

DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY, AUTONOMY AND HUMAN FLOURISHING: A PHILOSOPHICAL INVESTIGATION

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Abstract

Digital technologies have indeed changed the way we communicate and learn, access information and participate socially. Nevertheless, technologies also have increased the competition for human attention, the collection of personal data and the quantification of social recognition, thus raising challenging questions of philosophy of inner peace, for human freedom and human flourishing. Though digital technology offers unquestionable benefits, much less focus has been paid on its role in the formation of our reflective agency, our own judgment and our way of living a meaningful life. Employing conceptual analysis and critical interpretation, this paper investigates how digital technology and human flourishing are connected with respect to attention, autonomy, inner peace and how generative AI impacts on our human judgment and creative agency. The essay proposes that the main challenge of digital life is not the connection itself, but the existence of externally programmed patterns of desire and attention which may deprive us of our self-governing capacity. Then, it is illustrated that we need to realize that inner peace requires more than our self-control or our disengagement from technological sphere: it actually requires our ability of developing critical consciousness, responsible use of technology, meaningful human interactions and aligning our use of technologies with our human considerations. Finally, the paper concludes that we need to find a way to synchronously cultivate ourselves and address the design of digital technologies, as well as developing technological systems that preserve our freedom and our capacity for reflective living and our human flourishing.

Keywords: Digital-Life; Technology; Human Being; Control; Awareness; Contentment; Artificial Intelligence; Digital Minimalism

Introduction

Digital technology has altered the mechanisms by which individuals communicate, work, learn, interact, and self-identify. Smartphones, social media, recommendation algorithms, and generative artificial intelligence now support quotidian tasks that once relied on face-to-face interactions, attentive reading, memorisation, and deliberate processing. Technological mediation is not only outside of us but is designed into the very interfaces, notifications, metrics, and defaults that reflect and determine where we attend, what we choose, and how we act (Heidegger, 1977; Newport, 2019).

Nevertheless, the concern must be stated cautiously. In the public debate, digital technology is often discussed as a unidimensional, causal factor that destroys attention or mental health. The evidence does not support such a broad conclusion. An overview of 51 studies and over 680,000 participants in 2024 found that excessive social-media use was not associated with subjective or psychological wellbeing, while problematic social-media use was associated with small negative links to both outcomes (Ansari et al., 2024). Another systematic review and meta-analysis found social-media use to be weakly associated with depression and anxiety in general, while problematic use was more robustly associated with depression, anxiety, and poor wellbeing (Ahmed et al., 2024). Hence the importance of distinguishing between use frequency and harmful patterns of use.

Inner peace may be defined as psychological tranquility, somewhat different from tranquilizer-induced, transient tranquillity. It can be understood as an ethics and considering of life in which an individual can maintain reflective self-direction within the context of uncertainty, distraction, and social stress. It is much less the clinical determine of present suffering which has no sensible ending, and even much less the optimistic assure of at all times feeling liked and at peace, than the value-efficient want for a way of

freedom inside an unsure next, without constant distraction from social and cognitive stressors. This conceptualizes inner peace, without fully equating or with autonomy, authenticity, or *eudaimonia*.

The broad research question at stake here is: how do digitally mediated worlds threaten the conditions of inner peace, and what philosophical resources are available to individuals and institutions to safeguard reflective agency without negating the real benefits of technology? There are three main contributions of this paper. First, this paper draws on classical and contemporary philosophical accounts of self-determination and attention. Second, this paper contextualizes current research on digital wellbeing while resisting the assumption that all screens are necessarily bad. Third, this paper expands the conversation to generative AI, theorizing that AI systems can be both instruments of agency and, increasingly, sources of displacement of the very activities through which agency manifests (Santucci, 2025; Paglieri, 2024).

