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Contribution to Information Ethics from an antique point of view

Abstract:

Of course Plato and Aristotle were not using any of our modern communication systems or media. But there was a kind of phenomena that was close to what we consider mass media entertainment nowadays: poetry. Both philosophers used mimesis as an epistemological explanation for how one can possibly understand poetry. One thought of it as being good for mankind and the other thought of it as being bad for the human soul. In a certain way this argument is still going on in today's information ethics discussion. This article stresses the fact that only a certain conscious way of dealing with information will bring sustainable impact on global information ethics – independent of cultural or technical issues.

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Introduction: Issues and Context

The debates on Information Ethics are ruled by the "Digital Divide". Within this topic justice and responsibility are the main issues concerning technical and contentual distribution. Internet and unsolved problems within its development are the favourite fields of examination. Examples range from (1) legal difficulties in creating a fair global trade-, information- and communication-law or (2) financial questions about who pays the "spreading" of information technology. Solving these issues has become a global challenge that is even taken care of by the UNO.ⁱ

Parallel to these burning problems other issues concerning Information Ethics remain untouched. Even though some of these other issues have been around for decades and are still not worked off all the way.ⁱⁱ Especially considering the *perception of media* one oscillates in between theories, depending on what there is to observe – whether there are pictures, text, sound or combinations, moving or non-moving, involving interactions or not.

So on one side we are working on a globally valid normative frame of action for the internet and following evolutions, while on the other side multimedia-usage is constantly rising. In the meanwhile the argument on individual media-perception has moved out of philosophical (ethical) sight and into other scientific disciplines such as communication- or pedagogic studies. But the individual fascination towards media is a central point of the discussion. How can we expect thoughtful and responsible (ethically speaking: *good*) media usage if we cannot even describe what exactly media usage is? Without knowing about the phenomenon of media fascination, how can we judge whether media usage is good or bad? Discussing media perception marks the first step in the analysis of good media usage.

Testing TV Instead

Media usage is growing constantly. This development not only effects the individuals using media in the first place, but also their social and cultural surrounding.ⁱⁱⁱ Hereby the perception of *real reality* is replaced by the perception of *virtual reality*. Whether this leads to an irritation in the mind of the subject or not can also be examined taking TV as a reference instead of internet. Internet has not become a substitute for TV. At least in Germany

people watch TV more than ever.^{iv} Due to its simple (one-dimensional) structure of non-responsive perceiving, observation is clearer. Unlike others who work in this field, the opinion held in this article is that keeping apart virtual reality from real reality is epistemologically not impossible. It might require an extra effort, but nevertheless it is possible (and necessary – as we will see).^v

Statistical data shows, the fascination of TV is unbound. But data does not explain why. Many cognitive transformations take place whilst consuming TV – some of which are conscious, others "sub-" or "unconscious". A proper judgement of the consequences of media usage therefore presupposes an analysis of media perception (or media *consciousness*). Within this context media perception is not meant to be some special form of perceiving, nor does it preliminarily require special social or biological skills. It can however in a way be understood as a special kind of perception, not technically but concerning the expectations. Of course expectations vary if one compares looking at landscapes and watching TV. In the first case one might expect little but a great deal in the other. Dealing with viewer expectations, by presenting a story without letting him participate in the plot, has been part of the reason for Plato and Aristotle to argue about the influence of poetry. Even though both philosophers take imitation (*mimesis*) as the principle of perceiving poetry they derive contrary ethical consequences.

Antique Couch-Potatoes?

The analysis of threats induced by mass media leads us to phenomena that were current also at Plato's and Aristotle's time – unnecessary to mention the technical differences between then and today! Reading Plato and Aristotle one can actually find these similarities in today's media ethics discussion.^{vi}

Combining antique ideas and ideals with today's requirements of media ethics is possible due to shared principles of communication. Of course society has changed within the past 2500 years, and so have the technical devices that surround us on a day-to-day basis. But what has not changed is the formal structure of communication between transmitter and receiver. This is the basis of the following idea, to compare two forms of mass media, antique poetry and TV, both of which deal with a limited possibility of direct response.

