

Capitalism and Morality

THE TEMPORAL DIMENSION OF TECHNOLOGY AND THE MOVING PICTURE OF THE GOOD

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Picture of the Good

One of the most urgent tasks of philosophy is to understand how ethical, social, and technological goods can be integrated in the midst of rapid change. The problem is to a large extent caused by moral myopia and tunnel vision.¹ It is hard to get a clear focus when the viewer and the picture are moving so rapidly and irregularly. Technical advance and social change have a reciprocal relationship. This spawns a myriad of ethical problems which are distinctive to a technologically advancing society. Many of the social and ethical problems which involve technology result from the fact that technology does not advance evenly. When the technical aspect of social change combines with non-technical facets of life such as morality, legality, and politics, the unevenness becomes more pronounced and more troublesome.

The Temporal Dimension

Ethics must take account of the temporal dimension, i.e., the dimension of change. As the world and our interpretation of it change more and more rapidly, the past fades quickly out of sight while the future rushes on us ready-or-not. Past decisions were made without much of the information now available to us and within world-views which we can recapture only with great difficulty. The decisions which we make today will affect a future of which we are largely ignorant in ways at which we can only guess.

Contrary to the optimistic view of progress which reigned from the seventeenth century, to the mid-twentieth Century, technological progress is not always a clear good. Our current understanding of the effects of technology is always limited and the results themselves are mixed. In 1868 Currier and Ives could show the railroad moving out into the future—the American West—which was empty but bathed in light.² Our predecessors were confident that they understood the technology which would move westward and future-ward. They knew what they were creating and they saw that it was good. By the end of World War II, the heirs of the previous eighty years of progress knew that they did not understand what the future had in store and had reason to doubt its beneficence.

Not only is technology, to a significant extent unpredictable, but social values reveal unexpected faces. To mention some obvious value changes between 1952 and the present we could name the nationally accepted values about race, gender, environment, consumerism, and workplace expectations.

These values which became written into law and court decisions are often incongruent with the forward thrust of technology.

Progress and the Reverse Salient

There are a number of reasons for the incongruity. In the first place, our understanding of technology is always incomplete. We have a limited understanding of the full effects of any technological change. Secondly, the societal values change in ways that do not always match the changes which take place in the technological sphere. In describing the technical problems which sometimes impede the advance of technology, historian Thomas Hughes evokes the metaphor of the military *reverse salient*. Rather than the image of a bottleneck whereby a field of technological advance is held up by an unsolved problem in one area, he uses the battlefield image in which an army advances unevenly along a front. The reverse salient is the area in which the army has failed to advance creating a reverse bulge of the enemy behind the army's advancing line(71). To apply this metaphor to the problem of ethics and society, technological advance often proceeds at a pace which the legal, ethical, and cultural structures lag behind.

A good example of this was illustrated by Rachel Carson in Silent Spring in which she pointed out that the science of chemistry in its knowledge of technical ability to kill living things was far ahead of the science of biology in understanding the full impact of insecticides and other poisons. The economic demand for cheap and easily available pesticides, as well as the social goal of preserving the elm trees, was running ahead of the knowledge of the environmental implication of their use.

Another much discussed example of the uneven advance of technological and socio-ethical awareness was the Ford Pinto. On the one hand there was the social and economic demand for an American-made fuel-efficient car. On the other hand there was the demand for safer automobiles as expressed by the government in the form of the Highway Safety Act and the creation of NHTSA. The technology for creating safer cars and the technology for creating inexpensive fuel-efficient cars were both advancing, but not in step with each other. The result was a car that was much less safe than it could have been, given the safety technology that was available at the time. The public reaction, including the numerous lawsuits, the criminal trial in Indiana, and the government response which forced the recall indicate that the public valued auto safety more than the Ford engineers and executives apparently realized. This is not to make the accusation that they did not value safety at all, but that they apparently thought they had done their duty by complying with existing regulations, and that resisting stricter regulations was a reasonable thing to do.³ This may have seemed reasonable given that there had not been an obvious demand for safety on the part of the consumer if it meant added cost or inconvenience. In fact, the consuming public had resisted safety devices.