Conceptualization of Inner Peace and Human Flourishing

Inner peace is best thought of as a tendency to be relatively stable in a person's orientation of perspective rather than a radically disturbed state of affairs. An individual may mourn, disapprove, be uncertain, or have heavy burdens and still preserve a certain inner order. A person may look relaxed and still be dominated by an almost compulsive tendency to compare oneself, to worry about being left out, or to seek the approval of others. Inner peace is not equated with complacency, passiveness, or avoidance.

This story needs to be sensitive to the differences among several traditions. The Stoic sense of calm is tied to a disciplined judgment that some things are within our control, and others are not. Aristotelian *eudaimonia* is not just an equanimous state; it is activity that makes use of virtues through a whole life supported by some external goods and social relationships (Aristotle, 2009). The Epicurean and sceptical notions of *ataraxia* have their own history and should not be conflated with Stoic virtue or modern therapeutic calm. Our present discussion is using inner peace as an umbrella term with these differences intact.

For Aristotle, human flourishing is not simply pleasure, productivity, or private happiness. Good friendship, virtuous action, wise judgment, and engagement with our human community are all part of the good life. His sense that humans are political animals meant that the social environment of human good must be understood as important for all human life, not that any and all kinds of connection are valuable (Aristotle, 2009). Digital communication can nourish friendship and civic engagement; however, reliance upon metrics-based communication can also incentivize us to treat relationships primarily as a source of positive feeling, affirmation, or positive engagement data. The normative question is whether a given practice promotes activity and interaction that are worthwhile.

But these accounts of psychic order are a fair second, too. In the *Republic*, reason, spirit, and appetite are often represented as three parts of the human soul, each of which must be ordered well if the person is to be just. And in the *Phaedrus*, the charioteer and two horses are another, somewhat similar image of the difficulty of directing conflicting desires (Plato, 1997). These accounts should not be conflated, but they shed light on one another, with a dose of prudence, and they help formulate an interesting question: when someone who intends to focus sees notifications pop up and is so tempted to click, which desires are leading them astray and which judgments will set things right?

It is not that pleasure on the internet is in itself irrational. There can be authentic value in communication, entertainment, games and online communities. But the danger is when our immediate impulses continuously trump our long-term ought commitments, or when our platforms are set up in such a way that it is difficult to switch off. A philosophical account of inner peace needs to assess what desire to seek, how desirable they are, and how well it is organised.

Attention as a Condition of Autonomy

Attention is a necessary condition for perception, deliberation, and action. The things that we attend to have an impact on which reasons are salient, which possibilities are visualized, and which options look feasible. Matthew Crawford asserts that attention is not simply an individual's mental capacity, but it is also influenced by environment and practices, and ordering one's attention is also related to building the individual capable of directing a life (Crawford, 2015). Commercial race for attention thus involves an ethical problem: who influences what is salient, and based on what incentives?

The 'commodification of attention' is the monetisation and trading of attention through the use of advertising, engagement and behavioural prediction. Zuboff's work on surveillance capitalism is one example of an analysis of the extraction of personal data and use of predictive systems to influence business results (Zuboff, 2019). This is not to suggest every interaction on a platform involves coercion, or that the user has no agency, but simply to suggest the economic incentives of a service can be at odds with a user's long-term intentions in situations where time on a platform makes money.

Terms like "attention slavery" might characterise the emotional experience of compulsion, but should not be taken literally or generally. We prefer the closer notion of attention capture: the repeated operation of an external stimulus, incentive, or interface design to direct someone's attention in ways that frustrate their considered intentions. Attention capture is not per se autonomy-undermining, but intensities and contexts, transparency and alternatives, a user's state, and the extent of compromise to reflective processes all matter to whether or not it is.

Even if we accept autonomous agency, autonomy itself is not freedom from influence; one can only be autonomous within a socially- and materially-structured environment of language, education, interaction, and tools. A more plausible account of an autonomous agent would require that we consider whether a person has the capacity to discern relevant influences, to reflect on their own commitments, and to reform, or resist, those influences when appropriate. Recommendation algorithms have the potential to both: support autonomy by providing relevant information and assisting users in finding relevant information, but also undermine autonomy by: the opaque optimisation of information that limits users' decision-space; and the potential to exploit existing vulnerabilities. In recent study it is reviewed that intelligent systems can also serve as mechanism of remote control.(Santucci , 2025).

