

## *TECHNOLOGY AS THE MAKING OF HUMAN PERSON*

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The rapid development in technology makes it more difficult for us to study the impact of different artifacts on our lives. Most of us appear totally in the dark concerning our relations to technology and fail to consider the effects of emerging technologies on the societal life in general and on the personal life in particular.

The attitude towards such an issue can be downright lackadaisical. Take the case, for example, of a student who asked her teacher to present arguments concerning the moral issue of cloning. The teacher responded by asking her to clarify the term and directed her to some literature which will give her sufficient and profound knowledge on the issue. Besides, the technology has different nuances which can just be addled by lumping them in a word. Sadly, she wasn't satisfied as she wanted an answer fit for her purposes. Perhaps, it's just a plain intellectual exercise, and she is not at all personally affected. It seems that there is no need to pursue the view on technology rigorously. But the issue about technology, especially the somatic cell nuclear transfer technology (SCNT), is so contentious that we cannot pass up a chance of analyzing it carefully. It cannot just be dismissed or accepted in one setting, without further analysis of the issue.

The prevalent perspective on technology is still *homocentric* or *anthropocentric*, that is, human being is still the gauge of all things; or, the value of a thing depends on how human beings put premium on it. Does this kind of attitude toward technology still hold today?

We cannot take technology for granted. It has constructed our society: our homes, offices, buildings, parks, roads, and so on—all these are technological constructions. Technology has become a catchword and has added value, (apparently the use of “technology” adds value). It is attached to any human endeavor that might worth a penny: thus, we have computer technology, information technology, agricultural technology, cosmetic

technology, cooking or culinary technology, and so on. In other words, we are so related to technology that our being depends on it.

Yet, our fascination for such technology makes it appear merely corollary to our existence, as something that is only for our own purposes. Our propensity for merely adjoining technology to our purposes makes technology and its consequences hardly comprehensible to us.

Is technology merely conjoined to our existence? What consequences does technology have on us humans? What role does technology play in our lives? Does technology make us a different human? Will technology replace everything human?

In this paper, I argue that technology produces human beings insofar as human beings produce it. Technology offers possibilities for human capacities while retaining human values or perceptions; it enhances our chances of attaining our values. It alters our idea of being human and even offers a different way of interpreting our human values.

### **Conceptions of Technology**

We begin by clarifying what we mean when we use the term technology. First, it refers to “things made by humans that do not occur naturally on earth, for example: refrigerators, eyeglasses, atom bombs, paints...” (Kline 1985, 210). In this sense, the things produced by us, what we call artifacts, are technology. The second meaning refers to the “sociotechnical system of manufacture,” i.e., the complete system in producing an artifact (Kline 1985, 210). This includes all the materials needed for the production of artifacts. When we refer to movie technology, for example, we imply all the materials needed for the production of a movie, from a movie camera to film negatives, etc. The third would be the technique or the know-how. This entails knowledge of the sociotechnical system of manufacture (Kline 1985, 211). If materials are present for a construction, say, of a building, know-how or techniques accompany such materials. One must have the knowledge or technique to construct the building. The fourth is the “sociotechnical system of use” (Kline 1985, 211). In other words, the artifact is integrated into the network of users and uses. A bridge joining two islands, for example, integrates within it how is used by the community and how it relates to other artifacts such as roads, cars, boats, etc. These nuances are possibly what we mean by “technology”.

While each seems to be the meaning of technology, we nevertheless have a different attitude or view towards it. At times, we treat technology as only a means to certain ends and in no way does it have a control or grip on us. We use any music player be it an iPod, MP3, Videoke, and so on, to

soothe our ears with mellifluous sounds. It doesn't matter what music player we employ; what is important is we attain our ends. Perhaps, the only consideration is the convenience of procuring the ends. Some of our technological choices in this realm seem negligible. Also, we think that technology facilitates the attainment of our values or end. For example, the value that family member ought to cherish their kinship by being close to each other through sharing experiences, feelings, thoughts, and many others. Communication is important for such a relationship. Cellular phones, for example, conveniently enhance such a value. In this perspective, we treat technology as if it is merely an instrument which is handy for our own purposes; we see no significant impact of technology on us. Artifacts are neutral instruments and are only meaningful when we objectify them for our ends. I call this naïve notion of technology.

