Artifacts of Recognition: Integrating Technological Agency and Social Theory

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Introduction

The preamble of our 1987 Constitution states:

> We the sovereign Filipino people imploring the aid of Almighty God in order to build a just and humane society and establish a Government that shall embody our ideals and aspirations, promote the common good, conserve and develop our patrimony, and secure to ourselves and our posterity the blessings of independence and democracy under the rule of law and a regime of truth, justice, freedom, love, equality, and peace do ordain and promulgate this constitution.

In this declaration, how is a just and humane society going to be built? Is it going to be merely human effort? What considerations are we going to hold? Is this preamble an empty rhetoric of the framers of the constitution? Or, is a just and human society possible? Surely, the building of a just and humane society can actually be done, or to use an apt words, it is "actualizable" or "realizable."

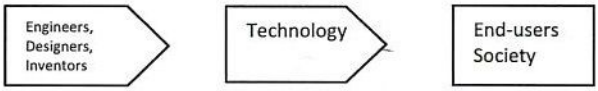
To truthfully answer these questions, we have to consider our real world: we live in a community of humans and things. By considering ***only*** ourselves, our social relations, we can claim that the way to an ideal society is through a morally responsive or ethically sound relation among fellow human beings. ***Only*** human beings attain the social agenda.

This view, however, is silent about, if not excludes, the community of things, within the lifeworld, that inundate our surroundings. Whether we are conscious or not about them, technological artifacts ineluctably influence the web of interactions in the social setting. In most of our actions, the community

of things is ever-present: even an ordinary act of sitting integrates the horizon of things; often, we see sitting as the sole action of man and never an "act of things". Sitting, however, requires a chair, not just the sitter. Without the support of a chair, a human artifact, no sitting is possible—unless through other materials except a chair.

This seemingly casual occurrence that forgets the role of things may also be gleaned in our nation building, especially when our technocrats and politicians put so much emphasis on the economic impact of projects related to technology, as if technology is passive and neutral means to achieving social goals. In a sense, it appears that technocrats and politicians recognize the role of artifacts since they implement reforms by introducing new technologies. A telecommunications project, for example, is usually studied by government officials in terms of project cost, economic viability or return of investment, and technical feasibility and efficiency—the latter being relegated to the judgments of technical experts whose concern is mainly the delivery of an efficient hardware—this goes without saying that the authorial voice of technical experts hastens the technological implementation. This practice, however, only takes technology as mere instruments determined by man and without any significant influence on man's life.

When we consider the roles of technical advisers, which are often composed of engineers, designers, and scientists, the programmatic flow of technology would be like this:



In this diagram, the providers of technology merely develop the technology as instruments for the End-users, while the task of nation building is left to the end-users themselves, perhaps, through their participation in the political activities such as, and maybe the only ones, electoral process and issue advocacy. If they were to participate in the achievement of the social ends, they can do so merely through the provision of efficient equipment or active participation in political activities. Hence, the impact of what they engineer is on the technical attainment of certain ends. This situation discounts their role in the society as engineers, as if the things that they produce are only meaningful in their use. It surely overlooks the artifacts' impact on the social life.

Current practices in the implementation of technology in the Philippines still manifest the instrumentalist view. Some sectors for instance claim that "we don't teach technology; we teach through technology." This one raises a lot of

questions as regards our pedagogy and technology. Let us think for example how this technology is translated in a classroom setting. Any person who has a PowerPoint presentation can lure his audience with creative animations. In a sense, this is teaching through technology. But in this setting, too, an alternative is indirectly being afforded by technology: learning can be had through images or animations, and at its extreme case, knowledge can be attained through direct perceptions alone, through a medium that appeals much to the senses. What happens to abstruse problems that require analysis at their deepest level is something that the alternative seems to omit. In this instrumentalist assumption, technology is humanly-controlled and is just an element in the passive realm of things.

The clear neglect of things has gained interest among philosophers of technology because, for one thing, it portrays an ironic contrast. In our society, commonly described as a consumerist and materialistic society, we ironically ignore the importance of things since we have little regard for them (Verbeek 2005, vii). Our neglect entails our lack of understanding them.

