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Technology Design as Experimental Ethics

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Introduction

Doing ethics of technology has become a complicated activity following the developments that have taken place in the philosophy of technology over the last few decades. Contemporary approaches, such as actor–network theory and postphenomenology, have argued convincingly that we need to blur the boundaries between human beings and technological artefacts. While Don Ihde has shown that human relations with the world are fundamentally mediated by technologies (Ihde 1990), Bruno Latour claims that we need to give up the separation we make between human and non-human beings (Latour 1993). In the meantime, according to various authors, even the field of morality has become a hybrid affair. Moral actions and decisions of human beings are fundamentally mediated by technologies, like turnstiles that intervene in fare-dodging in the subway and antenatal diagnostic technologies that inform moral decisions about abortion (Verbeek 2011).

This blurring of the boundaries between humans and technologies is a serious challenge for the ethics of technology. It makes it impossible for ethicists to play the role that is typically associated with them: the role of a border guard assessing whether a technology is morally acceptable or not. Ethics can no longer defend a boundary between humans and technologies when the recent insights from philosophy of technology show that this boundary does not exist.

This does not imply, however, that the ethics of technology has reached its end. As I explained elsewhere (Verbeek 2010) the real challenge is to develop new ways of doing ethics of technology, that shift their focus from ‘assessing’ technologies towards ‘accompanying’ their development, implementation and use. Rather than determining...
whether a technology is morally acceptable or not, the ethics of technology could focus on the question of helping to shape good hybrids. And rather than taking on the role of an external judge it then plays the role of an engaged participant who brings in perspectives that might otherwise remain under-represented.

In this chapter I will elaborate what such an ‘ethical accompaniment of technology’ could entail. First, I will further articulate the notion of ‘ethical accompaniment’ as opposed to ‘technology assessment’. By discussing Michel Foucault’s concept of ‘limit attitude’, I will show that the notion of ‘limit’ can be used not only to assess the desirability of technologies but also to accompany their development. Following this, I will propose a framework to read and to design the moral significance of technologies. By linking the approach of technological mediation to design thinking, it becomes possible to expand the realm of ethics from words and ideas to things and technological systems. In three sections, I will indicate three ways in which designers could take the mediating role of technology into account in their work: they can anticipate mediations, systematically assess them and deliberately design them ‘into’ a technology.

**Ethics: From assessment to accompaniment**

Implicit in many ethical approaches to technology is the model of a struggle between human beings and technologies. While some technological developments can be beneficial, others pose a threat to humanity. The role of ethicists, then, is to assess if technologies are morally acceptable or not. As indicated in the introduction to this chapter, this model of a struggle between humanity and technology has become highly problematic in view of the recent developments in philosophy of technology. According to recent insights, the human being cannot be understood in isolation from technology, just like technology cannot be understood in isolation from humanity. Approaching their relation in terms of struggle and threat is like attempting to give a moral evaluation of gravity, or language. It does not make much sense to be ‘against’ gravity or language, as they simply form the basis of our existence. In similar ways, technology inevitably helps to shape what it means to be human.

To be sure, this does not imply that all roles of technology in human existence are equally desirable, and that human beings are, in fact, powerless victims of the power of technology. But it does imply that the ‘opposition model’ of humanity and technology might not be the most