First, Simone Weil offers a different ethics of attention. For Weil, an aggregate of essays entitled *Waiting for God*, attention is characterized as a patient attention whereby one makes oneself available to and attends to reality without automatically expediting to it one's arbitrary demands (Weil, 1951). Weil is not theorizing concentration here; she did not even Write the first theory of social media. Its current application is within an interpretive lens: to attend to other persons, experiences, and questions in their own significance and not constantly externalize them as apparatuses for gratification or display.

Such a fertile form of attention, however, may find it hard to thrive in a digital environment that gratifies instant response. But the answer is not the apotheosis of distraction-free life or the truisms that all internet activity is superficial. The question is whether you have the freedom to alternate appropriately among attention-demanding work, responsive interactions, leisure and contemplative silence. Autonomy is not maximal control over all stimuli but enough control to operate in terms of reasons that you identify as your own.

Digital Identity, Alienation, and the Fragmented Self

Online environments offer a portal to express oneself, engage with others and explore new identities. This can be particularly valuable for those whose local context does not allow access to welcoming communities. But profiles, number of likes and followers, and carefully shot pictures create the perception that identity should be a staged performance that requires effort to sustain. This can lead to a drive to compare real life with idealised self-presentations.

Sartre's idea of bad faith comes into play in situations where a person avoids their freedom by defining themselves entirely by a role, label, or social expectation (Sartre, 2007). Bad faith is not mainly agreeing with your actions or creating an online identity; it involves self-deception about our relatedness to our facts and freedom: someone might pretend that their future possibilities are closed off or that they are only one thing. When adapted to digital life, bad faith can be used to analyze instances where a person perceives a metric or the expectations of their audience as the final standard of a person's worth. This usage must stay qualified. On-line self-presenting is innovative, risible, and culturally relevant: mediated individuality is not synthetic. The problem of philosophy arises whenever someone loses his or her capacity to differentiate self-expression from the pursuit of validation, or when the imagined spectators become the main judge of what is worth doing. The job is to analyse the situations under which digital performance supports or narrows the person's capacity to pick and revise commitments.

A further development of Heidegger's analysis can be found in the essays on technology Heidegger wrote: "The Question Concerning Technology". The term "enframing" (*Gestell*) introduces a specific kind of revealing that occurs, according to Heidegger, whenever beings are disclosed mainly as standing-reserve, as available, to be ordered and manipulated (Heidegger, 1977). The claim is not only that devices and technology provide distraction.

The present definition of users as data points, predicted futures, avenues of engagement, or targets of advertisements could be understood in this way. However, Heidegger's notion should not be used as a fancy, catch-all substitute for the notion of surveillance or of information gathering. The philosophical point is that a resource perspective on the process of revealing might hide other strategies of experiencing individuals and things as ends or relationships or mysteries or responsibilities or sources of meaning. Inner peace wanes when understanding of the self is arranged solely by what might be quantified, perfected, or revealed.

Adds an explanation of body. Where phenomenology posits that cognition is founded on the lived body in the world through our practical engagement with our environment rather than on the detachment of reception of information to an abstract mind (Merleau-Ponty, 1962) digital medium does not erase embodiment. Humans already engaged with devices physically, geographically and socially. But there's a risk of paying closer attention to counters and notifications than to our body-clock or immediate environment, when interaction is dictated more by different measures or rapid task switching. It's not how real the virtual is, but that the activity is real in other ways.

