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METHODOLOGICAL CHALLENGES FOR A NEW PHILOSOPHY OF TECHNOLOGY

INTERVIEW WITH NICOLA LIBERATI

DESAFÍOS METODOLÓGICOS PARA UNA NUEVA FILOSOFÍA DE LA TECNOLOGÍA

Entrevista a Nicola Liberati

DESAFIOS METODOLÓGICOS PARA UMA NOVA FILOSOFIA DA TECNOLOGIA

Entrevista com Nicola Liberati

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Nicola Liberati's research focuses on the effects of emerging digital technologies related to intimacy from a phenomenological and postphenomenological perspective. He holds a Ph.D. in Philosophy, and he is an Associate Professor at the Shanghai Jiao Tong University. Before moving to China, he worked in Japan as a JSPS Postdoctoral Fellow and in the Netherlands at the University of Twente with Peter-Paul Verbeek. In 2016, he was elected Co-chair of the Society for Phenomenology and Media. He won international prizes like the MASH'D Full Paper Award at the world-leading IEEE conference on Augmented Reality ISMAR2015 and the SPM2014 Best Paper by a Returning Member Award. In 2021, he was granted the Shanghai Overseas High-Level Talent Program, one of China's most prestigious awards. Newspapers and news agencies like Reuters, de Volkskrant, CNET, Happinez, and U-Today interviewed him, and commissions like UNESCO COMEST use his work to highlight the impact he has on societal issues. He has more than 50 publications, including a special issue on Prometeica on science-fiction and new humanities, which has been already accepted.



Associate Professor at *Shanghai Jiao Tong University*
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1. Why Shanghai Jiao Tong University? Was it an opportunity, or did you have plans to go to an Asian university?

I was looking to come to China because it is growing fast and tightly connected with digital technologies. So, I thought that there were many opportunities for developing my research. In China, at least in my field, you can do high-risk, high-gain research. Thus, you have the freedom to make complicated choices and explore a new line of research freely. Before China, I worked in the Netherlands, and I wanted to change, so I started to see possible different countries. I was looking for positions in Europe and the USA at first, but when I found this interesting opening position at *Shanghai Jiao Tong University*, one of the best universities in the world, and I thought, “Why not try it?”. The University paid for my flight to attend the interview. When I arrived, I visited the campus, the department, and the city, and I enjoyed them very much. The only problem with this position in China is that it is very far from Italy, where my family lives.

China is an important country in many fields, and, if you look at the statistics in research, very soon, China will be the first country in the world for research in terms of articles and projects. Moreover, most Universities in Europe where I applied could not offer the same working conditions like China. The position I got grants me great freedom, and it comes with a generous research grant to develop my research. Also, my previous experience in Asia has been much appreciated. And because I was a *JSPS fellow* in Japan, which is similar to the *Marie Skłodowska-Curie* European grant, was noticed this during the selection process. Thus, I felt the committee appreciated and evaluated all the different steps in my career, which touched countries out of the European Union like Japan and Mexico.

2. Do you consider yourself a continental philosopher?

I do not know because even the distinction between continental or analytic philosophy is very “western-centric.” Of course, my Ph.D. has been developed in Italy on Husserlian phenomenology and Postphenomenology, so I would pick the continental side if I had to choose. However, at the same time, I think this classification is a little bit reductive, and it might not grasp the distinctions existing in other contexts like the Chinese one. For example, in China, the difference between ‘western thought’ and ‘Chinese tradition philosophy’ might be more relevant than continental and analytic tradition. So, I do not think it is possible to follow this distinction too much.

3. In what department are you working? What kind of research are you and your colleagues developing?

I am in the Philosophy department, and, in my department, there are three main lines of research. A group of researchers is working on traditional Chinese philosophy, focusing on the relation between philosophy and religion and different ways of thinking in China. Another group is working on Epistemology and Philosophy of Science. A third group is working on European philosophers, focusing on phenomenology and standard philosophers based in Europe from the last centuries.

4. And you are in this last one?

No, I am in Epistemology (laughs) concerning the Philosophy of Science, and I know that in some way, it is a little bit tricky because I work in-between these groups. On the one hand, I am working with Philosophy of Technology, so I am close to Epistemology and Philosophy of Science. On the other hand, I work with Phenomenology, and so I am also close to the group working on European philosophers. I have always situated my interests in different fields. Postphenomenology is in-between Phenomenology and Philosophy of Technology, and I work with artists, engineers, and designers, so I am in philosophy, but, at the same time, I also work with other fields.

5. *What are your main research interests today?*

I have come to China because they allowed me to be completely free in what I do by developing my transdisciplinary research. So, I try to work with artists and computer scientists to reshape the kind of questions we have on the effects of emerging digital technologies. I say I work transdisciplinary because one thing is to study these effects from our perspective as philosophers. Another thing is to work with engineers, artists, and designers to reframe the philosophical questions by looking at the technologies used as the source of the effects. The empirical turn in the philosophy of technology already moved a bit in this direction. Its main idea is to organize a round table where every kind of expert sits together, and they try to have a dialogue starting from their perspective. This work is interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary, but everyone keeps their own identity and position within a discipline. I do not want to have just this dialogue among disciplines. I want to try to do philosophy by using other fields to reshape the question in philosophy according to the elements provided by engineering, arts, and design. I use engineering, arts, and design because I am close to them.

6. *I wondered: do you think of social change when proposing these kinds of studies? Do you think it is about changing the way people behave more than the way people think?*

I would say that it is about changing the way people think. Digital technologies are not neutral, and they have a deep impact on how we feel about ourselves and how we think of ourselves as human beings. We need to address these kinds of effects to understand better who we are and the society we live in.

