The Noise of Progress: a conversation with Mark Coeckelbergh on AI, Capitalism, and Democratic Renewal

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On June 6th, the final day of the OAP Workshop hosted at the London School of Economics and Political Science, I had the opportunity to talk to Mark Coeckelbergh, keynote of the event. Coeckelbergh is a philosopher of technology and Professor of Philosophy of Media and Technology at the Department of Philosophy of the University of Vienna. He is also ERA Chair at the Institute of Philosophy of the Czech Academy of Sciences in Prague and Guest Professor at WASP-HS and University of Uppsala.

In this interview, we dove into critical issues regarding human-technology relationships, based on Coeckelbergh's extensive work on the role of philosophy in engaging with contemporary technological and societal challenges. Drawing on insights from his recent books *Self-improvement* (Columbia University Press, 2022) and *Why AI Undermines Democracy* (Polity, 2024), we talked about the impact of the current culture and individualistic manifestations amplified by AI and capitalist dynamics, and concluded the interview with an urgent call for reimagining democracy through communication, relationality, and collective responsibility.

Throughout the conversation, Prof. Coeckelbergh emphasizes the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration, the transformative potential of narratives and cultural awareness, and the necessity of building spaces—technological, institutional, and personal—that foster listening, shared meaning, and democratic renewal. Enjoy the reading!

Gislene: Thank you prof. Coeckelbergh, for accepting our invitation to this interview for JOCO. As we briefly discussed, in these interviews, besides further understanding the author's ideas, we also want to learn a little bit more about the person behind the ideas. So, I'm curious to know when did Philosophy cross your path and what was attractive in that field?

Prof. Coeckelbergh: I guess I've always been a more reflective kind of person. During high school, I got more interested in Philosophy. I was also interested in questions related to society and its challenges. So, first, I studied political science and then, I realized that I liked theory, I liked working with concepts, I liked philosophy. Then, I went in that that direction.

Gislene: Technology has been a very important topic for you for a while already. What about technology became interesting for you?

Prof. Coeckelbergh: You know, I was always interested in technology as a kid already. After my philosophy studies, after finishing my PhD, I was looking for ways to more practically engage with societal questions and technological questions came up. I joined a project on engineering ethics and, in this way, I got kind of used to think about what philosophy could also mean for people in technical professions, for people outside philosophy. So, that was the starting of a range of jobs and pursuits that went more in interdisciplinary directions.

Gislene: This is very interesting, the importance of Philosophy in technical professions. In the common sense, we will use the word philosophy very loosely, but the way you're putting it, it really seems to be orienting practice. Can you elaborate a little bit more about this relationship?

Prof. Coeckelbergh: Philosophy is, of course, about arguments, concepts, interpretation, and discussion. But this way of approaching the world can also be helpful for people outside of Philosophy. When thinking, for example, about ethical problems raised by technology, and this was how I started, right. I believe that many of the questions that we face today, questions that are raised by technology, philosophers can help people to think more clearly about some of these issues. I think, today, for example, about AI, the ethical problems, but also problems about consciousness, authorship in writing and so on. I strive to contribute to addressing these issues through philosophy. I call myself a philosopher of technology, and by it, I mean that I do not only apply existing notions and discussions to that field, but I also use it as an opportunity to think about the major philosophical questions that we have: How should we treat our lives? How should we organize society? Also political questions: What is mind consciousness? What is language? What is writing? All these questions. I find really exciting to have these both sides. And the more practical side has also led me to contribute to policy making. For example, I was a member of the High-Level Expert Group on AI for European Commission, and in various national advisory bodies. I also have my passion for philosophy. I really like to think about the more fundamental questions and connect with other philosophers, taking part in these discussions. Thinking about technology in that way can also stimulate us to ask these fundamental questions again and maybe also contribute to more original ways of asking these questions.

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Gislene: Absolutely. I'm wondering about the spaces between these two sides, Philosophy and practice. To really grasp an idea philosophically, we need some reading, we need some thinking. Yet, as a practitioner, sometimes, we don't have that background and we don't have that time. Usually, in the world of practice, people want answers right away. How was for you to navigate these contexts? Not only with the practitioners, like the engineering team that you mentioned but also with policymakers who also have a different timing.

