Moral Education in the Digital Age

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Abstract

Our natural human inclination to seek a moral understanding of the world is one of the oldest cultural narratives handed down since the beginning of recorded history. Much has been written on the ontic nature of moral absolutes and the rhetorical discourse of what makes a good citizen, but neither metaphysics nor politics has been totally prepared for the instantly ubiquitous nature of digital technology and its effect on societies in the contemporary age of the networked world. This paper reflects both a philosophical inquiry into the nature of technical systems through a set of anecdotal observations on civic engagement, moral education and service learning as historically practiced at Saint Mary's College of California. With digital culture making information instantly accessible, unlimitedly dense, and bereft of context, younger generations of learners are finding it increasingly difficult to differentiate between information and knowledge and are easily lured into a reliance on technology to create meaning out of the hyper-mediation of contemporary society. Imbedded within this digital culture of instant gratification are innumerable problems for colleges and universities in terms of moral education, academic integrity, research reliability, and leadership formation in critical areas of civic engagement and social responsibility. This paper details the evolution of technical systems in the *artes liberales*, focusing in particular on the Cartesian *cogito* and its historical importance in the development of the age of enlightenment and the subsequent reverence for both the principles and practices of technocratic society and the consumer contrivances that represent the importance of technology in contemporary culture. The second part of this paper takes an anecdotal look at current pedagogical and curricular initiatives at Saint Mary's College of California to address the need for moral education and civic engagement in the first decades of the 21st century.

Short Overview

This paper is a philosophical inquiry into the nature of technical systems through anecdotal observations on civic engagement, moral education and service learning as practiced at Saint Mary's College of California.
Moral Education in the Digital Age

This paper is a philosophical inquiry into the nature of technical systems through the lens of anecdotal observation in the areas of civic engagement, moral education and service learning. Structurally, this paper is divided into two parts: (1) a descriptive analysis of contemporary digital culture from a metaphysical perspective, and (2) a prescriptive survey of initiatives currently underway at Saint Mary’s College of California the aims of which are to address the question of moral citizenship in the 21st century.

I must state up front that the topic of curricular initiatives involving civic education has not been my primary source of scholarship up to this point. Historically my writings have focused more on the philosophical nature of science and technology including those cultural artifacts that are evidenced when deconstructing the ontic nature of technical systems as manifest in both individual personality traits and attitudinal constructs found in larger group structures. That being said, the presentation of this paper at a conference on civic education research is by no means born of happenstance. There is a very specific set of circumstances that compelled me to begin writing this essay expressing my concern about what I, and other colleagues, have been observing by way of a collapse of ethical and moral reasoning in many aspects of contemporary culture. The following opening comments will explore those personal catalysts that led to this essay and place them within a larger context of the evolution of our technical inventiveness and its effects on post-modern society.

A certain amount of background into Saint Mary’s College of California is first necessary to set the stage for my later remarks. Founded in 1863 and located in the San
Francisco Bay region, Saint Mary’s is one of the oldest colleges on the west coast. More importantly, it’s Catholic, Lasallian, and Liberal Arts heritage has created an intellectual ferment that fosters “the intellectual skills and habits of mind which liberate persons to probe deeply the mystery of existence and live authentically in response to the truths they discover” (Saint Mary’s College of California [a]). And most importantly, an ethical meta-context calling for “an awareness of economic and social injustice” (Saint Mary’s College of California [b]) gives a purpose and meaning to the educational experience intended to move the learner from the classroom and directly into the sphere of citizenship and community. A core liberal arts curriculum, including a required four-semester great books seminar sequence, is central to this intellectual engagement, allowing students and faculty to participate in that great conversation that has been at the heart of western discourse for thousands of years. This grand dialogic is expected to provide more than just an immersion into the western canon, but also to allow for deep thought into contemporary issues through the Platonic lens of self-examination and the Aristotelian understanding of a *polis* born equally from politics, ethics and rhetoric (Anderson, 2005).

A synthesis of the college’s three core tenets and their role in shaping the institution’s principles of civic education was most recently articulated in an institutional accreditation document (Saint Mary’s College of California [b]):

Issues of social justice have a long and rich history in the three traditions of Saint Mary’s College. The college mission statement challenges students to probe deeply the mysteries of existence, to look twice, ask why, and seek not merely facts, but fundamental principles. The spirit of the liberal arts, especially the practice of shared inquiry initiates students into the examined life and enables them to contribute meaningfully to the common good and community life. The Catholic tradition has a long-standing history of social teaching that promotes action on behalf of justice as a constitutive dimension of practical faith. Our
Catholic heritage [also] charges us to defend the goodness, dignity and freedom of each person, and to foster sensitivity to social and ethical concerns. . . . there is a distinctive awareness of the consequences of economic and social injustice and its commitment to the poor. The phrase “Enter to Learn, Leave to Serve” has become our familiar motto connecting us to an historical and global context of direction and support for addressing issues of social justice.

