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10-1-2014

Review Of "Ethics In Technology: A Philosophical Study" By T. Heikkerö

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Ethics in Technology: A Philosophical Study by Topi Heikkerö (review)

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Ethics in Technology: A Philosophical Study.

By Topi Heikkerö. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2012.
Pp. xii+234. $75.

How should we think about ethics in a technological world? Sandwiched between Topi Heikkerö's clarification of the question and provision of an answer are three meaty chapters on philosophers who inform how the author thinks about the question: Hans Jonas, Albert Borgmann (who draws heavily from Heidegger), and Larry Hickman (a Deweyan pragmatist). In addition to these three, there is substantial discussion of Jacques Ellul, Lewis Mumford, Langdon Winner, and Carl Mitcham, as well as classical philosophers, including Francis Bacon, René Descartes, and Immanuel Kant. Thus, not many stones are left unturned. Heikkerö's discussions are sometimes illuminating and his criticisms always constructive, though his accounts of those in the analytic tradition are what might be found in a good textbook. Clearly, Heikkerö is more at home in the continental tradition, from which those in the analytic tradition can learn much.

We need to re-think ethics in a technological world for a variety of reasons: "new areas of human enterprise, expanded causal and temporal dimensions, risks, uncertainties, and vulnerabilities" (p. 10). But an even greater need arises because of what Heikkerö believes is modernity's penchant for rigorously separating facts and values. This modern way of thinking seems to place evidence, reason, objectivity, and truth on the side of science and technology, and opinion, emotion, and mere subjectivity on the side of values. This, Heikkerö argues convincingly, is what John Dewey called an "untenable dualism." It is untenable because values are implicit in the makeup of the problems that confront us, because they always sneak in by the back door anyway if not acknowledged, and because they are built into the objects we make. Heikkerö's illuminating example is of fetal screenings in Finland. Officially, Finland proclaims that every citizen has an equal right to existence and life, and promises to take care of its weak-

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est members. "Simultaneously, the fetal screening policy appears to be a tool for decreasing disabilities" (p. 186). And, in fact, the number of babies born with Down syndrome has been reduced by nearly half. The tests, the author argues, "set conditions for the acceptability of the foetus's birth" (p. 186). Finally, when serious abnormalities are found, health care officials often exert pressure to abort. So the screening technology embodies values, and isn't value-free, though it is often presented as if it were.

So how should we think about ethics in a technological age? Heikkerö practices a kind of bricolage: he takes a bit from here and a bit from there and tries to assemble the parts into a workable whole. He offers both a "minimalist" account and hints toward a "maximalist" account. Too much thinking about ethics in technology, he argues, goes on either at the fundamental level—e.g., Kant vs. Mill—or at the "micro" level—e.g., when is whistleblowing justified? Instead, Heikkerö recommends that we focus on the middle (or "meso") level. This means paying attention to the kind of sociological and scientific "facts" found in STS studies. He also recommends that we become more self-conscious and critical of our place in larger institutional practices. A young scientist, for example, might think she is doing basic science only to discover that the overall aim of the team is to secure lucrative patents. All of this is good advice if not altogether novel.

What about the more ambitious account? Here Heikkerö somewhat disappointingly only gestures at ways forward. He places great emphasis on "willing." He contrasts "manipulative willing" (stemming from Bacon) with "[c]onsciously and voluntarily accepting burdens," recognizing that "[w]ithin focal practices, interacting with things, human beings give reality a say in their lives" (p. 193). Of course manipulative willing will always be with us, but not exclusively. How does this cash out politically? Heikkerö suggests that some of the non-violent passive resistance that succeeded in India and the U.S. civil rights movement, and non-violent revolutions in Eastern Europe, might serve as inspiration for how to proceed. All this is a bit sketchy, and I hope that Heikkerö fleshes out his maximal account. Even without doing so, however, he has made a valuable contribution to how we should think about ethics in a technological age.

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