The intention is to clarify the historical groundwork. Given the *idea of good and bad*, we will evaluate what is necessary for *good media usage*. Whether good usage requires *good media* or *good users*, or both. Looking back to Plato and Aristotle we will try to fit old solutions into modern day problems. The following two chapters (about "revisiting") will therefore show what certain influence one or the other philosopher would take on today's media if he were to formulate a position in media ethics.

Plato „Revisited“

Following Plato's idea of a perfect state, the only media formats allowed would be the ones which (1) praise the work of the state or (2) clear up about the work of the state or (3) educate the people in any other way that can have a positive effect for the state. These would be news and documentaries. Critical or even destructive contents would be forbidden as well as badly investigated ones. Movies, Series, Daily Soaps and Advertising would also be forbidden. As a matter of fact, these ideals have a lot in common with the first days of state-run television in Germany.

As Plato differentiates between various levels of cognition, all that reaches the human mind through media can at best be something "third" in the hierarchy of truth, which makes media in general suspicious of manipulation.^{vii} Between the object and the viewer there is always at least a cameraman, who picks a certain angle on the object, an editor, who chooses parts of the material he gets, and some technical equipment, that transports the information from where it is to where it is viewed. An example shows though how difficult it is to transport Plato's idea of a hierarchy of truth into today's world: various forms of media create knowledge in a way that exceeds natural human consciousness. Today mankind knows a great deal through high tech lenses, cameras or other media. Certain "truths" would not be known if there weren't appropriate media. X-ray and Ultrasound show us images of things we would not see without them.^{viii}

Would Plato raise an objection against this form of discovering truth, knowing all the information about something true could be something third at best? Probably not. His argument against poetry and so in a sense also against certain forms of media isn't that all is automatically untrue what is "third" but that it has a potential of diluting the idea from the object. What also bothers him about poetry is the artificiality of "pleasure and reluctance" that simulates truth but is something different.^{ix}

Summing up, Plato's view can be described as a fear of polluting the human mind through artificial impressions that lead away from truth and virtuousness.

However, not everything he considers "third" automatically leads to a negative proposition. So without further explanation, we can accept certain media as helpful in getting closer to truth. In this sense we can not directly conclude anything between poetry and media, but we can identify poetry as a possibility of language that is not welcome in a Plato-state as movies are one possibility of media that would not be welcome either. Whereas the exclusion of movies in this example does *not necessarily* have an impact on other forms of media.

Aristotle „Revisited“

In Plato's sense the audience is not sufficiently educated to properly understand the essence of poetry.^x Aristotle on the other hand arrives at a different diagnosis. He makes no difference between people with higher or lower education: the only effect poetry can have is to clean the soul. One can imagine so called *catharsis* similar to a process of an illness: from infection to outbreak to healing.^{xi} After this the soul feels free and relieved. This phenomenon is also known as the experience of "tragic pleasure".^{xii}

The media system can also be divided into the three central fields of Aristotelian „Rhetoric“. ^{xiii} These actions would be (1) analysis of the recipients psychology, (2) bringing whatever content into presentable form and (3) convincing the audience with tricks as e.g. special effects or other attractions. Today's media world has risen from the beginnings of theoretical rhetoric and is still working on perfecting these above mentioned fields to optimise the communication of *the message*.

What the message entails, is undefined and depends on whose interests are being presented or represented. As most TV networks face economic competition - meaning they have own interests and therefore also individual messages to spread - the message that gets through to the audience will always be at least two dimensional. Factually everybody involved in producing media output automatically adds his dimension to the message to a certain extent (depending on the influence, of course). In the end the audience receives media output that has been optimised on various rhetoric levels.

The Antique Media Ethics Dispute

It took Plato four steps to judge poetry: (1) poetry is mimesis, (2) poetry plays with affections, (3) poetry causes joy, (4) poetry has repercussions on the personality. He concludes: the effects of poetry are at least dubious.^{xiv} Aristotle adds, without opposing: (5) the audience recognizes the ontological difference between mimesis and reality (because this is the reason for cognition and pleasure), (6) tragedy leads to catharsis and cleans the soul of affections, and (7) tragedy serves as a typical model for poetry considering generality, structure and focus of the proposition. Therefore Aristotle concludes - contrary to Plato - that poetry encourages the right orientation in life (praxis) as long as poetry operates naturally (meaning according to its nature - so to say as virtuously as all was thought of to be in the first place).

