

DEMOCRACY AND DIGITIZATION: ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS FROM A GERMAN PERSPECTIVE

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In my presentation, I explore and attempt to defend the thesis that in the context of digital transformation, the foundations of self-determined ways of living and of our social coexistence, including its constitutional and democratic figuration, forfeit their longstanding intuitive plausibility. My intention with this thesis is twofold: on the one hand, I would like to raise awareness of the potential of digitization to constrain the real-world exercise of freedom and self-determination in ways that raise the question whether humans as such—or at least sufficiently many—can still act and decide freely and responsibly. On the other hand, and this is at least as alarming, it seems to me that this possible process within society unfolds silently and through small steps whose consequences might not become apparent before it is too late. In order to validate my thesis and its two sub-theses, I will sketch three development trends of digitization which mutually reinforce each other and could jeopardize self-determination and our civil-societal social coexistence in these ways: one economic, one civil-societal, and one self-determination-directed development trend. In view of these trends, following a phrase by Terry Eagleton (“Hopeful, but not optimistic”) I advocate not for optimism in dealing with big data, machine learning and deep learning, but for not giving up hope for a responsible shaping of the digital transformation. To this end, the seriousness of the situation must be recognized with a sober mind. Through concerted action which unites all forces of society, individual self-determination as well as the cultivation of the regulative idea of the public sphere under the conditions of an “onlife” society shall be defended and—where necessary—reclaimed. For these reasons, I propose—with the 2017 opinion piece “Big Data and Health” of the German Ethics Council—to focus on the right to informational freedom that motivates traditional data protection law, and to think carefully about how to implement it in the age of big data and machine learning. This can be achieved if we steer away from the traditional input orientation of data security law (consent, data minimization, purpose limitation) and towards a more output-oriented approach on the handling of data. As a theologian, I may further bring to mind the religio-cultural tradition and presence of Christianity which provides significant and trusted resources for meaning and interpretation in order to strengthen life forms in times of digital transformation.