Corollary to such a thought is the view that our use of technology will in no way change the whole human being and has no significant consequence to our humanity since our being human is far from the effects of technology, and thus it is merely an extension of humanity and, as Hubert Dreyfus has argued, will never be something human.

A step further than the naïve is anthropocentric. This view perceives technology as extensions of humans—technology extends or preserves human capacities as when we use telescopes to gain better view of distant objects or places; the phone, the good ear; the car, the feet. This is what Ihde calls embodiment relations (Ihde 2002, 507). In this regard, technology, as being part of us, expands, extends, or empowers our faculties as humans. We become better through technology.

Another view, which has a metaphysical ring to it sees technology as a disclosure of being and influences humans profoundly. For Martin Heidegger (1977), for example, technology is taken as a mode of truth, a form of revealing. Technology offers a different frame of viewing things. A pre-technological view of a mountain, or perhaps a truly technological view, paints it as a land mass filled with different flora and fauna. A modern technological view, however, *enframes* the mountain as a source of stones that can easily be made as marbles. Now, the mountain is a *standing-reserve*, a resource so-framed as something available whenever need arises. In this sense, humans are indispensable for but are equally beholden to the disclosure of Being. In such a case, technology is considered as a disclosure of Being whom humans depend on.

A different perspective sees technology not as an extension of but as an entity equal to humans. Technology is an other—Ihde would call this *alterity relation* (Ihde 2003, 522). We feel this when we play, say, chess on a

computer. Despite knowing that we are *only* playing a computer game, we evoke similar feelings as when we play against humans—for some the frustration can be that great that undoing his/her moves seems necessary. Imagine Kasparov's frustration when defeated by Deep Blue—he cannot say “It is *just* a computer”; rather, “It is a computer”—the semantics has far-reaching implications. In this sense, humans have no ontological priority to things: technology is not reducible to what they wish it to be, and they are not reducible to the demands of technology (Haman 2009, 14-15)

The differences concerning these views will be useful for our purpose.

### Conceptions of the human person

In the history of thought, we can glean the various conceptualizations of the human person. It might be worthy to recall prominent philosophers who have propounded their views. Plato, for one, holds that the human person is essentially a soul put in a body. His view relies on the principle of opposites and his theory of knowledge, recollection, although it is worth noting that the existence of the soul is already presupposed in his cosmological theory found in *Timaeus*. Aristotle also insists on the existence of the soul that is inseparable to the body; he supports this assertion through the theory of hylomorphism and his notion of causality. The soul as the efficient, formal, and final cause of the human person makes a human being distinct from all other beings that possess soul. St. Augustine of Hippo and St. Thomas de Aquino echo similar arguments from the Greek philosophers, although we cannot discount their original contributions to the history of thought. Both affirm the existence of the soul in a human being, an entity mirrored in God's likeness and ultimately returns to Him.

In addition, Rene Descartes is one philosopher who might be regarded as a transition to a different view of the human being. He affirms the human person as soul or *res cogitans* through the clarity of his “*Cogito ergo sum*” and as *res extensa* through the distinctness of the body. In his view, there appear two separate entities, that of a soul and a body, which does not depend on the soul for its life.

In all these views, which I regard as a *substantivist* or *essentialist* perspective, the human being is premised on the idea that he has a nature which is rooted profoundly in a being called soul, and the manifestation of such soul is reason. All other possibilities through reason can be contemplated: human being is able to think, and ultimately decide, autonomously. In other words, he has liberty to act and, in the end, determine creatively his life in this world.

Not all philosophers will agree to such notions. Others reject the idea of a soul or a self, insofar as it is merely a figment. Hume comes to mind. For Hume, all knowledge comes from experience. Either we have impressions or sensations, which are lively perceptions of the world, or we have ideas or thoughts, which are only secondary since our mind merely thinks of the impressions. All other ideas that the mind has are merely caused by the mind reflecting on the impressions through the use of such principles as resemblance, contiguity, and causation. On the face of it, the argument that the human person contains an underlying substrate or substance is already undermined. Hume has rejected such argument by castigating the propensity of reason to simulate images far beyond impressions or sensations. The results are mirages, which are held firm as true by sentimental attachment to them. For Hume, then, the soul or self is nothing short of fiction.

