Wisdom and Well-being in a Technological Age

Edward H Spence[1]

1. Centre for Applied Philosophy and Public Ethics (CAPPE), Charles Sturt University, Australia, and 3TU, Centre for Ethics and Technology, Netherlands. Email: ESpence@csu.edu.au.

Abstract

In this paper I explore the conceptual relationship between wisdom and well-being and present a theoretical model based on the notion of wisdom for evaluating the normative impact of technology on society. Finally, I briefly explore the question of how to design wisdom-in-technologies for the enhancement of wellbeing.

Keywords: information, technology, ethics, wellbeing, eudaimonia, a good life, wisdom

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to address a general question in the philosophy of technology, namely, to what degree if any, technology, in the form of products and processes, is capable in contributing to a good life. To answer that question, the paper will develop a meta-normative model based on the notion of wisdom to explain and evaluate the capability of any technological product or process in its design and/or its use to contribute in some way, if any, to the good life of individuals and society at large. In this paper, the all-embracing term "technology" will be used to refer to both the products and processes of different technologies. The *eudaimonic* value of technology will be assessed on the basis of its capability to contribute to a good life for the attainment of *eudaimonia* (broadly understood as a collective concept that encompasses notions such as happiness, wellbeing, self-fulfilment and flourishing). The outline of the paper is as follows: In section one I shall examine why well-being is a fundamental human right; in section two I shall demonstrate how technology theoretically relates to wellbeing; in section three I shall present a theoretical model for evaluating the normative

impact of technology on wellbeing; and finally, in section four explore by way of proposed future research on how wisdom can be designed in technologies.

Wellbeing as a Fundamental Right

Based on the philosophical work of Alan Gewirth and that of Edward Spence, I explain in this section how wellbeing can be conceived as a fundamental right, both in the negative sense of not infringing it and in the positive sense of actively promoting it.[i] This step is important for introducing and establishing the normative *ethical* dimension of wellbeing. Gewirth identifies wellbeing with the general capabilities and conditions required by an agent for acting to attain any of their purposes. These are the necessary preconditions of action that comprise certain physical and psychological dispositions and include:

- Basic Wellbeing: basic goods such as life; physical integrity; and mental equilibrium. These are necessary for all purposive action, notwithstanding what other particular and variable components individual agents might consider as part of their wellbeing.

- Non-subtractive Wellbeing: necessary general abilities and conditions required for maintaining and retaining an agent's goods he already has (non-subtractive goods) and their associated capabilities for action;

- Additive Wellbeing: for advancing and improving further goods he obtains (additive goods) and their associated capabilities of action.

An agent's wellbeing is primarily constituted by the above general capabilities for action comprising the aforementioned three aspects of wellbeing (1).

Alan Gewirth's argument for the Principle of Generic Consistency (PGC) offers a description and prescription for both the rational authority (based primarily on instrumental and deductive rationality) and the content of the fundamental rights, freedom and wellbeing, that persons have necessarily and only by virtue (sufficient reason) of being purposive agents. Due to constrains of space, I will not attempt to provide a justification for Alan Gewirth's argument for the Principle of Generic Consistency (PGC) on which his derivation of rights is based, as this is well beyond the scope and limits of this short paper. I will, however, offer a brief summary of the rationale of the argument for the PGC by way of a schematic outline of the three major steps of that argument. Gewirth's main thesis is that every rational agent, in virtue of engaging in action, is logically committed to accept a supreme moral principle, the Principle of Generic Consistency. The basis of his thesis is found in his doctrine that action has a normative structure, and because of this structure every rational agent, just in virtue of being an agent, is committed to certain necessary prudential and moral constraints. Gewirth undertakes to prove his claim that every agent, qua agent, is committed to certain prudential and moral constraints in virtue of the normative structure of action in three main stages:

First, he undertakes to show that by virtue of engaging in voluntary and purposive action, every agent makes certain implicitly evaluative judgments about the goodness of his purposes, and hence about the necessary goodness of his freedom and wellbeing, which are the necessary conditions for the fulfilment of his purposes. Secondly, he undertakes to show that by virtue of the necessary goodness which an agent attaches to his freedom and wellbeing, the agent implicitly claims that he has rights to these.

