

Title: Critical Reflections on “Appropriate Technology”: Between Autonomy and Immanence

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Abstract:

The transfer of ‘universal knowledge’ from ‘Western civilization’ to non-Western contexts in order to ‘develop’ them can be seen as characteristic of a modern perspective. The objectivity of the knowledge transferred was a corollary of the neutrality of the technology employed that embodied or ‘applied’ the knowledge. Postmodern perspectives have questioned and criticized this modern understanding. Understandably and perhaps prudently, a particularly salient postmodern reaction to the modern has argued for, in contrast to a “top-down” imposition of abstract knowledge and importation of potentially inappropriate technologies, a “bottom-up” collaborative implementation of expertise and technology in order to develop these to a scale appropriate to the locality. Put in these terms and set in the current historical situation, the appeal to locality seems an obvious, indisputable good.

A plausible consequence of an obviously or indisputably good appeal is that it becomes so taken-for-granted that it is examined either minimally or not at all. The application of universal knowledge and the transfer of a neutral technology were indisputable goods to the modern understanding not so long ago! Minimal examination of a good appeal means its articulation will be correspondingly “thin”. The intent of this paper is to think the appeal to locality critically in order to, following Clifford Geertz’ argument for “thick description, “thicken” its articulation because – so the paper will argue – an insufficiently “thick” articulation impairs the capacity to evaluate “appropriateness”. To do so I draw on the critical tradition of the philosophy of technology, initiated by the work of Martin Heidegger and Jacques Ellul, at the center of which is the development of a non-neutral understanding of technology. How is it that the implementation of new technologies could be seen to be neutral? How are we to understand the manifestation, side by side, of the ‘obviousness’ of some of technology’s impacts, along with the ‘hiddenness’ of others? Have particular forms of argument, or particularly insightful modes of analysis, developed within the tradition? Applying these questions reveals rich veins of intellectual resources available for mining for a diversity of aims, both theoretical and practical.

This paper will bring together two veins in particular that hold out some of the richest potential. The first vein, which can be summarized under the theme of “autonomy”, deals with the widespread perception of technology as an autonomous force. While human inventiveness and entrepreneurship set the wheels in motion, technology then takes on a life all its own, oriented toward its own telos and dynamically realizing its aims; our participation in this process has in the meantime been transformed into the role of passive spectators. How does this perception of technology as autonomous come about? How accurate is it? If inaccurate, to what extent is this inaccuracy expressive of the manner in which technology itself operates? How are we to question, and to take responsibility for, an autonomous technology?

The second vein this paper mines can be summarized under the theme of “immanence”. Charles Taylor’s (2007) most recent work examines the emergence of secularity, not as an established fact nor as necessarily commanding widespread assent, but as the perception of the viability of the option of a

purely immanent humanism. The rise into prominence of the viability of this option corresponds, for those compelled by this option, to the slow eclipse of the orientation to transcendence we associate with religiosity and tradition. While Taylor gives a detailed historical exposition of these developments, and lays out the spectrum of positions available between a radically immanent stance and a radically transcendental view with considerable complexity and nuance, he addresses the possible role of technology in these developments only in passing. Within the developing critical tradition of technology, there is considerable support for an understanding of technology as “immanentizing”. Thus Taylor’s detailed historical account can be put into productive dialogue with developments within the critical tradition of philosophy of technology. How does the increasing involvement with technology effect an eclipse of transcendent goals? Is this a necessary or unavoidable effect?

Through developing an account of the two themes of technology as autonomous and technology as “immanentizing”, this paper will aim to articulate a greatly “thickened” account of the appeal to locality, in order to contribute to our capacity to evaluate the appropriateness of technology.

References

Taylor, Charles. (2007). *A Secular Age*. Cambridge & London: Belknap Harvard.