The desire to give things their share has already been articulated by some philosophers. Don Ihde, for instance, describes through phenomenology our relation with technology as embodiment, hermeneutic, and alterity relations. In embodiment relation, devices act as extensions of our perceptual sense, as in the case, for example, of a telephone through which we hear other persons' calls (Ihde 2003, 507). In hermeneutic relation, technology presents before us the world as text that requires our interpretation; some artifacts re-present the physical world for interpretation and understanding: the Internet churns out satellite images, which meteorologists regard as significant data for a true picture of the weather condition, without them needing to go out and directly observe the weather. In alterity relation, artifacts transform into something we consider as an "other", that is, artifacts engage us as if they are like us; thus, we compete against, say, a computer over a scrabble game, evoking similar feelings as when we have a human opponent.

Langdon Winner's view of technology incorporates its politics. In his view, technological arrangements substantively bring certain political biases in that a technology may be centralized, authoritarian, etc., depending upon a group's interest. The overpasses in Long Island, New York serve as his paradigmatic example. Robert Moses, according to Winner, integrated his political bias in the design of expressways and parkways, when he was put in charged of the construction as regional planner. He designed the bridge so low as to deny colored people access—they use buses or public transport then—to the Jones Beach (Winner 1986, 23). In such a case, an overpass embodies certain political bias by discriminating a marginalized minority, or in another example, a nuclear

facility requires that its arrangements are essentially authoritarian for reasons such as security, environmental management, and technical maintenance.

Andrew Feenberg's approach to technology is critical. For him, technology involves dialectical processes, which he calls as four reifying moments: decontextualization and systematization, reductionism and mediation, autonomization and vocation, and positioning and initiative (Feenberg 2002, 175). In all these moments, the subject has the free play to isolate technical objects and reintegrate them into the system, which may be rationally designed with the social ideals in mind. Thus, in its development, technology may be constructed in such a way that it coheres with the democratic character of the society.

Bruno Latour, using what may be called amodern approach, dissolves the distinctions between "humans" and "nonhumans" and views symmetrically all social elements, calling them all as "actants", which relate to one another along a certain network that is formed by their relation. In this view, Latour denies the notion of human being's interiority in contrast to exteriority, and lump them as collective or network (Latour 2003, 133). Reality both humans and nonhumans, including artifacts, are constructs that make up the collective (Ibid., 136).

The regard for things or artifacts has been given emphasis in technology studies. The core argument of these endeavors is that technology, in many ways, is a cogent agent of social change, not the way instrumentalists view its role, because it introduces certain practices, prevents certain behavioural patterns, encourages radical thinking, promotes certain culture, prescribes new practices, etc. In this case, technology or technical arrangements perform something in the society.

The social constructivist perspective has already advanced the theory that artifacts participate in the human affairs, although it attributes some technical properties through the appropriation or interpretation of some sectors of society (Brey 2005, 61). Technologies or technical systems are not value free or neutral, not because we give significance to things, or we value them, or they are products of our valuation. Rather, they have their own properties that make us relate with them, and these properties are either inherent in the artifacts or merely recognized, perhaps attributed, by social groups or individuals. A *videoke* machine, for instance, has no command over the confidence of some musically-challenged amateurs, but it has some property that somehow boosts these individuals to inserting five-peso coins into the machine despite their wayward singing or out of tune voices. It may be argued though that it is because of the commercial nature afforded by the machine that is giving the prevailing thought: I-pay-for-this-so-I-have-a-right-to-do-this-

regardless-of-what-others-think. In any case, the *videoke* machine does its trick.

What we have thus far is that social constructivists hold that artifacts have the so-called agency. In other words, things participate in the affairs of the society and they act in an analogical way like humans as actors do. Although this is rarely observed, artifacts indeed have their own agency or, in this sense, prescriptions (Brey 2003, 76). A metal fence or a concrete island on the middle of the road, for instance, does its job demanding certain type of behaviour from among the motorists, that is, they are supposed take the direct route lest they have their cars damaged. Also, the fence or the island prevents pedestrians from crossing the road and encourages them to use the skywalk specifically constructed for them.

An objection may be raised to this. Such influencing element is not really possessed by the artifact but merely attributed to it by the users. It is not that the fence or the island compels or demands certain behaviour, but rather users merely attribute a certain characteristic to it; thus, pedestrians may simply cross the street and jump over the fence. Besides, two yellow lines on the road may suffice, as in the case for example of road practices in some other countries.

