

Foucault, Facebook and freedom

This paper examines the role played by the technical object in the production of self and focuses on certain lines of approach to understanding the links between Facebook and how much freedom net users have in creating their online self. Given the techniques of self activated, we evaluate this digital networking platform as a disciplining device for both the subject and the collective self. Ethical considerations relating to online practices of self will be explored from different perspectives: the subject's freedom according to Foucault's ethics, Kant's deontological approach and Bentham and Mill's utilitarian approach.

Keywords: ethics, Facebook, freedom, dispositive, online self

Michel Foucault's work revolves around three constitutive poles: power (his study on prisons), knowledge (his study on madness) and ethics (his study on sexuality). The last theme, ethics, may be divided into four areas dealing with ethical substance, kinds of subjection, practices of self and teleology. In this article we look at the practices of self within the context of the utilisation of Facebook, a social networking website. We examine certain ethical challenges by problematising the relation to this digital platform as a practice of self and even as a 'considered practice of freedom' (Foucault 1984a: 1530, free translation).

While the practices of self have undoubtedly evolved since Ancient Greece, Foucault points out that Christianity 'shifted the practices of self towards oneself and the discovery of self as a subject of desire' (Foucault 1984a, free translation). This way of considering the question of production of self has prevailed for many centuries, but Foucault shows how the practices of self can be perceived differently – not as explication (something present, buried

within us, waiting to be discovered), but rather as a process (something in the process of becoming, being experienced, taking shape).

Foucault proceeds to question self-writing as a process of experiencing oneself: 'The question of self and writing of self has not been central but has always been very important in the constitution of self' (1984c: 1519, free translation). Without necessarily suggesting a superficial analogy between Facebook and self-writing, it seems pertinent to consider the writing of one's 'profile', within the broader framework of the practices of self, as akin to self-writing. Researchers cannot dismiss some 900 million users of this social network by belittling this mode of writing as futile or unpolished. If this practice of self constitutes an experience of self, then how can we have the necessary conditions, when a disciplining *dispositive*¹ is at work, to make it an ethical technique of the self?

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Facebook as a technique of the self

Foucault attests to the production of self by subjection and subjectivisation through practices involving the body. These practices may be techniques of the self realised by repeating and improving certain gestures and through an auto-reflexive approach to the effects of this practice on the self. Foucault homes in on various techniques that produce the subject, including that of self-writing. By considering writing on Facebook and participation within the social network as a practice, we explore whether this practice can become a technique of the self.

In etymological terms, 'technique of the self' is the way in which actions are deployed, organised and practised. It is the mechanics at play in the crafting of self where each meaningful and introspective gesture produces the thinking subject. However, a technique

of the self cannot be considered apart from ethical reflection. It is part of a larger dynamic of the production of self where each element influences the adopted technique of the self. Seen thus, the role of the technical object in this dynamic depends on the type of utilisation chosen through the action. But the form of action is partly inherent in the technical object which in turn 'informs' the resultant subject. The technique of the self, therefore, depends on both the subject and the technical object, which shapes an important practice for the subject. A *tekhné* of the body is constructed in keeping with the constitutive elements of the technical object.

The practice of writing on this online platform acts upon the subject and the self is produced through sequential acts in the user's profile (his or her account). 'Facebook' becomes part of a technique of producing the online self and the profile becomes a trace of the user's composite individuality. The accumulated traces are glimpses of the produced self for both others and oneself to see. Production of self occurs through the daily writing of one's state of being and also through the information shared consensually (shared links or statuses, etc.). Facebook, then, becomes a means (both a tool and technical object) whereby the subject experiences the self through the sharing of oneself in the gaze of others. There is a dynamic in this production of the self through the relationship between subject and technical object and the bilateral effect of this relationship. '[For certain Stoics,] the experience of self is not the discovery of a truth hidden in oneself, but rather an attempt to determine what one can or cannot do with the freedom they have' (Foucault 1983: 1227, free translation). Playing on the relationship between subject and technical object, internet users modulate their practice and learn to gauge their manoeuvrability using the tool, but this relationship should not be considered solely in binary terms: Facebook and the user are part of a larger dispositive that affects the technical object as well as the user.