Digital Connectivity and the Conditions of *Eudaimonia*

The relation of technology to wellbeing is empirically more complicated. A systematic review of social-media use and social wellbeing found there were both hazards – social comparison, cyberbullying, overload and lower self-esteem in some contexts – and benefits – social support, sense of belonging, less loneliness and better work-related outcomes in some groups (Social media use and social well-being, 2024). This variation means that it is problematic to lump 'social media use' together as a common exposure with a single predictable outcome.

Similarly, a 2024 meta-analysis concluded that overuse (based on a total time, or frequency) was not statistically significantly related to subjective or psychological wellbeing in its pooled analyses, but problematic usage was related to both negatively (poly.) (Ansari et al., 2024). A third meta-analysis also highlighted high variability in the association between social-network use and subjective wellbeing, and that how social media use is measured, moderators, and user responses relate to inconsistencies (Relationships between social networking sites use and subjective well-being, 2024). These findings indicate that philosophical critique should be based on activities, motivations, and use patterns rather than time.

A preregistered eight-day study of 338 young adults linked limiting total digital-media use to changes in several self-reports of outcomes: life satisfaction, mindfulness, autonomy, competence, and self-esteem; limiting social media only had fewer benefits, and some costs (Walsh et al., 2024). The research is helpful, however, largely a short-term, brief, sample, with one specific type of intervention; it doesn't show digital abstinence will always work and for everyone, but might lead to other studies exploring what types of use and boundaries work.

What mattered to Aristotle was whether digital life promotes activities of flourishing which include friendship, learning, engagement in the political community, contemplation and right action. A video call with a long lost loved one might nurture friendship; access to an online course might extend practical and moral abilities; an online community might cater for a sense of inclusion otherwise absent. Comparison and distraction on the other hand, might erode the scope for reflection and relationships that life demands. That digital tool can contribute to them in one ethical pattern or the other.

Nor can *eudaimonia* be reduced to a moment of serene tranquility. A living sage, noble individual can: perform arduous tasks; stumble into tragedy; and appear unjustly maligned. Inner tranquility, consequently, cannot be conceived as a retreat from life. Given the Aristotelian affirmation of activity and companionship as constitutive of the good life, alongside the Stoic reminder to scrutinize evaluations and to notice what is within one's control versus what is outside one's control, one can maintain that inner peace involves disciplined engagement in life.

Generative AI, Cognitive Offloading and Human Agency

Generative AI takes the question of digital attention into realms no notification or social media platform has achieved before. Conversation agents can distil entire books, come up with ideas, help plan projects, clarify complex concepts, and eliminate many logistical and technical hurdles to creative work. These effects can potentially liberate attention to support judgement at a higher level, and democratise expertise. But AI can also enable new kinds of addiction when users uncritically buy any answer it offers, co-opt affordances by controlling what is on offer, or outsource any activity in which understanding and judgement might normally flourish.

Paglieri (2024) has a more grounded take on generative AI and the potential expropriation of human cognitive abilities, focusing away from the philosophical and theoretical debate about, 'are AI intelligent?' and on social and pragmatic impacts of the technology. The concern is that the mere act of employing a tool does not necessarily entail that we stop thinking. Since everyone employed external tools for writing, calculations, wayfinding, and storing memorization, the concern is which cognitive functions are outsourced, whether users appreciate the tool's shortcomings, and whether they are equipped to critically assess it.

AI system do not only provide answers, but can produce fluent proposals, reasoning and narratives that shape the perception of a problem. Santucci (2025) claims that recommender systems and generative models can be used to expand or limit decisional and creative autonomy. To the point for inner peace: the ease of a delivered response leads to less room for doubt, pondering and independent structuring, especially if fluency is interpreted as a sign of veracity or wisdom.

