Pragmatism, Ethics, and Technology
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Pragmatist Ethics for a Technological Culture presents a variety of essays on a significant and timely issue. The plan of the book is thoughtful. It comprises nine major chapters, each followed by a brief commentary. The volume is divided into four parts: technology and ethics, the status of pragmatism, pragmatism and practices, and discourse ethics and deliberative democracy. In addition, the introductory and concluding chapters by the editors help to connect the various contributions. Moreover, these chapters sketch an interesting programmatic approach for dealing with the ethical problems of our technological culture. The only complaint one might have about the book's composition is the lack of a subject and name index.

In this essay, I will not present the usual summary review but instead offer some reflections on the three main concepts of the book (pragmatism, ethics and technology) and on the way these concepts have been explained, employed and related in the various contributions. My overall conclusion is that, although much can be learned from the book, it also falls short in some respects. The most important problem is that, appearances notwithstanding, the full significance of technology for our ethical problems is not being appropriately acknowledged.

Pragmatism

Let me start with a preliminary issue. As do most of the authors, I think that it is appropriate to speak of a pragmatist, instead of a merely pragmatic, approach to ethics. As I see it, a pragmatist approach requires the commitment to engage in discursive explanation and argumentation, while a pragmatic approach suggests that these more theoretical activities may be omitted. That is to say, as academics, pragmatic people should be pragmatists.

Quite a few contributors address the questions of how to define pragmatism and whom to include as pragmatist philosophers and ethicists. The editors' intention is to describe pragmatism in a broad way. Hence, they sometimes speak of a pragmatist "spirit.". They name five characteristics of this spirit: anti-skepticism, anti-foundationalism, anti-dualism, the priority of practice over theory, and an experimental attitude (Keulatz, *et al.* 2002, pp. 14-15; pp. 250-251). In this and the following section, I will briefly comment on each of these characteristics.

Among philosophers living in the 21st century the rejection of foundationalism and skepticism—be it in epistemology or in moral theory—is quite common. Finding and substantiating an indubitable foundation for our knowledge, norms and values is usually deemed to be as impossible as systematically and universally doubting everything we believe or desire. In this sense, almost all of us are pragmatists.

Sometimes however, further claims are advocated under the banners of anti-foundationalism or anti-skepticism. Thus, Tsjalling Swierstra (p. 224) and Hans Harbers (p. 143) mention universalism and foundationalism in the same breath and accordingly claim that pragmatists should reject all forms of universalism. Not all contributors subscribe to this claim, however. Bryan Norton, for example, holds the evolutionary-pragmatist view that what will prevail (that is, survive) in the long run must be right, both epistemically and ethically (pp. 185-186). This view clearly expresses a universal criterion of truth and rightness. Paul Thompson, to mention another example, endorses the more sophisticated account of Peirce, who links truth to a universal but counterfactual consensus, and extends this to a similarly defined notion of normative rightness in the sense of Habermas' and Apel's discourse ethics (pp. 202-204).

I think that these specific proposals of universal criteria are highly problematic. They presuppose that both our knowledge and our ethics will converge, either factually in the long run or counterfactually under certain ideal conditions. The basic problem, however, is that there simply is no good reason to expect the emergence of such a convergence, however long we may continue our inquiry or however ideal our discourse might be organized.[1] In his commentary paper, Henk van den Belt reaches a similar conclusion regarding Norton's brand of pragmatism which is primarily based on the work of the older American pragmatists. Van den Belt rightly concludes that Norton "fails to come to terms...with a situation of persistent scientific disagreement...or irresolvable value pluralism" (p. 194).

The same point can also be phrased as follows. The volume as a whole presents a variety of philosophers as pragmatists. Next to the classical American pragmatists Peirce, James and Dewey, we find Wittgenstein, Neurath, Habermas, Foucault, Rorty, MacIntyre, and Latour. Now, the above criticism of universalist evolutionary and discourse pragmatism is quite compatible with, for instance, the views of Wittgenstein, Foucault, Rorty, MacIntyre or Latour. What this shows is

that it does not make much sense to lump together the substantive views of modernist, postmodernist, and amodernist philosophies under the banner of a united pragmatism.

In the next section, I will come back to the question of universalism for the case of ethics. Here I would like to say a few words about another characteristic of pragmatism, namely its anti-dualism. This anti-dualism involves an opposition to a variety of dichotomies (p. 15). I will discuss only one of these, namely the dichotomy between theory and practice (which is mentioned as a separate characteristic on p. 250).

Many contributors emphasize the primacy of practice. Pragmatism, they say, is primarily oriented toward the solution of practical problems and/or the clarification of practical matters. From this perspective, the older pragmatists—in particular, James and Dewey—declared that philosophical theorizing should always be subservient to practice. More recent views—the later Wittgenstein, Foucault and Latour—are even more radical in that they explicitly deny the significance of philosophical theories and explanations. Both positions, however, achieve much less than the promised resolution of the claimed dichotomy between theory and practice. The older pragmatists merely reverse the philosophical hierarchy between theory and practice, which can hardly count as resolving the dichotomy. The problem with the more radical claim that philosophical theories and explanations are practically insignificant is that this claim itself lacks practical support.

Here are some counter-examples to this claim. Practicing scientists often hold philosophical views which may influence their scientific research in decisive ways. Thus, the scientific work of such physicists as Maxwell, Boltzmann, Pauli and Heisenberg shows a substantial impact of their philosophical views about a variety of ontological, epistemological and methodological subjects (De Regt 1996). Furthermore, people involved in technology policy debates, for example on the risk of nuclear power, often prove to endorse specific philosophical views, for instance on the objectivity of risk analysis versus the subjectivity of risk perception (Radder 1996, ch. 6). Finally, lawsuits about patent controversies may include theoretical-philosophical debates, for instance about the distinction between scientific discovery and technological invention (Radder 2004). I trust that these illustrations from scientific, technological and legal practices can be easily supplemented with many examples from other practices, including moral practices. Hence, a pragmatist approach should neither dismiss theory altogether

nor subordinate it to "merely" practical affairs.