Prof. Coeckelbergh: Absolutely. A different timing and, first of all, the expectation of answer. As a philosopher, you're more specialized in trying to ask the right questions. In those contexts, as a philosopher, I think you can do that; you have to stimulate people to think about things harder. At the same time, you have to compromise on this question-answer dynamic. You have to say like: OK, I'm just going to try to give you some answers; some proposals for answers. And then discuss with other people. You have to give up being a 100% a philosopher and you have to become a little bit more policy maker, a little bit more engineer as well. I don't think that should be a problem. I think it's good to find some kind of middle ground with other disciplines, with practitioners. In that middle ground, you also have to be open to learn from them. We should strive to understand what the problems are they are busy with? What are the societal problems for the policymakers? What are the challenges that computer scientists and engineers struggle with? I think by engaging with that, as philosophers, we can ask better questions and have better discussion around existing problems. I think mutual learning has to take place. It's not always easy to establish this middle ground, this kind of communication. It's a challenge by itself and, although many academics and people in leadership positions would encourage interdisciplinarity, we don't often get the time and support to do it. There are still a lot of disciplinary ways of thinking and organizing. But I think things are slowly changing, and I think there's a bright future for that kind of work.

Gislene: I hope so! You touched upon a very interesting point: That interdisciplinarity takes time. We have been hearing a lot about it; that we need solutions that are really interdisciplinary; solutions that look at the problems, instead of disciplines. But they need time. However, we are also pressed by *time*: we must deliver results 'yesterday' because today is too late. Is there a way to finding a balance? Do you see any good horizon in that front as well? Like more balanced ways of experiencing time?

Prof. Coeckelbergh: I mean, it's true that there are very different temporalities. To bring things together; there needs to be efforts from both sides. In the institutional processes, in politics, and in organizational processes, of course. There needs to be a conscious effort to build these moments for reflection and trying to get into ethics, for example, into the processes and the institutional arrangements. If that means slowing down the development, a compromise must be made. Otherwise, you get problems later down the line. There needs to be an effort from that side, but also from the side of academia, particularly, Philosophy, Ethics, and so on. Efforts should be made to think about questions such as: How can insights be translated to practice? What kind of role can academics fulfill there? How can we train people to take this role? I think there's a huge opportunity also here for academics to say: let's train people to deal with interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity. Let's prepare people to go beyond academia, and link academia with practice. I think maybe this is lacking often in Humanities and Social Sciences nowadays, and it could really help people see the relevance of what they do, and it could help people outside the academia.

Gislene: This is a great point. Would you say that you are on 'the team' arguing that researchers also have to find way to communicate with practitioners? There are scholars who say the opposite, that researchers should do the research and other professionals should be experts on translating insights to practice, thus arguing that dissemination is not the role of researchers. What is your take on that?

Prof. Coeckelbergh: Well, of course, researchers should have enough time to do their research. This is, of course, a precondition. But there should be a remaining time for interdisciplinarity. I think it's important to get sort of time and get rewarded for this kind of work. In academia, nowadays, we don't always get rewarded for the right kinds of things. Of course it's important to have output. Of course, in the current situation, one needs to get an external funding and these kinds of things. But the sort of impact side, maybe it's not always easy to measure it, but because something can be measured easily doesn't mean It's not important. When it comes to impact, when it comes to bridging to practice, I think this should also be rewarded. Of course, some people are going to be better at it than others, just like with many things we do in academia. But I think it's good to reward it, to encourage it, and to train people to do it as well. Currently, only a few people have this kind of experience. When I teach my students, I see that some of them are ready to move in that direction, often those who already have some professional background, which helps. And there are those who also try, in their work, to link to relevant questions they know from their field of practice. But I

think this could be done in a much more systematic way and stimulate people to do that.

Gislene: Fantastic! Great points! Now, regarding your work more specifically. One aspect that I appreciate in your work is the way you think about and use narratives. Can you elaborate on this point? Why did you decide to go to this road to reflect about the world?