Granting that such property has no compelling force to the human users, we cannot however deny the influence, whether suggesting or necessitating influence is irrelevant, being exerted by the artifact on the users. Indeed, the pedestrian may choose to jump over the fence at his own risk but the amount of effort required by the fence often discourages other users from following. Latour's claim is similar to this: a key that has a bulky ring holder does not directly influence guests to leave it to the reception counter, but through its bulk, guests are "suggested" to leave it at the reception desk (See Verbeek 2005, 157).

At this point, we can claim that things are alive: they act in the social realm so long as they exist by prescribing actions, constraining unexpected behaviour, minimizing efforts, encouraging social relations, and so on. In this sense, engineers, designers, or inventors are doing individually their tasks to keep things alive. But the importance of their roles in the whole social program is hardly noticeable unless we rethink technology and integrate it into the whole social theory. There is thus a different view: technology is an essential agent for the realization of a social project and any social theory must not ignore the agency of technology.

Insofar as technology is a social construction, it is an indispensable component of social change, not that it is an important material or instrument for reform but it is a product that embodies and articulates social values. But this is where the limit of technology arises: so long as technology is viewed as

solely social agent, as one that embodies certain values, as one that possesses certain properties, which exhibit certain affordances, so long as it is not integrated into the social theory, it cannot contribute to the attainment of social ideals, to the "building of a just and humane society."

Honneth's Struggle for Recognition as a Social Theory with Normative Content

The 1987 Philippine Constitution presupposes a social contract, a contract that appears to have evolved theoretically from a state of nature. The document itself envisions a society that promotes the common good and the rights and welfare of all the stakeholders. On what foundation this vision of society rests is something for social philosophers to figure. Axel Honneth (1996, 1) proposes a ground for a theory of society that coheres with a vision of society, a "social theory with normative content". Honneth uses Hegel's and Mead's model to lay down the foundation of such a theory.

Philosophers like Hobbes and Machiavelli predominantly hold the theory that the society has evolved from a state of nature, a state where individuals are in constant struggle among themselves and are preoccupied by a concern for self-preservation; this state of nature is hounded by conflict since the presence of one poses a threat on another. In this view, the individual has to be on guard always and has to wield influence or assert power so as not to endanger himself. On the one hand, this view patronizes, or perhaps romanticizes, human society because it appears to have made a big leap from the wild. On the other hand, it has little regard for its foundation since the society appears to face imminent collapse, held only at bay by a constant check on self-preserving tendencies that underlie conflicts.

Relying on the model of the young Hegel of Jena, Honneth proposes a different foundation of the society. The threat of annihilation felt by the individuals exerts no compelling pressure on them to associate and provides no guarantee for a stable association. An alternative to self-preservation hypothesis is thus necessary: This alternative is the "struggle for recognition." A struggle for mutual recognition among individuals has germinated in them and urged them to establish institutions that would guarantee positive liberty. In other words, there exists a "claim to intersubjective recognition" in an individual that creates a tension in him to respond morally, and this "moral tension" serves as a unifying element in socio-historical processes, which may dialectically develop through social conflicts (Honneth 1996, 5). Recognition, in this sense, entails the "granting of status" to an individual (Ibid., viii).

This struggle for recognition thesis offers a stark contrast to the self-preservation thesis and ennobles human beings in their association. Several

implications of this thesis emerge. First, human socialization need not be seen through a constant state of tension and stabilized by holding in check certain individual whims or passions. Even among animals living in groups, there exists a certain type of order that is not impelled by self-preservation, although some conflicts, it is granted, may arise. Second, man's social life presupposes moral impetus, and not a moral life presupposes a socialising impetus. It is more sound to hold that society begins with man's moral tension to recognize his fellows rather than with man's purely isolated act of preservation and only later consciousness of moral aspects of his association in order to preserve himself. Third, this struggle for recognition regards the "ethical bonds of men" as the basis of the social theory. In this sense, any social act presupposes a moral dimension.