Improving Moral Vision

Many examples could be given to show how people who are intelligent and not ill-intentioned can make decisions which in retrospect appear to be unethical, and in fact are bad in terms of their consequences. Unintended consequences are part of the human condition, but they become greatly magnified when technology enables such far-reaching consequences while making the future more and more difficult to predict. If the problem is moral myopia and tunnel vision, then the question is whether ethics can provide a larger perspective? Since the seventeenth century, when Rene Descartes asserted that he would be sinning against charity if he did not benefit his fellow human beings by publishing his work with its potential to improve our condition, Western society has acted as if technology is patently good, and needs no justification nor external standard. Technology has always had its share of eloquent opponents, but they have been spectacularly ineffective until very recently. There have been some checks on technology in the past twenty-five years such as the American version of the SST, and more recently, SDI, the super collider, and fetal research. In each of these cases there have been strong voices for going

along with the research and development and the opponents were accused of being Luddites. Technology can serve good or bad purposes but becomes dangerous when we collectively treat it as the ultimate good. Ethics must take a position of priority in the relationship among ethics, technology, and social change. We cannot distinguish between a good and bad use of technology unless we have some standard by which to judge the value of anything.

Ethicists cannot fulfill their role by resisting technology and hearkening back to a bygone world-view. Instead they have to be as flexible and creative as the technologies which they are trying to enlighten. Ethics must lead and not merely follow the parade with a broom and pan. If ethics waits to see what technology produces and then passes judgment on it, it is not doing its job. The ethical values of the technologists determine what they do. If ethics is going to be anything more than a critic on the sidelines, it has to be part of the thinking of innovative people.

A large part of the role of ethics is to create vision. It can do so by developing its own moral imagination, by learning what it takes to be creative and working creatively in its own field as well as in the area in which it hopes to be applied, whether this be medical ethics, business ethics, or ethics and technology.

The Contemporary Challenge

The role of the ethicist relating to contemporary technology can be clarified by contrasting it with the traditional role of the philosopher. Traditional wisdom had a vision of an unchanging good which served as a basis for making good decisions. Can we reclaim this vision? Probably not. Technology constantly challenges us with changing realities and with new ways of seeing reality. The Greek and medieval philosophers thought of the material world much differently from the way we do. The ancient philosophers saw things as expressions of eternal *forms*. We no longer have this view and the difference is enormous. As Barry Cooper put it: "If nature is formless, then technology can perform anything. When the structure of things is as changeable as things themselves, then it is as if there is no form, idea or *eidōs* to guide production" (44-45). Technology constituted a new way of seeing the world. It is not simply the application of science to problems, any more than science itself is merely a method of investigation.

Modern science involves a metaphysical view of reality that is radically different from any pre-scientific world-view. In the traditional view, material realities were a composite of matter and form and each thing had a specific purpose, i.e., a purpose dependent on the species or form of the being. The metaphysics of modern science, by contrast, understands matter differently and the concepts of form and purpose make no sense. Material reality is understood as atoms and molecules that can be expressed quantitatively. Material things are broken down into their smallest components so that human skills can manipulate them and we thereby become, in Descartes' words, "masters and possessors of nature."

The basic feature of this world-view is that nature is dead and without purpose; therefore it deserves no respect. It is not mysterious and can be arranged any way that suits human will. "Technology," in the words of Hans Jonas, "is the metaphysics of science come into the open" (qtd. in Cooper 44). Technology is primarily a way of thinking, a form of consciousness. It is evidently a very powerful form of consciousness. For ethics to do its work, it must itself become a very powerful form of consciousness with a clear and creative vision.

Fountains of Wisdom in a Dry Age

The philosophical theories which are most appropriate for creating the ethical vision are found in the classical American philosophers. While the views of Plato, Aristotle, St. Thomas Aquinas, and Immanuel Kant are still workable for many contemporary problems, they are inadequate for the problems which are

specifically technological. These older theories presuppose a fixed reality as well as a fixed standard. But we are living in a world in which reality itself as well as the standards of value are changing in ways that are unpredictable. The vision of the American philosophers was born in the midst of this change and presuppose it.

It is obviously beyond the scope of this paper to develop an ethical theory of technology based on classical American philosophy. But an outline of the program can be given. Streams of thought from James, Royce, and Peirce respectively can form a confluence from which can spring an ethical framework for technology. This view flows with technology but overcomes the materialistic atomism with a view that is more communal and which does justice to the spiritual dimension of the human person and society.