At this stage of the argument, these rights being merely self-regarding are only prudential rights. And thirdly, Gewirth undertakes to show that every agent must claim these rights in virtue of the sufficient reason that he is a prospective purposive agent (PPA) who has purposes he wants to fulfil. Furthermore, every agent must accept that, since he has rights to his freedom and wellbeing for the sufficient reason that he is a PPA, he is logically committed on pain of self-contradiction, to also accept the rational generalization that all PPAs have rights to freedom and wellbeing. At this third stage of the argument these rights being not only self-regarding but also other-regarding, are now moral rights. The conclusion of Gewirth's argument for the PGC is in fact a generalized statement for the PGC, namely, that all PPAs have universal rights to their freedom and wellbeing.

The generic rights to freedom and wellbeing prescribed by the PGC, although universal impose no global uniformity on living one's life as one chooses to, but on the contrary allow for maximal variety of moral experience and expression both for individuals and social groups globally, on the minimal proviso that people respect each other's prima facie rights to freedom and wellbeing.

Wisdom, Wellbeing and Technology

Having argued in the previous section that wellbeing, in accordance with Gewirth's argument for rights to freedom and wellbeing, is a fundamental right and therefore has an inherent *ethical* dimension, I shall in this section explore the *eudaimonic* dimension of wellbeing. That is, its conceptual connection with the notion of a good life.

Eudaimonia can be defined by a family of terms including self-fulfilment; well-being; happiness; and flourishing. A "good life" is any life that both in its conception and its practical pursuit is *capable of contributing to the attainment* of eudaimonia (which includes wellbeing). A good life is the means to the attainment of eudaimonia (the goal of a good life) characterized in terms of a cluster of concepts such as self-fulfilment; well-being; happiness; and flourishing, as mentioned previously. Wisdom conceived as meta-knowledge can be defined generally as the practical knowledge (both as propositional knowledge—*knowledge that*, as well as experiential knowledge—*knowledge how*) which enables the conception, guided pursuit, and realization of a good life for attaining eudaimonia.

The question I will be addressing in this section is how to normatively evaluate and measure the *Eudaimonic Value* of technology? A quick answer is by its capacity to contribute to a good life for the ultimate goal of the attainment of eudaimonia (including wellbeing). As we shall see the application of wisdom to technology enables the evaluation of technology's eudaimonic capacity for contributing to the attainment and/or enhancement of wellbeing. In this section I will propose and defend a eudaimonic model for evaluating the capability of technology for contributing to a good life (its eudaimonic goodness). In asking the question, "what is technology good for", we can begin by saying that technology has generally some instrumental goodness as a means to attaining some functional goal or purpose. The instrumental goodness of an aeroplane, for example, lies in its capacity to transport passengers across the globe in less time than any other available means of commercial transport, such as boats and trains.

Intrinsic but Conditional Goodness

Technological products and artefacts have some minimal intrinsic value and goodness by virtue of their designed-in-agentive-purposiveness (DiAP). It is conditional on evolving human values and needs but technologies have no unconditional value or goodness in themselves (2). Technology has minimal intrinsic but conditional value only to the extent that it contributes to meeting some specified functional human goals or purposes. So insofar as technology is not good simpliciter, it is good only to the extent that it has the capacity to contribute to the human good. People have a vast array of different instrumental goals to which technology can contribute as a means of achieving those goals. Is there one ultimate goal that all people value and desire as an end in itself? It is reasonable to assume that most if not all people aspire to have a good life capable of contributing to the attainment of eudaimonia (self-fulfilment; well-being; happiness; flourishing). This is in keeping with the *Eudaimonist Axiom*, the view that "happiness is desired by all human beings as the ultimate end or *telos* of all rational action" (3). Undoubtedly technology contributes in countless ways to the good life instrumentally in meeting evolving needs, desires and valued individual and collective ends such as transportation, health, wealth, power, communication, etc. How can we normatively evaluate technology's variable instrumental contributions to the good life?

In what follows I will argue that the answer lies in technology's capacity to contribute to the attainment of a good life. What value can we use to normatively evaluate technology's capacity in contributing to a good life (CCT-GL)?