In sum, the ageless pursuit of truth and understanding has long been woven throughout the fibers of the Saint Mary’s institutional fabric and each generation of graduate has been challenged to use their education in service of the common good and especially for the disenfranchised.

Against this backdrop of a college founded on the theory and practice of civic virtue and social justice, has been a recent series of troubling observations about unethical behaviors by Saint Mary’s students. Many of the issues have been socially related such as alcohol abuse and date rape. To some extent, there has been concern for what appears to be apathy towards the topic of local and national politics. These and other issues certainly have found their way into the public discourse of community formation, however these collective conversations pale in comparison to the universal concern by the faculty towards academic dishonesty and in particular plagiarism. Saint Mary’s of course is not alone in this concern. A rash of academic dishonesty has swept across academe like a wildfire, threatening to undermine not just the educational end-product, but also the very process of education itself. This problem became the genesis for this paper whose attempt it is to show that causation is in large part a by-product of: (1) the technical age we live in through which there is an expectation for technical solutions to deep problems, (2) a ubiquitous culture of computing that contributes to this allusion and actually fosters unethical behavior, and (3) a resultant blurring of ethical and
moral reasoning due to the hyper-mediation of messages that ultimately renders communication meaningless and devoid of context.

Thus, the central thesis for this paper is that the various manifestations of 21st digital culture have created a confusion towards an ontic sense of self identity, a decline in trust of institutions, a lapse in ethical and moral reasoning, and a lack of responsibility for civic engagement. This primary contention is predicated upon the ontic nature of technical systems, especially the digital technologies of the 21st century, and the notion that they have become the new evolutionary yardstick by which we measure the advancement of the species. This is represented by the seminal theories of Media Extensionism and Technological Determinism as espoused by the likes of Jacques Ellul (1991), Harold Innis (1951), Paul Levinson (1997), Marshall McLuhan (1962, 1964), Lewis Mumford (1934, 1966), Neil Postman (1992, 1995), and other contemporary scholars inquiring into the philosophical nature of technical systems. Furthermore, the ubiquitous infusion of consumer technologies throughout every aspect of popular culture along with the electron-quick nature of networked communications and the general acceptance of citizenship in the virtual agora of cyberspace, has led us to the brink of the imploding collapse of the post-modern era of the twentieth century. Finally, I contend that one critical method for the understanding and control of this new paradigm is through a pedagogical praxis in which timeless truths are purposefully imbedded into contemporary channels of public discourse and contemporary culture.

I would like to begin the discussion with the premise that while digital networks now make information instantly accessible, they also create an information stream of
unlimited density that is simultaneously bereft of context. This phenomenon has created a unique set of challenges for today’s generation of learners who are finding it increasingly difficult to differentiate between information and knowledge and are easily lured into a reliance on technology to create meaning out of the hyper-mediation of contemporary society. Imbedded within this digital culture of instant data-gratification are innumerable problems for colleges and universities in terms of moral education, academic integrity, research reliability, and leadership formation in critical areas of civic engagement and social responsibility. This has been witnessed most profoundly over the past several years during which time there has been a dramatic rise in plagiarism caused by the vast storehouse of essays and thesis stored in the databases of the Internet and the amazing ease by which students can retrieve these documents. This acknowledged rise in academic dishonesty was what first compelled me to begin writing this essay as I saw more and more students getting lured into unethical behaviors because the information infrastructure made it too enticing not to.

The shifting paradigms of contemporary culture that have led to this phenomenon have been readily apparent the past several years. The current generation of youth holds high the moniker of Napster as the standard bearer for the rapid shift in the ways we understand commerce, culture and entertainment. Peer-to-peer file sharing networks, low-cost digital recording systems, and wide-band, high-speed information pipelines have dramatically altered the ways we produce, consume, and communicate. Within this context, the expectations for ethical behaviors involving intellectual property become just so-much static in the background noise of information glut. For many students, it is just assumed that lifting text from a website is no different than downloading a free MP3 song.
which is no different than pasting a digital image in PhotoShop which is no different than moving blocks of text around a word-processed document. In other words, for those weaned at the bosom of technology, everything can be converted to a binary bit stream, thus rendering all things digital as fair game for cooption, deconstruction and later reconstruction. It’s no longer a matter of illegal or immoral actions. The problem has evolved into an identity crisis in which we attempt to find meaning in foundational truths in an age in which the prevailing ethos is based on rapid change, constant evolution and total rejection of prior ethical structures.

