An Ambivalent, Postphenomenological Philosophy of Technology

What Things Do: Reflections on Technology, Agency, and Design.
By Peter-Paul Verbeek. Translated by Robert P. Crease.
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With *What Things Do: Reflections on Technology, Agency, and Design*, Peter-Paul Verbeek (2005) provides an in-depth review and synthesis of the history of the field of philosophy of technology. With the goal of understanding the ethics involved in the processes of designing new technologies, Verbeek critiques major classical and contemporary figures in the philosophy of technology, builds their ideas into his own original fusion of positions, and applies his views to a case study of an environmentally-conscious design company.

What Things Do will be valuable for both those looking for an introduction to philosophy of technology and also those deeply engaged in the field. Unlike many writers who primarily present straw men or appropriated versions of the major figures they review, Verbeek's treatments are fair and his critiques are helpful. The exposition is clear and straightforward, making the book a potentially useful supplemental text for students working on the primary figures Verbeek engages. *What Things Do* will also be important for those who are working on philosophy of technology since Verbeek is clearly a rising star in the field, and this book will be looked back upon as the text in which he had put forward his foundational views.

Verbeek begins the articulation of his "philosophy of technological artifacts" with a critique and appropriation of works by figures from the history of philosophy of technology such as Karl Jaspers and Martin Heidegger. He claims that, in general, these figures succumb to what he calls "the Orphic temptation" (after the Ancient Greek mythological figure Orpheus who was punished after looking back over his shoulder). This refers to making the mistake of staking claims about the essential features of technology by observing the conditions necessary for the particular contemporary state of technology.

Verbeek explains that in early works such as *Man in the Modern Age*, Jaspers (1951) provides a clear example of a dystopian perspective. Working through an existentialist framework, Jaspers claims that, due to an explosion of mass culture, we have lost an authentic relation to reality; we are utterly dependant upon mass-produced, carbon-copied technologies; our labor has become mechanized; the bureaucracy that organizes us has become endless; our society has become a massive machine of which people are simply mechanisms. While affirming aspects of Jaspers's observations, Verbeek claims this account succumbs to the Orphic temptation, mistaking the characteristics of the culture of his particular era as indicative of the nature of technology itself. As an insightful counter-example, Verbeek reviews the history of trends in industrial design, revealing the functionalist attitude popular in Jasper's time to be one of many possible approaches. In Jasper's later works, such as *The Origin and Goal of History* and *The Atom Bomb and the Future of Man*, according to Verbeek, his position became an exemplar of an instrumentalist view of technology, understanding it to simply follow the directions that humanity plots for it (1953; 1958). For Verbeek, this account does not attend to the "intertwining" of culture and technology, or technology's capacity to play roles in the shaping of human action.

Next, Verbeek distinguishes his views from Heidegger's widely influential philosophy of technology, building on several analyses of Heidegger that have been offered (e.g. Feenberg, Dreyfus, and Ihde). The project of Heidegger's later philosophy in works such as "The Question Concerning Technology" and "The Origin of the Work of Art" is the attempt to uncover the general mode through which reality becomes disclosed to us (1971; 1977). As Verbeek puts it, "Reality always already" is "in a certain way when human beings enter a relation with it-being always already has a meaning for them" (2005, 55). These days, Heidegger observes, reality is disclosed as a "standing reserve," as a resource available to be tapped for human ends. This mode of disclosure is dangerous since it limits us to seeing our world, and even ourselves, only as means to ends. While others have criticized Heidegger's view as totalizing, abstract, or nostalgic, Verbeek claims that the real problem with this position is that it relies on faulty transcendental reasoning, taking limited instances of our experience to count for all possible relations to technology.

Verbeek's positive account of technology comes as he engages contemporary philosophers. The figure from whom he borrows the most is Don Ihde. Verbeek's emphasis on the study of bodily relations to technology

from a phenomenological perspective, much of his historical account, and also the title of "postphenomenology" which he gives to his own account, are all shared with Ihde's work. Many of Ihde's concepts for understanding how technologies alter our abilities to experience and act upon the world are adopted. Verbeek's largest departure from Ihde comes in the central importance he places upon the changes which occur to humans as we relate to the world through technology. For Verbeek, both humans and the world are "co-shaped" by their relation through technology.

Verbeek also finds much to borrow and criticize in Bruno Latour's Actor-Network Theory (ANT). ANT conceptualizes technologies in terms of the various political, social, and material factors which converge to make entities meaningful and useful to us. In Latour's lexicon, these factors should be understood as the various "actants" which are assembled into "networks" that enable us to take an entity for granted Verbeek sees potential for phenomenology and ANT to each provide the other crucial supplementation. ANT provides concepts for articulating the ways that technologies lead our actions by virtue of their materiality. Verbeek adopts a number of the notions Latour has offered for describing how, for example, a bulky hotel room keychain encourages one to return it, or how a speed bump encourages slower driving. Verbeek also sees the potential for phenomenology to supplement ANT in a way that, in my view, amounts to an insightful criticism. Verbeek holds that ANT is insufficient in its portrayal of human relations to technology. Latour's account, Verbeek suggests, could benefit from the detailed structural claims phenomenology makes regarding the specific ways technologies are used. For example, where ANT would describe the associations between "gun" and "human" to together form "gunman," phenomenology offers a more careful analysis of the specific ways that a gun mediates the actions of a person.

