Book Review

A fruitful relationship with the environment is a crucial requisite for well being, either in health or in disease and frailty. By definition, the physical environment is full of technology, in all the meanings of this word. Think of knife, fork, spoon, house, furniture, and warming systems, as well as of personal computers and information and communication technologies. But not only technological appliances vary; users also differ from each other, both in age and in characteristics. Ageing brings such differences to their climax. If we truly want old persons use, exploit, and enjoy technology, we have to take into account these differences. Otherwise, technology can lead to social exclusion for them. The new discipline named by the clerks "Gerontechnology" was born about ten years ago to tackle these issues, and to introduce lay people to them. The new book by Thomas and Marcia Harrington has many merits. The principal one is the ability to translate such consolidated knowledge envisaged by scholars from separate disciplines, into words understandable to everybody, as it is stated as a primary goal of the book. Hence, this book has another merit: to open wide and deep perspectives onto the world we live in. The look is cast towards the future and the problems to be solved yet, but without refusing the awareness of the past, again as it is explicitly written in the introductory paragraph on the spirit of the book. Surely, the book is not a systematic review of the topic, but it is conceived following a confirmed structure of gerontechnological analysis: how technology can prevent loss of function, compensate or enhance functions, help care, or support research on ageing. This structure is also the scheme that has framed the chapter on lifelong working. There, a proverb that has become a basic understatement of gerontechnology is shown: "an ounce of prevention is worth of a pound of compensation (cure)". Incidentally, assistive technology is proven to spare personnel.

The same scheme as above shapes the chapter on personal mobility and transportation. Driving is indeed a battlefield for gerontechnology, usual health indicators not explaining driving cessation. While medical conditions are the most common reason given for quitting, old persons who stop driving have fewer medical conditions than current drivers. Room is wide for compensation systems, from self-monitoring up to "smart roads".

The book from the Harringtons remarks also the explicit or implicit "imperatives" of gerontechnology. Among the latter, we could imagine "be fashionable", and the example brought – in terms of care - is a "gaily coloured" walker, just as the ones I use to prescribe … Among the former exhortations, we find "be creative": examples may come again from indoor mobility, wherein low tech can be astonishingly keen as in the SturdyGrip™, or from outdoor mobility, with already available pieces of technology which can be adapted and assembled to stabilize bicycles at low speed, preventing tipping over and keeping old persons riding.

Creativity is valuable also in mathematical modelling for research on aging: a whole chapter is fully dedicated to this promising hit. Another explicit "imperative" of gerontechnology is "think flexibly". It fits in also with housing. In the respective chapter, the refrain of gerontechnology that "what is good for elderly people is good for everybody else" is well exemplified. Quoting from the discussion about the "average fallacy" of ergonomics and about safety from accidents, it is stated "it doesn't hurt to grind down the breaks in the sidewalk – no one will trip on them if you do, someone eventually will if you don't". Gerontechnology indeed does accord with civil progress.

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