

# Motivating (Non-)Normative Freedom and Technologically Mediated Well- Being

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The elderly might become trapped in their own freedom. When Schwartz & Ward (2004) write that currently „freedom and autonomy are valued above all else and (...) expanded opportunities for self-determination are regarded as a sign of the psychological well- being“ they point to an issue that deserves attention, also and maybe especially in the development of new technologies.

Technologies are and always have been part of the human condition. Thus, freedom cannot be thought as defined by being free from technologies; and well-being must always be seen as being technologically mediated. We have always been cyborgs. Humans find themselves thrown into the world and part of this world is constituted by technologies. The goal must be to reflectively and critically accompany technological development in order to take an active stance towards the inevitable changes new technologies will bring about.

Inevitability, however, cannot produce a source for direction. Technological development cannot be condemned as a whole and should not be uncritically praised. The ways in which technologies mediate our perceptions and actions can be analysed and should consequently be subjected to normative evaluation.

Freedom is thus a highly normative notion and at the same time void of any direction.

The demographic change in the European Union has led to a lot of funding for the development of Ambient Assistant Living (AAL) technologies and when looking at the European scientific landscape one finds that the attitude described

by Schwartz & Ward is also represented in AAL research. In titles and goals of the funded projects, there are three notions that can regularly be found (BMBF 2011, iso e.V. 2011), which I will summarize under the umbrella terms: **health**, **freedom**, and **well-being**. The three goals are usually described as being intertwined.

Health is already a difficult notion. What is considered good health is strongly dependant on the environment one is situated in. It follows that assisting technologies will change what we consider a healthy life to be and where we see the line towards illness to be crossed. This change clearly has implications for social interaction on a very basal, non-institutionalised level. Yet, one can expect - and to a certain degree already find - these changes to manifest themselves institutionally, thereby shifting the focus away from the (inter-)personal and making them very tangibly relevant questions of society and democracy.

The focus here, however, will be placed on the relation between freedom and well-being. While the different formulations of freedom (autonomy, self-determination, etc.) as well as different formulations of well-being (e.g. quality of life), need to be examined closely in philosophy and denote very distinguishable concepts, they seem to refer to the same basic idea within the scientific community that is dedicated to developing AAL technologies. The aim of my research is to show that the intertwinement of freedom and well-being, which is presented as being mutually stimulating, cannot be left unexamined and should undergo philosophical and empirical scrutiny.

This immediately raises the question about what conception of freedom can be sustained in a technologically mediated world. How then can and should developers of AAL technologies deal with this freedom? And how will this affect the well-being of users?

The research of Schwartz & Ward (2004) provides insights that are apparently counter- intuitive to what most researchers in the AAL field believe to be true and also presents a basis for how to deal with it. To oversimplify: empirical research has shown that more choice leads to less well-being. Alongside a more detailed analysis and suggestions to counteract, the authors raise some issues that are of particular relevance to the field of AAL technologies.

The first concerns the number of choices. Schwartz & Ward suggest that the more choices one has, the more opportunities there are to decide sub-optimally. This effect is amplified, considering that a higher number of choices requires more cognitive work in order to arrive at a higher number of decisions. In a research area such as AAL technologies, where a significant number of users suffer various degrees of mild cognitive impairment, this issue is of enormous practical relevance.

The second issue that is particularly relevant can be found in what increases well-being, rather than in what decreases it (such as, apparently, too much choice). What increases well-being is sometimes even decreasing the amount of choice:

What assessments of well-being suggest is that the most important factor in providing happiness is close social relations. People who are married, who have good friends, and who are close to their families are happier than those who are not. In the context of a discussion of choice and autonomy, it is important to note that, in many ways, social ties actually decrease freedom, choice, and autonomy. Marriage, for example, is a commitment to a particular other person that curtails freedom of choice of sexual, and even emotional partners. To be someone's friend is to undertake weighty responsibilities and obligations that at times may limit your own freedom. Counterintuitive as it may appear, what seems to contribute most to happiness binds people rather than liberating them (Schwartz & Ward 2004).

This is of special practical relevance as many of the AAL technologies provide a context in which more choice is made possible at the expense of institutionalized social contacts. The possibility to live self-dependant in one's own home with less professional care for a longer time can lead to isolation.

The theoretical contemplation about freedom and empirical findings regarding psychological well-being come with practical consequences for the future development of technologies. Freedom and well-being come about in relation with technologies and not in their absence. This has rather harsh consequences for their developers. Since the technologies they develop will necessarily co-shape human freedom and well-being, they are by default morally burdened, as they cannot help but shape decisions and practices. It is for this reason that Verbeek (2011) refers to design as materializing morality. Thaler & Sunstein (2008) call people involved in this shaping *choice architects*. A choice architect is anyone who "has the responsibility for organizing the context in which people make decisions". In choice architecture there are so many potential influences, they write, that it seems a good heuristic to just assume that everything matters. This insight "can be both paralyzing and empowering". Paralyzed or not, designers cannot escape. How then should they deal with it?

## References

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