In "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life," William James argues that a final ethical system could not be established until the last person has a say. Ethics must be open to the ideals of each person and the only thing that can make an ideal bad is if it prevents another ideal from being realized. The best ethical judgment is the one that is most inclusive. The job of the ethical philosopher is to create an ethical republic in which all ideals are respected. James's philosophy emphasizes conjunctions rather than exclusive disjunctions. Persons imbued with this philosophy would not be seeking their good at the expense of the others. They would be looking for ways to realize this good and that one. For example, the mind set of the product manufacturer would be to create a product that is profitable, and safe, and environmentally friendly, etc. This is not an unrealistic notion. It is simply a removal of blinders.

Josiah Royce advocates *loyalty to loyalty* as the highest moral ideal. By loyalty, he means the devotion to a cause beyond oneself. After arguing that loyalty is necessary for individual persons to unify their life, and acknowledging the criticism that loyalty can lead to dangerous fanaticism, he argues that the highest virtue is loyalty to loyalty. Since individuals need loyalty to unify their life and thereby enable them to realize their individuality, the greatest good that one person can do for others is to help them live loyally and the greatest harm is to destroy their loyalty. Ethical persons, therefore, are those who unify their life by devotion to a cause that enhances the loyalty of all. This is the meaning of loyalty to loyalty (56).

The third tributary to this stream is Charles Sanders Peirce who defines ethics as "*the study of what ends of action we are prepared to adopt*"(2:199). Ethical persons control their passions and make them conform to an ultimate end which they can consistently and deliberately pursue. Thought leads to actions, but the action is not an end in itself. The purpose of action is the attainment of the ideal. The ideal is that which is admirable in itself. Peirce compares the person who thinks that action is the purpose of thought to the person who thinks that the purpose of the artist is to dab paint. The painter, in fact, dabs paint to serve an aesthetic ideal, and action serves an aesthetic ideal of creating that which is admirable.(5:130) In applying this concept to technology, we can say that ethical technologists deliberately subordinate their work to creating what they deliberately choose as an admirable ideal.

The person of action and technological creativity does not have to know the ideal in detail anymore than artists have to know the aesthetic ideal in detail before their artistic action brings it into view. But there are some features of the ultimate end which can serve to show the way. To pursue an ideal deliberately means to pursue it reasonably. Peirce points out that reason is essentially unselfish. Reason is communal and universal. The law of mind is that ideas connect to other ideas. He compares reason to agapaic love. It finds the seed of reasonableness in the midst of the chaotic and brings it into reasonableness. It does not destroy that which is foreign to it but joins with it to form a greater synthesis. Therefore ethical technologists are reasonable men and women who deliberately pursue ends that are admirable in the context of the largest community over the longest period of time (Sheriff 56).

James' republic of moral ideals, Royce's loyalty to loyalty, and Peirce's reasonableness as an admirable ideal share a common notion of an ultimate ethical good. Namely, they release a passionate commitment to a person's own ideal while appreciating and fostering as many other ideals as possible. A commitment to an ideal unifies the individual, but the only kind of ideal that is admirable and can really unify an individual is one which is reasonable and so unifies the whole human community.

Each of these philosophers had an explicit religious dimension. The symbols of religion are a way to give body and passion to this ideal. The ideal is not something ready made but a task calling for the creative work of the technologist as well as the ethicist. Creating a world-view which is scientific without being materialistic, and which integrates individual commitment with a sense of responsibility for the common universal good would be a step toward overcoming moral myopia and tunnel vision.

Notes

1. In his book *Ethics and Excellence: Cooperation and Integrity in Business*, Robert Solomon uses these terms to explain much of the wrongdoing in business. In this paper, I will use these concepts to explain ethical problems that are specific to changing technology.
2. By way of contrast to the Currier and Ives reproduction, Michael L. Smith reproduces a picture presented in the 1952 Golden Anniversary edition of *Popular Mechanics* showing a half-century of progress. Technological progress from 1902 is coming at the viewer in the form of changing transportational artifacts. Trains, cars, aircraft are speeding by us into an unknown future.
3. The Pinto case was often presented as a clear example of corporate depravation by which a cost benefit analysis caused Ford to deliberately sacrifice 180 lives to save \$11.00 per car. A good study of the complexities of the case is found in *The Ford Pinto Case: A Study in Applied Ethics, Business and Technology*. Ed. Douglas Birch and John H. Fielder. Albany: New York University Press, 1994.

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