There are three forms of recognitions, as adopted by Honneth, in Hegel's social theory. These are primary relationships (or love, friendships), legal relations (rights), and community of value (solidarity) (Honneth 1996, 129). Love is the primary form of recognition because it happens at a purely personal level. Through love, the uncultivated natural self is recognized (Ibid., 37). In love, one knows oneself in the other but this relation transforms into genuine love "only to the degree that it can become intersubjectively shared knowledge on the part of both. For only when each subject has also seen that 'the other knows itself likewise in its other' can it possess certain 'trust' that 'the other...is for me'" (Ibid., 37). By taking love as fundamental to the experience of recognition, Hegel provides a moral content of socialization, entertaining thereby the possibility of ethically laden social relation (Ibid., 38).

Legal relation emerges on the premise that individuals have prior recognition of their intersubjective relation, and raise it on a level that guarantees mutual rights. In this sense, legal relation is an achievement on the part of human beings since they have transformed their personal relation to a practice that is based on abstract principles of law. This time recognition has taken in a social character, and the individual is elevated to a status that is accorded with rights (Honneth 1996, 109). Legal rights, however, assume mutual recognition or respect from among the members of the community. Hence, legal rights enable a human being to develop himself insofar as he interacts with members of the community who accord him with respect to this status in the community.

The community of value or solidarity involves the individual who realizes his standing in the community and who shares the values, interests, beliefs, practices, etc. of the social group where he belongs. In this social group, "forms of interaction normally take on the character of relationships of solidarity, since each member knows himself or herself to be esteemed by all others to the same degree" (Honneth 1996, 128). This social relation entails allowing and

appreciating the other to contribute his skills, attitudes, values, works, products, and many others that are necessary for sharing in a certain way of life. This social esteem—the concern for the other's worth—is the basis of solidarity (Ibid., 129). "For only to the degree to which I actively care about the development of the other characteristics (which seem foreign to me) can our shared goals be realized" (Ibid.).

Honneth's notion of "struggle for recognition" presents a different beginning of social development. It theorizes, as an alternative to self-preservation that marks a chaotic state of nature, a social history that substantively bears the moral tension, and thus there underlies ethics in the social association of men and women. Of course, the forms of recognition dialectically develop since conflicts may arise in the struggle for recognition. The important thing, though, is that love, rights, and solidarity are anchored on the idea of moral recognition and responsibility and not on self-preservation whose bond formed is hounded by a constant fear for life.

Integrating Recognition and Technological Agency

In the previous section, we can glean that Honneth's theory is silent about the role of technology in the social affairs of human beings; he cannot be faulted for this since his task is merely to provide a normative content to the social relationship. The social constructivist perspective upholds that artifacts are agents of social change, and thus, they embody social values. But these artifacts seem to gain social influence only if the society so arbitrarily decides. This is not at all promising for social progress unless artifacts are designed in a way that certain social principles are integrated in them. There is thus a need to integrate technology and social theory so that technology echoes social aspirations and values.

The task of aligning technology to the social ideal—in our case a just and humane society—and thereby effecting change is not at all new. The problem of rectifying social iniquities, for instance, is addressed through the negative practices of "panopticism," described Michel Foucault as disciplinary practices, which are based on panopticon, an imaginary facility designed by English philosophy Jeremy Bentham that evokes from prisoners a constant sense of being watched by supervisors or officers even though no person is actually observing. The panopticon is not an ordinary facility because rather than telling the prisoners "Behave properly for you are constantly being watched," it translates, at least materially, such imperative of socially acceptable behaviour through series of bare cells whose interior is totally transparent to the position of the observer. If such disciplinary practice finds an expression in the actual participation of an artifact so fashioned as to carry out certain norms, can other

artifacts, in their actual operation, evoke or afford social values of justice and humanity? Before we can answer that question what would be their bases?

Richard Dawkins, in *The selfish genes*, holds that memes are "the units of cultural transmission" but these are only ideas which find concrete expressions through their vehicles, through artifacts or technology (see Alvarez 2005, 5). Considering this notion, we can then say that technology is an essential component of social history, and thus, it is indispensable, but sometimes overlooked, in a social theory. Technology goes hand in hand with social theory. But where does technology come in?

This paper argues that a society envisioned by the Philippine constitution is possible, but it must have a technological interpretation, one that has the voice not only of politicians but also of engineers, philosophers, and end-users as politicians, that is, insofar as they are active stakeholders of the *polis*.