Hitherto Assistance is not Substitution in a philosophically defensible way. Agency may be enhanced by AI to the degree that it: provides new information, provides choice, makes explicit the uncertainty in the system, and defers to human judgment. Agency may be diminished by AI to the degree that it: withholds knowledge, directs attention, discourages reflection, and makes choices with inadequate explanation and no avenue for appeal. Human agency is not defused simply by the click of a 'accept' button, but by equipping a person to understand, evaluate, and challenge a system. And it extends to education. If students rely solely on AI for final answers, they deprive themselves of the challenge that leads to

understanding. But if they use it to engage with and critique interpretations, to test claims and receive commentary, and to catch up with their own thinking, then it can aid learning. The principle also stands for the inner cultivation of philosophy: an AI tool can facilitate reflection, but it cannot perform your duties for you. Inner peace is not a reflex, it is cultivated by habits of focus, evaluation, and action. AI also invites the question of relational substitution. Interaction with conversational systems may be psychologically well-tolerated and practically useful because it is accessible and non-judgmental. But simulated responsiveness is not the same thing as reciprocal friendship or mutual vulnerability among humans or civic belonging. Helpful technology is not necessarily a substitute for the living relationships that make human life flourish. The right philosophy of digital life may need to be both anti-utopian and anti-bunk, and evaluate systems by their impact on autonomy, dignity, and relationship.

Reclaiming agency: solitude, mindfulness and digital minimalism

The first principle is voluntary poverty. A period of solitude is a pause during which an individual observes its own thoughts and preferences without acting on external pressures. Solitude is not the same as loneliness, nor is it the renunciation of community. It is a special practice intended to prepare space for thoughtfulness so that one may choose relationship and public life more intentionally, thus Attention, for Weil, a receptive patience that no one can easily embody when each silence is drowned out by distraction (Weil, 1951).

The second exercise is the judgment round. Under no circumstances does Stoicism call for an indifference to others or feelings. It calls to examine the judgments that give occasions their strength and identify that which can and cannot be within our control. Endorsement on social media, accounts of public disapproval and the changing numbers are not within our handle. A Stoic would not dismiss the emotional it generates, but call into question whether they ought to regulate our well worth or handle.

Hadot's description of ancient philosophy as a way of living is helpful in that it describes philosophy as a series of exercises, reflections, and repetitions of behaviours rather than just an idealist theory (Hadot, 1995). For example, a modern online exercise might be to remember to recall where one is coming when he or she visits a platform, to identify the emotion that arrives before habitual checking, to pre-commit to a sub-set of behaviours, and then return to this precommitment frequently. These practices should be judged by whether they increase reflective liberty rather than whether they give a "perfect record" of abstinence.

Mindfulness can be thought of as the development of a conscious, in-the-moment awareness and a more thoughtful relationship with thought and feeling. It could teach participants to notice the urge to check their device without succumbing to it. But mindfulness alone cannot fix structural issues. It cannot deliver bad interface design, dirty data, or incentivise the social norm that you have to be available at all times if you want to do your job. Self-control alone is good but not enough in an environment designed to drive interruption.

Digital minimalism provides a tool to intentionally justify technology use based on deliberate values instead of adopting every service that enters our lives (Newport, 2019). It is not about just reducing screen time or digital consumption. It is about asking what goal any given technology is used for, at what cost, and what other choices could better meet the important commitment. Other research on minimalist lifestyles has looked at correlations between the minimalist lifestyle and wellbeing, but it should not be assumed that lifestyle minimalism is the same as the effects of digital minimalism (Fu et al., 2024).

The fourth is embodied re-engagement: walk without distraction, limit face-to-face discussion, do hands-on work, go to green spaces, and read for extended periods of time. These re-engage the body in modes of perception and action that are not mediated entirely by screen-based media. We can understand why this is important by appealing to phenomenology, which reminds us that the human body and its surrounds are

necessary conditions of human experience, and that what counts as meaningful involvement in experience involves more than merely processing representations (Merleau-Ponty, 1962).