Usually, Philosophy provides us a kind of interpretation of the main aspects of a specific technology thanks to the perspective of a particular philosopher. This standard approach is advantageous, especially for my work, but I want to move a little beyond it. The empirical turn, in a way, already started aiming at a social impact by opening a dialogue with other disciplines like engineering. Now, I suppose, it is time to shape philosophy by using other fields to tackle better the societal challenges we all face. It is not just a question of a dialogue among disciplines. We need new words, ideas, and tools. We need to look at the latest digital technologies and the collaborations with artists, engineers, and designers as valuable sources to generate them.

7. *And how do you do that? How do you execute your research project?*

I focus on the body of people and intimacy. Everything in my research works on the human body understood as ‘flesh’ and ‘living body.’ I am interested in how we live with computers and how we live with others when digital technologies are on and around us. I have three different lines of research about intimacy: smart textiles, digital technologies for sex, and augmented reality.

One of my last works on the journal *Humana.mente* is on smart textiles. Some clothes have digital technologies interwoven in them, which means it is possible to have clothes reacting to people’s moods. Clothes can change colors, shape, and position according to how a person feels or how they live in the world. So, what happens to fashion when the mood becomes part of the clothes? What happens to the way we think of clothes when we can ‘smile’ with them? What if your clothes become blue or transparent when you are sexually aroused, for example? What happens to your way of relating to these feelings and emotions the moment they are visualized by everyone? What are the meanings and values you give to your inner life when it becomes visible to everyone?

As we know, clothes have deep repercussions on many elements of our life like the constitution of the self, the position in society, and social identity. So, from a phenomenological perspective, when there is such a dramatic change in clothes because they become digitally embedded, it becomes interesting to see what happens to the subject and society.

I also study robotics in relation to sexual activities, focusing on how we can be digitally together. There are different kinds of sexual technologies that allow a person to experience sexual intercourse. Sex robots, for example, are essential for the implications they have on the values and meanings we give to

love and sex in general, even with other human beings. What happens to our way of thinking about love and sex when thinking about having sex and love with robots? There are also haptic sexual technologies like *teledildonics*, which allow you to touch and feel touched in physical bodily sexual intercourse. When you use these devices, you are “in touch” with the other person but differently from a “normal” physical situation. What happens to the way of being with another person the moment we use these technologies? My publications on *teledildonics* in *Science and Engineering Ethics* and *Paladyn Journals* study these elements and how digital technologies shapes the values we give to our intimacy.

Moreover, I study Augmented Reality and its implication to what we mean with ‘real’ and ‘physical’ in our surroundings. This line of research is related to my Ph.D. thesis, and it is about the meanings and values we give to our world the moment we can have objects made of ‘digital materiality’ around us.

I found that I cannot just address these kinds of questions in a traditional philosophical way. For instance, I can use Merleau-Ponty’s idea of touching-touch for *teledildonics*. Does this kind of touching-touch relation tell you something about what it means to have sex with another person through *teledildonics*? Yes, to some extent, but maybe there are aspects of touch and intimacy that become visible only through the use of these technologies. So, we need to reshape our ideas and words according to the technologies we use to understand better the change in values and meanings we face.

8. *So you hypothesize that these experiences that are being promoted by all these new technologies are going to generate a new kind of humanity, other values...?*

Yes! I do not think that values and meanings are untouched by the technologies we use. We have many different examples already, like the ultrasound pre-natal technologies. What does it mean to be a father or a mother when you or your partner are pregnant, and the technologies show you some problems in the fetus? These technologies force the parents to make choices that emerge only because of the action of the technologies. So, what it means to be a father and a mother changes according to the devices you can use.

Regarding sexual technologies, condoms change what we mean and the values we give to sexual acts. Condoms are used for ‘protection,’ but this ‘simple’ element shows that the choice of using or not using the condom makes visible the level of protection you want as lovers. Thus, the possibility of using condoms reveals the kind of trust the lovers have that before was not so directly visible. Our world, the values, and the meanings we give to our life change with the introduction of new digital technologies like sex robots and *teledildonics*, and it is our work to understand these changes to live better.

9. *When you say “robot,” people start thinking of a machine as a version of C3PO from Star Wars (George Lucas, 1977). But in Blade Runner 2049 (Denis Villeneuve, 2017), Ryan Gosling’s character falls in love with a robot that suggests a threesome with a human, and he does not want it at first. Is this the kind of threesome between robots and humans that you have in mind? Are there examples of real robots that are having sex with people?*

Well, that is why I’m not particularly eager to talk too much about robots because we do not have anything like that today while we already have other technologies for intimacy like *teledildonics* which are already available on Amazon for around 100 USD. However, I think it is vital to keep futuristic imaginaries in perspective. For example, my last publication in the *International Journal of Technoethics* is on a threesome with a robot and two human beings. The effects on values and meanings in love and sex implied by it.

Especially in the last year, there has been a detachment between Philosophy of Technology and Science-fiction, highlighting how much philosophy is not about novels and future scenarios. Still, it is something applied to the technologies we already use. I suppose this change is helpful because it can show companies and the general public that what philosophers do is related to the world we live in and real-world cases. However, I think this position might have some limitations.

Science-fiction is a way to envision the future or at least a possible future scenario and present issues and topics not yet present in our society. Since philosophy is usually seen as a study of something which has already passed, and science-fiction provides a look to the future, why not intertwine them? For this reason, I am working on a conference on science-fiction and philosophy. The main idea is to show that it is possible to mesh philosophical methods and science-fiction visions of the future to address the effects of new digital technologies.

Digital technologies change who we are and how we live, and we need a transdisciplinary perspective to tackle the societal challenges we are all facing.

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