

ETHICS AND PRAXIOLOGY AS TECHNOLOGIES

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This is a progress report on a larger research project. The project consists in elucidating and evaluating the idea that moral philosophy and action theory are the two philosophical technologies.

This idea is less novel than it may seem, for ethics has traditionally been regarded as the practical branch of philosophy: the branch concerned with regulating human action in such a manner that its outcome benefits others. As for the inclusion of praxiology among the technologies, the only surprise is that it does not seem to have been realized before.

To explore the idea that ethics is a philosophical technology, let us start off by introducing a distinction between morals, scientific ethics, philosophical ethics, and metaethics.

Morals, or morality, is any system of moral rules prevailing in a given social group, or at least the body of such ideas that the group members pay lip service to. Examples: the norms of loyalty and reciprocity.

Since moral codes contribute to shaping social conduct, their study fits certain branches of factual science. These are psychology and anthropology—particularly their social halves—sociology, politology, and history. This motley collection of disciplines dealing with morals may be called scientific ethics. It is a strictly descriptive discipline: its findings are testable and thus more or less true. Examples: the empirical study of the moral code of basic scientists, and of the emergence of moral norms in human development and evolution.

By contrast, philosophical ethics is the branch of philosophy concerned with examining, proposing, inter-relating, systematizing, and evaluating moral rules, whether actually enforced in some social group or desirable. Examples: the deontological, utilitarian and agathonist moral philosophies. The union of scientific and philosophical ethics may be called the field of ethics. (See, e.g., Bunge, 1989.)

Finally, metaethics, or analytical ethics, is the branch of philosophy devoted to analyzing such key moral and ethical concepts as those of goodness, rightness, fairness, and moral code, as well as to examining the logical, semantical, epistemological, and ontological underpinnings and status of moral discourse and its relations to value theory, science, technology, and ideology. Examples: the problem of the existence of moral facts and corresponding truths, and the subject of this paper.

As for praxiology, or action theory, it is supposed to investigate the general concepts of individual and collective action, as well as the conditions of efficient action regardless of its moral value. (See, e.g., von Mises, 1949; Kotarbinski, 1965; Bunge, 1998a.) In this regard praxiology is nothing but the philosophical counterpart of management technology (usually called "management science"). Examples: the investigation of the means-goal (or input-output) relation in general terms, and the search for general principles of efficient action, such as that of "satisficing" (instead of maximizing).

Now, an action can be efficient and satisficing to its agent, yet morally defective for being selfish, just as it can be morally well motivated but inefficient or even counterproductive. This shows that ethics and praxiology should not be conducted in isolation from one another, as they usually are. Only the union of the two fields can tackle the problems surrounding the full legitimacy—both praxiological and moral—of action. One such problem is the design of the new behavior norms called for by the introduction of new practices or products that are bound to alter the everyday lives of many people, such as downsizing, the dismantling of the welfare state, info-addiction, and the globalization of junk culture.

Finally, technology will be taken to be the sector of human knowledge concerned with the design, repair, and maintenance of artificial systems and processes with the help of basic science and mathematics. (See, e.g., Bunge, 1985, Mitcham, 1994.) The systems and processes in question may be physical, chemical, organic, or social. Formal organizations qualify as artifacts along with machines and high yield grain. Likewise, management, healing, and teaching qualify as artificial processes along with steel lamination, construction, and computation.

We are now ready to examine the thesis of this paper. The reason for regarding philosophical ethics and praxiology as technologies and, indeed, *as the* philosophical technologies, is this. Technology is about designing and planning, maintaining and repairing. So are moral philosophy and praxiology. In fact, to face a moral or praxiological problem, to take responsibility for it, and to reflect on the means to solve it in the light of available knowledge and resources, may be regarded as a technological problem. Conversely, to face a technological problem in any depth necessitates invoking general praxiological concepts and principles. And to tackle a problem with social responsibility requires some ethical concepts and principles.