„Tragic pleasure“ is Aristotle’s hook to questioning aesthetic reception.^{xv} Within aesthetic reception he differentiates between *educating* theatre and *entertaining* theatre, whereas he considers entertainment to be the crucial *good* format. The audience is not supposed to gain intellectual knowledge, but aesthetic joy. This aesthetic joy is catalysed through *compassion* and *fear* which lead to cathartic cleansing of the soul. Therefore Aristotle considers poetry and tragedy to be morally harmless.

But how can we be sure that tragedy - and poetry in general - only influences the soul in a way that can be considered to be good? Why does Aristotle not accept it as being the contrary to the cleansing of the soul. Some kind of pollution, as Plato sees it? Because no matter what happens and at what stage of the *illness* the soul is relieved, if there is an effect, it is always and can only be healing. The worst that can happen in this theory is no effect at all.

This is where catharsis carries its enormous potential. The astonishing thing about this is, how little influence tragedy and poetry and therefore catharsis have on Aristotelian ethics. Catharsis is not mentioned within the article on pleasure at all and only plays a minor role within the discussion on the voluntary nature of men.^{xvi}

Projecting the above explained points of view into our media landscape today or especially into TV and its leading ethical questions, some further explanation of the settings are necessary.

The debate between the “Old Greeks” touched only the influence of poetry and not that of rhetoric. TV though includes formal and textual elements of both topics. Since most viewers take TV in general as entertainment^{xvii}, holding up this double lens of poetry and rhetoric up should not bother our following analysis.

Another rearrangement takes mimesis into account: as the fundamental epistemological idea of understanding poetry. Both Plato and Aristotle take recognition of humanity and therefore identification of the audience with the plot as the central epistemological phenomena. Without this phenomena there would be no direct link between sender (on stage or on screen) and receiver (in audience or on couch).

The expansion of Plato’s premises starts with a critical point. Aristotle stresses that the audience can differentiate between mimesis and reality. This is the reason, why poetry - and indirectly also TV - is harmless to the human mind. But this exactly is the crucial point in the debate today: the differentiation of virtual reality and real reality cannot be applied automatically. Virtual reality (including news, daily soaps, internet etc.) has submerged into our consciousness too deeply over the past decades to clearly separate it from the rest of reality. What has been perceived as TV quality in the early days of broadcasting (documentation of reality with no feeling for entertainment) is loosening up and transforming into the contrary. Patted by light entertainment the viewer is evolving to be hyper sceptical. A somewhat strange transformation takes place: no more warning is needed regarding fictional content, but instead real content is to be marked extraordinarily.

It is tricky enough to argue against Aristotle. Especially because his fundamental settings are so strong. In case of media this would be the same. As soon as the setting “poetry functions naturally” is bought, it automatically spreads good ideas that lead to a better life praxis. The modern version of poetry, say TV (as it is developed here), destroys this harmonic self-fulfilling prophecy. Here an evil eye is naturally included to media and this harms the idea of a never ending beautiful chain of virtuous thought. But what would happen then? If we add “TV naturally includes bad thoughts” and these bad thoughts are spread and used as benchmarks for life praxis, the self-fulfilling effect of mass media content would still happen, only in an unvirtuous way. Of course this is only the case if the individual set of virtues is not strong enough to

catalyse these bad thoughts cathartically into good ones.

Both philosophers have arguments that can be transmitted into today's debate on media ethics. Aiming for a clean and free human soul, Plato forbids poetry in his state. This attitude is paternalistic but on the other hand shows his visionary judgement concerning the alienation of mankind towards truth. Aristotle who considers poetry to be all good, or harmless in the worst case, gives the audience all the autonomy it wants, knowing that its virtuousness will automatically regulate the impressions and function more mind-building than mind-destroying. Today we face a similar setting in our debate on media ethics: between regulation of media through third parties and individual free choice of media usage.

Consequences for Information Ethics

A consistent mimetical theory of perception flows from a *relativistic starting point*, where the ability for criticism and thus the autonomy of the individual is recognized. This applies independently to specific cultural heritage and a personal record dealing with mimetical cognition. Taking this into account a global idea of media pedagogy falls back on other principles of enlightened education: *identity* and *criticism*. The enlightened media user who is aware of himself and can reflect on external action will be strong enough to cope with information in the idea of catharsis – and from there on will be able to handle any other form of ontological conflict induced by media. Following this track the effect of media- and internet usage is thrown back on the individual responsibility of the user, and therefore is also detectable in his cultural surrounding.