Wisdom as the Principle for Evaluating the Contributing Capacity of Technologies for the Attainment of Wellbeing

Insofar as the ultimate goal of a good life is the attainment of eudaimonia we can evaluate a technology's CCT-GL by ascertaining its capacity for contributing to a good life for the attainment of eudaimonia: A technology's capacity to contribute to a good life is its Eudaimonic Value. A technology's eudaimonic value therefore relates and is directly proportional to its capacity to contribute to a good life, capable of leading to the attainment of eudaimonia. In this paper I shall demonstrate that a technology's eudaimonic value can be determined directly by the application of a model based on the notion of Wisdom. In the first instance I define wisdom as a type of meta-knowledge and an enabling second-order reflective virtue whose application is capable of guiding one in conceiving and discovering what a good life is and applying that knowledge in its active pursuit for the attainment of eudaimonia. Wisdom provides the overall answer to the question of why we need to design and use technologies in general: Because they are capable of contributing to human eudaimonia. In addition, wisdom enables us to evaluate the capacity of specific technologies to contribute to a good life for the attainment of eudaimonia. Wisdom as a type of meta-knowledge provides why-answers—why design and use certain technologies in the first place; and as an enabling meta-virtue for conceiving what a good life is for the attainment of eudaimonia, wisdom provides how-answers—how to use those technologies in pursuit of a good life for the attainment of eudaimonia. Therefore, wisdom provides a theoretical and practical model for evaluating why and how certain technologies are good for us by ascertaining their capability for contributing to a good life for the attainment of eudaimonia. This essentially is the core argument of this paper.

In what follows, I shall examine more closely how technology (understood as a collective term for all technologies) can be directly related to the notion of a good life via the concept of wisdom. Insofar as wisdom is a primary and essential condition for an individual in (a) determin-

ing what a good life is or ought to be (meta-knowledge-that and meta-knowledge-why); (b) providing us with guidance and direction, both as individuals and societies generally, of how to live such good lives; and (c) as a reflective meta-virtue, conceived as a disposition of character, practically enabling us to live such good lives for the attainment of eudaimonia (meta-knowledge-how); to what extent and in what ways, if any, can wisdom provide guidance in identifying and evaluating the degree by which technology contributes to the good life for the attainment of eudaimonia?

The paper posits that one direct way of evaluating the value of technology and its capacity to contribute to a good life generally (its overall axiological goodness) is by determining the degree to which it contributes or is capable of contributing to the attainment of a good life: epistemologically (its capacity to yield knowledge); ethically (its ability to contribute to the moral good of others both negatively by not causing unjustified harm to others, and positively by causing positive good for others); and eudaimonically (its capacity to contribute to both the conception and the attainment of a good life for the attainment of eudaimonia). In this paper I will show that in order to achieve that theoretical objective the notion of wisdom is essential.

In sum, insofar as the ultimate purpose of a good life is the attainment of eudaimonia then wisdom, which informs the conception of a good life and directs its active pursuit for the attainment of eudaimonia, is an essential condition for both the conception and the attainment of a good life. As the essential condition for both the conception and guided active pursuit and successful achievement of the good life, wisdom is therefore established as an essential conceptual link between technology on the one hand and the good life on the other, and in particular for evaluating the eudaimonic contribution that various technologies make to a good life. This, in turn, allows us to determine some of the generic implications and ramifications of technology for the conception of a good life, in particular, a eudaimonic conception of a good life. However, as Kekes points out, "the eudaimonic conception of a good life is not to be understood as the endorsement of a particular form of life. It is rather a regulative ideal that specifies some general conditions to which all good lives must conform" [emphasis added] (4). The eudaimonic account of a good life canvassed in this paper is broadly speaking pluralistic as it is in principle compatible with other different conceptions of a good life that meet the same necessary general conditions to which any notion of a good life must conform. For example, insofar as hedonistic, desire-satisfaction and objective-list theories of the good life meet the minimal conditions for both specifying what a good life is as well as providing the enabling conditions for its practical realization, then they too can be aligned broadly to the notion of wisdom developed in this paper. To the extent that they meet those conditions, they too can be used to determine the contributive capability of technologies to a good life.

