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Authentic Practical Identities and the Need for Targeted Automation

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Abstract

In an age were artificial intelligence can do everything for us why should we do things for ourselves? What is at stake is the intrinsic value of doing things for ourselves, our relationship to the world, and the sense of personal identity that springs forth from our actions. An age were automated machines do everything for us, threatens to de-skill our perceptions and to turn the individual into a passive observer rather than an active participant in the world. Therefore, this paper draws upon the phenomenology of skilled perception and the Aristotelian concept of Aretê to argue for the importance of doing high-quality work for its own sake and how such domains of activity are central to our personal identities. What is required to live authentically is the targeted automation of routinized work and to enable the individual to freely choose their own practical identities based on its potential to provide an engaging perceptual niche. AI may either enhance or diminish our authenticity in three salient ways; it can either be used to *liberate* us from disengaging work, to *facilitate* psychologically engaging work, or to *annihilate* engaging perceptual niches and to close off corners of reality from mankind forever.

Keywords

Automation, Artificial Intelligence, Phenomenology, Aristotle, Practical Identities

1. Introduction—The Fight For Control

In an age where artificial intelligence (hereinafter referred to as: AI) can do an ever-increasing amount for us, what is at stake is the value of doing things for ourselves and our relationship to the world around us. Indeed, some four million American manufacturing jobs have been automated away since the year 2000 (Yang, 2018) with estimates predicting a rise to twenty million by 2030

(Flynn, 2023). Moreover, forty two percent of occupations have at least fifty percent of their activities that are automatable (Chui, 2017). However, it is not only blue collar work that is susceptible to automation, similar trends have been observed among the white collar professions and the arts. Indeed, Microsoft replaced dozens of journalists at MSN and Microsoft News with AI that can scan and produce written content and JPMorgan now has AI reviewing commercial-loan agreements, completing in seconds what used to take lawyers 360,000 hours over the course of a year (Semuels, 2020). Furthermore, generative AI tools have disrupted China's video game art industry, leading to a seventy percent decline in illustrator jobs and an exponential increase in productivity (Zhang, 2023). Tensions are also running high in Hollywood that AI tools may one day be used to write the next blockbuster script or digitally recreate Hollywood stars, potentially leaving writers and actors with reduced work (Richardson, 2023). As AI imperils the work of the writer, the truck driver, and everyone in between, the AI revolution threatens to replace the human touch in the creative process for the algorithmic crunching of data, to extinguish human flair and spontaneity, to decommission the eye for the beautiful, the unique and elegant that characterises the creative process. Therefore, in section 2 I will outline the value of doing things ourselves and draw on arguments from ancient Greek thought and modern phenomenology. In section 3, I will outline Zoller's concern that a world were automated machines do everything for us, threatens to de-skill our perceptions and to turn the individual into a passive observer rather than an active participant in the world. Furthermore, Zoller argues that to live authentically we must value doing high-quality work for its own sake, I will therefore outline the Aristotelian virtue of aretê (the capacity of the virtuous individual to exercise their skilled judgement in the situations they inhabit) and how it should shape our limited practical identities. In section 4 we will cover how Zoller's concept of skilled perception is instrumental in cultivating the individual's practical identity as we inhabit our own vocations. In section 5 I will draw upon the works of Sartre to argue that what is required to live authentically is the targeted automation of routinized work and to enable the individual to freely choose their own practical identities based on its potential to provide an engaging 'perceptual niche' (the capacity to immerse oneself in some psychologically engaging activity). In section 6 I argue that to live more authentically according to our practical identities, AI powered technology must only be deployed in a manner that facilitates our practical identities or liberates us from disengaging domains of activity. In section 7 I will discuss how this argument could be criticised for overstating the role of autonomy in contributing to a sense of satisfaction, and for assuming that psychologically engaging goods are even desired.

