Boys with Toys and Fearful Parents?
The Pedagogical Dimensions of the Discourse in Technology Ethics

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ABSTRACT

Based on recent complaints about the neglect of the human in the philosophy of technology, this paper explores the different ways how technology ethics put the relation between the human and the technical on stage. It identifies various similarities in the treatment of the human in technology and the treatment of the child in education and compares Heidegger’s concerns about the role of technology with the duplicity of childhood and adulthood in conflicts of adolescence. The findings give reason to assume that technology ethics and pedagogy are closely related. A brief review of selected topics in technology ethics illustrates exemplarily how a pedagogic interpretation of the current discussion can contribute to further progress in the field.

Keywords: Adolescent Conflicts, Childhood and Education, Existentialism, Foundations of Technology Ethics, Heidegger, Philosophical Anthropology

1. THE ROLE OF THE HUMAN FOR THE DISCUSSION IN TECHNOLOGY ETHICS

Despite all progress in the field during the last decades, it often remains the biggest challenge for studies in technology ethics to explain why they are necessary. Economic interests already exert a strong selective pressure on the development of technology that forces tools and machines to become more efficient and better adapted to the needs of their users. Ethical approaches only seem to add another dimension to the decision making process about technology.

In the eyes of many engineers and managers, they are more likely to complicate the situation than to improve it. In order to make clear that the creation and use of technology requires further attention, ethical approaches have to address the implications of tools and machines for human life beyond the horizon of efficiency, usability and convenience. Technology ethics, like any other kind of ethics, can therefore not be reduced to the study of a certain phenomenon. Implicitly or explicitly, it always includes a general reflection about the human condition. The anthropological aspect of technology ethics currently does not seem to attract a lot of attention, but it would be wrong to assume that it has lost its importance.

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For Ernst Kapp, technology is a consequence of the fact that human beings, unlike any other animal, are not bound to a certain form of life. They use tools and machines to expand and transform their bodily functions. Similar to Aristotle, Kapp describes technical devices as a projection. They expand, enhance or replace the function of natural organs (Kapp, 1877, p. 41, cf. Micham, 1994). The hammer increases the force of a hand, the microscope improves eyesight and the telephone extends the distance in which a voice can be heard. With reference to Hegel, Kapp describes technical progress as a dialectic movement (Kapp, 1877, p. 124). The projection of natural organs to technical devices allows the recognition of the potentials of human nature. By watching technology from a distance, the consciousness realizes how powerful it is and it also gains insight into the responsibilities to use its power in the right way. If, however, the human is not considered as an unbound, but instead as a needy being, the line of conclusions changes direction. Technology does not appear as a projection of organ function, but as an aid to overcome deficiencies (Linton, 1936). Human beings rely on technical devices to survive in the world. They use clothing, weapons or fire to make up for missing fur, claws and bad adaptation to climate and vehicles, houses and other aids relieve them from too much strain (Gehlen, 1980, p. 8). With the creation and use of tools and machines, humans try to overcome their weaknesses, alienating themselves at the same time from their real nature (Freyer, 1955).

Looking at technology this way, it is essential to make sure that technological progress remains adequate to the necessities of human existence, moving the focus of technology ethics from strategic and organisational considerations of what should be done with technology to the critical analysis of its implications for human life.

Ethical reflections about the usage of tools and machines have a long tradition, going back to Plato, Aristotle and ancient mythology (cf. Hubig, 2000). Nevertheless, it was not until the late twentieth century that technology ethics—or Technoethics, as Mario Bunge suggested to call it—started to evolve into a separate field of research (cf. Bunge, 1977). The topics of technology ethics are quite diverse, ranging from surveillance and ubiquitous computing to intellectual property and artificial life. Due to the different expertise required to work on these topics, research in technology ethics is usually a quite interdisciplinary activity, involving full-time philosophers and ethicists as well as scientists and engineers (cf. Luppicini, 2009). As a result, technology ethics has become a very heterogeneous field with many separate lines of discussion. All contributors claim to be concerned with technology. Their perspectives, however, are so different that it is hard to say if they are really talking about the same thing, particularly if the public forces them to assume very specific roles in the discussion. Advocates of free access to the internet, for instance, imply that technology is beneficial to the human and everybody should have access to it, while many critics of bioengineering argue on the basis that technology poses a threat nature. This disparity in the treatment of technology can be explained by differences in the anthropological foundation of the arguments. The single lines of discussion in technology ethics, however, are rarely confronted with this disparity, because they remain within the context of one topic. For them, there does not seem to be much need to consider the role of the human element in technology. Many philosophers consequently do not include the people involved in the creation and use of technology in their research.

According to Joseph Pitt, the “failure to include the decisions and actions of the appropriate individuals results in philosophical accounts that appear isolated from the remainder of the philosophical conversation, and this is often why philosophers have been seen as having failed to provide an adequate account of technological issues” (Pitt, 2000, p. 66). The exclusion of the anthropological element from the study of technology is mistaken for an outside look at technology. In reality, it is just a neglect of the point of view from which technology is approached. Instead of helping us to understand technology, it contributes to the formation of certain attitudes towards it (Pitt, 2000, p. 70),
Conclusion
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