From structure to dispositive

Facebook must be defined through a broader field of relations than technological media. It is part of a dispositive, in Foucault's meaning of the term, viz.: a 'heterogeneous set' of 'discourses, institutions, architectural designs, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative procedures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic statements – in short, what is explicit and implicit' (Foucault 1977:

299, free translation). In our study of Facebook, we take discursive and non-discursive practices into consideration: this online social platform is a technical object but also a group of elements including material and symbolic signs, the internet, net users, various contexts of use, different goals, and so on.

In the *Grand Robert de la langue française* dictionary, the first two etymological meanings of the term 'dispositive' are military and legal. The third meaning, referring to a 'technical dispositive', is closer to the one given by Foucault: 'the way in which pieces and organs are placed within an apparatus: the mechanism itself'. The dispositive implies the coming together of different elements, defining the placement of tangible and intangible elements to become a meaningful whole, a producer of discourses and practices. There may be confusion between dispositive and structure since it is the structure² that denotes 'the way in which the concrete and spatial whole is considered in its parts, in its organization'. Nevertheless, there is a major difference in the original meanings of these terms: while 'structure' stems from the Latin verb *struere*, meaning to construct, the word 'dispositive' derives from the Middle English and Old French *devis*, meaning a thing devised, contrived, a mechanical invention. Included in the term 'structure' is the idea of permanence, a construction built on a foundation (we can use the example of the structure of a building), according to a predetermined and 'vertical' order.

The term 'dispositive', however, includes the idea of action, of arranging elements in a certain 'order' ('a set of means devised according to a plan'), but this order can reorganise itself in a dynamic way and can be polymorphic (without hierarchy, for example, 'horizontally'). The structure and the dispositive may be partially visible in the way they take shape. Yet, for the structure, the predominant factor is the nature of the elements in place, while for the dispositive the significant factor is its effect on the elements: 'for the dispositive, it is the nature of the link that can exist between these heterogeneous elements' (Foucault 1977: 299, free translation). The structure is homogeneous through the articulation of its elements, while the dispositive links up heterogeneous elements and creates a coherence among them.

In this way, the dispositive gives shape to a set of forces that find an equilibrium together for a certain time. But these forces can constantly reposition themselves to form a different

meaningful whole, with constant variations of individual elements within their interacting variations. We understand that the dispositive can also be rigid (the prison dispositive), fragile (the democratic dispositive), ephemeral (the anarchist dispositive), and so on. Yet, at the moment of confrontation of those forces, there is a certain equilibrium that enables the production of meaning. Each element participates in and affects the other elements of the dispositive. It is a dynamic way of considering a set of forces that variously affect or are affected through their relations within a network.

From this distinction, we can assert that Facebook exists as a structure and as a dispositive. The structure refers to the organization of the software itself (the way in which the elements are organised, the vocabulary used to define it, the publicity, etc.). It refers to the type of elements of a specific structure constituting an online social platform and capitalistic interests, but also, social inclusion or exclusion (one is either connected to Facebook or not), the net's participative mentality, the individuality of the net user, copyrights and online reproductions, other similar sites, the history of the platform, etc. While Facebook's structure 'imposes itself' on the user (meaning there is a 'given'), Facebook as a dispositive includes the net user in the shaping of his or her network and 'creates a space for him or her'.

A disciplining dispositive

A study of the internet user's relationship with digital social media in the perspective of the technique of the self cannot readily ignore the interacting effects of the heterogeneous elements on each other. Using Facebook to produce oneself does not obviate what this media form entails and its effect on its users. We must assess how each element of the dispositive is affected and in turn affects other elements: are certain elements 'subjected' to the force of one or more of the dispositive's elements? More precisely, is the platform user subjected to the Facebook structure? The internal coherence of the Facebook structure favours certain arrangements of elements. Some of the dispositive's elements have greater impact than others and hence on the user, thereby fostering certain interpretations and behaviour.

For Foucault, the dispositive thus refers to an apparatus shaped by a series of parts arranged in such a way as to influence the field of action. A dispositive indicates an arrangement which has a normative effect

on the environment since it introduces it to certain dispositions. The device creates a propensity for certain types of actions, a tendency for certain things to 'happen' (Raffnsøe 2008, free translation).