2. The Value of Doing Things Ourselves

Zoller (2017) argues that doing things ourselves is more authentic than allowing automated machines to do things for us, but the value of doing so is seldom ex-

plained. Zoller (2017) draws upon a long philosophical tradition of ancient Greek thought and modern phenomenology to illuminate the value of doing things ourselves. Indeed, Socrates famously rued the invention of handwriting because it would diminish people's capacity to recall information (Plato, 2008). While the value of the pen has been borne out over time, Socrates' was concerned that human capabilities would atrophy as technology became more deeply embedded in our lives and would alter our relationship to the world. Heidegger (1977), shared similar concerns arguing that technology was not simple a means to an end, but rather a mode of understanding and relating to the world. Heidegger (1977) warned that viewing the world exclusively through a technological lens risked severing our relationships with the world and seeing the objects that populate it as a 'standing reserve'. To regard the world as a standing reserve is to see the objects of our environment fundamentally as a resource, a latent stockpile of materials central to the mass production of consumer goods, rupturing the direct importance the objects of the world have to our own being. In the industrial age the forest is no longer my home, I no longer fell trees for firewood, or take shelter under them to escape the elements. The forest is carved up en masse and its wood shipped all over the world, a social gathering turns into an opportunity to 'network' and collect contact details to do further business, we extract what we need to get an extrinsic good that we want, robbing ourselves in the process of a direct relationship with our environment and the opportunity for creation. With the advent of modern technology the process of extracting resources from the environment becomes an "exact science" were machines extract raw materials and produces goods on a scale previously unimaginable while depriving the individual of poesis, the act of creation and bringing forth their own ideas into the world (Heidegger, 1977: 14). Heidegger (1977) argues that if we are not prepared to do things ourselves machines will deprive individuals of the opportunity to learn from and engage more intimately with their environment:

> If he is to become a true cabinetmaker, he makes himself answer and respond above all to the different kinds of wood and to the shapes slumbering within wood-to wood as it enters into man's dwelling with all the hidden riches of its nature. In fact, this relatedness to wood is what maintains the whole craft. Without that relatedness, the craft will never be anything but empty busywork, any occupation with it will be determined exclusively by business concerns (Heidegger, 1963: 379).

Drummond (2007: 27) similarly contends that we cannot pursue even the very basic goods of agency, and in particular "free and insightful agency" in the abstract, rather we must pursue these in and through our own limited vocations. It is by engaging in a determinate field of activity that we come to acquire knowledge and exercise our agency, indeed I embed myself in the physicist's environment and learn the art of seeing the objects and norms of being a physicist. Conversely, the physicist should they find themselves in the vocation of a seam-

stress, despite their knowledge of atomic and molecular structures, experiences a diminution of their agency and is no more equipped to sew an oven mitt or upholster an armchair due to their inability to perceive the complexities and possibilities of the task at hand (Drummond, 2007).

Sennett (2008) characterises this as the ethos of the craftsman, a concern for the act of doing high-quality work for its own sake and draws upon the advent of computer assisted design (CAD) software to demonstrate how becoming dependent on AI can blunt our perceptions and pull us out of our relationships with the environment. With the advent of CAD, which largely replaced hand drawing in architectural teaching, required architects instead to plot points on a screen which the software would connect together and in the process prevented architects from ingraining the structure of the building in their memory. As Sennett (2008) remarks, once an environment becomes ingrained in our mind we come to understand it in a way that is not possible when we delegate such tasks to software programs. It is by physically exploring and then tracing and retracing a structure that the architect comes to deeply understand it and uncover future possibilities to augment its design (Sennett, 2008: 40).

Zoller (2017) argues that doing things ourselves is critical in developing 'skilled perception' and deepening our understanding of the immediate environment. As Zoller (2017) suggests, doing things ourselves enables us to acquire skills that reveal new corners of reality to explore that are not open for the novice. As the experienced motorcyclist performs a perfectly choreographed dance of undertaking and overtaking cars on the road and of braking fast enough at a turn so not to drift into another lane, but slow enough as to not go flying over their handlebars. Now compare this to the driver of a semi-autonomous Tesla asleep at the wheel watching reality tv. Therefore, a central concern for Zoller (2017) surrounding automation is that it will de-skill our perceptions and close-off these corners of reality for good.