Similar to Dux's theory of morals „in the schism of the logics^{xviii}, where the justification for morals is found in phylogenesis *and* ontogenesis, individual *media usage* arises through autonomous determination on one hand, and at the same time through existing cultural habits on the other side. In addition a practical problem would be that in modern media colonisation content arrives before specific enlightenment. This ongoing coil of interaction and prerequisites is one well known problem in the history of philosophy. No matter what we try to explain – morals, culture, ethics – reasoning will always be at least two-dimensional: grown out of the past and matched with present ideas and beliefs.

The genesis of values brings us back to Plato and Aristotle and to the mimesis as a *principle of media perception*. One problem with mimetical cognition is the indefinite source of imitation. Taking theatre as an example, there are at first the actors who imitate human being, and make the audience identify on an abstract level, because of their own experience of being human. A next step introduces the characters which enables further identification with the plot and the actors. Now the difficulty of mimesis becomes clear: when something new happens in the plot it cannot be based on a mimetical structure. Only an explanation (or creativity) allows the understanding of the new content. Concerning the ongoing story, whatever is the imitation can find its origin in the plot - which of course can only be understood, as it is an imitation in a broader sense itself. In this sense mimesis can be continued infinitely. Or is it already infinitely continued? Where do mimetical cohesions find their source if we can assume, they are a mixture of existing and setting? This is the missing link between moral, culture, ethics and mimesis: the origin is indefinable. So dealing with what is present in this dynamic context leaves open whether fundamental changes should be included, e.g. if philosophical reflection criticises the Status Quo to be insufficient.

In the German speaking area it seems as if the media user still feels comfortably over-directed by the Plato-coloured system of state-run media, whereas he is already challenged in an Aristotelian way to take personal responsibility of his autonomy, which is fortified through nothing less than general virtuousness itself. The cultivation of virtuousness, generally or specifically, concerning e.g. media usage meaning *good handling* of media, is, with Aristotle, the task of all which recognize it as task, and the particular task of those who are responsible for others. In the first place this would not only be the task of parents towards their children, but also the task of the government towards its citizens – towards all citizens, no matter what age or education.

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- ii E.g. Postman, McLuhan, Benjamin, Adorno/Horkheimer.
- iii E.g. Capurro: 2004.
- iv In 2003 average TV-usage in Germany was 203 minutes per day. That is an increase of 13 minutes compared with 2000. Source: AGF/GfK.
- v A contrary position is held e.g. by Mikos: 1999, p. 7
- vi The mentioned texts were read in German translations. Plato: „The Republic“/„Der Staat“, „Symposium“/„Das Gastmahl“; Aristotle: „Poetics“/„Dichtung“, „The Art of Rhetoric“/„Rhetorik“, „Politics“/„Politik“.
- vii See: Plato: Der Staat, Buch X.
- viii Other examples of a similar category would include the electron microscope to „go small“ (as close as 1 nm, that is 0,000000001m) and the space telescope to „go big“ („Hubble“ show us galaxies that have existed 13 billion years ago). Source: www.de.wikipedia.org, July 2004.
- ix Plato: Der Staat, Buch X, 607a.
- x Plato: e.g. Der Staat, Buch X, 595b.
- xi Aristotle: Poetik 13, 1453a35f., 14, 1453b12.
- xii Höffe: 1996, p. 74.
- xiii (1) *Psychology* of the audience („Zuhörerpsychologie“), (2) logical *Form* of argumentation („formallogische Argumentation“) and (3) rhetorical *Tricks* („rhetorische Tricks“). Aristotle: Rhetorik, I, 2, 1.
- xiv Platon: Der Staat II-III und X; in: Höffe, 1996, p. 70f.
- xv Höffe: 1996, p. 74.
- xvi Aristoteles: Nikomachische Ethik III 1, 1110a 27-29.
- xvii Unz, D./ Schwab, F./ Winterhoff-Spurk, p.: 2002.
- xviii Dux: 2000, p. 3f.

ⁱ E.g. within the "World Summit on the Information Society".