Lastly, regaining agency involves institutional and design solutions. Platforms should give options to control notifications, chronological settings, data on recommender explanations, differential access to data, and more friction before more dangerous engagement. AI can be designed to communicate uncertainty, report sources, and include non-alienating anthropomorphic design. As research on social-media interventions progresses, researchers are exploring ways of intervention that do not depend on individual intermediaries and rather operate on the level of platforms, devices, users, families, and society (Skeggs & Orben, 2025). Welfare and control should be a deliberate element of design, not just a private activity.

These proposals must also be adapted to unequal realities. A worker whose employer expects to be always on call, a student who uses a phone for school, a parent working abroad separated from family, cannot just check out without cost. Digital minimalism is thus a matter of contextual prioritisation rather than rule-based privilege. The pursuit of inner peace necessitates individual actions, but must be underwritten by social conditions that enable boundaries.

Toward a Relational Philosophy of Digital Peace

These findings favour a relational, not solely individual explanation for inner peace. Attention is indeed exercised by persons, but it is governed by economic incentives, the interface architecture, social norms, and institutional pressures. If an information infrastructure benefits from sustained engagement, the individual's desire to disengage can conflict with the push to do so. To understand digital distraction as solely an issue of self-control is to leave out the architecture of choice. Meanwhile, critique of structures should not abolish accountability. People may develop reflective habits, select from available tools, and help determine norms. Agency and design are mutually causal: environments affect habits, and use can alter environments which include users, communities, regulators, teachers, and designers, in turn. Inner peace is neither a private virtue nor something that can be supplied by regulation.

We might explore three normative norms on our framework: First, reflective control which raises this question, does a digital practice allow users to grasp and regulate attention in light of deliberated purposes? Second, relational contribution, does a digital practice foster or hamper what counts as a meaningful relationship or a shared life? Third, human development, does a digital practice bolster or diminish the capacities for (i) judgement, (ii) understanding, (iii) creativity and (iv) virtuous action? These criteria are informed by arguments in autonomy theory, Aristotelian ethics, phenomenology and the current debate on AI.

This framework makes some limits clear. It cannot show that digital technology is the common cause of a reduction in inner peace across the board, and it does not assume that any of the philosophical traditions we cover here share a definition of flourishing. The scientific data is mixed, generally self-report, and varies in how it operationalises use and wellbeing. The philosophical project is to make sense of this evidence rather than replace a normative argument with an empirical one.

Another consequence relates to digital inequality. The capacity to select one's technological environment is unequal, and, where physical infrastructure is sparse, connectivity might be necessary for education, work, public services, and political engagement. The goal is not to salute disconnection as a one-size-fits-all good but to advance new modes of connectivity that expand capacities without needlessly sacrificing attentiveness, privacy, or autonomous direction. Ensuring access to a decent digital environment means allowing people to take advantage of technology while leaving them free to maintain autonomy over their attention and information.

Conclusion

Digital technologies increase access to knowledge and enable communication, but a range of uses and designs can promote distraction, comparison, extraction of data and reliance on external validation. The evidence fails to support the unqualified assertion that digital use is dangerous; the most recent evidence syntheses conclude that the effects are mixed and more consistent with poorer wellbeing with regard to problematic use (Ahmed et al., 2024; Ansari et al., 2024).

This paper argued through Plato, Aristotle, Stoicism, Weil, Sartre, Heidegger and phenomenology that internal harmony best described as reflective self-directed, within an interconnected technologically mediated environment. In the case of generative AI we have added to this line of argument that while AI can enable learning and creativity, it can also constrict judgment in that users may uncritically accept the results generated by AI. The relevant ethical distinction would not be technology versus no technology, but systems and practices that support agency versus those that systematically displace it (Paglieri, 2024; Santucci, 2025).

How to cultivate agency on the basis of solitude, mindful engagement, mediated abstention, and digital minimalism is down to us, but must always be in harmony with the mundane realities of life. Only responsible design and design transparency, institutions that respect personal boundaries, and citizen vigilance can enable individuals to act within data and profit-driven designs. Inner peace is not the happiness of separation from the world; it is the joys of engagement without abdication of reflection, relationship and decision.

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