Among other things, Foucault analysed the disciplinary dispositive. Using institutions as examples, he showed the transformations in disciplining down through the centuries. Within a specific field, discipline asserts the rules of conduct to obtain order. Maintaining the rule ensures regularity of practices, for example. *Mutatis mutandis*, Facebook's structure can be seen as a disciplinary mode with a well-established order for using different functions. There is a disciplining of the net user's relationship with Facebook during his or her online production of self. This is due to a structure that limits contestation of the discipline promoted by the platform.

Indeed, compared to other online platforms (open source platforms, for instance), Facebook leaves very little room for the net user to organise, at their convenience, the elements and types of use. Except for the choice of using or not using a function, posting or not posting certain information, the platform is rigid and offers little possibility to personalise the functions and interface. The structure is organised around 'boxes' that the user may or may not fill in, that can be clicked on or not. Using Facebook entails a kind of exercise, a technique strongly defined by simple and often binary choices the user must make. This technique, as practised, becomes the art of using Facebook. It is 'the right use of Facebook' – the specialised and inherent way, as embedded in its structure.

This form of repeated exercise trains the user's behaviour: one's conduct is organised by the Facebook structure. Through constantly repeated actions, an automatism occurs, disciplining the practices and even creating habits. For instance, through the repetition of 'liking', an automatic way of expressing one's approval, consent, support or complicity develops. The repeated exercise of 'liking' 'creates' other ways of acting to make certain things happen: in this case, it tends to spur ever greater participation.

In using Facebook, a set of repeated micro-actions, such as 'I like', are assembled into a coherent whole. These coalesce in a general conditioning of behaviours on the platform that includes writing comments, sharing

links, messaging, and so on. The utilisation of Facebook then becomes embedded in a self-reinforcing process with each micro-action being encouraged and rewarded. In this way, through a series of its structure's elements, Facebook validates the 'right use' of the platform and reinforces the active presence of the net user. The structure consolidates certain practices and discourages others to ensure the one-way objectives: namely, active participation through the disciplining of behaviours.

The transformation of the disciplining complies with the platform's evolutionary structure. Initially, Facebook was more like a database of personal self-presentation pages. Now, the platform provides more functions and applications under the same profile, whether the net user is inside or outside the platform. This platform has become a 'manager', a mode of organising social life, such that using Facebook not only disciplines the relations between the net users and this technical object, but also disciplines the relations of users to themselves and to others.

According to a study published in 2012 by comScore, 'between 2010 and 2011, the time spent by Canadians on social networks increased by 32 per cent'.³ Facebook, notably, increased by 20 per cent. This growing attraction to social media is particular to Y generation youth (born between 1977 and 1993): 'in 2011, 93 per cent of internet users from this generation consulted social media content at least once a month, 84.1 per cent interacted with other internet users, 79 per cent managed a profile, 66.5 per cent forwarded information and 64.6 per cent created content.'⁴ This mass membership participates in a community, a socialisation dispositive where everything is geared to increasing the number of subscribers and the number of links among them. There comes a point of no return when a crucial stage is reached⁵ and a position must be taken: to be or not to be on Facebook.

The Facebook members constituting the social body of 'subscribers' are not a unified mass. Rather, they are a gathering of a multitude of ID pages all created under Facebook's structural model where each user's strength can add to the global structure. Each user becomes a unique member when they present their life like a diary (timeline), 'a new type of profile, like a biography'. Each profile defines a user since the content of each 'box' can be particularised. Facebook is built in a way that spurs the addition of personalised

data, making it very easy to create unique profiles: status updates, personal information, pictures, comments, links towards other exterior applications, etc. Each user presents units of the platform and what appeals is the differences between these units: the content of each profile is unique. The glorification of individual identities contributes to the feeling of attachment to one's profile, a form of pride fostered by the structure of visibility that each shared information incorporates. There is a self-acclamation, a constant exposure which transforms the relation to time and space.

Despite the constricting aspect of Facebook's structure on the user, it continues to be an easy means of self-valorisation within a vast social network. It may seem senseless from the outside to invest in a space where one feels limited, but for the keenly involved the structure of this space offers multiple possibilities of contacts that feel gratifying. The dispositive created by this gathering of individuals of corresponding social image fulfils fundamental identification needs creating for users a genuine feeling of belonging that nourishes their self-image (Deci and Ryan 2000). This gratification goes hand in hand with the act of participation on Facebook and renders it an efficient mode of self-production. The rigid structure of the platform engulfs users within a disciplining dispositive reinforced by the pressure of conformism tied to its broad social use. However, the constraints are compensated by the huge gain in space and time that gives users a certain visibility and celebrity in a 'digital global village' inhabited by millions. In this way, the profiles become a kind of constant parade representing an ideal investment in the platform, an archive or record of oneself by participating.