Insofar as technologies with a positive eudaimonic value are contributive instrumental means to the end or *telos* for having a good life, and wisdom is the meta-knowledge (second–order knowledge) for providing the conception of a good life and guiding its realization, wisdom can be considered as a meta-technology of the self. For it provides both the theoretical and practical means for the conception, design and realization of a good life for the end for attaining eudaimonia. The means to the realization of a good life may include and often does include first-order technologies such as computers, for example. If computers can be considered as extensions of the self then the degree by which they form part of the self also becomes a question concerning wisdom. How and to what degree computers as an extension of the self, contribute to a good life for the attainment of eudaimonia? To the extent that first-order technologies provide the means for making our lives better by contributing to a good life and wisdom provides the means as a meta-technology of the self for enabling human beings to have a good life for the attainment of eudaimonia, then clearly wisdom conceived as a type of a cognitive meta-technology should direct the choice and design of first-order technologies; especially, those technologies that will have the highest eudaimonic value and the highest capacity for making a positive contribution to a good life; similarly, wisdom as a cognitive meta-technology should direct the avoidance of the design and choice of first-order technologies that have the capacity to make negative contributions to a good life (ii).

Take as an illustrative example, information communication technologies (ICTs): these technologies can have a high eudaimonic value by contributing positively to individual and social wellbeing, for example, by enabling the maintenance of good relationships between family members, friends and colleagues. By contrast, when misused, such technologies can have a negative eudaimonic impact and diminish the wellbeing of its users and that of others. Cyber-bullying and sexting as in the recent case

of the New York mayoral candidate Anthony Wiener, are just two such examples. Insofar as the negative impact of the use of technologies on well-being is not always the fault of the technologies but that of their users, wisdom is especially useful in offering guidance, or at the very least raising awareness, of how to use technologies to enhance wellbeing for oneself and others rather than diminish it. Sometimes the diminution of wellbeing for oneself and others though the misuse of the communication of information though Facebook, email, Twitter and other digital communication devises occurs not so much because of malicious conduct but rather because of self-defeating, unreflective, unwise and foolish behavior. Wisdom is and can be the antidote to such behavior.

Wisdom Applications (W-apps)- Designing Wisdom-Assisted-Technologies

To the extent that knowledge is a necessary but not sufficient condition for wisdom then existing technological applications (apps) that one finds on most smartphones or tablets such as iPads, apps have the capacity to contribute to individual and collective knowledge, which in turn may contribute to our individual and collective wisdom, and that in turn contribute to our individual and collective wellbeing. For example, an app such as "myfitnesspal" that enables the monitoring of calorie-intake, weight-gain and weight-loss for regulating a healthy diet and body weight and avoiding being overweight or obese that has adverse health implications and a potential negative impact on wellbeing can be conceived as a Wellbeing-Enhancing-App and as such can be thought of as a Wisdom–app or W-app since it provides information of how to improve or enhance one's wellbeing, which is the direct aim of wisdom. If my analysis is correct at least in outline if not in detail we should as a society aim to systematically design wisdom in technologies through designing W-apps or other technologies as a means of contributing to our individual and collective wisdom for the attainment of our individual and collective eudaimonia and wellbeing. Insofar as wellbeing is a fundamental positive right, designing technologies that contribute to wisdom and by extension to wellbeing becomes a societal ethical responsibility.

Disclaimer

There was no external funding in the preparation of this manuscript.

Competing Interests

The author declares that he has no competing interests.

Notes

i. For further elaboration on this topic, See Alan Gewirth, Self-fulfilment (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998) and Reason and Morality (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978) as well as Edward Spence, Ethics Within Reason: A Neo-Gewirthian Approach (Lexington Books, Lanham, 2006).

ii. For an extensive discussion of what wisdom is and some different types of notions of wisdom, see Edward Spence, "Information, Knowledge and Wisdom: Groundwork for the Normative Evaluation of Digital Information and its Relation to the Good Life," Australian Journal of Professional and Applied Ethics. 2008; 10(1 and 2):73-81.

References

1. Spence E. Ethics within reason: a neo-Gewirthian approach. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books (a division of Rowman and Littlefield); 2006.
2. Spence E. Information ethics without metaphysics: a neo-Gewirthian approach. International journal of technology and human interaction. 2010; 6(1):1–14.
3. Brink D. Eudaimonism, love and friendship, and political community. Social Philosophy and Policy. 1999; 16:252–289.
4. Kekes J. Moral wisdom and good lives. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press; 1995.