The third contemporary figure Verbeek engages is Albert Borgmann, primarily responding to his work *Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life* (1984). Verbeek approves of Borgmann's attempts to locate large-scale general patterns in the manners in which technology informs the way we live. He adopts a number of Borgmann's concepts regarding how technologies make things possible for us, and how these processes often remain out of view. Borgmann attempts to ascertain whether technologies are what he calls "engaging," providing us with meaningful experiences. His diagnosis is largely negative; for Borgmann, our use of technologies tends to separate us from meaningful experiences, leading us to be, for example,

couch potatoes that spend less time with our loved ones. This presents Verbeek with an interesting challenge. Since he does not interpret Borgmann to rely on universalizing, transcendental argumentation (i.e. "the Orphic temptation") as had the classical phenomenologists, he must explicitly engage Borgmann's negative assessment of technology. Verbeek's move is to claim that many of our relations to technology are indeed alienating or not in our best interest, but they need not be. Countering several of Borgmann's examples, Verbeek explains that highways do not merely cut up potential places to hike; they also make it easier to visit people that live far away. Telephones do not merely suffocate traditional forms of correspondence; they also enable easier communication with loved ones. And television does not merely discourage live performances; it also provides some valuable programs to people on occasion. In Verbeek's view, technologies play an ambivalent role in human life, at times limiting engagement, and at times enabling it in new ways.

Verbeek concludes *What Things Do* by making a case for the usefulness of the perspective he has forged thus far for those that engineer products for the community. He contends that consideration of the manners in which products will have effects on ethical issues should take place as products are being designed. As a guiding example, he offers a case study of an environmentally-conscious design company called Eternally Yours. An agenda of this company is to provide products to which users develop deeper relationships, thus inclining them to keep the products for a longer time, ultimately produce less waste. Verbeek endorses this agenda and offers the perspective developed throughout *What Things Do* as a context for thinking more deeply about these goals. For example, building on Borgmann's framework, he suggests that technologies can be made more engaging through design practices that keep a device's inner workings more accessible. This would encourage a user to develop a deeper understanding of them, and may encourage one to fix the device when it fails, rather than throw it away. As well, Verbeek suggests that a deeper relationship with technologies can be facilitated by designing them in ways that require a significant level of interaction between the users and device, thus discouraging mindless, easy consumption.

It should be noted that another value of *What Things Do* is its status as a contribution to the emerging school of thought called "postphenomenology." This perspective, spearheaded by Don Ihde, combines aspects of the phenomenology of technology with some of the commitments of American pragmatism. These researchers share a commitment to concrete empirical

investigation, an interest in technological mediation, and use several of Ihde's notions as starting points (see also Ihde, 1993; Hasse, 2006; Verbeek, 2006; Rosenberger, 2008; Ihde, forthcoming; Selinger, forthcoming; and a forthcoming issue of the journal *Human Studies* devoted to this topic). As this perspective continues to grow, the importance of *What Things Do* as one of its central texts will also increase.

As a final set of thoughts, I suggest that an avenue for assessing the claims of *What Things Do* is to observe how it stands up to criticisms which have been previously leveled at Ihde's work, since so much of this book is built upon his insights. The first criticism to consider is the claim that, while often offering comments regarding the ethics of case-specific instances of our experience with technology, Ihde's body of work lacks systematic inquiry into ethical issues regarding technology (e.g. Smith, 2003; Scharff, 2006; Thompson, 2006). In *What Things Do*, Verbeek seems clearly to avoid this problem; with his emphasis on the moment of design, Verbeek identifies and articulates a space where phenomenological insights into technological embodiment prove relevant and useful for ethical discussion. Also, by articulating specific productive places of overlap between phenomenology and the perspectives of Borgmann and ANT, Verbeek locates areas where his work can be useful to other systems of thought that have explicit ethical features.

A second criticism which Ihde's work has received is that his account does not yield an evaluation of our general technological culture. His work is often interpreted to convey a generally positive view of technology, peppered with case-specific critical comments. But if Ihde, against those with generally negative views of technology (e.g. Heidegger, Borgmann) indeed views technology in a by and large positive way (or at least an ambivalent way), his position requires either some sort of empirical support or systematic argumentation. Does Verbeek's own ambivalent view of technology fall prey to the same criticism?

It is possible in Verbeek's view for someone to both resist succumbing to the Orphic temptation and, through concrete empirical analysis, to come to a pessimistic general view of technology; Borgmann's work is presented to have done just this. The task for Verbeek, insofar as he defends an ambivalent-rather than pessimistic-view of technology, is to counter Borgmann's empirical analysis. Put another way, since Borgmann does not rely on transcendental argumentation (as did Heidegger), but instead identifies a general pattern in the way we relate to technology, his position cannot

simply be refuted (as was Heidegger's) by pointing out flaws in his argument structure. Verbeek must instead identify a different general empirical pattern to support his own alternative view.

Does he succeed? I suggest that while Verbeek clearly points out that it is possible for one to take up different relations to technologies than those which typify the pessimistic pattern Borgmann identifies, he has yet to show that people *do* in fact generally share a more ambivalent and changing relation to technology. For example, though he is correct to point out that it is possible to have non-couch-potato relations to television, he has not countered Borgmann's contention that, in general, our relations to television are negative ones. With another example Verbeek suggests that, "a medical instrument such as an MRI can reveal a patient not only as a body permeated by causally linked connections, but also as someone whose life is more than controllable but also intrinsically valuable" (2005, 66). As a multi-stable technology, an MRI can indeed support both of these sorts of relations. But the question is not simply whether it can, but whether in general it actually does. And what would it take for us to break such a general negative pattern of interaction? This sort of criticism of Verbeek's claims is of course no crushing blow to his overall work. But it does identify a specific area of issues into which postphenomenological inquiry should next expand.

In summary, with *What Things Do*, Verbeek has provided a productive analysis of the history of the philosophy of technology, and has succeeded in setting a useful conceptual context for addressing the issues of this field.

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