Zoller (2017) argues from the phenomenological tradition that our perceptions are 'normative', that is, the basic perception of any object gives me a sense of certain goals and future possibilities. As the side of a box invites me to have the whole box in mind that would be present if I walked around to see its hidden sides. Or as an open flame conjures the possibilities of cooking a warm meal or providing illumination in the dead of night. Indeed, the whole object is a goal to which my perceptions direct me towards a range of actions and possibilities implied by the box. As the individual gains skill in dealing with certain objects, they learn the art of seeing their possibilities. As a novice looks on towards a restaurant's kitchen and observes an assemblage of disconnected instruments and tools. Whereas a chef, observes a complex unity as every instrument in the kitchen comes together to cook a banquet. As Zoller (2017: 84) notes, out of the myriad perceptual worlds one can inhabit, one gradually trains their mind to inhabit a particular 'niche' and in the process 'couples' with a limited range of objects that they skilfully perceive. In other words, to couple with our environment is to become intimately familiar with the objects that populate it and the

possibilities that they afford the individual. As the scalpel becomes an extension of the surgeon's freedom to make an incision here and a laceration there the process of coupling allows the individual to become more embedded in the task at hand and to construct an identity around their own psychological niche.

3. Passive Spectators in a World of Automation

Zoller (2017) paints a dystopian world of ubiquitous automation, where machines powered by artificial intelligence (AI) pull us out of these corners of reality and blur the skilled perceptions that once characterised our world. Skilled perception is not merely the facility to observe the flat objects of our environment, but to go beyond such superficial appearances and apprehend a set of possibilities that take me towards an optimal unity. The novice is lost in a cacophony of noises while a master conductor knows just the right note to bring the symphony to life. As Zoller (2017: 84) notes "Perhaps the purest inhabitant of Automania, lacking any serious perceptual training, fails to truly inhabit the various niches of her life". The individual, unable to skilfully interact with the objects of the world, is no longer at home in the world, but is a stranger in a foreign land as their home is annexed by the silicon revolution, robbing the individual of their perceptual niches and from positing complex unities, as Da Vinci sees the Mona Lisa in the union of simple colours. Instead, like a novice in a cockpit, we are disorientated by an assemblage of random dials to be turned and buttons to be pushed.

Rather, in the world of automania we come to see all human activities according to a 'sufficient' standard of success, were value is placed upon finishing a task and its end results rather than skilfully engaging in the processes that bring about such ends (Zoller, 2017). I render, and 3-D print a statue to place on my mantlepiece rather than making it from fickle clay. In a foreign land I fall back on the crutch of google translate to make sense of the random words around me. Rather than seduce a potential lover with wit and charm I order an AI girlfriend who will love me unconditionally no matter how poorly she is treated. However, Zoller (2017) juxtaposes the sufficient standard of success with Aristotle's (2004: 1115a–b) virtue of inhabiting situations excellently (aretê). To inhabit our situations excellently is to exercise our hard fought skills across an array of domains and to cultivate our cognition and judgement for their own sake leading to the development of virtues that are necessary to live a good life (Aristotle, 2014). Living excellently can thus be understood as a habit of refining the skills necessary to exercise good judgement and navigate the challenges of human existence. For Aristotle, much of life is an exercise in contextual decision making, as we aim towards a golden mean between the vices of insufficiency on one side or excess on the other. To be courageous in the face of danger and not reckless or cowardly. To be honest without being blunt or wilfully dishonest. Therefore, the virtue of the craftsmen aims towards the golden mean of doing a small number of things for its own sake without their labour simply being a means to an end,