This relation to time based on archiving makes it possible to introduce, in the present, digital traces which follow the user and can be followed by others. The production of the online self must take into account the constantly updatable past, for better or worse, since each action produces an imprint, a groove which can discipline that very action. This relation to 'permanent' time disciplines the user since each trace of the past can constitute an incriminating 'proof' and it embeds a history which is opposed to the volatile nature of the elements. In other words, by the visual construction of a profile's history, a certain legitimacy of the 'I am part of, therefore I am' is ensured. The diary henceforth offered to users grafts the flood of information into a portrait in a structure unique to Facebook and valid only on Facebook. This practice of the

self produces traces that the user can consult in order to evaluate his or her own practice in a diachronic perspective from which he or she cannot be freed.

We must then question whether it is the content that truly invests the Facebook dispositive or is it the participatory activity that is significant. In other words, are the major effects on the dispositive caused by the particularisation of the profile content, or, through the act of participating in these profiles? There is the question of the gains Facebook enjoys through technological development and advances in diversifying platform usage and other functions and applications that can be linked to it. To optimise the user's presence, participation is made easy, so easy that participants are unaware, even oblivious to their participation. This propulsion to participate is neither good nor bad in itself. However, one wonders about the user's actual place in the structure, since the addition of profile content can now happen automatically.⁶

Like all techniques of the self, the action becomes more significant than the content: participation on Facebook takes precedence over what is published and we can observe the user losing control of the very content of his or her own profile. Facebook's structure is such that self-production goes far beyond the featuring of one's own profile since anyone can be identified in another person's photo profile, a user can quote or share the status of another profile, the profile activity of a friend can be seen by the 'friends of a friend' without being tied to them, a group invitation can present a profile among a group of subscribers and disclose certain ties to the 'host' or certain affinities with the event, and so on. Controlling the production of self can become extremely complex or even impossible for the user. In terms of using the platform, it can become a major preoccupation for a user conscious of the dangers of uncontrolled circulation of one's personal information.

While disciplining individual actions, Facebook, through its structure, also disciplines social relationships: the forms of the relationships are disciplined in accordance with Facebook's structure. A regularisation conditions the relations between Facebook's members while the platform gives form and regularity to the way in which one presents news (by status updates), stays in contact (by reading friends' and acquaintances' 'walls'), organises events (by the invitation to check 'going', 'maybe'

or 'not going'), indicates agreement ('I like'), etc. Non-participation seems to be the sole way of contesting the discipline. Moreover, this discipline extends to other online social networks while certain 'reflexes' acquired with Facebook are reproduced elsewhere, always with the risk of pre-formatting social interactions.

Indeed, while *tekhnê* was previously a specialised Facebook-specific way of using the platform, it is now serving to conform other platforms and interactive websites, becoming generalised as a social habit. The practices developed on Facebook are migrating to other platforms. Originally dedicated to insiders who were admissible on the basis of certain criteria, Facebook is now open to all net users and a diversity in the types of members is observed. Facebook's structure thus instils a collective order for the use of the platform where new subscribers copy the 'old' subscribers' practices: the fact of reproducing serves to reinforce how things are done. The platform transforms itself in response to new technologies and practices that are increasingly established and consensual. For instance, Facebook is now adapted to smart phones and optimises its functions so these dispositives can be consulted at any given moment.

Thus, when connected to the internet, this disciplinary mode is no longer limited to Facebook practitioners. Users who adopt Facebook's prism in presenting their actions can also have this experience of self even when offline: taking pictures on a night out explicitly to post on one's profile, thinking of the status to write about while at certain events, producing material with the goal of posting it on Facebook, etc. The fact of disciplining a practice produces effects which are not restricted to the use of the technical object. This partially explains how the generalisation of the disciplining of the Facebook dispositive extends to other life experiences. It not only reaches into the population but also everyday practices, with the Facebook dispositive entering many areas of the social experience. It not only 'alters our way of relating with friends or community' (Bogost 2010: 24), but also upsets the forces at play in an array of dispositives. For example, the political and economic dispositives are shaken up by both the power of Facebook's structure and the habits which have been conditioned through the repeated use of this digital social medium. Today, the ways of doing politics and business have changed. By introducing this heterogeneous element into

