De-Marginalizing Technophilosophy and Ethical Inquiry for an Evolving Technological Society

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ABSTRACT

How does technoethics help de-marginalize the philosophy of technology (technophilosophy) within academia and society? The first part reviews key academic and technological developments within contemporary technophilosophy defined in terms of its core areas, namely, technometaphysics, technoepristemology, technopraxiology, technoethics, and technoaesthetics. The second part discusses the rapid development of technoethics and the success of technoethical inquiry to illustrate practical ways to leverage technophilosophy within academia and society. The article concludes with recommendations on how to continue developing technophilosophy to target key research areas to build on its success, strategic positioning within academia, and growing relevance within society.

KEYWORDS

Technoaesthetics, Technoethical Inquiry, Technoethics, Technophilosophy

INTRODUCTION

This article is based on a presentation delivered at the 2016 Symposium of the Philosophy and Society Circle hosted by the Central Connecticut State University. It addresses a current debate among leading scholars within technophilosophy (hence force referred to as technophilosophy) concerning its marginalization within Philosophy and its relevance to society. This pervasive problem in technophilosophy is particularly alarming given the important focus that technology now plays in life and society. As stated by Hannon (2012), “There is no lack of technology-related subject matter in philosophy, but there is a remarkable lack of sustained attention to it. This has to be rectified in order for philosophy to adequately reflect the human condition. It is high time to de-marginalize the philosophy of technology (p. 92).

This paper is based on the assumption that with the waning popularity of academic associations and ongoing struggles to maintain membership numbers and attract new scholars to Philosophy and its sub-areas (including technophilosophy) it is time to reflect on how scholars and academic associations can (or should) remold themselves to better keep pace with the changing values and interests within contemporary society in an effort to remain relevant.

Where did technophilosophy come from and how did it evolve? How can insight can be gained from the recent success of technoethics to help de-marginalize technophilosophy and leverage its future relevance within society? The purpose of this article is reflect on the state of contemporary technophilosophy and the recent success of technoethics with an eye toward the future. to address this problem, this article draws inspiration from the pioneering ideas of Mario Bunge and successful applications of the technoethical inquiry approach to help identify key areas of inquiry to help further de-marginalize technophilosophy and showcase it as a budding avenue of academia with much to offer.

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BACKGROUND

The Rise of Technophilosophy: How Did We Get Here?

2016 marked the 40-year anniversary of the Society for the Philosophy of Technology and the culmination of 20 years of publications for the flagship journal in technophilosophy, Techne and the rise of a number of other new journals including the International Journal of Technoethics. The proliferation of philosophical problems raised by technology and the ongoing response from scholars working in technophilosophy over the last 40 years has given rise to new approaches in how technophilosophy is pursued, new philosophical problems to address, and a rich research base from which to build. But how did technophilosophy get to where it is today?

There are multiple interpretations of how the contemporary field of technophilosophy evolved with a recent spike of interest from reputable scholars in the area (Brey, 2010; Michelfelder, 2010; Hannson, 2012). For instance, Brey (2010) divides the development of the field into classical and contemporary, while others trace the development of the field in terms of its relation to the larger professional organization of philosophy in the US (Michelfelder, 2010) and its marginalization from mainstream philosophy (Hannson, 2012). Such reflections from new and established leaders help situate it within its recent historical context and explain its early development.

In the most general sense, technophilosophy is the sub-area of Philosophy that originated in the mid-20th century as a philosophical reflection on technology. The rise of technophilosophy is rooted in contemporary Philosophy and Interdisciplinary Studies linking broad minded scholars, supporting initiatives, and forming professional groupings which nurtured philosophical reflection on technology. The first major symposium on technophilosophy was held in the 1960s and was published by Mario Bunge in the SHOT (Society for History of Technology) sponsored, Technology and Society publication (Idhe, 2010). Although the symposium had a number of pioneers we recognize today (Carl Mitcham, Robert MacKay, Paul Durbin, etc.) Bunge was perhaps the most important driving force in the development of the field (this will be discussed further). Bunge had the insight to draw on established societies with overlapping interests like SHOT to help disseminate emerging work in technophilosophy.

The strategy of using existing infrastructure from other related scholarly areas helped nurture technophilosophy throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Technology and Society published the “Bibliography of Philosophy of Technology” by Carl Mitcham and Robert Mackay (1973) which helped provide a useful resource for new scholars interested in advancing scholarship in this new area. Paul Durbin’s edited volumes, Research in Philosophy and Technology (Durbin, 1978) and A Guide to the Culture of Science, Technology, and Medicine (Durbin, 1980), juxtaposed technophilosophy with more established fields, including SHOT (Society for History of Technology) and the Society for the Social Studies of Technology (4S). These early publications and associations provided technophilosophy enough exposure to win the interest and support of Virginia Tech to later allow the publication of the online journal Techne in the 1990s. It is worth noting that the renaming of Techne, reflected the coming together of multiple strands of scholarly input from inside and outside the society of technophilosophy as is reflected in the new title Techne: Research in Philosophy and Technology.

The Developing Identity of Technophilosophy: Who Are We?

There were a number of key developments in technophilosophy that allowed it to grow as a field of research and study. First, there was a move away from one sided deterministic accounts of technology as separate from humans and society to a recognition that technology and humans cannot be studied apart as separate objects, but rather, are complex, intertwined, and must be studied together as co-shaping (or mediating) entities (or agents) and relations within a technological world. In other words, technology is part of the human condition and our natural state (at least at this stage of human evolution. As pointed out by Galvin and Luppicini (2011):
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