Morality in Design

Design Ethics and the Morality of Technological Artifacts

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Abstract A core issue in the philosophy of technology has been the non-neutrality of technology. Most scholars in the field agree that technologies actively help to shape culture and society, rather than being neutral means for realizing human ends. How to take seriously this non-neutrality of technology in ethics? Engineering ethics mainly focuses on the moral decisions and responsibilities of designers, and remains too external to the moral significance of technologies themselves. Yet, analyses of the non-neutrality of technology make it plausible to ascribe some morality to artifacts. First of all, technologies substantially contribute to the coming about of actions and of decisions about how to act. Second, their role cannot be entirely reduced to the intentions behind their design and use. This paper investigates what these observations imply for ethical theory, and for the ethics of design.

1 Expanding the Ethics of Technology

In our technological culture, ethical issues regarding technology are receiving ever more attention and weight. A few decades ago, normative reflection on technology was highly abstract, criticizing 'technology' as such, and its impact on society and culture, like the advent of a 'one-dimensional man' (Marcuse), 'mass-rule' (Jaspers), and 'mastery and control over nature' (Heidegger). Over time, normative reflection has sought closer contact with technologies themselves. Not only did applied fields like ethics of information technologies and ethics of biomedical technology come into being; the ethics of technology has also started to reflect on the very design of technologies. Branches like engineering ethics and ethics of design aim to provide engineers and designers with vocabularies, concepts and theories that they can use to make responsible decisions in the practice of technology development.

This movement toward more contact with technologies themselves can be taken one step further. In its current form, engineering ethics and the ethics of design tend

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to follow a somewhat externalist approach to technology. The main focus is on the importance of taking individual responsibility ('whistle blowing') to prevent technological disasters, and on methods that can be used to assess and balance the risks accompanying new technologies. Favorite cases studies concern technologies which have caused a lot of problems that could have been prevented by responsible actions of engineers, like the exploding space shuttle "Challenger", or the Ford Pinto with its rupturing gas tank in crashes over 25 miles per hour. Case studies like these approach technology in a merely instrumental way. They address technologies in terms of their functionality: technologies are designed to do something, and if they fail to do so properly, they are badly designed. What such case studies fail to take into account are the impacts of such technologies on our moral decisions and actions, and on the quality of our lives.

When technologies are used, they always help to shape the context in which they fulfill their function. They help to shape human actions and perceptions, and create new practices and ways of living. This phenomenon has been analyzed as 'technological mediation': technologies mediate the experiences and practices of their users (Latour, 1992; Ihde, 1990; Verbeek, 2005). Such technological mediations have at least as much moral relevance as technological risks and disaster prevention. Technologies help to shape the quality of our lives and, more importantly, they help to shape our moral actions and decisions. Cell phones, e.g., contribute explicitly to the nature of our communications and interactions; and technologies like obstetric ultrasound play active roles in the decisions we make regarding unborn life. In order to address the moral aspects of technology development adequately, the ethics of technology should expand its approach to technology to include technological mediation and its moral relevance, enabling designers to take responsibility for the quality of the functioning of their designs, and for the built-in morality. In this chapter I will first explore how this moral relevance of technological devices can be conceptualized. After that, I will elaborate how it can be incorporated in the ethics of technology.

2 Do Artifacts have Morality?

The question of the moral significance of technological artifacts has been playing a role on the backbenches of the philosophy of technology for quite some time now. As early as 1986 Langdon Winner asked himself: "Do artifacts have politics?" This question was grounded in his analysis of a number of 'racist' overpasses in New York, which were deliberately built so low that only cars could pass beneath them, but not buses, thus preventing the dark-skinned population, unable to afford a car, from accessing the beach (Winner, 1986). Bruno Latour (1992) subsequently argued that artifacts are bearers of morality as they constantly help people to take all kinds of moral decisions. For example, he shows that the moral decision of how fast one drives is often delegated to a speed bump in the road with the script 'slow down before reaching me'. Anyone complaining about deteriorating morality,