society's other dispositives, there is a crafting of the social self that is not conceived outside of the disciplining of social relations arising from digital social media. The ways of doing politics or business are now passed through the filter of the social web: this social fabric recreated online, scans and evaluates the information that will show up on different profiles. Social order is destabilised. We have seen this with the international Occupy movement, the 'Arab Spring' or the student strike in Quebec in 2012. The social body of connected users on Facebook establishes its own internal order in which the information is organised according to a logic. This logic is reproduced in the social sphere: direct links become established between the practices on Facebook and social practices.

In fact, Facebook is coherent with the more general changes in society, the very changes that shape digital social media. The individual or collective disciplining of Facebook works because it aligns with the more global transformations of the socialisation dispositive. Facebook participates in the current wave of the social web as well as the everyday use of smart phones and other digital tablets. Links are constantly established between Facebook and the socialisation dispositive and are consistent with each other. They are unified in such a way that it is now impossible to think of the socialisation dispositive without the disciplining of digital social media. A study on the production of self and the techniques of the self cannot underestimate the role of Facebook (and other digital social media) in the relational processes of contemporary society and must assess their effects on the socialisation dispositives. So there is an ethical question attendant to considering the role net users want within the dispositive and the influence on their freedom.

The ethics of the production of self on Facebook

As a technical object, Facebook's vocation is to produce maximum effects with minimum effort. This fundamental determinism is a powerful motive of Facebook's insertion as a socialisation dispositive in contemporary societies. Thus, '[a human being] wants to conquer nature with a new prodigy' (Ovide 1806). However, with Facebook, net users are confronted with an ambivalence which illustrates an important ethical problem. On the one hand, they open themselves to a potentially immense social web that feeds the roots of their self-determination (Deci and Ryan 2000). Users fully control their keyboard and can do what they please. In seconds they can be informed, make contact,

play, like, hate, meet, consult, agree, publish, be moved, share, converse, work, or role play. Thus, in the usual meaning of the concept of freedom, the use of this technical object makes the net user a free agent. However, through the ease and exclusively digital mediation the tool offers, the users more or less entrust to it the production of their ego and the construction of their social interactions. These are highly disciplined digital exchanges that, by digitising the exchanges, serve to compartmentalise their own and others' identity. In short, in this apparent freedom proclaimed by Facebook's popularity, what ethics are at work? Is there something lost or at risk of being swallowed up by these digital social practices?

Freedom as duty

To answer this question, there must first be a deconstruction of the commonly referred to notion of freedom. This necessarily entails opposing two aspects of freedom which emerge from using the Facebook dispositive as a mode of self-production. In modern ethical theory, influenced by deontology or utilitarianism, freedom is generally conceived in two ways: either as *duty* or as *satisfaction*. The notion of freedom as duty centres on the discovery of a psychic competency that renders the subjects capable – or at least, partially capable – of detaching from their natural determinants or from their emotions to accomplish a deliberate and autonomous act. This vision of freedom is primarily associated with Kantian deontological ethics. Unlike Descartes, it is not founded on ontological dualism which perceives body and spirit as two separate entities. This understanding of freedom instead relies on a phenomenological⁷ dualism revealed through the introspective experience of a rational consciousness capable of self-determination, sometimes running counter to one's 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 deemed *negative*, since it asserts what freedom is opposed to in order to manifest the autonomy of will. For Kant, positive freedom is will which determines its own law (ibid: 64). But how is this possible,

by what means? It is possible because will, guided by reason, can determine actions independently from psychic dispositions tied to preferences or desires that are geared towards objects. For instance, a gluttonous person may be able to adjust much of his behaviour to his desire to eat. But if he so wishes, he could also suppress this desire and refuse to have the object (food) determine his action. However, this person might also choose to set aside his immediate desire by focusing his actions on motives other than self-interest, such as sharing food with others regardless of his personal craving. The possibility of sharing, like all other ethical acts, springs from the basic universal quality of human reasoning which is to act in an objective manner, despite considerations rooted solely in physical and egocentric needs. In more technical terms, Kant calls this rule of action the *categorical imperative*.⁸ It allows the subject to freely determine himself. The categorical imperative underlines the importance, for subjects of an ethical nature, of acting in an impartial manner and hence adopting a form of conduct that can be deemed acceptable by all reasonable human beings 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, which 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 solely by personal interests, humanity would quickly find itself in a state of permanent war of all against all (Hobbes 2005 [1651]). In Kantian ethical reasoning, 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 therefore apprehended by *all* reasoning human beings. If something exists, rather than nothing, it is precisely because life and the world are ordered according to regularities that can be formulated as laws. A world without laws would not exist because its structural instability would make it unperceivable to human intelligence. Decidedly, without structural stability, the existence of life would be impossible. And so it goes for ethics. Kantian ethics assume a structure of possibilities upheld by the capacity to make choices that stand apart from strict self-reference; choices that are supported by freedom and a shared meaning whereby each human being can