Prof. Coeckelbergh: First of all, I like the arts. I like literature. I like that side of things. There is in Philosophy a huge tradition that recognizes the value of narratives. In particular, it recognizes that the way we stand in the world, the way we make sense of the world, is very much shaped by narratives. We use narratives, myths, for example, but also all kinds of stories to make sense of the world; to make sense of what we do; to make sense of ourselves. Narratives play an important and structural role in our lives and society. Once you recognize this, you also have to bring that to the more practical questions. Let's say a question such as what is meaning of technology? I wrote about the meaning of technology explaining that the meaning is shaped by narratives. I looked at several cultural narratives that shape our thinking about technologies. That's important because often people see technologies as just instruments, as these purely technical things. But technologies are always like linked to narratives and to sense-making. We can use the hermeneutic tradition, the narrative philosophical tradition to think about ethics of technology, to think about the nature of technology and the role it plays in the society.

Gislene: Can you give me an example? Maybe something that you already have in your one of your books? That or one of the cultures that you explored based on these narratives.

Prof. Coeckelbergh: Before studying on AI, I worked on the ethics of robotics *[see for example: You, robot: on the linguistic construction of artificial others]*, and there you see that the Western ways of looking at robots can differ very much from, let's say, East Asian ways, for instance a Japanese way of looking at robotics. Then you see that culture and religion play an important role. Similarly with AI. I'm now studying ways that cultural and religious patterns in our cultures, in the history of our cultures, and how they play a role in the ways we think about AI. For example, human-machine relations and the ways we think about them is very much shaped in our thinking in terms of creator and creature. That's a theme that we find also in religious writings. I find it fascinating, to go back to that sort of history of ideas and see where our thinking on human-machine comes from and what does it mean for today. If we neglect this and don't look at this more narrative and cultural backgrounds, then we cannot be sufficiently critical, and we cannot sufficiently find new ways of dealing with new technologies or even inventing new technologies. I believe we need to be more self-aware; we need to be more cognizant of this kind of background that is there, and it is not necessarily technical, but in the narrative aspect.

Gislene: Super interesting! I would love to dive more into that, but I want to talk to you about the book you published in 2022 titled *Self-improvement*. In the book, you argue that the current culture around self-improvement has become toxic. Ca you explain what do you mean by that, why is that a problem, and if is there any solution to it?

Prof. Coeckelbergh: Good questions. I mean, of course, self-improvement, in itself, it's a good thing. Since ancient times it has been a good thing, and I went back into the history of this topic to discuss it. Yet, what I'm worried about is that self-improvement, today, became an obsession, a heavy duty, something that people must do. And it becomes problematic because it is mediated by biotechnologies, for instance, by technologies that quantify the delf. But also, there is the role of capitalist culture. People feel like they have to overwork, people are burned-out and exploited. If self-improvement becomes this thing that people feel they must do, then it also becomes a way to focus too much on the self. Thus, people engage less with the world around them, engage less with other people. Self-improvement becomes this thing that is outsourced to a commercial capitalist system through the idea that you can buy self-improvement, for instance, while reading certain things, and all different practices, including wellness, and so on. The book criticizes the sector that is built upon that, a sector that is telling us: buy this because this will improve your life. I think it's good that people reflect on their lives, that people try to live better lives, but this cannot be bought. The obsession with self-improvement to the detriment of other things, I think, is problematic in many ways.

Gislene: Yes, I certainly agree. And to this point, we have been studying, for instance, work for a long time and the aspect of self-improvement is intensively there. It's interesting that you say that it may turn our focus too much into ourselves and not as much to our existence with others. How do you think that shapes the way we see the world? While engaging with this toxic approach to self-improvement, we are doing so because requested by others. How is this relationship existing and how is that shaping what we are as humanity?

Prof. Coeckelbergh: The basis of my book and the view I aim to convey, the criticism I built in the book, is that we

might have forgotten that we are relational beings. Being relational means that what you are and, therefore, also your improvement, is not something that you can do alone, but that crucially depends upon other people. You cannot, in a way, self-improve in a strict sense; the improvement will always depend also on your environment. But we forget that, like with most things in our Western culture, we individualize everything, and we think we can do it alone. But what we are, and our improvement depends on others, and in the end, also depends on the improvement of society. You can do all the proposed self-improvement and wellness, and so on, but, in the end, when you live in the kind of specific capitalist society, it won't improve much because your environment will actually still have all these negative effects on you. It's very difficult to live the good life and improve yourself in this kind of environment. So, in the book, I argue that if we really want to change things, including change ourselves, we also, at the same time, have to change our environment and create the conditions at societal level for the improvements of ourselves, as persons, and also as communities.