Nietzsche also rejects the view by appealing to aesthetics rather than epistemology. He developed his view by analyzing the Greek's deep appreciation for tragedy. In his first work, *The birth of tragedy*, Nietzsche recognizes two impulses that have significantly influenced arts: **Apollinian** and **Dionysian**. The **apollinian** impulse is a dreamlike energy, attributed to Apollo who is the "ruler of over the beautiful illusion of the inner world of fantasy" (Nietzsche 1992, sec 1, 35). This impulse is mirrored among plastic arts, sculpture and other imagist arts, which clearly manifest this inclination for beauty and order. Amid the cornucopia of dreamlike images, the apollonian impulse restrains these images for truth and beauty to emerge. And, this impulse allows us to manage our everyday life; at the same time, it includes "measured restraint" or "freedom from wilder emotions" (Ibid.). The **Dionysian** impulse is analogical to a form of intoxication—from Dionysius or Bacchus, the god of wine. If the apollonian impulse is characterized by truth, beauty, and order amid the reality of man's individuality, the **Dionysian** impulse manifests life's absurdity and dawns on man as he is awakened to the terror of existence. His individuality is thus effaced and "vanishes into complete forgetfulness" while life comes to him as flux beyond his control (Nietzsche , 36). For Nietzsche, the marriage of the two impulses gives birth to Greek tragedies, whereby the human being is reminded of his/her existence as tragedies contain the seeming ordinariness of human life filled with beauty and order and the rapture of absurdity of existence. The Greeks loved tragedies because they are reminded of their existence as both Apollonian and Dionysian. Unfortunately, this appreciation for art, for life, is ruined by Socratic

insistence on reason, the Apollonian, which paved the way for the conception of the soul. In this sense, the soul is just a creation.

I call these views that reject the existence of the soul as a *constructivist* perspective. There are of course different consequences of the two perspectives mentioned.

### **Technology as the making of the human person**

At this point, we may now go back and examine the different views of technology and their consequence for human beings.

The naïve conception of technology would fail when we put it under scrutiny. While we may insist that we are not determined by, say, our cellular phones, since we only use them for our purposes, we are in fact different as a cellular phone user compared to a non-user. For one, a person who doesn't have a cellular phone is an anachronism; he or she is a Jurassic entity living in a digital milieu. More importantly, we are changed, to put it mildly, with our use of the device. Some are, for example, restless—the day seems incomplete—when the cellular phone is forgotten, or some would have cellular phones as a companion to the pillow, rather than a lullaby to make them sleep. Or, as a worse reminder, let us imagine how life for the victims of sex scandals would be had they chosen Nokia 5110 over other cellular phones with multimedia applications.

Also, the metaphysical conception of technology is too limited to offer a profound understanding. Technology does not substantially determine human beings since they have a role in its design. That is why “any technology is non-neutral.... This means, minimally, that any invention will have some social and political consequence” (In Ihde 2007, 109 quoted in Selinger 2008, 122). In this regard, technology possesses certain values. Some devices embody certain values or prescribe certain actions to which human beings respond: the railings put by a security guard on a certain area of a mall, for example, tells one not to cross the area, despite that the device is merely made of two poles connected by a rope.

This possession of value, however, is not absolute. Technology may contain the so-called *black box*, that is, the technology may have some properties, which are unknown to the designer themselves but are only discovered or disclosed through the use of technology (Sismondo 2004, 97). As a consequence, we cannot absolutely say that we determine technology, or we are its masters.