judge the validity of an action. This freedom and meaning are necessary to the integrity of human life as proclaimed in international law or world religions, the prohibition of murder or the defence of dignity and fundamental liberties.

Thus, in the deontological Kantian tradition, freedom is conceived as a responsibility or duty. This means that the actions whereby human beings surpass themselves are *efforts* that must be made if there is to be freedom or ethics. To honour human beings is in itself acting through duty while setting aside natural and spontaneous inclinations that impinge upon our actions. Whosoever ponders the meaning of ethical actions will side with Kant in recognising that ethical actions are made possible by the strong and common capacity of all reasoning human beings for self-sacrifice.

Freedom as satisfaction

On the other hand, freedom as satisfaction stems from the natural inclination of humans to value useful actions, those that yield the most benefits at the least cost (human, business, etc.) (Sen 2010). This concept was first defended by the British philosophers Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill and, interestingly, it has dominated economic theory for many decades. Freedom as satisfaction relies on an anthropology radically different from the one enunciated by Kant. A famous passage by Bentham eloquently summarises 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, be it economic or philosophical, human actions are motivated by a *summum bonum*: the quest for well-being and the avoidance of suffering. Thus, what is ethical is what promises the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people (Mill 2008 [1863]: 19). It is in this context that freedom appears, in its positive definition, as the means to fulfil a quest for well-being. Inversely, in its negative form, freedom consists in not being prevented from pursuing happiness, which would lead to the *harm principle* articulated by Mill:

Acts, of all kind, which, without justifiable cause, do harm to others, may be, and in the more important cases absolutely require to be, controlled by the unfavourable 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 outcome of ethics provides three principles relevant to our understanding of the ethics of production of self enabled by Facebook: maximising the cost-benefit ratio, maximising freedom of expression, and unabridged development of individuality. The principle of maximisation logically proceeds from the imperative: 'the greatest happiness for the greatest number' insofar as it invites a summation, 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 tallied along with the positive ones to obtain an arithmetic progression of the utilitarian ethical choice. It is nonetheless natural to seek the most efficient means, i.e., actions that yield the greatest happiness within the cost-benefit constraints of those actions.

Freedom of expression, in turn, transposes this freedom as satisfaction into the political sphere, by seeking through action a certain state of well-being. Well-being is an effect inseparable from the possibility offered to all human beings, to live the life one desires, to adopt one's personal mores, to adhere to the ideas one holds dear.

As it is useful that while humankind is imperfect there should be different opinions, so it is that there should be different experiments of living; 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 (ibid: 53).

To have access to an authentic form of freedom, individuals must have the self-imposed capacity to align their personality and particularities to a range of situations, to thus create their own individuality. On this topic, Mill observes, in a passage borrowed from the German philosopher Wilhelm 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. From the union of these arise individual rigour and diversity, which combine themselves with originality (ibid: 54).

In sum, and contrary to Kant's deontological view, the concept of freedom as satisfaction is characterised by its eudemonist scope, which means it focuses on happiness. Therein, Mill's ethics and his contribution to the concept of freedom approaches the Greek philosophers. For them, as Foucault reminds us, the development of the individual and freedom are first expressed through the concern for self, which then enables the advancement of the social group. The Kantian vision is different since its ethics are characterised by a systematic search for self-detachment versus action validated through the innate truth of a universal law.

