



The quest for autonomy in the digital age

ATTENTION ECONOMY

MORALITY

DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY

On the one hand, digital technologies have proven to be very liberating: they give us unprecedented access to information, ways to communicate with others, or voice or own thoughts and opinions to a global public. However, excessive use of digital technology and the proliferation of companies that are fighting for our attention also mean that we are becoming increasingly distracted. Moreover, this “attention crisis” puts pressure on the foundations of our moral theory and ideas of freedom, and forces us to rethink our ideas about everyday practices.

Our observations

- We have written before that [capturing our attention](#) has become the defining business of our time, and is about more than advertisement, as attention has become the building block of the entire digital economy. Furthermore, managing our interactions with the world and making them as smooth or [frictionless as possible](#) is one of the core imperatives of the smartening of our living worlds and has become the main goal of a new strand of “[affective capitalism](#)”.
- While digital technology has become an absolute necessity in our everyday lives, the [problems](#) of excessive use have also become all the more clear. For example, [social media usage](#) stimulates the same part of the brain as cocaine, making it highly addictive. And a [Microsoft consumer study](#) even found that the human attention span is now only 8 seconds, down from 12 seconds in 2000 (and shorter than the attention span of a goldfish, which is 9 seconds), because of the proliferation of screens and digital devices in our daily lives (e.g. millennials in the U.S. check their smartphone [150 times](#) per day).
- In his book [Shop Class as Soulcraft: An Inquiry into the Value of Work](#) (2009) Matthew Crawford states that the de-skilling of our everyday life results from the decoupling of knowing and doing, of our actions and their effects. Because people see their own actions reflected in the world less, e.g. because they are part of a huge production chain that spreads across multiple companies and countries, or because they do not know which effects are caused by their actions, people are losing touch with social produced reality and the value of work. The same goes for everyday activities, such as [cooking](#), [driving a car](#), or [repairing a bike](#), which we outsource to the “gig economy”.
- In his second book [The World Beyond our Heads: On becoming an Individual in an Age of Distraction](#) (2015) Crawford shows that genuine agency happens only when we become attuned to the world, objects and things. This means that autonomy is not only a matter of choosing what to do, when and how, but subjecting oneself to the rules and necessities of practice and things. For example, to become a good music player, one has to discipline oneself and learn from rules and habits how to play the instrument. However, given the proliferation of screens and digital services, we are increasingly distracted by them (e.g. we check our email or our phone more and more frequently), resulting in a cultural “crisis of attention” in which we cannot attend to things outside of our screens and ourselves anymore.

Connecting the dots

Digital technology gives us more access to the world (e.g. global news is just a click away) and provides us with a higher degree of freedom to do what we like (our smartphone connects us to global networks and an [increasing variety of digital services](#)). As such, it ties in with the ethics of consumer capitalist culture, as we are freed from constraints and experience an increase in the possibilities to satisfy our consumer preferences. However, given the proliferation of big tech companies vying for our attention, using swaths of big data to track and predict what we like to pay attention to, this means that we are also experiencing a “crisis of attention”, according to Crawford. As we are increasingly distracted, whether by our devices, social media or because companies use data to make their attention-capturing techniques even more pervasive and well-targeted, the anthropological foundation of our moral theories and conceptions of the self is being undermined. However, as our attention is more and more drawn by commercial parties, our ability to make autonomous choices is decreasing. Human beings are reflective and rational beings, and it is only by reason-giving, i.e. by justifying our actions and constructing a narrative about ourselves (and more broadly: the society and symbolic order we live in called “culture”), that we become truly human. Most of this thinking and rational deliberation happens when we abstract from the immediate sensory inputs of the environment (e.g. we look up to the sky when we try to remember something or gaze into the void when we think). “Autobiographical thought” thus arises only when we are in a position to let go of our direct environment, reinforcing our mental capacities, as with thoughts and ideas, we are better able to control our environment (e.g. the [Hegelian idea of concrete freedom](#)). It is in these times that we find coherence in our experience and ourselves, making human beings the only beings able to recall something that is not cued by the environment or which transcends sensible reality. However, this thus happens only in times when the envi-

ronment does not make urgent claims on our attention, and we need to have a space for this rational agency in which we suppress our awareness of the environment and have no external stimuli to distract us. Thus our age of distraction puts our human activity of coherence-finding at risk. Furthermore, this increased distraction puts the foundation of our moral theory under pressure. We have written before that Western culture places [high value on autonomy and individual freedom](#), much more so than other cultures. In fact, in [Kantian moral philosophy](#), autonomy and individual free choice make up the foundation of moral philosophy that is still dominant in today’s moral theory. Autonomy, according to Kant, means “giving a law to oneself”, and its opposite is “heteronomy”: being ruled by something alien to oneself. Only autonomous decisions, which come from rational reason itself, can be the proper foundation of a universal and rational moral theory. But as we are becoming more distracted and algorithms now often determine what we get to see and [make our choices](#), we are ever-more determined by heteronomous forces, undermining our autonomy and thus the freedom to make real, moral choices. However, new, positive reactions are emerging to these forces that undermine the coherence of our individuality and autonomy. One example is the returning cult of craftsmanship that wants to amplify the causality between action and effect, between work and production. This is visible in, for example, the emergence of craftsmanship in food and drinks, such as [beer](#) or [coffee](#). Other examples are about creating a serious space for rational agency in which the external stimuli of the environment are suppressed, and focus is redirected towards the self, such as meditation or the popularity of [martial arts](#), which combine spirituality with sports. More theoretically, this is reflected in the re-emergence of philosophy in popular discourse or the increased [interest in different cultural notions](#) of autonomy and individuality.

Implications

- We have written before about people’s struggles in dealing with the [vast, abstract forces](#) that influence and dominate our daily lives at the beginning of the 21st century, such as secularization, globalization, digitization. In his book [The Metropolis and Mental Life](#) (1903), sociologist George Simmel compares the psychological life of the city dweller with that of the rural inhabitant. Because of the “intensification of nervous stimulation” from the continuous stream of outer and inner stimuli (e.g. traffic signs, billboards, sounds, other people), human psychology is fundamentally altered in the metropolis. Many people, according to Simmel, who follows Nietzsche, are not well-equipped to resist these destabilizing forces. However, this suggests that technologies that vie for our attention are not inherently harmful to human beings, but what matters is how they are implemented and used in everyday life.
- Kantian moral philosophy has become the foundation of consumer capitalism, as the consumer is able to freely choose the products and services he likes, while his preferences are the representation of his free will and autonomous calculations that lie beyond rational scrutiny. As such, a growing number of experts now agree that the internet needs to be “[fixed](#)”, in order to align social with private interests, by establishing, for example, new user practices, new business models, new regulations and possibly a new set of leading tech companies. The undermining of our freedom and moral responsibility is another vector for attacks on the “[market failures](#)” in the attention economy, possibly to be used in the current antitrust debate surrounding big tech.
- The deep psychological urge to realize ourselves through our actions and make something happen is reflected in new consumer practices, as we’ve described. Furthermore, they also point to new concepts of intelligence and autonomy, such as embodied knowledge or extended cognition. However, this is increasingly at odds with rational epistemology and anthropology in Western culture, and thus forces us to rethink even more fundamental questions about the nature of the self and freedom.