Tapscott (1998), noting that 30% of the current U.S population in 1999 was comprised of children between the ages of 2 and 22, began referring to this demographic as the Net Generation or N-Geners. Tapscott, unlike the critics of the post-modern world, views this generation has having a highly evolved set of values based that has allowed them to communicate, play, learn, work and think in new ways.

Many pundits describe youth today as materialistic, self-absorbed, cynical, and demanding of immediate gratification. From our experience, these pundits are wrong . . . They are the young navigators. They doubt that traditional institutions can provide them with the good life and take personal responsibility for their lives. They do value material goods but they are not self-absorbed. They are more knowledgeable than any previous generation and they care deeply about social issues. They believe strongly in individual rights such as privacy and rights to information. But they have no ethos of individualism, thriving, rather, from close interpersonal networks and displaying a strong sense of social responsibility. (p. 9)

It has also been observed that the current generation of youth have developed the ability for multiprocessing in ways prior generations never experienced. A recent study at the Xerox Palo Alto Research Center (Brown, 2000) demonstrated that “today’s kids are always ‘multiprocessing’ – they do several things simultaneously – listen to music, talk on the cell phone, and use the computer, all at the same time . . . I was astonished that
[they] could do this so well” (p. 4). Such attributes appear to be merely a hint of the changes to come, requiring modern educators to reevaluate how they teach to Gen-N, what is taught to them, and the reasons that they teach the way they do. As Tapscott (1998) succinctly stated, “Those who believe that these youth will be passive supporters of the status quo are in for a surprise” (p. 9).

As strategies are developed to answer the rhetorical and pragmatic implications of the above queries, an interesting by-product of the immersive virtual agora into which Gen-N is born begins to become evident. This by-product of the all-pervasive digital culture that cocoons Gen-N is what Ihde (1990) referred to as pluriculturalism.

The first curvature of the contemporary lifeworld now acquired is what I shall call pluriculturality. It is a lifeform arising out of the use of image-technologies catching up to cultures. I shall use this neologism to contrast with the cross-cultural and the multicultural, which are related phenomena not necessarily formed by technological mediations. (p. 164)

Ihde goes on to describe this pluricultural phenomenon in the context of digital technology’s multiplicity of uses. A general purpose computer, for example, can be used for any number of tasks including word-processing, media production, communication, data management, entertainment, information gathering, etc. Within this framework, this cultural hermeneutic creates an oxymoronic neutrality of fixed-relativism in which the user defines the intentionality of use, but must do so within a very circumscribed set of parameters (Tywoniak, 2001). What this has done for those in Gen-N is to create an “illusion of neutrality that associates with all technologies” (Ihde, p. 164). Ihde perceived this as having a ripple effect throughout the social and cultural constructs of this generational group. As noted earlier, an example of this can be found in the seeming neutrality of ethical decision-making by young adults when confronted with the question
of ethics regarding the illegal downloading of copyrighted music over the Internet. To them, the decision to download copyrighted material has no ethical implication, but rather is just another method of digital manipulation of the world around them.

Dangers arise as cultural neutrality leads to a perception of technological neutrality when applied to education. “We’re faced with a crisis in knowing how to distinguish truth from falsity, the legitimate from the illegitimate, and reality from make-believe – or even caring about the difference” (Stacks, 1996, pp. 123-124). Collins (2000) described how Paulo Freire recognized the non-neutrality of technology within a pedagogical framework.

Subjectivity and objectivity are not dichotomized in a true act of knowing... language may be taken in two different ways which seriously distort thought. He [Freire] names two epistemological errors: (a) subjective idealism and (b) mechanistic objectivism. The first error becomes possible if ‘ad-miration’ and ‘re-ad-miration’ of human perception are understood to identify thought with the object of consciousness. This error leads to solipsism. The mechanistic error arises when one ignores the fact that human consciousness is a copy of reality. Either error will lead men to act uncritically, a-historically, and in an unauthentic fashion. (p. 213)

Thus, how one teaches ethics and morality in a seemingly neutral cultural context becomes an interesting dilemma. It is here that Catholic educational philosophy might have a particular inside track, but for reasons not readily evident. Although the Catholic school environment is structured around a core moral foundation, it also has another fundamental institutional purpose at work – “the aim of a common education of mind and spirit” (Lee, 1997). When all students follow an academic curriculum and all have common academic experiences, it is not surprising that they all learn more” (Lee, 1997, p. 155). Such a common purpose of “mind and spirit” could very well suggest a way of
providing meaning within the "neutrality" of pluriculturalism as curricula are developed for the classroom of tomorrow.