nor undertaking the unrealistic burden of fully engaging themselves in all human activities (Sennett, 2008). A life of skilled contemplation towards the mean, or towards an 'optimal unity' represents the peak of human flourishing for Aristotle (2004) and there is empirical evidence to suggest a relationship between exercising skilled judgement and deep psychological fulfilment. Csikszentmihalyi (1975, 2008) is one of the first people to experimentally explore the relationship between being engrossed in an activity (what he would call a 'flow state') and its capacity to promote greater psychological fulfilment. Like Aristotle's concept of inhabiting situations excellently, to enter into a flow state requires that we engage in a single clearly defined task; to paint this canvas or write that song, that is personally meaningful, and is at the limit of our abilities. What Csikszentmihalyi (2008: 40) found after studying a group of painters and interviewing individuals engrossed in a range of activities from rock climbing to playing chess was that they described these instances of deep immersion as the best moments of their life as they were absorbed in the task at hand and hours felt like minutes. What motivated these individuals was not some extrinsic reward, or merely getting the job done, but the purpose of the flow state was to keep the flow state going (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008). However, should an activity be too difficult or too easy then we struggle to flow into our own perceptual niches and instead become passive and distracted observers (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008).

It is precisely these instances of deep immersion in our own perceptual niches that we jeopardise with the gradual march of automated AI into the realms of human activity that we cherish most. Ultimately, Instead of depending on automation to do everything for us, we are encouraged to develop our attention to inhabit situations excellently and like the craftsman, to develop high-quality work for its own sake. Rather than de-skilling our perceptions, we stand to gain a richer and deeper perceptual experience of the world around us with enough depth to express our capabilities and autonomy, and perhaps even to live more psychologically fulfilling lives.

4. We Are What We do

However, rather than shouldering an open-ended commitment to do everything for ourselves, like crafting every chair we sit on, what is necessary to cultivate skilled perception is that we are skilled at perceiving a limited set of 'affordances' or invitations to act. Instead, as Crowell (2013) states, the individual comes to value themselves according to their 'practical identities' as a parent or a chef, and carries out the skilled, trained perceptions that characterise their roles. Success is not merely meeting some sufficient standard, but I am in my daily actions implicitly "concerned about my own being", what I do and how I exercise my own judgement is not simply about completing a task and getting the job done but is a manifestation of my own identity (Crowell, 2013: 273) For a chef, it is not enough to flip burgers eight-hours a day, but I, in light of my identity, seek an

environment with the perceptual depth to express my agency. I express my agency by pursuing some limited field of human activity in congruence with my practical identity. Ultimately, I can only inhabit my own perceptual niche and act with authenticity by coordinating my skilled perceptions with my own determinate course of action. However, one must note, while automania threatens to de-skill our perceptions across the board, automation in specific fields of routinized human activity promises to enrich rather than impoverish our perceptions. As we turn to next.

Zoller (2017: 87) rightly asserts that "It would seem odd to say that we, as conscious beings, can inhabit our lived situations or the world at large "excellently" if we are scarcely paying attention to them" but fails to recognise the widespread disengagement people feel in work. As Danaher (2017) notes, only 13% of workers worldwide are psychologically engaged with their work and people in routinized jobs, such as manufacturing, are twice as like to be actively disengaged as people in knowledge-based jobs with creative freedom, such as managers and executives. James (2020: 197) like Zoller, appears to be suffering from a similar moral blind spot, stating that "It is an undesirable feature of a society that people are forced to find a way of monetizing the activities they love, simply to have enough time to pursue them vigorously" when in reality most people are not fortunate enough to be in such a position and are instead forced to monetise and tolerate activities lacking the perceptual depth to engage them. Not only does work seldom provide the perceptual opportunities to act excellently, but as Yang (2018: 108) notes, individuals struggling with a scarcity of time or money often accompanying routinized work, experience on average an IQ reduction of 13 points. Indicating that such work may erode our cognitive bandwidth to pick out the complex unities of our environment. Therefore, what is required is that our practical identities offer enough perceptual depth for us to act authentically and that we are free from economic duress to choose our practical identities autonomously. Which we turn to next.

