

CHAPTER ONE

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ETHICS IN A TECHNOLOGICAL CULTURE

A Proposal for a Pragmatist Approach

"Pragmatist ethics ... is not only interested in the application of pregiven normative rules, but in the construction of new possibilities for moral action ... (in) the creative character of the solution of moral problems" (Joas, 1993: 253)

The Communist Manifesto (1848) could be read as a preamble to our present technological culture. In it, Marx and Engels conclude, with scarcely concealed admiration, that during its short period of domination, the bourgeoisie has brought together productive forces on a vaster, more massive scale than all of the previous generations combined. As a result, society has taken on an extremely dynamic character. "All fixed, fast frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real condition of life and his relations with his kind" (Marx and Engels, 1969). Elsewhere, in *The Poverty of Philosophy* (1847), Marx summarized his view of the relationship between technology and society concisely with the following words: "The hand-mill gives you society with the feudal lord; the steam-mill, society with the industrial capitalist" (Marx, 1982: 109).

In *The Public and its Problems* (1927), the pragmatist John Dewey described the rise of technological culture in similar words. Columbus may have discovered a new world in the geographical sense, but in reality, Dewey says, the new world was only created during the past century. "Steam and electricity have done more to alter the conditions under which men associate together than all the agencies which affected human relationships before our time" (Dewey, 1954: 323). Dewey argues that these new technologies have contributed more to the establishment of modern democratic forms of government than the political theories of Locke and the utilitarians did. "The transition from family and dynastic government supported by the loyalties of tradition to popular government was the outcome primarily of technological discoveries and

Keulartz, Korthals, Schermer and Swierstra (eds.), *Pragmatist Ethics for a Technological Culture*, 3-21.

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inventions working a change in the customs by which men had been bound together. It was not due to the doctrines of doctrinaires" (ibid., 326).

Dewey remarks further that the value of technological advances is seldom fairly assessed. These advances are generally held responsible for all of the misery of modern existence, a widespread tendency that he dismisses as lazy thinking. "It is always convenient to have a devil as well as a savior to bear the responsibilities of humanity. In reality, the trouble springs rather from the ideas and absence of ideas in connection with which technological factors operate" (ibid., 323).

There seems to have been little change in this problematic situation since Dewey's time. In a recent article, in which he posed himself the question of "how to live" in a technological culture, the Dutch philosopher Gerard de Vries concluded that the customary philosophical and ethical vocabulary is not properly equipped to formulate an appropriate answer to this question. This vocabulary is more of a hindrance than a help to a proper understanding of the technological culture (De Vries, 1999). A concrete example of the associated difficulties is the debate on cloning, in which the established ethical vocabulary has proven insufficient to articulate certain widely felt moral intuitions (Swierstra, 2000). Another example is the debate on genetics and predictive medicine: the fixation of current ethics on self-determination and on the individual doctor-patient relationship has formed an obstacle to a proper understanding of the issue (Horstman, De Vries and Haveman, 1999).

The problem for which we are seeking a solution in this chapter can now be summarized as follows. On the one hand it is safe to say that the technological culture has an extremely dynamic character: the old ways of life are continually being replaced by the new, norms and values are continually being put up for discussion, and we regularly find ourselves confronted with new moral problems. On the other hand, however, neither philosophy nor ethics seem to possess a vocabulary that can accommodate this dynamic character adequately. In this chapter we will examine whether, and to what extent, a pragmatist ethics would be better equipped in this respect than current ethics. Before we begin to explore the perspectives of a pragmatist alternative, we would first like to make clear in which sense the traditional vocabulary falls short, in view of the technological culture.

1. THE "TECHNOLOGY-BLINDNESS" OF ETHICS

Modern philosophy builds upon two traditions: an empirical and a rational tradition. The foundation for the empirical tradition is formed by the work of Francis Bacon, in which a utopian program is launched, aimed at achieving social progress through scientific and technological means. The leading proponent of the rationalistic tradition was René Descartes. He regarded consciousness as the one and only unshakeable foundation upon which knowledge could systematically be constructed. The image of man that arises from modern philosophy is one of a completely autonomous subject who uses science and technology in a sovereign way in order to achieve his or her aims.

This humanistic and heroic self-image is still to a large extent characteristic of applied ethics. It centers completely on people, their actions and the regulation thereof. "Depending on the sort of ethical theory one supports, attention will be focused either on the presuppositions underlying actions or on the consequences of actions. In the former case, the question to be answered is whether the principle underlying the action satisfies ethical criteria, particularly whether it can be universalized. In the latter case, one asks whether the action contributes to the aggregated individual welfare" (De Vries, 1999: 19).

As a result of this conceptual restriction, ethicists limit their search for the cement holding society together to the values, principles, norms and rules by which people attune their actions to each other. However, society's social and moral order is not only determined by symbolic constructions such as these, but just as much by material objects: "Fire, food, money, steam engines, dikes and polders, sewage pipes, viruses and computer systems have just as strong a binding effect as symbolic constructions, if not more so" (Harbers and Koenis, 1994: 4).

As a result of its humanistic and anthropocentric self-image, applied ethics has been unable to move on from its "technology-blindness". If one were to look up the subject of "technology" in the most recent edition of Beauchamp and Childress's famous handbook, *Principles of Biomedical Ethics* (2001), one would search in vain. Nevertheless, it is obvious that technological advances in the very field of medicine and health care are an important source of moral problems and conflicts. Applied ethics seems to view technology mainly in instrumental terms; it can be used for good or for bad, but does not form a subject of consideration in its own right. In the occasional instances in which the subject of technology does arise in medical-ethical thinking, it is portrayed as cold and calculating, sharply contrasting with a culture of good care based on warm solidarity. "People assume that technology and care push each other out. An increase in technology leads irrevocably to a decrease in care ... Where technology dominates, care suffers" (Widdershoven and Verkerk, 1995: 250).

The view of technology as a neutral resource is replaced in these reflections by the negative view of technology as the polar opposite of good care. This negative view first appeared in Dutch discourse in a book by Jan Hendrik van den Berg entitled *Medische macht en medische ethiek* (Medical Power and Medical Ethics, 1969), which played an important part in the rise of principlism in this country. It also continues to form the backdrop to the critical thinking of Heleen Dupuis, a well-known proponent of this form of ethics in Holland (see Dupuis, 1998). To put it briefly, (medical) ethics is dominated either by a neutral or a negative vision of technology. In modern philosophy both visions are now considered to be outdated. While classical philosophy of technology has given short shrift to the idea that technology is no more than an innocent resource, modern technology research has in turn raised doubts as to the utterly apocalyptic view classical philosophy of technology adopted to replace the instrumentalist vision.

<http://www.springer.com/978-1-4020-1115-3>

Pragmatist Ethics for a Technological Culture

Keulartz, F.W.J.; Korthals, M.; Schermer, M.; Swierstra,
T.E. (Eds.)

2002, XXVI, 264 p., Softcover

ISBN: 978-1-4020-1115-3