At this point it is necessary to delve a little further into the etymological derivation of the word "technical" which finds its root in the Greek *technikos* or *techne*, which meant art, craft or skill. While *techne* originally described a "technique", we now find within the context of modern English that it has become more closely associated with its linguistic cousin "technology" and the culture of science rather than the more humanistic concept of an artisan's skillful craftsmanship. The irony of the lexicon has not been lost on the critics of popular culture's fascination with technological instruments. Ellul (1964), Postman (1992), Stoll (1995) and others have been vociferous in their criticism of society's blind acceptance of technology and the ubiquitous glut of information clutter permeating every aspect of global culture (Postman, 1992). Such criticism has made its way into a broad range of rhetorical discourse including economics, business, education, politics, science, and theology. In particular, in the arena of philosophy, the conversation has turned to questions involving the teleological relationship between human essence and the development of tools and techniques.

For this author, this central thesis of the evolution of philosophical thought as it relates to humanity's relationship with technology finds its pivotal moment in the 17th century and the dawning of the Scientific Revolution. In particular, René Descartes, and his declaration of an internal epistemology devoid of external causation, forever changed the ontology of technology. Descartes (1641/1992) through his meditative reflection "Cogito ergo sum" (I am thinking, therefore I am being) heralded the rational shift of epistemic reference to a self-actualized primacy that forever changed the course of
history and ushered in the age of scientism as we almost overnight began to ascribe to technology those attributes of human causation that were previously ascribed only to God. Descartes himself described his *cogito* as follows:

... observing that this proposition, *I am thinking, therefore I exist*, was so firm and sure that all the most extravagant suppositions of the skeptics were incapable of shaking it, I decided that I could accept it without scruple as the first principle of the philosophy I was seeking. (p. 7)

From this simple reflection came forth a transformative restructuring of how humankind would forever view its relationship to primary causation. In the acceptance of human essence as the first principle, humanity could direct its focus towards technological efforts aimed at becoming that which had heretofore been thought to be unattainable, to aspire towards the perfection of God himself (Noble, 1997). Thus, Descartes' influence on philosophy, mathematics, ethics, and eventually even psychology was revolutionary and significantly aided in the shift from a theosophical to a technical worldview.

Of course Descartes' revelation wasn't born in a vacuum. The Age of Enlightenment found humanity delving deeply into the mysteries of the universe as our abilities of observation progressed to the point where we gained tremendous new understandings of the cosmological connectedness of the heavenly bodies and the subatomic world. The information explosion resulting from Gutenberg's moveable-type printing press further accelerated our expanding universe of knowledge and brought heretofore unthinkable concepts directly into the experiential grasp of virtually everyone. Within 50 years of the invention of the press, "eight million books had been printed, almost all of them filled with information that had previously been unavailable to the average person" (Postman, 1992, p. 61). The printing press unleashed a variety of new modes of thinking that accelerated the changes wrought by media extensions of human
thought. Typography also created a homogenized repeatability that eventually led to the mass consumerism that has become the predominant characteristic of the Western world (McLuhan, 1962). It was perhaps Marshall McLuhan who proferred the grandest explication of this concept in his presaging of the Internet and the World Wide Web.

Today, after more than a century of electric technology, we have extended our central nervous system itself in a global embrace, abolishing both space and time as far as our planet is concerned. Rapidly, we approach the final phase of the extension of man – the technological simulation of consciousness, when the creative process of knowing will be collectively and corporately extended to the whole of human society, much as we have already extended our senses and our nerves by the various media. (p. 19)

So it is that we find ourselves at the dawn of the third millennium and facing the inevitable challenges of a species in transition. At Saint Mary’s College, we have found ourselves beginning to find consensus of voice in the articulation of those core tenets that lead to the morally educated citizen of the 21st century. In the spirit and likeness of Aristotle’s vision of an educated citizenry improving the body politic and John Dewey’s more contemporary philosophies equating education with democracy, Saint Mary’s has made recent commitments to key initiatives intended to purposefully move us to a culture of justice. As noted earlier, the college mission statement challenges students to “probe deeply the mysteries of existence, to look twice, ask why, and seek not merely facts, but fundamental principles” (Saint Mary’s College of California [a], 2004). To prevent these statements from being just so many words, the college has systematically engaged in a thorough examination of its efforts towards social justice in all curricular and extracurricular aspects of the institution. To this end, Saint Mary’s has recently provided internal assessment and external validation of core initiatives intended to create a culture of justice, a curriculum of deep thought and purposeful praxis, and an expectation that all
members of the campus community engage in the ongoing conversation about what it means to teach and learn for the sake of social justice and the common good.