5. Towards Authentic Identities

One cannot act authentically without autonomy. Therefore, the two horns of this thesis are as follows: To act authentically I must, in the spirit of Sartre (2020: 577) "perpetually choose myself" in light of my own consciously recognised possibilities (projects). The individual must not choose their practical identity under economic duress but instead, (P1) one must freely choose their practical identity based on its potential to provide a niche rich with perceptual possibilities that the individual finds engaging. Secondly, (P2) our practical identities must therefore provide the perceptual depth for the individual to express their agency. Therefore, (C) what is required is the targeted automation of highly routinized jobs, which will prevent individuals from entering disengaging employment, and to liberate them from economic duress to pursue perceptually engaging practical identities (perhaps by passing a universal or precautionary basic income). As

scribes of the middle-ages were tasked with meticulously writing each book until the invention of the printing press, people today are tasked with flipping every burger, cleaning every toilet and making every out-bound sales call until such jobs are automated. However, as Musial (2018) notes, it is important to ring-fence certain goods from automation, such as the goods of truth, beauty, and achievement that individuals find engaging. Therefore, it is critical to draw a bright line between the determinate fields of human activity that we wish to automate and those that we do not. As we turn to next.

Musial (2018) argues that in order to ringfence the goods of truth, beauty, and achievement we must decide whether we want robots in the fields of determinate human activity that enable such goods to flourish. Specifically, Musial argues that we can only hope to attain such goods by actively participating in intimate relationships, community relationships and by being with others. Therefore, it is critical to recognise the virtue of excellence in our social roles as well as our vocational and creative endeavours. As Musial (2018) states, sex robots may attain a sufficient standard of success, but such relationships are also less demanding and involve less skill and effort than human-human relationships and therefore may fail to provide a sense of achievement. As self-driving cars de-skill our perceptions of the road and the surrounding traffic, social robots similarly threaten to de-skill our capacity to meaningfully engage with others by forgoing the difficulty of balancing our needs with those of our partner and reaching a middle ground. Moreover, as Musial (2018) rightly adds, the automation of caring relationships also threatens to deprive the caregiver of a meaningful practical identity and of a valuable source of achievement that is earned by fostering empathetic and reciprocal nurturing bonds with moral patients. We risk one day denying human practitioners the opportunity *to* care and for moral patients to feel cared for. Therefore, to live more authentically what is required is the targeted automation of routinized fields of human activity that lack the perceptual depth for individuals to express their agency, and equally, to reject the total automation of human activity that promises the goods of truth, beauty, and achievement that individuals find perceptually engaging.

6. Targeted Automation

To live authentically and autonomously, AI must liberate us to inhabit our freely chosen perceptual niches and to foster goods that the individual finds engaging, without occupying these corners of reality by itself and denying humanity the chance to live excellently. AI can either enhance or diminish our authenticity in three salient ways. AI can be used to *liberate* us from disengaging perceptual niches by automating routinized work, like Miso Robotics' Flippy, an AI that can autonomously cook a range of fast-foods and potentially free individuals from flipping burgers eight-hours a day. Similarly, the Flexi Virtual Assistant could eliminate the need for people to make highly scripted out-bound sales calls until they lose the will to live. What is needed for routinised work is the sort of revolution the Gutenberg printing press brought to arduous process of hand writing

books. AI may also be used to *facilitate* and tease out engaging perceptual niches rather than replace people entirely. Paro, a primitive care-robot designed to resemble a baby harp seal, is used as an intermediary to facilitate human-human social relationships in the caring environment and shows how automation can deepen our perceptual niches (Calo et al., 2011). However, as Zoller (2017) states AI can also be used to *annihilate* our perceptual niches by removing people from these corners of reality, as seen by the advent of increasingly (though not fully) autonomous vehicles or by Harmony the sex robot developed by REALROBOTIX (Kragen, 2017) which simulates the experience of being with a romantic partner according to a sufficient standard of success and therefore imperils the goods that come from being perceptually engaged with our relationships. No doubt, the need for a clear demarcation between the domains of human activity that AI can facilitate or annihilate has never been more important given the creeping incursion of AI into the spheres of screenwriting and art, threatening the very essence of the humanities. Ultimately, to live more authentically according to our practical identities, AI powered technology must only be deployed in a manner that facilitates our practical identities or liberates us from disengaging domains of activity.

