Theorizing Technological Mediation: Taking Technology to the Humanities

Over the past decades, the philosophy of technology has developed into a new subfield of philosophy, with its own domain of inquiry, journals, conference series, educational programs, and forms of societal relevance. But, remarkably, the various approaches that have developed in the field have hardly matured into systematic theories. At the same time, the empirical field of Science and Technology Studies (STS) has developed from an ‘empirical detour’ to answer philosophical questions regarding science and technology into an established field for the empirical investigation of scientific and technological practices. But in this development its originary philosophical ambition seems to have shifted to the background.

In this talk I will elaborate how the ‘post-phenomenological’ approach in philosophy of technology has the potential to develop into an empirical-philosophical approach to technology that overcomes the limitations mentioned above. Building upon Don Ihde’s phenomenological analysis of human-technology relations (Ihde 1990), an expanding group of scholars has started to study various aspects of the social and cultural roles of technology, ranging from the epistemic role of the Mars explorer vehicle to the role of technologies in education and from the impact of hands-free calling on driving behavior to the role of sonography in moral decisions about abortion. By now, it’s time to develop this postphenomenological approach into a systematic theory of technology.

In order to do that, though, one crucial step needs to be made. In all attention for the mediating roles of technologies, the processes of appropriating these mediations by human beings have remained largely unstudied. To develop a full understanding of processes of mediation, therefore, we should not only study ‘what things do’ but also how humans give meaning to these mediations – both empirically and conceptually.

Connecting to the three questions that Immanuel Kant found the central questions in philosophy (what can I know?; what ought I to do?; and what may I hope for?) such a theory should systematically investigate the mediating role of technology in three dimensions of the relations between humans and world: epistemic, ethical, and metaphysical. This will result in a framework to conceptualize and investigate how technologies help to shape human understandings of the world, normative frameworks and actions, and metaphysical frameworks. How do imaging technologies reveal the fetus and the brain, and how does this inform our understanding of our offspring and ourselves? How do gender selection technologies reorganize moral and political frameworks and actions? How does Google Glass reorganize the character of public space? And how do brain imaging...
technologies and reproductive technologies help to shape experiences of transcendence, reorganizing the boundaries between the given and the made, fate and responsibility?

BIO

Peter-Paul Verbeek (1970) is professor of philosophy of technology and chair of the Department of Philosophy, University of Twente, Enschede, The Netherlands. He is also president of the Society for Philosophy and Technology and a member of the Dutch Council for the Humanities. Verbeek is an editor of Tijdschrift voor Filosofie and a member of the editorial board of SATS. Journal for Northern Philosophy and of the scientific advisory board of Philosophy & Technology. From 2010 until 2012 he held the Socrates chair at Delft University of Technology. Between 2011 and 2013 he was chairman of the ‘Young Academy’, which is part of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences. Fall 2006 he was guest professor at Aarhus University, Denmark.

Verbeek’s research focuses on the social and cultural roles of technology and the ethical and anthropological aspects of human-technology relations. In 2014, he received a VICI-award from the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research to develop a theory of technological mediation, after having received a VIDI-award (2008), for studying the blurring boundaries between humans and technologies and a VENI-award (2004), for studying the moral significance of technology, and its implications for design.

He recently published the book Moralizing Technology: Understanding and Designing the Morality of Things (University of Chicago Press, 2011), in which he analyzes the moral significance of technologies, and its implications for ethical theory and for design practices. He is also the author of What Things Do: Philosophical Reflections on Technology, Agency, and Design (Penn State University Press, 2005), which investigates how technologies mediate human actions and experiences, with applications to industrial design. He is co-editor of the volume The Moral Status of Technical Artefacts (Springer 2014, with Peter Kroes) and User Behavior and Technology Design – Shaping Sustainable Relations between Consumers and Technologies (Springer 2006, with Adriaan Slob).

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