Ordinary Technoethics

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ABSTRACT

From recent philosophy of technology emerges the need for an ethical assessment of the ordinary use of technological devices, in particular telephones, computers, and all kind of digital artifacts. The usual method of academic ethics, which is a top-down deduction starting with metaethics and ending in applied ethics, appears to be largely unproductive for this task. It provides “ideal” advice, that is to say formal and often sterile. As in the opposition between “ordinary language” philosophy and “ideal language” philosophy, the ordinary requires attention and an ethical investigation of the complex and pervasive use of everyday technological devices. Some examples indicate how a bottom-up reinvention of the ethics of technology can help in numerous techno-philosophical predicaments, including ethical sustainability.

Keywords: Ethics, Ordinary, Sustainability, Technology, Wisdom

This paper resists “Ideal Technoethics”, which is implicit in mainstream academic applied ethics approaches and is currently favored by the bureaucratic implementation of ethics in public and private affairs. Instead, some trends in philosophy of technology emphasize the importance of ordinary technologically-laden behaviors. If we take this approach one step further, it leads to ordinary technoethics. In my take on ordinary technology, values are construed differently, starting from the importance of the ordinary use of technology (humble devices and focal familiar practices). The primacy of use in the history of the Internet provides a paradigm for the ordinary empowerment of users. What are the ethical consequences of this empowerment, and how is the average human being today equipped to address them in the innumerable micro-actions of ordinary life?

TECHNOETHICS

Technoethics as a research and practice field is situated in between philosophy of technology and applied ethics. What happens at the intersection of these two cultural domains is more significant than ever since we can hope from it a new inspiration to tackle the cultural crisis of modernity. This crisis implies the search for a more sustainable civilization, but this requirement does not mean much unless we give “sustainable” a definite meaning. I suggest the following ethical meaning for “sustainable”: the capacity to be accountable for one’s actions (personal and collective). It excludes this rampant interpretation: the wish to maintain and perpetuate our welfare and power.

Much has been done in technoethics, from its first conception in the context of philosophy of science and technology (Bunge, 1977) to
its current use in handbooks (Luppicini and Adell, 2008) and field research (Ess, 2009). Carl Mitcham has spelled out what has to be done: “Our thesis is that properly appreciated, technology can and should likewise serve as a unifying theme across specific applied ethics discussions – and that the time has come for deep and systematic investigation of the connections between applied ethics and the philosophy of technology, that is, to move reflections of technology from the margins to the center of applied ethics” (Mitcham, 1997, p. 163). He identified clearly enough where the major hurdle is: “Although one aim of the academic study of ethics and technology has been to bridge the two cultures’ divide, applied ethics expertise sometimes creates a new version of the very difference it would overcome. The real promise of applied ethics will only be realized when such reflection both transforms technical decision making and enters the public realm”. (Mitcham, 1997, p. 18).

Ordinary

The expression “ordinary ethics” refers to the split between “ideal language” and “ordinary language” in analytical philosophy. This story took place a long time ago, in the middle of the 20th century, somewhere in England between Cambridge and Oxford. The Linguistic Turn (Rorty, 1967) provides the sacred texts for a common narrative in English speaking countries. It recounts the first emergence of analytical philosophy as a philosophy of language taking over philosophy and then the conflict between ideal and ordinary language. This conflict inaugurated a “metaphilosophical” divorce in analytic philosophy between the ideal language school and the ordinary language school. The former is linked to logical empiricism and is a largely neo-positivistic project to construct science as a perfect language, including the social and human sciences. The latter is linked to Wittgenstein II and its champion was J. L. Austin.

Ordinary language philosophy launched a deflationist project to scrutinize real uses of language in everyday life and to describe its implicit metaphysics. Ordinary language assumptions and implicit logic provide an ordinary metaphysics, always complex, sometimes smart. Austin’s dissections of excuses for instance gave a precise, concrete, and palatable form to ordinary language methods and results. But do they lead anywhere? The masters of ordinary language philosophy evolved a sort of aporetic snobbery. A never-ending game of reinterpretations and refinements prevents any conclusion and practical use of some ordinary language masterpieces. This aristocratic snobbery was entirely abandoned by the posterity of ordinary language philosophy when it mixed with American pragmatism. Following from this encounter, a fecund alliance of Deweyan style pragmatism (Hickman, 1990) and ordinary language methods is still active in the background of technoethics.

The Problem with Ideal Applied Ethics

The controversy between the ideal and the ordinary is no longer active in philosophy, in these terms at least, even if the divide between analytical and continental philosophy still follows some of its fracture lines.

My point is limited to the field of ethics and my intention is to start from this naive interpretation: there exists an ideal technoethics trend in mainstream academic applied ethics. So far so well. But alas it turns out more than often to be misleading, deceptive, and counterproductive. As a result of this drifting process, ideal technoethics has given birth to a new language, an Orwellian ethical newspeak, within which scholastic disputes and agreements flourish at will. An academic can easily assure an enviable rate of publication by harnessing this language. Public and private institutions are now the home of an ethical technocracy, an establishment in charge of ethical affairs. They produce an impressive number of charts, advice, and recommendations. Alas my experience in the academy and in corporate consulting has taught me that the expertise in this literature
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