Gislene: Does AI play a role in that?

Prof. Coeckelbergh: AI is currently used as a tool for this kind of self-improvement industry. AI is used to model us, to profile us, and to quantify us. Our data is analyzed by AI, and we are continuously compared to the numbers created by AI. We compare ourselves also on AI-based social media. So, the problem is also that in our self-improvement culture, you are never enough. You will never be enough. You can always better. You can train always harder. You're never beautiful enough. You're never good enough because there will be always people and profiles that are better. This toxic comparative process that's happening in our society anyway, is exacerbated by the use of AI in data science for commercial purposes. This doesn't really help us, and it doesn't really improve anything. It rather makes us obsessed. And, in the end, we can really suffer from this self-improvement pressure.

Gislene: I might be taking a leap here, but for me that seems to be very central to one of the topics we have been discussing lately, which is democracy. I think there's a strong relation between the toxic obsession with self-improvement and how we experience democracy. So, if democracy is about how we live with each other, about how we can exist together, how can we experience it if we are too self-centered? Do you think there is a relationship between this toxic self-improvement culture and the way democracy is now existing in our societies?

Prof. Coeckelbergh: Yes, absolutely. If we want to change society, and if we want to organize things in a more relational way, we need a different kind of democracy. And here I've argued for a more communicative version of democracy, which is about what we share and about actively making something in common. In this view, the stress is not so much on *me* as an individual, and what can *I* get out of society, how can *I* improve. Rather, it's about: how can *we* get better? How can *we* learn as a society? How can *we* improve together? In the West, we really missed that dimension of politics. And I could even argue that politics itself is in danger when we completely forget about this. If we improve on the political side, if we have more democracy, I think that can also create conditions for self-development and self-improvement. Dewey, for one, believed that democracy is not just an instrumental means to other goods, but that it is itself a form of self-improvement. Through it, we can learn from each other and become more virtuous, for example, through the democratic process. But that process needs to be more participatory, more communicative, and more socially oriented and oriented toward the common good.

Gislene: In the book *Why AI Undermines Democracy*, you propose that we should think about AI particularly in terms of how it can redirect us toward more democratic values. Now, I wonder: we are living in very odd times, and narratives around war are very strong. More than that, these narratives seem very concrete; war is happening. On top of that, there's the constant call for acceleration. We don't have enough time to digest things as they're happening. Taking this context into consideration, do you think it's really possible for us to create these democratic values?

Prof. Coeckelbergh: To have that kind of democracy, we need to get away from narratives of competition, narratives of "there's no time"; "we don't have time for anything." This is a difficult process because it has to do, first of all, with the culture that is there already for a long time. People are being socialized in this culture. Instead, we need to educate people in a different way. More importantly, we need to change the structures of our society. Now, everything is organized in ways that promote competition and more conflictual relations among people. We absolutely need to change that. If we don't change the wider organizational and political ways of doing things, then, as an individual, it's very difficult to go against it. I mean, academia is an example of that. As an individual you can say "I don't want to live like this kind of competitive environment." But as long as we don't change the environment, as an individual, you have very little choice, effective choice. You only have a formal choice; you can step out of it. But when you're in it, you are living in these structures, you're disciplined by these structures. So, the only way to change it is to really

collectively decide to change the organizational and political structures.

Gislene: That sounds very hard.

Prof. Coeckelbergh: It feels very difficult right now, and I think collective action isn't very popular these days. But that goes against our own interests. As long as we continue to believe in these narratives and myths, that only competition benefits us, that the world is a bad place where we always have to fight, and that the other is necessarily the enemy, it will be very hard. But I think we can change our beliefs; we can change our culture. It may be slow, but it's possible. Education is one way to do that, and of course, collective political action is another.

