The Ethics of Freedom on Facebook

Yanick Farmer[1] y Maude Bonenfant[2]

Abstract

As a technical object, Facebook's vocation is to produce a maximum of effects with the least amount of effort. This fundamental determinism is a powerful motive of Facebook's implantation as a socialization device in contemporary societies. However, with Facebook, the web user is faced with an ambivalence, which illustrates an important ethical problem. On the one hand, he opens himself to a potentially immense social web which nourishes the roots of his self-determination. On the other hand however, through the facility and the exclusively digital mediation that the tool offers, the user abandons more or less partially the building of his self and his social interactions to strongly disciplined digital exchanges that fragment his identity and that of others. Thus, the progressive and deep infiltration of these new organizational modes of communication seem to influence the traditional meaning of ethics. What ethics are at work? Is there something lost or is there a risk of something being absorbed by these digital social practices? This article proposes answers to these questions by opposing two philosophical perspectives on freedom: kantian deontology and anglo-saxon utilitarianism.

Keywords: Ethics, Kant, utilitarianism, Facebook, freedom

Introduction

As a technical object, Facebook's vocation is to produce a maximum of effects with the least amount of effort. This fundamental determinism is a powerful motive of Facebook's implantation as a socialization device in contemporary societies. Thus, "[a human being] wants to conquer nature with a new prodigy" (Ovide, 1806). However, with Facebook, the web user is faced with an ambivalence, which illustrates an important ethical problem. On the one hand, he opens himself to a potentially immense social web which nourishes the roots of his self-determination (Deci and Ryan, 2000). Thanks to the keyboard he fully controls, the user does what he wants. In a few moments, he can be informed, make contact, play, like, hate, meet, consult, agree, publish, be touched or moved, share, converse, work, or role play. In this way, which is the sense we usually attribute to the notion of liberty, the use of this technical object renders the web user a free agent. On the other hand however, through the facility and the exclusively digital mediation that the tool offers, the user abandons more or less partially the building of his self and his social interactions to strongly disciplined digital exchanges that fragment (because of the digitalization of the exchanges) his identity and that of others. In addition, because of its internal

[1] Assistant professor. Department of social and public communication. Université du Québec à Montréal. Case postale 8888, succursale Centre-Ville. Montreal (Quebec) H3C 3P8 CANADA.
farmer.yanick@uqam.ca / 514-987-3000 ext. 3392

[2] Department of social and public communication. Université du Québec à Montréal. Case postale 8888, succursale Centre-Ville. Montreal (Quebec) H3C 3P8 CANADA.
bonenfant.maude@uqam.ca / 514-987-3000 ext. 5086

coherence, Facebook's structure favors a certain disposition of elements, meaning that certain elements of the device have more effects than others and this has a major incidence on the web user whose interpretations and behaviors are either encouraged or discouraged. As defined by Foucault (1977), the device refers here to an apparatus, which is formed by a series of parts placed in a way that affects the field of action. This arrangement has a normative effect since it creates a propensity for certain types of actions (Raffnsøe, 2008).

While Facebook disciplines individual actions, it also disciplines, through its structure, social relations. A regularization conditions the relationships between Facebook members and the virtual platform, giving form and regularity to the way the users give news (status updates), stay in contact (reading friend's or acquaintance's "wall"), organize events (invitations which can be checked "going" , "maybe" or "not going"), manifest their agreement ("I like"), etc. Non-participation seems to be the only possible contestation of the discipline. Moreover, this discipline spreads to other digital social networks while some reflexes acquired in Facebook are reproduced elsewhere, always with the risk of prefomatting social exchanges.

This is not all. The practices developed through Facebook migrate to other web platforms. Originally dedicated to practitioners with certain criteria making them admissible, Facebook is now open to all web users and the diversification of the type of member is observable. Facebook's structure instills an order for the collective use of the platform where the new subscribers copy the "old" subscribers' practices: there is a reproduction and then a consolidation of the different ways to use the device. The platform transforms itself to respond to new technologies and conforms to more and more usual and consensual practices. For example, Facebook is now adapted to smart phones and optimizes their functions through this type of apparatus, which is available at all times. Disciplining a practice produces effects on you, which are not restricted to the use of technology. This explains, in part, a generalization of this type of disciplining of the Facebook device into other life experiences. By generalizing itself as much in the population as in everyday practices, the Facebook device is therefore introduced in many fields of social experiences.

Thus, the progressive and deep infiltration of these new organizational modes of communication seem to influence the traditional meaning of ethics. To the face to face interaction, which constitutes the founding act of ethics, is added a diversity of digital platforms which regulate exchanges. From that moment, what becomes of this apparent freedom proclaimed through Facebook's popularity? What ethics are at work? Is there something lost or is there a risk of something being absorbed by these digital social practices?

