Chapter III
Technoethics:
An Anthropological Approach

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ABSTRACT

Common ethical issues related to technology are formulated in terms of impact. With an anthropological approach, every technological device is considered as the result of a designing and building process, through which social values are transmitted. The impact can be properly assessed only once these values are understood. The question of privacy is used here to illustrate the approach. Then, it is shown how human beings and machines are defined in reference to each other, the latter being considered as superior. Therefore, human beings try to improve themselves by using technology.

INTRODUCTION

Most of the time it is assumed that the relationship between technology and society can be understood quite simply as the influence of the former on the latter. As a result, social and ethical issues related to science and technology are usually tackled in terms of *impact*.

However, with an anthropological approach, it is important to take into account that technology is not just a starting point for good or bad consequences. It is also the result of a designing and building process. Anthropology aims at understanding the values that are behind technology. The goal of this chapter is to show what an anthropological vision can bring to the understanding of the relationship between technology and society. By standing back from common ethical views, such an approach can provide an original framework with which to think about ethical and social issues in a different way. Therefore, by replacing technological development in its broad social and cultural background, this paper proposes a different view of classical ethical issues.

ANTHROPOLOGICAL VERSUS CLASSICAL APPROACHES TO TECHNOLOGY

Social and cultural anthropologists are involved in the study of differences between human cultures, and in the study of what human beings may have in common despite these differences. One common thing is the use of technology, as there is absolutely no human culture without it (Leroi-Gourhan 1993). Therefore, the study of the relationship between technology on the one hand, and society—and more fundamentally humankind—on the other hand, is a very relevant topic for anthropology.

Most anthropologists are more interested in other cultures than in their own. Nevertheless, our western society deserves being studied at different levels. Understanding how technology is designed, produced, and used in our society is fundamental.

The main anthropological questions are related to what kind of society we want to live in the future. This implies that we need to stand back from the classical visions of technology. Broadly speaking there are two different classical approaches.

The first one considers that there is a technological determinism. It may be technophile determinism, and in this case the implementation of technology appears as necessarily synonymous with welfare, knowledge and prosperity for most people. Conversely there may also be technophobe determinism, in which case technology is considered as intrinsically dangerous, the fear being that its implementation will lead to a huge disaster.

In the second position, technology is neither good nor bad, but simply neutral. According to this standpoint, there is a good use and a bad use of technology, the goal of the good guys being to promote the first one. In this case, it is assumed that the user is responsible for what will happen, good or bad. Those sharing that view use frequently a very simple example: if you take a hammer to nail, it is good. If you take it to kill someone, it is bad.

Moreover, we find very often a mix of neutralism and determinism in common speeches. A good example is the World Summit on the information society. Organized by a Committee established under the patronage of Kofi Annan, the summit was initially mentioned in a resolution of the International Telecommunication Union, in order to be organized by the United Nations. The first step was held in 2003 in Geneva. Its goal was to obtain a consensual point of view—that was not easy to group the interests of different states, the business world and the civil society—and to develop some operative action plans. The second step, held in 2005 in Tunis, was focused on the evaluation of the results. According to the World Summit on the Information Society web-site[1], which explained the challenge:

The modern world is undergoing a fundamental transformation as the industrial society that marked the 20th century rapidly gives way to the information society of the 21st century. This dynamic process promises a fundamental change in all aspects of our lives, including knowledge dissemination, social interaction, economic and business practices, political engagement, media, education, health, leisure, and entertainment. We are indeed in the midst of a revolution, perhaps the greatest that humanity has ever experienced. To benefit the world community, the successful and continued growth of this dynamic requires global discussion and harmonization in appropriate areas.

Most positions defended during the meetings assumed that we have no choice (determinism) and at the same time that we have to do the right things if we want to reach the right goal (neutralism).

Despite their obvious differences, neutralism and determinism have something in common: they assume implicitly that technology does exist, as a starting point, and that we just have to assess

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