Gislene: You published a paper in the AI and Ethics Journal last year (2024), and I separated a quote for us to discuss: "One could also discuss whether AI itself should be understood as a commons (some would say public good), or if it should rather be treated as any other commercial product regulated by the invisible hand of the free market." I find this very interesting because in a way it sounds like we have an option; we have to make a choice. But is there any way to have both? Or the only way is to make a choice and deal with the consequences?

Prof. Coeckelbergh: In the end, it is a political decision: where should the balance lie? What's now happening is that things are presented as if we don't have a choice. The individualist approach and total free market and capitalism seem to be the only options, but that's misleading. We are given the idea that the only way we can have better AI is to have the private sector develop it. I'm not against the private sector. I think that there should be both private and public initiatives and innovation. Yet, now, I think the balance is really totally on one side. Instead, we should think about these technologies considering several political questions. For example: who benefits currently from these technologies? Who has the power to develop them? Then you see this huge power asymmetry. And I think there is, rightly, more and more criticism about that. I also criticized this imbalance in my previous book *The political philosophy of AI*. Nowadays, we see many more books criticizing the power of big tech, for example. Thus, I think we need to redress the balance. Also, we need sufficient public investment in these technologies, and we should give more power to public sector, civil society, and smaller initiatives, so that we can get out of this situation of exclusive ownership and exclusive power and control by the private sector. Even within that sector there's just a very few, just a handful of companies in the game now. I think we can do a lot to change that situation. Of course, digital commons, sharing data and so on, these kinds of approaches can contribute to redressing the balance.

Gislene: And now we're going to talk specifically about the idea of Communicative AI, which is developed in your most recent book. Can you please explain what do you mean by democracy as communication?

Prof. Coeckelbergh: *Democracy as communication* is an article that I published in the *Contemporary pragmatism journal* because the idea is inspired mainly by Dewey. So, here is my argument: Normally when we think of communication, we think of this relation between a message that gets transferred from A to B, from a sender to a receiver, and, of course, many of the digital technologies do that. At the same time, if we see democracy as communication, what I mean here with communication is not so much that transfer of a message, but rather communication as having something in common and as making something common. And this idea resonates with a Deweyan and philosophical republican ideal of democracy, which I also started to develop in the book *Why AI undermines democracy*. The notion of communication, if we understand it in this more common, communal way, as something that links people, can help us to also think of AI and other digital technologies as communication technologies in this richer sense and think constructively about current AI effects. More specifically, we can make sure that AI contributes to making community, to connecting people, to building a common world. The common world that Dewey and Arendt, for example, thought is so important for democracy and politics. With this angle, AI can have a more positive political role.

Gislene: And that goes to how we use these technologies, how we relate to them and how they help (or not) to us to relate with others. And I think that goes back to your book on the self-improvement, because I think the mindset we build with the toxic self-improvement pretty much shape the way we interact with AI. In that sense, how could we develop a more communicative approach to using these tools? And could that help us be better with one another in our relationships?

Prof. Coeckelbergh: What's really needed, according to Dewey and Arendt, is that you have common experiences, and I think AI could help us to build these common experiences. It could also bring together people who have similar opinions, for example, about things, thus helping the democratic process. It could stimulate people with different opinions to talk to one another and listen to each other. And finally, I think that AI could also be communicative in the sense that the stress is not so much on authors, but on readers. I address this issue in the book

I wrote with David Gunkel, *Communicative AI*. If we look at these large language models, there's no longer a human writer, but it shifts the importance to readers. And that also has a democratic aspect because it means that you and I can also give our interpretation of the text. What matters for the meaning of a text is not just the author; we can also interpret the text. We can talk about it, discuss about it. It can also be a model for democracy, not only in spite of our differences, but also using our differences. Each person contributes to interpretations and through the communication, people can try to find what they have in common. So, finding things in common, shaping, building a common ground, building common experiences is very important. And I see this as a process. Instead of starting from a traditional understanding where you share a fixed set of views and values, we need to create a common ground. I think in the current political context, at levels of big cities, at the global level, there's a lot of diversity. But we can try to use the technologies to find these common experiences and build something in common, coming from different interpretations, coming from different readings, so to speak, of our world. But it shouldn't stop there, with the different readings. We need to get to the common.