7. Some Important Objections

However, one must ask whether the goods of skilled perception are still part of the good life? As Illouz (2017) asks, is love still part of the good life? In a world of ever proliferating lovebots and with a record decline in people getting married or entering committed relationships, and with deteriorating community-bonds (DePaulo, 2017), perhaps we do not care about social relationships like we used to, and we should get used to human-robot relations. However, we must note, if people are suffering from a scarcity of time and money that often accompanies low-pay routinized work, then by passing a basic income and allowing people to work in engaging careers at their own pace, then we can free people to spend more of their time and energy to pursue the goods of love, achievement, and beauty.

One may also ask that, even if one cannot live authentically without autonomy, that we do not always need to freely choose our perceptual identities based on their potential to engage us, indeed perhaps its impractical to do so and we should just accept that many of our identities are simply given. Indeed, the ship builder, carrying on the family tradition, may not have chosen his practical identity from a range of possibilities, but instead merely chooses to uphold his and the family's identity while still being engaged in their craft. One could argue that given identities offer a sense of structure that grounds our freedom and that unconstrained freedom is often not correlated with a sense of fulfilment, but rather with a guttural feeling of anguish in the face of innumerable options (Schwartz, 2016). Certainly, authenticity can be found without freely choosing our identities but as seen in the world of work when people work in routinized jobs under economic duress without the autonomy to pursue engaging practical identities, what results is a labour-force that is

mostly disengaged, disenfranchised, and deskilled. If our given identities offer a sense of structure in our lives, then these benefits seldom constitute an engaging relationship with our work.

A related concern with automating routine work is the loss of independence and status that comes from long-term unemployment. Even if such jobs are disengaging, they still provide individuals with a sense of independence and gratification by earning their own wage. As Yang (2018) notes, with the advent of factory robots such as the Selective Compliance Assembly Robot Arm, there has been a loss of 5 million manufacturing jobs since the year 2000 in the USA. One of the key consequences of long-term unemployment, as Yang (2018: 71) states, "is the loss of status, independence, a general malaise and demoralisation". Indeed, long-term unemployment is worse over time for life satisfaction than a permanent injury or the death of a spouse (Yang, 2018). Therefore, a concern remains about how we can prevent people, who have worked much of their life in routinized work from slipping into long-term unemployment and how we can encourage them to pursue new practical identities.

8. Conclusion

As AI creeps into more domains of human activity we will continue to be presented with a dilemma between pursuing a sufficient standard of success and the autotelic goods of doing things for their own sake. As what was once complex and difficult becomes simple and trivial and producing the next masterpiece of literature or film becomes no more arduous than inputting a series of prompts into a large language model, the use of such AI threatens to deskill skilled work, to take the human out of the humanities, and to reduce the caring professions to a mechanised simulacrum of compassion. Without a clear demarcation between the domains of human activity that AI can liberate us from, facilitate us in, or annihilate completely, we risk closing off psychologically engaging corners of the world forever and sacrificing the autotelic goods of being active participants in the world for a life of passivity and convenience.

Ultimately, what is required to live authentically is the targeted automation of routinized work and to enable individuals to freely choose their own practical identities based on its capacity to engage them. It is only by skilfully perceiving some corner of the world that we come to inhabit our own perceptual niches. However, unrestrained freedom may not lead to a sense of fulfilment for everyone, and indeed may undermine the structure that our given identities offer us. Therefore, open questions remain as to how we can provide structure and a sense of independence in the face of unrestricted freedom and potentially long-term unemployment. Perhaps, when the individual is liberated from the scarcity of time and money, the goods of being with others, of encouraging community bonds, and achieving together can provide the structure that has been lost by automating routine work. Perhaps, as a society we can live excellent by pursuing what is beautiful, difficult, and loving.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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