Freedom emerging from the Facebook dispositive

It is now clear that the questioning of production of self through the Facebook dispositive first calls for reflection on the theme of freedom, whether it is understood as duty or as satisfaction. The Facebook platform allows net users to satisfy their desire for socialisation, personal expression, exposure and, more globally, to have access to a stimulating environment. Here the abolition of certain spatial and temporal boundaries is not so banal. The multiplication and establishment of information sources through networks on a global scale clearly help reinforce the sense of decompartmentalisation of thinking and the fostering of a freedom-sensed consciousness. What unites the different notions of freedom are primarily self-awareness and knowledge. These allow a human being to retreat from aspects of the programming inherited from childhood, to become an adult and hence more free: to outgrow the 'state of being a minor'⁹ according to Foucault's (1984) reading of Kant's reply to the question *Was ist Aufklärung?* (What is Enlightenment?). This observation can apply to Kantian ethics because reason and will imply the growth of self-awareness. It can also apply to Bentham's and Mill's ethics since the search for well-being requires an acute judgment

generated by awareness and knowledge. The distribution network constituted by Facebook participates in this consciousness-raising via the free flow of information. It contributes to the edification of a truly collective intelligence to the benefit of each stakeholder.

Yet, the disciplining dispositive through micro-actions still induces certain perverse effects which can be explained by the behaviourist mechanism of conditioned reflexes. The Facebook dispositive lets users socialise in a relatively safe psychological environment (the effects are present online, but they pass through the platform's filter) and unlike the face-to-face approach where shyness and uneasiness are exposed and visible, Facebook lets users present themselves to others through the mediation of a screen, so there is greater control over the socialisation steps. This comfort comes directly from the user's own effect on his or her digital reality and acts as a defence mechanism for the ego. But it is a situation that can create a feeling of dependency on that predictable and safe universe where the pain of rejection or the critical regard of others can be avoided. However, the experience of suffering and the experience of the other remain essential for a sense of the ethical to emerge in existentialist and philosophical phenomenology (Husserl 2000 [1931]; Sartre 1976; Lévinas 1990).

In fact, paradoxically, this object accorded the net user by means of a keyboard and screen represents an insurmountable physical limit, namely the organicity of the body and all its attributes: the energy of the other's presence, integral sensuality, uncontrollability, proprioception, etc. Consequently, the shaping of the net user, through repeated contact with this input, could well produce 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 freedom – relies on learning through receptors (senses), but also through the physical and psychological ordeals inherent to living, which can at times be heavy, afflictive or uncontrollable. The Facebook dispositive can only partially translate these aspects.

Given the relationship to another which is modulated by the prism of particularisation, Facebook's structure promotes an egocentric dynamic and a reification of identities. While it may be simplistic to state that this dynamic inevitably lures all users towards their own dehumanisation, the sheer allure of this tool resides in the possible seclusion

from socialisation, and concomitantly from ethical sensibility, within a digital corridor that securitises the relation with the other. Ultimately we accept the idea that within the Facebook dispositive, the search for happiness which is at the core of the utilitarian concept of freedom as satisfaction, can end up whittling away the capacity for self-sacrifice necessary to the realisation of freedom as duty. We must find ways to avoid the individual's seclusion while moving towards an ethical ideal in the utilisation of Facebook.

Conclusion

In this paper we discussed how the practice of Facebook can become a technique of the self in the context of disciplining behaviours and the difficulties entailed in breaking free from the structure in order to experience freedom. By broaching the question from the perspective of the dispositive rather than the structure, it was possible to better grasp the forces at play and their dynamic nature. Moreover, we introduced an ethical reflection for users and their relation to the technical object: the net user becomes one of the forces at play. He or she submits to the pull of the dispositive, its force, while being a part of it: there is a power relationship, but not one of domination between the net user and the structure. Theoretically, amongst the forces at play, reversal is always a possibility. Abuse of power occurs when we 'go beyond the legitimate exercise of power and impose on others our own fantasies, tastes and desires' (Foucault 1984a: 1534, free translation). There is a certain risk involved. Facebook's owners, for instance, could abuse their power by merchandising the user's personal data or by surveying their actions. But despite the risk, users must remain free and evolve towards an ethical relation with this technical object which is Facebook. Users must be able to self-liberate, to extricate from conditions of subservience that could be imposed by the dispositive through imbalanced forces at play.

