

# Digital culture, philosophy and metaontology

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October 24, 2012

Our world is getting more and more digital. The digital space is probably becoming the first and the only existing space; in this context, one can anticipate that there will not be any non-digital space in a few decades. And, if this idea is true, theorizing about our relationship with technology becomes a central issue; a philosophy of the digital world will be the first philosophy and the specification philosophy “of...” will become useless. Philosophy, the only possible philosophy, will be the one considering the conceptual structures of digital culture as its basis.

The adjective “digital” will be completely senseless or at least redundant.

This idea implies many questions. First of all, the urgency of defining the proper investigation field of the discipline “philosophy of digital culture”. Let us start with the analysis of the word “digital”, the meaning of which is not always clear. With “digital”, we mean both the changes operated by new technologies and the continuity between our traditionally technical world and today’s digital world. We can actually have two opposite points of view when we try to understand the world in which we live, the world of the Internet and of the web, the world of smartphones and ebooks. This world can be interpreted as a product of a radical change, concept which implies a rupture between the world we used to know before digital technologies and the one we know after them. As such, the world is something completely new, and unknown before. This change has theoretically taken place at the end of the last century, and more precisely in the 90s – or even more so, 1994. On the other hand, we can think of this digital world as the simple development of a thousand-year-old tendency; the technical way mankind has to inhabit the world [1].

These two points of view may be interpreted as contradictory, but a deeper analysis shows that it is not the case: they are complementary and they cannot be understood separately. If we want to understand our world and, specifically our digital world, we need to find a balance between these two visions. If we do not do that, we will have just a caricaturization of the theory of digital culture.

Thus, as one tries to consider technical changes in a continuum, one should admit technology as a fundamental aspect of mankind. This means that one should accept that Men are technical animals. Technology is, in some ways, a sort of human nature, as one can say reading the myth of Prometheus. But if this is true, one should also accept that men do not have their own nature because their nature is external to them: therefore men’s nature changes with technical evolution. Men do not have an eternal essence, which is what differentiates them from animals.

So one should accept that studying this continuum means accepting the centrality of changes.

This is why a philosophical theory about digital culture become fundamental nowadays.

The theories of Milad Doueihi [2] and of Maurizio Ferraris[3] are significant examples of such an attempt. In his works, Milad Doueihi is able to develop an analysis of changes issued from digital technologies without forgetting the continuity which characterizes our culture.

In his books [4][2] Doueihi shows how digital culture changes some of the fundamental concepts of our previous cultures – and especially the culture of paper editions (print culture). Ideas and notions as public and private or friendship or anthology did exist in print culture: digital culture

takes them and changes them deeply. The point is to understand the reason and the structure of these evolutions.

From a complementary point of view, Maurizio Ferraris tries to build up an “ontology of topicality”. In his *Anima e iPad. E se l'automa fosse lo specchio dell'anima?* (Soul and iPad. And if the automaton was the mirror of the soul?), he argues that “instead of praising or blaming technical progress or looking at the changes that technology produces, one should insist on the fact that these changes are able to reveal and show what exist. In this direction, the ontology of topicality is an ontology through topicality, which means that the very conscience of the fact that essence and structure manifest themselves through transformations and modifications”. [3], p. 11.

Starting from these ideas, and from my previous works on the philosophy of digital culture [5], [6], my paper will aim to provide the foundations of a metaontology. Metaontology (which I first defined in [7]) is a philosophical approach which tries to understand the delicate relationship between changes and continuity, accepting different ontological points of view. Metaontology is not a super-ontology, and its objective is not creating a system aimed at understanding all the different ontologies single handedly. It is an interstitial ontology able to consider the relationship between technology and essences. Thus, it enables the understanding of the relationship between an essence and its transformation through time and through technical evolutions.

The goal of my research is to build a philosophical approach to digital culture and its social, ethical and political implications. The foundation of a metaontology will provide the methodology and the main principles of such an approach.

Metaontology will allow Digital Humanities to be both a technical and a cultural discipline, as well as putting together practical and theoretical points of view.

In order to reach these goals my paper will be divided in 4 parts:

1. **New Technologies as a revolution.** First, I will consider the thesis according to which new technologies are creating a completely new world. This idea is often connected with the pessimistic perception of the changes digital culture is producing [8]. The supporters of this position often think that one can define human nature, which means one knows what mankind is. From this point of view, technologies are something external to Humans and they are changing the very nature of Men.
2. **New Technologies as a continuity.** Secondly, I will analyze the opposite point of view, from which the human nature *is* technology [9]. This means that Men do not have any nature, because their peculiarity is to change and adapt themselves to the environment thanks to technology. The development of technology is indeed the actualization of the potentiality of human nature [1].
3. **A definition of metaontology.** The problem of this second point of view is that it is contradictory: it aims to define men’s nature as something external to them – and therefore continually transforming – by stating a stable idea of the human nature. That is why we need a third approach: the one of metaontology. In the third part of my paper I will explain the history of the notion of metaontology (starting from Heidegger [10]), its relationship with ontology and with a general philosophy of technology. I will particularly consider the notion of “intermediality” [11] according to which one can understand an idea only by focusing on the set of systems that permit its transmission.

I will then explain why metaontology is the best theoretical approach to understand the role of digital technologies in human lives.

4. **Cultural, political and ethical issues of technologies from a metaontological point of view.** As a conclusion, I will analyse how a metaontological approach could change the way one conceives ethics and politics in digital culture. The first feature of metaontology is to allow the respect of the multiplicity and the differences preserving the comprehension between different points of view. This should be our first goal as Digital Humanists: to find models and standards – in our semantic web’s practices, for instance, or in our way to choose a digital format or language – which permit exchanges and interoperability but always respecting the multiplicity and the differences.

## References

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