

Moralizing Technology

Understanding and Designing the Morality of Things

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Peter-Paul Verbeek, *Moralizing Technology: Understanding and Designing the Morality of Things*, Chicago / London, The University of Chicago Press, 2011, ISBN 0226852938

We human beings have a difficult time of it: How to live in a good way, what 'being forced into it' entails, juveniles spoiling the atmosphere of a public square, drones in Pakistan. That's morality. And then we produce all these objects around us, things that have a function and meaning, and that can conjure up the imperceptible for us and camouflage what we would rather not notice. That's technology. And this is when it really becomes complicated, because technology moralizes and is partly responsible for our behaviour and viewpoints.

Technological philosopher Peter-Paul Verbeek has written about this in *Moralizing Technology*. The book is a broadly substantiated argumentation of how technology and morality are related. Many people think that technology simply overcomes us. Others see it as a way of making life more pleasurable, of wiping out terrorists and of earning money. The most important point that Verbeek makes is that human beings and technology do not exist in separate universes. The most banal example comes from Bruno Latour, in reference to the American National Rifle Association's assertion that guns don't kill people, but that it's people who kill people. That's right of course, but we do this in a world, or context, in which guns at least offer the possibility of shooting others.

Technical ingenuity is human, and the phenomena it produces are part of our identity. The interweaving of man and technology, Verbeek rightly claims, is indisputable, and it implies that technical products are representative of human views on correct behaviour and that they also express human moral doubts, both intended and unintended.

The biggest part of the book comprises a careful analysis of the views of famous and less well-known philosophers on the status of technique, and the refutation or refinement of their arguments. The author is good at explaining things, and this means that in passing he furnishes a fairly complete survey of the role that philosophers have ascribed to objects throughout the centuries. In doing so, Verbeek more than once uses to good advantage an example with which he himself was confronted when his wife was pregnant: sonography. This is a very strong example. Sonography does not compel people to commit a particular 'moral' act in the way that a speed bump directs your foot to the brake, or a piercing whistle keeps juveniles out of the area, but instead saddles expectant parents with dilemmas that until recently were unknown. Supposing you decide to have a sonogram taken (dilemma 1) and the result shows congenital defects; do you abort the foetus (dilemma 2)? Your second decision is unintentionally influenced by the visual representation of the foetus. It has such a scale and quality, designed as it is for the sake

of mediation, that you could almost think the foetus is already an individual. As a result, the representation acquires a moral charge that the inventors of sonography did not foresee.

This indicates the central concern of the book. Technology is us. It therefore is not separate from morality; it falls under human moral practices and is part of the whole gamut, from the simplest rules of conduct to the discourse on the quality of human life, to public safety, privacy, sports, play and warfare.

In the second part of *Moralizing Technology*, the accent is on application: the designing of the morality of technology with which we surround ourselves. Here Verbeek mainly selects examples with regard to relatively simple behavioural influencing, but it's a pity that he more or less drops the unexpected moral dilemmas, such as that of sonography. For they clearly indicate that our awareness of the morality of contrivances is still in its infancy. But the book certainly works. We can't get around it: technology steers morality, and we'll have to start taking that much more into account.

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Tags

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