In fact, certain dispositives are more rigid than others. In this article, it was imperative to evaluate the rigidity or flexibility of the Facebook dispositive in order to discern how it informs both the online self and social ties. We saw that the disciplining aspect of Facebook's practices is inscribed in larger disciplining practices particular to a digital social media and Internet era. This era pressures the users of new technologies in such a way that their field of action undergoes a normative effect which transforms certain tendencies. This means the dispositive creates a strong tendency

to shape certain behaviours and certain forms of socialisation. The pertinent question was whether users can still create a space so that the behaviours being shaped within it have ethical implications, such that users can refine these implications by turning their use of Facebook into a technique of the self specific to themselves. We then examined how the conditions for freedom are produced and how a reflection on the type of freedom available to the user (the ethics of the use of Facebook) is encouraged.

We have defined ethics through the practices of self (Foucault), the Kantian deontology of freedom as duty and the utilitarian approach of freedom as satisfaction. We can conclude that through the defined perspectives, these conditions for freedom can exist within the Facebook dispositive, but they demand an ethical component, a purposeful effort to shape one's actions 'according to reason', to move beyond our 'minority state' – or to gain maturity as a digital social media user. Our duty would then be to use the online social network in order to surpass ourselves – to truly make it an auto-reflexive technique of the self, based on the effort of becoming 'a better human being', by ourselves opposing causes that would distance us from that goal. We must become 'stronger' than Facebook's structure (than its mercantile and 'surveillance' objectives, for example) in order to free ourselves from it, to appropriate it to our advantage. This means directing the use of Facebook to the common good, in efforts to reduce suffering for all. Using Facebook collectively not to harm others nor to recede further from our corporality, but to open ourselves up to the other, to participate in enhancing social life. We should consider the use of Facebook as a way of varying our relationships to ourselves and others, as an added value, not something replacing any of the various means of contact with others, but rather a way to diversify our information sources, experiences and social ties, to experience and be ourselves by making it a technique of the self that participates in the full development of individuality and happiness for the greatest number.

By refining this openness to the world through each micro-action, we could maximise the cost-benefit ratio of this tool so as to optimise freedom of expression, mutual well-being and living together in harmony. We would all participate in building the world we wish to live in, through the merging and networking offered by this online tool. In other words, the

rigid structure must be adapted to make it a powerful political and artistic tool, used ideally. And if the Facebook dispositive is to gain this power, it will be due to a disciplining of behaviours that achieves a common quest for well-being, a considered practice of freedom, and to be free ourselves.

Notes

¹ As a translation for 'dispositif' in French, we choose 'dispositive', based on the work of Bussolini 2010

² We wish to emphasise that we do not base our understanding of structure as Foucault does and this reflection on the differences between the device and the structure is not inspired by his approach

³ The information is available on the Canadian Heritage Information Network website (available online at <http://www.rcip-chin.gc.ca/sgc-cms/nouvelles-news/anglais-english/>, accessed on 27 April 2012)

⁴ The study is available on the CEFRIO website (Centre francophone d'informatisation des organisations) (available online at http://www.cefrio.qc.ca/fileadmin/documents/Rapports/NETendances_7_LR_.pdf, accessed on 27 April 2012), summarised by Jean-François Ferland (24 April 2012) on the Direction Informatique website, available online at http://www.directioninformatique.com/DI/client/fr/DirectionInformatique/Nouvelles.asp?id=67128&cid=79&utm_source=632878&utm_medium=ditop5&utm_campaign=enews, accessed on 27 April 2012

⁵ In 2010, the marketing research firm Inside Network (<http://www.insidefacebook.com/>) estimated 16 million Canadians subscribed to Facebook, meaning nearly half the population (and everything leads us to believe that the number has increased since). Available online at <http://technaute.cyberpresse.ca/nouvelles/internet/201006/02/01-4286306-facebook-compte-plus-de-16-millions-de-canadiens.php>, accessed on 27 April 2012

⁶ For example, when reading an article on Yahoo, watching videos on Dailymotion or playing a game on Facebook, a post automatically appears on a friend's news feed wall indicating these actions

⁷ By phenomenological, we mean knowledge as a result of the process of a self-observing conscience

⁸ There are many formulations of the categorical imperative, the best known being the following: 'Act only according to that maxim whereby you can, at the same time, will that it should become a universal law', Kant 1985 [1788]

⁹ Minority is characterised by a 'certain state of our will which makes us accept the authority of someone else to guide us in areas where reason should be used', Foucault 1984: 1383, free translation

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**Maude Bonenfant
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