Freedom as duty
To answer this question, there first must be a deconstruction of the commonly referred to notion of freedom. To pursue this task, there seems to be a need to oppose two aspects of freedom, which emerge from the use of the Facebook device as a mode of self-production. In modern ethics theory, influenced by deontology or utilitarianism, freedom is generally conceived in two ways: either as *duty* or *satisfaction*. The notion of freedom as a duty focuses on the discovery of a psychic competence which renders the subject capable - or at least, partially capable - of detaching from his natural determinants or from his emotions to accomplish a deliberate and autonomous act. This vision of freedom is primarily associated to Kantian deontologism. Contrarily to Descartes, it is not founded on ontological

dualism that understands body and spirit as two separate entities. This understanding of freedom rather relies on a phenomenological[3] dualism revealed through the introspective experience of a rational consciousness, which can allow self-determination, even if sometimes it goes against certain desires and inclinations.

> The *will* is a species of causality of living beings, insofar as they are rational, and *freedom* would be that quality of this causality by which it can be effective independently of alien causes *determining* it; just as *natural necessity* is the causality of all beings lacking reason, of being determined to activity through the influence of alien causes (Kant, 2002 [1785]: 63).

This definition of freedom is referred to as *negative*, since it indicates what freedom is opposed to in order to manifest the autonomy of will. Positive freedom, for Kant, is will's attribute of determining its own law (Kant, 2002 [1785]: 64). However, through what means is this possible? It is possible because will, guided by reason, can determine actions from psychic dispositions which are tied to preferences or desires geared towards objects. For example, it is possible for a gluttonous human being to adjust many of his behaviors to his desire to eat. At the same time, if he wants, he can also dismiss this desire and not let the object (food) determine his action. This gluttonous person can, on the contrary, choose to ignore his immediate desire by founding his actions on motives that do not come from his own interest. He does this when, for example, he shares with his peers despite his hunger. The possibility of sharing, like all other ethical act, emanates from the fundamental and universal aptitude of human reasoning which is to act in an objective manner, despite considerations solely rooted in physical and egotistical needs. In more technical terms, Kant calls this rule of action *categorical imperative*[4] and it allows the subject to determine himself freely. The categorical imperative underlines the importance, for subjects of an ethical nature, of acting in an impartial manner and, consequently, of adopting a way of conduct, which can be deemed acceptable by all reasonable human beings, placed in similar circumstances.

For Kant, the possibility of the categorical imperative (and what he calls the moral law) is the necessary condition for ethics because it is through freedom that human beings best express their singular essence, that is to say, their dignity. It is thanks to freedom that they can maintain their integrity as individuals and as members of a species. Indeed, if all human actions were motivated uniquely by personal interests, humanity would quickly find itself in a state of permanent war of all against all (Hobbes, 2005 [1651]). In Kantian reasoning on ethics, we can see an analogy with science. For knowledge to exist, it is not possible to have an intelligible world without universal laws, founded principally on causality, and whose coherence is shared by *all* human beings granted with reason. If there exists something as opposed to nothing, it is precisely because life and the world are ordered according to regularities, which can be assimilated to laws. A world without laws would not exist because its structural instability would make it imperceptible to human intelligence. Decidedly, without structural stability, the existence of life would be impossible. That also goes for ethics. Kantian ethics suppose a structure of possibilities supported by the

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[3] By phenomenological, we mean knowledge as a result of the process of a conscience which observes itself.

[4] There exists many formulations of the categorical imperative, the most known is this following: "Act in a way so the maxim of your will may always be worth a universal legislation principal." (free translation from Kant, 1985 [1788].

capacity to make choices which are decentralized from strict self reference; choices that are supported by freedom and by a shared meaning from which each human being can judge the validity of an action. This freedom and this meaning are necessary to the integrity of human life as proclaimed in international law or the religions of the world, the prohibition of murder or the defense of dignity and fundamental liberties.

Therefore, by following the deontological Kantian tradition, freedom is conceived as a responsibility or a duty. Meaning that the movement by which human beings surpass themselves is an *effort* without which neither liberty nor ethics can occur. Honoring human beings is in itself a way to act through duty while refusing natural and spontaneous inclinations to command our actions. Whoever has had thoughts about the meaning of ethical action will recognize with Kant that, at all times, it (ethical action) is made possible by the strong capacity for abnegation that all human beings, who are granted with reason, share.