Gislene: What's the role of difference in that?

Prof. Coeckelbergh: One problem that happens often in the current digital social media environment is that we are encouraged to stay in our own bubble, or if it's not our own bubble, we are encouraged to fight with the other person, shout at each other, without really doing effort to understand each other and to empathize with the other position and so on. But a democratic process, a communicative AI process, if we do it right, means that I try to understand your differences: where you're coming from, what your identity is, what your concerns are, what your needs are, and vice versa. I think a democratic process, potentially, can be supported rather than hindered by technologies. They can help to overcome differences, but also help us learn from each other. So, it can be that difference leads to something new, because there can be mutual transformation. This is the learning process that I talked about. Dewey suggests that we also develop ourselves as people, so we can grow from it. Your difference, in a way, can help me to change. And at the societal level, it can bring more diversity in terms of solutions, more creativity in addressing our common problems, and even in recognizing that there is a common problem, even making it a shared problem, negotiating that shared understanding. I think it becomes very difficult if we don't share the problem, if we stay too much in our bubbles, or remain stuck in that competitive, confrontational, almost fascist atmosphere.

Gislene: In fact, listening plays a key role in communication. Yet, usually, when we talk about communication, we discuss content or the message exchanging mechanism. But the listening dimension, we do not reflect on it often. Still, it's an important component on all of this. Do you think we will give us time to listen to each other?

Prof. Coeckelbergh: I think it's really something that needs to be created. For listening you need to consider the role of silence, and in in our shouting culture, silence is a very rare good. We need silence to hear the voice of the other, to hear things, and to find this common ground. So yes, at both, the level of organizations and the level of politics, we have to build silence into our processes. We need to create space for listening to one another and, of course, to educate and train people in the virtue of listening.

Gislene: To be honest, I'm not sure if I know how to be silent anymore, because even when you're silent, you're silent with your mouth, but your head is just full of things. If you try to meditate, the mind usually wanders away because your head is just full of things. I agree with you; we should create this space for listening. Yet, usually, when we create the spaces to give voices, we often use that space to producing noise. So, in our accelerated context, how do you envision we could build a space for the virtue of listening?

Prof. Coeckelbergh: Of course, as you say, in the personal level, it's it is like very hectic in our heads. And it's very hectic in our head because we are just relational beings and we are in this hectic, non-silent, screaming world. The solution is to develop our own skills in dealing with this, but also to change it in the world. One way of doing that, if you take seriously the whole message of philosophy of technologies that technology and media are not just instrumental, but also shape our thinking, our politics, and so on, is to start with the technologies. If you want to change the world, you also have to change the technologies and media. I do believe that we can intervene, that through regulation and technical interventions we can create different kind of online environments and different social media, and different AI. So, if we work on that, then it's not just about what you and I can try to do to our own minds. It's also about how we can be supported in investing in, and finding again, this commonality and listening. For this, we may need a very concrete set of material and other structural arrangements.

Gislene: Yeah, absolutely. My final question is also to help those who are reading this interview, this conversation, if we want to learn more, how to engage with philosophy,

what are your recommendations? What should we do? Where should we look for inspiration?

Prof. Coeckelbergh: I think it's valuable to look at the work of philosophers who deal with these themes, those who go beyond the status quo and manage to bring philosophical discussion to the big questions of our time. There are many opportunities to engage with this kind of work. And I think, vice versa, it's also important for philosophers to look at the real problems people face, in their practices, in organizations, in politics, to better understand what people are truly struggling with. What are they worried about? Why do so many feel overwhelmed or unwell? Why do people struggle so much in both their work and private lives? I believe more and more people are beginning to reflect on these issues. This is one way, both within and outside academia, because there are also people outside academia doing this kind of work, that philosophy can contribute to improving things. And in the end, that also helps us improve ourselves.

Gislene: So, we should have hope?

Prof. Coeckelbergh: We should have hope, but we should not just rely on hope, because hope is also sometimes too much waiting for something to happen, waiting for someone else to solve the problem, and I think we should also take action to change things.

Gislene: Thank you so much, Prof. Coeckelbergh. It was a fantastic conversation!

Prof. Coeckelbergh: My pleasure.