A brief survey of recent initiatives addressing civic engagement is impressive in depth, breadth and scope. For example, imbedded in both core and professional curricula “is a horizontal theoretical context that explores the symbiotic relationship between civic engagement, social capital and liberal education” (Saint Mary’s College of California, 2003). New courses have been introduced that are specifically structured along the theme of social responsibility. Academic programs such as our Liberal and Civic Studies major create opportunities for direct social engagement in the community as a fundamental part of an experiential learning framework that takes theory and converts it into direct praxis. Faculty are encouraged to view themselves as “public intellectuals” and recruitment and orientation for faculty which focus on these themes are now an accepted part of our academic culture. Recent student-led initiatives have resulted in an ambitious recycling program intended to go far beyond typical recycling efforts in order to teach all members of the community the role we play in the stewardship of the planet. Students also spearheaded a successful living wage campaign for our primarily Latino janitorial and grounds-keeping staff. Again it was students who brought to the forefront issues of gender equity in both the academic and social aspects of the institution. Faculty are now encouraged to pursue scholarship in the areas of civic engagement as part of the rank and tenure review. And students, staff and faculty are being trained by members of the Public Dialogue Consortium in the art of public discourse and consensus building. The list goes, but suffice to say that there has been, and continues to be, a willful acceptance of ownership by the community for the conscious and conscientious engagement with
contemporary issues of social inequality in all of its variants. It is the contention of the college that “social trust, civic efficacy and democratic tolerance,” the hallmarks of social capital, are the foundational cornerstones of civic engagement. In a broader context, “the academy, like other social institutions, cannot function in the absence of social capital. The hallmarks of higher education, such as open dialogue and freedom of inquiry, are not possible unless the minimum conditions of social stability and support are present.

Conversely, responsible membership and leadership in social, political, and economic communities presupposes the intellectual skills and habits of mind imparted in the academy” (Saint Mary’s College of California, 2003).

The most significant manifestation of these principles came to fruition at Saint Mary’s College during the commencement of this 2004 – 2005 academic year in which the college initiated a mandatory academic honor code for students. Two years in the development, the honor code is intended to address the problem of academic dishonesty at our institution while simultaneously inculcating our students with ownership and responsibility for their own scholarship and learning. New student orientation sessions have been purposefully restructured to better focus incoming students on the understanding and appreciation of the of the higher-order reasons for intellectual engagement and their personal responsibility for their own work in their own words. Of particular note was a rite of passage ceremony for incoming freshmen at the start of this academic year during which the students, with great fanfare and celebration, signed an honor code pledge that reads: “As a student member of an academic community based in mutual trust and responsibility, I pledge: to do my work at all times, without giving or receiving inappropriate aid; to avoid behaviors that unfairly impede the academic
progress of other members of the community; and to take reasonable and responsible action in order to uphold my community’s academic integrity.” And most impressive is the fact that facilitation and management of the academic honor code system is student-driven including peer review of cases involving academic dishonesty and impropriety. These are students empowered to lead a culture built upon ethical and moral expectations and behaviors.

So it is in conclusion that I marvel at these tremendously exciting initiatives that herald the blossoming of a golden age for Saint Mary’s College and its core mission of service to humanity and leadership formation in the areas of social justice and civic engagement. Yet, in the typical fashion of the Greek tragedy, I find myself observing the fruits of these important labors from within the context of an institution still struggling with the pedagogical formula through which our learning community truly embraces and engages these ideals. For all of our wonderfully inspiring initiatives, and I am truly personally inspired by the work we are doing, I am keenly aware of all the work that still needs to be done and the difficulties that lay ahead. As we in the field of civic education collectively struggle with these issues, our primary task is to maintain a sense of optimism and forward momentum in the work that we do. Regardless of the systemic roadblocks we encounter, both human and technical, the need has never been greater for a unified effort towards the guidance and shaping of a just and equitable future.

*Dominus opus tuum.*
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