their time getting their information, not others. In his book published as early as in 1981, Masuda has stated that in the information society "time value will be the major determinant of modes of action" (Masuda 1981: 71). More recently, Eriksen points out that something which we all lack nowadays is "slow" free time which can be correlated with another feature of the information age, namely the loss of privacy (Eriksen 2001). Will people be able to use their priceless free time for reading philosophy? How will philosophical works be visible in the general mess of all possible kinds of information that always surrounds us?

Philosophy, traditionally understood, requires time to be "slow". It concerns not only the reading and writing process, but also the processes of thinking and reflecting which cannot be engaged in without a proper amount of concentration, a quiet place and the lack of deadlines. We all know that this is very far from what the situation looks like nowadays. We philosophers, who are mainly academics, are no longer expected to write long, detailed, carefully prepared books whose completion necessarily lasts up to a few years, but are instead expected to publish often, a lot and in distinguished journals. And we care less and less about how many people will read such work and discuss it with us. We, as others, lack "slow" time. One can even have a feeling that there is more and more to read but there are less and less readers. We cannot escape the conclusion that when we write something (being obliged by the academic rules to do that), we increase the amount of information people have to deal with. As philosophical writers, we make the situation worse.

It is quite often emphasised that the first decade of development of the business of computer technology (which is a vital part of the information age) was influenced by the military industry, and the next thirty years – by show business. Neither the former nor the latter creates any space for traditionally understood philosophy. If philosophy consists of information that could be important to many people in different situations, why does it remain such an insignificant domain in contemporary society? Why does this information matter less and less? Maybe it is the fact that philosophical knowledge does not count as knowledge

anymore. Maybe philosophy should be a kind of descriptive therapy as Wittgenstein wanted us to think. Or maybe, in a worse version, information matters nowadays only when – in one way or another – it can lead to making money, and philosophers do not know precisely how to produce such information? It can be said that if we count information as a product to buy, its quality is not always the most important factor. If so, and assuming that in philosophical thinking quality is something what truly matters, then maybe the philosophers of the information age would have to become pop philosophers at the expense of quality. Are we ready for that? Pop does not have to mean rubbish. To state something easier in order to make it more comprehensible does not mean that it becomes less professional, less scientific, less important, as many philosophers tend to assume. Yet, in order to do so, the whole tradition of teaching philosophy to the elites would have to be given up.

If we treat philosophical theories as a source of useful knowledge for people dealing with everyday life, should we not do everything that we can to popularize philosophy in order to share the knowledge we possess? Should we not use all accessible media of the information age to achieve this, in order to prove that philosophical thinking can change the way the world is to us, that it can change our life for the better (as Dewey has claimed many years ago)? How many of us, however, are ready to make our articles openly accessible from our websites? How many of us help to write internet encyclopaedias and take part in internet chatrooms and other places where one can share the opinions? A number of researchers claim that there are many boundaries which have been transgressed in the information age, for example the boundaries between the experimental and the established, between high and low culture, also the boundaries between scientific disciplines (Briggs, Burke 2002: 320). Is it possible that philosophers may be able to learn something from such changes, or will they insist to focus on establishing what can count as a real philosophical problem and what is not? Perhaps it is time to enrich philosophy with fresh ideas, to respond to the problems of today's culture, to learn something from sociologists, psychologists, anthropologists etc. – to open our minds and change our discourses towards pop and vision-oriented culture.

Some factors of the information age look really promising. According to some researchers, the current trends favour the professions of intellectuals (Toffler 1980). Philosophers are mainly academics, so they are intellectuals by definition, and their situation from the point of view of occupational change seems to be perfect. Philosophy is a kingdom of reason, of abstract ideas, the domain which has gone through all possible battles against wrongly understood positivist and materialist theories according to which only concrete, physical entities matter. If we have passed the material eras and have reached the information age, that abstract and immaterial phase in the history of the human species, the present should be the perfect time for philosophers. Why, then, are they at the margins not only of the academia, but also of interests of ordinary people? Is there something wrong with the diagnosis of the contemporary age or, perhaps, is there something wrong with the way philosophers do philosophy?

4. Concluding questions

Philosophy as an intellectual activity of humans has many breathtaking stories to tell. It can be read as a history of ideas which were changing the way people used to think. But if the information age researchers are right, the world has changed dramatically. Recently, it has been changing

faster than ever before, and it has brought new values into play. Let me provide just one example, one concerning the definition of information. Stonier writes: "Information exists. It does not need to be perceived to exist. It does not need to be understood to exist. It requires no intelligence to interpret it. It does not have to have meaning to exist. It exists." If he is right, almost all values and activities, so important from the philosophical point of view, do not matter in the age of information. They do not come from old philosophical stories. Are we, as philosophers, able to move on with the baggage of our tradition and respond to the world's most recent issues at the same time? Are we able to be treated as useful and needed elements of cultural heritage of our societies, not just because of the past, but mainly because of everything that we can do for the future? At present, the interest in philosophy is next to nothing from the point of view of the ordinary man. If we choose to say complacently that it was always like that and philosophy should simply go on, then we have learnt no lessons from our own tradition of critical and reflective thinking.

Literature

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