These commonalities between technology, ethics, and praxiology coexist along with salient differences. The most obvious difference between the philosophical and the strictly technical approaches to a practical issue is that the non-philosophical technologist is more interested in the particular than in the universal, and efficiency rather than morality. However, in recent times public opinion has started to exert some pressure on the technological community, exhorting it not to skirt the moral aspect of human action. Indeed, this is the point of the non-antiscience branch of the Green movement. The classing of moral philosophy and praxiology as technologies can only help push this sound tendency forward.

However, there are two additional differences between the philosophical technologies and the rest. The first is of an ontological kind: the philosophical technologies have a universal scope, whereas the others are regional or special. In other words, whereas ethics and praxiology cover the entire spectrum of human action, every particular technology is concerned with a particular kind of human/artifact interface.

The second difference is of an epistemological type: the philosophical technologies do not rest on laws, whereas the others do. Let me explain. Every technological rule, unlike the rules of thumb characteristic of the arts and crafts, is based on some scientific law. More precisely, any law with possible practical application is the basis for two technological rules: one that tells us what to do to attain a given goal, and the other that tells us what not to do in order to avoid a certain effect. (See Bunge, 1998b.)

Take, for example, the sociological law that the crime rate is a linear

function of the unemployment rate. This scientific law is the basis of two rules of social policy. One of the rules states: To decrease criminality, create jobs. The dual rule states: To increase criminality, disregard unemployment. (It might be thought that nobody uses this second law, but this impression is wrong. In fact, the legal crime industry, in particular the booming industries of the construction and management of jails, relies on the second rule, for it entails that politically profitable Wars on Crime should always take precedence over effective job creation programs.)

The peculiarity of technological rules is, then, that, far from being either conventional or sanctioned by practice alone, they are based on scientific laws. By contrast, the ethical and praxiological norms are, at least so far, not justified in the same manner. It is arguable that they are only justifiable by their consequences and by such high level principles as the Golden Rule, the utilitarian norm of the greatest happiness of the greatest number, or the agathonist maxim, "Enjoy life and help others live."

In sum, there are clear differences between the philosophical technologies and the others. Still, there are also important commonalities, since all are normative disciplines concerned with getting things done in optimal ways. The realization of such commonalities has at least two consequences, one for the classifying of technologies and the other for academic activities and, in particular, for the training of well-rounded technologists and philosophers.

The upshot for the classifying of technologies is this. We should add explicitly the twin branches of philosophical technology to the extant branches. The new list looks like this:

Physical technologies: e.g., mechanical, electrical, and mining engineering.

Chemical: industrial chemistry and chemical engineering.

Biological: e.g., agronomy and genetic engineering.

Biosocial: e.g., bioeconomics and normative epidemiology.

Social: e.g., management science and the law.

Epistemic: computer science and artificial intelligence (AI).

Philosophical: moral philosophy and praxiology.

The preceding should have the following impact on academic activities. First, philosophers should bridge ethics and praxiology to technology. In particular, they should realize that doing ethics or praxiology should not be idle speculation in an epistemic vacuum: doing the good or the right thing takes both knowledge and adequate resources in addition to good will.

Philosophers should also realize that fashionable technophobic and irrationalist philosophies—in particular, existentialism and hermeneutics—render students incapable of tackling the conceptual and moral problems posed by technological advancements; consequently, they render them incapable of taking part in rational debates over the right way to adjust those advancements to social needs, and to adjust society to those innovations.

The second practical consequence is that those responsible for the design of the curricula of schools of engineering, management, normative economics, law, city planning, social work, education, and other technologies, should realize that their students are not just expected to apply recipes; they must find new knowledge and tackle new issues armed with general principles of action and morals. Hence their courses of study should include some ethics and some praxiology.

Such inclusion would benefit both parties; it would sharpen the moral consciences and the social responsibilities of the students, and it would stimulate philosophers to climb down from their ivory towers to become better acquainted with the day-to-day philosophical perplexities of the people who, perhaps more than anyone else, design the future.

Let this suffice to outline the research project in question. If found worthy of being pursued, it should suggest that the project is broad and challenging enough to invite the formation of teams composed of both philosophers and technologists.

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