What are the possible points of integration in the social construction of technology? First, we view the initial development of technology. In the initial phase, technology develops through the creative activity of an individual. This takes place on a personal plain. Even creators who work with team members contribute as an individual to the team. But the work of an individual is not for personal consumption alone; it involves a struggle for recognition at a level that would help develop self-confidence in the person. Although his work appears to be a self-centered activity, the individual already experiences, in Honneth's language, the inner moral tension to be recognized by the other. As a consequence, his work expresses his creativity and mirrors the expectation of, perhaps the significant, others. For example, when one makes, rather than buy, an aquarium to offer as a present to another, one ensures that this aquarium is free from defects and is presented with personal touch; this idea of personal touch is not in the giving alone but in the aquarium itself. In this sense, the person is embodied in the aquarium. Second, in the societal context, one's product has to meet the legal requirements for such a product so as not to violate any law. The injunctions appear as merely external principles but these legal requirements are congealed ethical expectations emanating from a struggle for recognition among individuals. Although the connections are already difficult to see, the end of such struggle is to gain mutually self-respect and be accorded with the rights due to each member of a society in good standing. In this respect, an engineer's design of an artifact, say cellular phone, includes his personal creativity in the choice of material, aesthetic preferences, professional integrity, and more importantly, considerations for legal requirements, especially concerning technical specifications, environmental restrictions, safety regulations, and so on, as mandated by law. But what underlies his meeting the legal fiat is moral response. Third, viewed from a larger perspective, technology should manifest communal values, and thus, it

embodies solidarity. In the social constructivist perspective, the society itself perceives solidarity in the artifact; they see the artifact as an expression of their value and the designer's recognition of this value. The jeepney, a local transport, is an example. Our jeepneys are designed to discourage, though not necessarily prevent, interactions with the driver, thereby leaving him to focus on his task of bringing passengers to their destination. But the back portion puts the passengers facing each other, leaving much room for interaction among them; for a culture that welcomes strangers, the design embodies its preferences. The passenger trusts the driver but the destination is several stories away. The example might elicit some objections since some incidents may portray the opposite, but this contrast can be attributed to the evolution of cultural values and practices rather than the artifact itself. The point of this example, however, is that individuals who participate in the processes of technology, both manufacture and use, do so on a higher plain of social responsibility impelled by moral recognition. In this sense, their acts must be socially responsive and must recognize or "grant status" to the members of society.

The points for integrating recognition and technological agency reveal that a technological process involves tensions for moral recognition and that artifacts can be made to act as agents of social values. In this respect, social ideals can be partly realized through technology.

The whole range of our technological activities then has a lot of moral undertones, if not overtones. Our use or manufacture of a technology presupposes a moral consciousness that extends as a social response to recognize others. Technology then can be taken as a moral agent, although in the sense of human's moral agency. This is not at all difficult to see. The provision of accessible passageways for physically-challenged persons is not supposedly just to pass, while mandated by laws, the legal requirements; more importantly, it is a material agent of our social responsibility to morally recognize the inclusion of disabled persons. Thus, more than a legal requirement, more than an environment friendly technology, we can have a technology that is socially responsive and morally cognizant.

By integrating the theory of recognition into the technology studies, what outcomes do we get? Technology can be imbued with moral recognition. Since artifacts can be designed in such a way as to contain properties that can be valued which would later affect the social life, they might as well be creatively made not only to address certain ends or to make efficient means but also to embody values of solidarity; and thus, the result is an artifact that esteem societal values. This appears problematic but this is answered or leveled by a morally sound social responsibility; hence, technological artifacts do not enter

the social dimension by sheer business interest; artifacts emerge with a tension for moral recognition.

Conclusion

The first section presents the social constructive perspective, which stresses that technology has arbitrary properties that are recognizable by social groups. Depending on the social groups, therefore, certain technologies may contain values that are appropriated by members of society. But these values in technology require a moral foundation. The next section discusses Honneth's social theory that provides normative content. His contention is that society develops out of a moral struggle for recognition, in contrast to the view that society develops out of self-preservation. This struggle for recognition evolves with society and has its forms such as love, rights, and solidarity. Integrating the two theories, this paper has argued that technology can be developed in such a way that it articulates social values grounded on moral recognition. In this way, technology is a moral agent of social change through which social ideals can be realized.

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