This brings me to my thesis: technology as the making of the human person. On the one hand, it can be interpreted that human beings produce technology and that we are solely responsible for its emergence. This goes

without saying that without humans technology will not exist. This is, rather, too anthropocentric and is premised on the view that “if there are no humans, technology or objects will not exist”. The argument “if there are no objects or things, no humans will survive as well” can also be used. And, this is antinomy. But this is exactly the point when we interpret this argument: technology or things exist as humans exist. This view supports the other interpretation that human beings produce technology, and technology produces the human beings. In other words, human beings have no ontological priority over technology: the human person is a making of his/her own making. This entails a different conception of the human person in relation to technology: he/she is a construct.

Surely, the view that the human person is a construction is not at all new. Berger and Luckmann (1966, 189) argue that human reality is a “socially constructed reality”. Our understanding of human being is “socially constructed”; what will pass up for “soul” for one may not stand up for others’ acceptance. Thus, they write:

Humanness is socio-culturally variable. In other words, there is no human nature in the sense of a biologically fixed substratum determining the variability of socio-cultural formations. There is only human nature in the sense of anthropological constants (for example, world-openness and plasticity of instinctual structure) that delimit and permit man’s socio-cultural formations. But the specific shape into which this humanness is molded is determined by those socio-cultural formations and is relative to their numerous variations. While it is possible to say that man has nature, it is more significant to say that man constructs his own nature, or more simply, that man produces himself. (Berger and Luckmann 1966, 49)

Superficially, technology has made already the human person more than he/she can imagine. Each epoch of human existence is determined according to the technology human beings employed, thereby determining the quality of his existence or, bluntly, the type of human being he is. The Stone Age reminds one of man with his limited resource totally dependent on crude implements; his civilization was crude, then, as he was; or that the past half a century was the nuclear age; ours is a digital age, and more evidently so, the age of nanotechnology (Postman 1992, 22).

Further analysis, however, would lead us to this view. It would be entirely romantic when we hold on to the idea that who we are is especially

determined by our soul, self, or person. Despite evidences to the effect that our identity is constantly being altered by artifacts or technology surrounding us, we found romantic attachment to the thought that we are not changed. Media technology, for example, makes us rethink of relationships. How many of our friends in Friendster, Facebook, etc. are really our friends? Don't these social networking sites redefine our meaning of friendships? Does not virtual reality redefine the idea of death? When we do "burial online"?—Virtual communities have this practice of preparing burial to online friends... Whenever an online close friend—however close friendship can get—virtual friends have ready made virtual burial sites. Now, death means online virtual disappearance.

The existence of reproductive technology reinterprets our conception of a sexual act. If sexual activity then is thought only as an act of procreation, now with reproductive technology such view is challenged. Sex is narrowly viewed then because it seems whenever such occurs it will lead to a new entity. Contraceptive devices allow for a different conception of sex.

Even the notion of a traditional family composed of two parents of opposite sexes and an offspring may be challenged by technology as in the case of *in vitro fertilization* (IVF) coupled with surrogacy. Let's take an example of a wife who has an egg cell but is unable to bear a child and her husband who is equally potent. They may have a contract with another married woman who can act as a surrogate and bear a child for the duration of pregnancy up to the child's growth. Child-rearing values may be challenged this way since the child has now two mothers and two fathers.

Moreover, our conception of natural things, and by extension of our human nature, has already been changed: Who would even think that bioengineering would make us rethink that what is natural can also be artificial. Or, who would imagine that sexual reproduction can be asexual.

In the face of technology, we cannot really give ontological priority to human beings over artifacts or devices. Every being is an actant—to borrow Latour's term; because of that, every being is also irreducible, not even to the consciousness of humans.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, I have presented various ideas of technology and the human person. My arguments lead to the thought: technology as the making of the human person. With that let me go back to the anecdote. We might become frustrated in the face of technology, but we need to have a critical perspective of it since as we employ technology we also make



ourselves. We can only therefore discern our technological choices. Let me end this paper with a reminder from Michel Foucault:

As an archaeology of thought easily shows, man is an invention of recent date. And one perhaps nearing its end.

If those arrangements were to disappear as they appeared, if some event of which we can at the moment do no more than sense the possibility—without knowing either what its form will be or what it promises—were to cause them to crumble, as the ground of Classical thought did, at the end of the eighteenth century, then one can certainly wager that man would be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea (Foucault 1970, 387).

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