Freedom as satisfaction

On the other hand, freedom as satisfaction is based on the natural tendency of human beings to value useful actions, those that produce a maximum of benefits for the lowest possible cost (human, economical, etc.), (Sen, 2010). This conception first was defended by the British philosophers Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, and interestingly, it has dominated economic theory for many decades. Freedom as a satisfaction relies on an anthropology radically different from the one enunciated by Kant. A famous passage in Bentham's works eloquently synthesizes this vision:

> Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, *pain* and *pleasure.* It is for them alone to point out what we ought to do, as well as to determine what we shall do. On the one hand the standard of right and wrong, on the other the chain of causes and effects, are fastened to their throne. They govern us in all we do, in all we say, in all we think… (Bentham, 1789: 1)

For classical utilitarianism, whether it be economical or philosophical, human actions are motivated by a *summum bonum:* the quest for well being and the avoidance of sufferance. Thus, what is ethical is what promises the greatest amount of well being for the greatest number of people (Mill, 2008 [1863] : 19). It is in this context that freedom appears, in its positive definition, as the power to satisfy a certain quest for well being. Inversely, in its negative version, freedom commands to not impede the pursuit of happiness, which is what leads to the *harm principle* enunciated by Mill:

> Acts, of whatever kind, which, without justifiable cause, do harm to others, may be, and in the more important cases absolutely require to be, controlled by the unfavorable sentiments, and, when needed by the active interference of mankind. The liberty of the individual must be thus far limited; he must not make himself a nuisance to other people. (Mill, 2001 [1859]:52).

This research on well being as the ultimate goal of ethics results from three principles which, we will see, are worthy of interest to grasp the ethics of self-production which is enabled by the Facebook device: the maximization of the cost-benefits ratio, the freedom of expression and the full development of individuality. The principle of maximization is the logical outcome of the imperative: "the greater well-being for the greater number" insofar as it invites a summation - thus, a calculation in which the

option producing the greatest sum will be chosen. Obviously, like all calculations, the negative aspects of a given situation are added to the positive ones to create the arithmetic of the utilitarian ethical choice. That said, it becomes natural to aim for the most efficient means since they offer the greatest sum of well-being if the costs and the benefits are both related to an action.

As for freedom of expression, in the political sphere, it remains a transposition of feedom as satisfaction, which is to say a transposition of the seeking, through an action, of a certain state of well-being. Well-being is an effect inseparable from the possibility which offers itself to all human beings, of living the life he wishes to live, of adopting mores that are as he sees fit and of abiding to ideas in which he believes.

> As it is useful that while mankind are imperfect there should be different opinions, so it is that there should be different experiments; that free scope should be given to varieties of character, short of injury to others; and that the worth of different modes of life should be proved practically, when anyone thinks fit to try them. It is desirable, in short, that in things which do not primarily concern others, individuality should assert itself. (Mill, 2001 [1859]: 53)

If he wishes to have access to an authentic form of liberty, a human being must be able to confront, by himself, his personality and specific faculties with a diversity of situations, which will help him construct his individuality. On this topic, Mill writes, in a beautiful passage borrowed from the German philosopher Wilhem von Humboldt:

> The object towards which every human being must ceaselessly direct his efforts, and on which especially those who design to influence their fellow-men must ever keep their eyes, is the individuality of power and development; for this, there are two requisites, freedom, and variety of situations; and that from the union of these arise individual rigor and manifold diversity, which combine themselves in originality (Mill, 2001 [1859]: 54).

In sum, and contrarily to the vision of Kant's deontology, the conception of freedom as satisfaction is characterized by its eudemonist scope, meaning its focus on happiness. Therein, Mill's ethics and what he contributes to the concept of liberty is not far from the Greek philosophers. For them, as Foucault reminds us, it is first by concern for one's self which is expressed in the integral development of the individual and of his liberty, that a social group's progress can occur. The Kantian scope is different since its ethics is charaterized by a systematic search for self-detachment, which can validate an action with the inate truth of a universal law.

Freedom Emerging from the Facebook Device
It is now clear that the question of the self-production through the Facebook device first falls into the reflection of the theme of freedom, whether it be understood as duty or as satisfaction. The Facebook platform allows the web users to satisfy their desire for socialization, personal expression, exposure and, more globally, gives them access to a stimulating environment. Here, the abolition of certain spatial and temporal boundaries is not so banal. The multiplication of information sources and their establishment through networks on a universal scale can certainly contribute to reinforcing the sentiment of decompartmentalization of thoughts and the development of a consciousness, which reinforces the feeling of liberty. What unites

the different conceptions of freedom is first and foremost self-consciousness and knowledge. Thanks to both of these, a human being can detach himself from parts of the programming inherited from his childhood and become an adult, and thus, more free: he grows out of his "state of minority[5]" according to Foucault's (1984) reading of Kant's answer to the question *Was ist Aufklarung?* (What is enlightment?). This observation is applicable to Kantian ethics because reason and will imply the growth of self-consciousness. It is also applicable to Bentham and Mill's ethics since the search for well-being requires an acute judgment generated by consciousness and knowledge. The distribution network constituted by Facebook participates in the enterprise of the sensitization of consciences through the free flow of information. It contributes to the edification of a truly collective intelligence, which profits each stakeholder.

