3.2 Taking Mediation into Ethics

There are two ways to take mediation analyses into the ethics of technology and design. One, they can be used to develop moral assessments of technologies in terms of their mediating roles in human practices and experiences. Two, the conclusion that artifacts do have a specific form of morality also shifts ethics from the domain of language to that of materiality. When artifacts have moral relevance and embody a specific form of moral agency, ethics cannot only occupy itself with developing conceptual frameworks for moral reflection, but should also engage in the development of the material environments that helps to form moral action and decision-making. Hans Achterhuis has called this the 'moralization of technology' (Achterhuis, 1995).

The first way to take mediation into ethics is closest to common practices in the ethics of technology. It comes down to an augmentation of the current focus on risk assessment and disaster prevention. Rather than focusing on the acceptability and preventability of negative consequences of the introduction of new technologies, it aims to assess the impact of the mediating capacities of technologies-in-design for human practices and experiences. When an action-ethical approach is followed, moral reflection is directed at the question of whether the actions resulting from specific technological mediations can be morally justified. This reflection can take place along deontological or consequentialist lines. But in many cases, a virtue-ethical or life-ethical approach is at least as fruitful for assessing technological mediations, focusing on the quality of the *practices* that are introduced by the mediating technologies, and their implications for the kind of life we are living. It is not only the impact of mediation on specific human actions that is important then, but also the ways in which mediating technologies help to constitute human beings, the world they experience, and the ways they act in this world. To return to the example of ultrasound again: rather than merely assessing the impact of routine ultrasound scans in obstetrical health care in terms of safety and abortion rates, a life-ethical approach would try to assess the quality of the practices that arise around ultrasound scanning, in which the fetus and its expecting parents are constituted in specific ways, as possible patients versus decision-makers, and in specific relations to each other, i.e., in situations of choice.

The second way to augment the ethics of technology with the approach of technological mediation is to *assess* mediations, and to try to help *shape* them. Rather than working from an external standpoint *vis-à-vis* technology, aiming at rejecting or accepting new technologies, the ethics of technology should aim to *accompany* technological developments (Hottois), experimenting with mediations and finding ways to discuss and assess how one might deal with these mediations, and what kinds of living-with-technology are to be preferred. Deliberately building mediations into technological artifacts is a controversial thing to do, however. Behavior-steering technologies are seldom welcomed cordially, as the regular destruction of speed cameras illustrates.[2] However, since we have seen that *all*

[2] For a closer analysis of behavior-steering technologies see Verbeek and Slob (2006).

technologies inevitably mediate human-world relations, thus shaping moral actions and decisions, this should not imply that ethics should refrain from explicitly designing mediations into artifacts. It rather shows that ethics should deal with these mediations in a responsible way, and try to help design technologies with morally justifiable mediating capacities.

The contested nature of behavior-steering technology makes clear that such 'materializations of morality' cannot be left to the responsibility of individual designers. The actions and decisions of designers always have public consequences, and therefore these decisions and their consequences should be subject to public decision-making. The products of the designing work then literally become 'public things', in the sense of *res publica*, as recently elaborated by Latour (2005). 'Res', the Latin word for 'thing', also meant 'gathering place', or 'that which assembles', and even indicated a specific form of parliament. 'Things' can thus be interpreted as entities that gather people and other things around them, uniting them and making them differ. Seen in this way, technological artifacts not only help to shape our lives and our subjectivities, they should also be approached as foci around which humans gather in order to discuss and assess their concerns about the ways in which these things contribute to their existence. These are precisely the places where the morality of design should be located.[3]

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