Yet, the device of disciplining by micro-actions still inducts certain perverse effects explainable by a behaviorist mechanism of conditioned reflexes. The Facebook device offers its users the possibility of socializing in a relatively safe psychological environment (the affects are present online, but they pass through the platform's filter) and, contrarily to the face-to-face approach where shyness and uneasiness is exposed and visible, Facebook allows to present oneself to others with the mediation of a screen. Thus, a greater control of the socialization steps exists. This comfort, which results from the influence exerted by the user on his digital reality, acts as a defense mechanism for the ego. This situation therefore risks creating a sentiment of dependency towards the foreseeable and safe universe where the pain of rejection or poignant looks from others can be avoided. The experience of suffering and that of alterity is still, however, considered essential to the emergence of an ethical meaning in existentialist and phenomenological currents of philosophy (Husserl, 2000 [1931] ; Sartre, 1976; Lévinas, 1990).

In fact, paradoxically, the object which is given to the web user through the means of a keyboard and screen, creates for him an insurmountable physical limit, namely the organicity of the body and all its attributes: energy of the presence of the other, integral sensuality, uncontrollability, proprioception, etc. Consequently, the shaping of the web user through repeated contact with this input, risks producing a habit in which fundamental aspects of ethics and liberty can be partially absent. From a developmental point of view, self-consciousness - a motor of liberty - relies on learning through receptors (senses), but also through the physical and psychological ordeals resulting from life, which can, at times, be heavy, afflictive or uncontrollable. The Facebook device can only partially translate these aspects. Given the relationship to another, which is modulated by the prism of particularization, Facebook's structure promotes an egocentric dynamic and a reification of identities. If it is simplistic to affirm that this dynamic is a fatality through which all users ineluctably progress towards their own dehumanization. the power of attraction of this tool is the possibility of a seclusion from socialization and corollary, from ethical meaning, within a digital corridor which assures a relationship with another. In the end, we accept the idea that within the Facebook device, the search for well-being which is at the core of the utilitarian conception of freedom as satisfaction, can end up gradually hollowing out one's capacity of abnegation necessary for the realization of freedom

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[5] Minority is characterized by a "certain state of our will which makes us accept the authority of someone else to lead use in areas where it is appropriate to use reason" (free translation, Foucault, 1984: 1383).

as duty. We must find means to avoid the individual's seclusion while leaning towards an ethical ideal for the use of Facebook.

Conclusion

We saw that disciplining practices on Facebook subscribes to a larger disciplining of practices within the internet and digital social media era. This puts a pressure on the individual using these new technologies in such a way that his field of action undergoes a normative effect, which transforms certain dispositions. The device tends to favor certain behaviors of socialization. Thus, the question is to know if the user can still create a space to allow his behaviors to have an ethical aim and if he is capable of refining them by transforming his use of Facebook.

In the perspective where we have defined the ethics of freedom from the Kantian deontology of freedom as duty and the utilitarian approach of freedom as satisfaction, we conclude that these conditions for liberty can exist within the Facebook device. However, it comes with the cost of an ethical effort, which renders the action a means of self-fashioning "in accordance with reason". It is important to become "stronger" than Facebook's structure (and of its mercantile and police-like objectives, for instance) in order to free ourselves from it and learn to use the tool in order to diversify its functions to our own advantages. That is to say, to shift towards a quest of the common well-being and the reduction of suffering for all; collectively, to use Facebook not to harm others or to distance oneself from our corporality, but rather use the device to open ourselves to one another and participate in the amelioration of social life. We should consider the use of Facebook as a way of varying the relation to oneself and to others or as an addition (and not a replacement) to the diversity of means we have for coming into contact with others and remaining authentic to oneself. This technique of the self can be part of the integral development of the individuality and also could contribute to the happiness of the greatest number. Thanks to the sharing and the networking perpetuated by the online tool and because of each micro-actions, we could maximize the cost-benefits ratio of this tool to optimize liberty of expression and collective well-being in which each individual could participate in the edification of a world in which he wants to live. In other words, we might adopt the rigid structure to transform it into a political tool, which is artistically proficient thanks to a disciplining of behaviors, which leans towards this collective quest for better living. What has been described is what the ethical ideal of Facebook's use could be in order to make it into a "thought out practice of freedom" (Foucault, 1984) and for us, an action towards our own freedom.

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