The root of this problem, however, goes more deeply. The problem arises from the one-sided view of human beings as exclusively practice-oriented and the complementary neglect of the reflective side of human life. In thinking about this issue, two things should be kept in mind. First, as we have seen, significant theoretical-philosophical reflection can be found in many human practices and not just in professional philosophy and ethics. Second, the value of theoretical-philosophical reflection is not necessarily limited to the practices for which it has been invented in the first place.[2] Hence, a more truthful and more fruitful view should acknowledge the fact that theory, even metaphysical theory, may play a meaningful role within practices, while its meaning cannot be reduced to the specific practices in which it has thus far played this role.

Ethics

In their introductory chapter, the editors describe the pragmatist approach to ethics in the following manner.

> Pragmatist ethics...does not represent a radical break with the current practice of ethics, but does imply a number of interconnected changes of emphasis: from epistemology to methodology, from product to process and, above all, from justification to discovery (Keulatz, *et al.* 2002, p. 20).

This careful phrasing is, I think, a plausible rendering of how pragmatist ethics is actually being practiced. Consider, for example, the experimental attitude to moral problems, itemized by the editors as one of the main characteristics of a pragmatist approach. This attitude involves a willingness to develop and try out novel, morally relevant concepts, vocabularies and practices. The introduction and articulation of the concept of a pre-embryo in debates on in vitro fertilization, described in chapter 2 of the book, and the exploratory practices of the adaptive management movement for a sustainable environment, discussed in chapter 9, exemplify this experimental approach.

I suppose, however, that also pragmatist ethicists will not find just every experiment that could be performed permissible, and that they will accept certain limitations on the experimental approach. Schermer and Keulartz, for example, advocate an experimental attitude with respect to reproductive technologies, but

apparently this attitude should not be extended to experiments that would imply the commodification of children (p. 58). Analogously, Norton promotes an experimental approach to environmental problems, but he also insists that the use of experimental science in environmental management should be embedded within a (participatory) democracy (pp. 187-188). Apparently, democratic decisons may designate certain experiments as allowable and others as not allowable. Thus, these examples illustrate the general point that the advocacy of an experimental approach to moral issues involves a change of emphasis and not a license for normatively unconstrained experimentation.

In the preceding section, I criticized two universal criteria of truth and rightness. However, contrary to some of the contributors, I do not think that pragmatists should a priori ban each and every form of universality. With respect to this subject, it is crucial to distinguish three different issues.

The first is whether pragmatist ethicists should always refrain from making (moral) claims of a universal scope. I think the answer to this question should be a clear 'no'. In fact, quite a few examples of moral claims that are universal in scope can be found in the book. Thus, Michiel Korthals asserts that all animals deserve serious (but not equal) moral consideration (p. 138). Furthermore, in their account of the ethics of in vitro fertilization, Maartje Schermer and Jozef Keulartz apparently assume that all lesbians should be eligible for IVF treatment (p. 59). Clearly, one may accept some universal claims without being committed to a form of foundationalism.[3]

A second issue bears upon the distinction between the normative force and the factual acceptance of a claim. Making a moral statement of universal scope is not the same as asserting that it is being universally accepted, let alone stating that all people always act in accordance with the statement. Thus, while the first of the universal claims in the preceding paragraph may be widely (but probably not universally) agreed upon, the second will be much more questionable. Nevertheless, the distinction between normativity and acceptance remains important for blocking the reduction of norms to facts.[4]

In the book, such a reduction is implicit in Hans Harbers' commentary paper on how human beings (should) relate to different kinds of farm animals. In a more explicit way, Bryan Norton attempts to explain the concept of sustainability in terms of the evolutionary notion of survival. What he fails to notice, however, is that the norm of sustainability cannot be derived from the facts of evolution.

After all, the history of evolution shows both survival and extinction of species. Since nature at large does not care about the latter, the history of evolution provides no reason at all why human beings *should* strive for a sustainable future.[5]

The third issue with respect to universality in ethics adds a very important qualification to the first two. The existence of moral norms does make a difference in practice. Yet such norms, even if they are of universal scope and universally accepted, do not independently fix what we should do in concrete circumstances. One reason for this is the gap between the general description of the norm and the requirements of a particular case. All animals may deserve some moral consideration, but this does not yet tell us what this concretely means for our relationship to a particular animal in a specific situation. Another important reason that constrains the practical application of norms is the reality of moral dilemmas. This tragic aspect of the human condition is rightly stressed by Korthals, who also provides some illustrations from the domain of human-animal relationships (pp. 128-130). Another illustration may be found in the IVF case. Even if everybody agrees that all lesbians should be eligible for IVF, in particular cases there may be countervailing reasons for not acting according to this norm, such as age or a pre-existing medical condition.

Technology

Let us now turn to the third main concept of the book. Unfortunately, the book is least convincing when it comes to analyzing the significance of technology for a pragmatist ethics. To be sure, the editors do criticize the "technology-blindness of ethics" and recommend technology as a subject of sustained ethical consideration in its own right (pp. 5-6). In the same vein, some of the commentators emphasize the ethical relevance of technology. Thus, Peter-Paul Verbeek points to the technologically mediated character of human experience and the ethical significance of this mediation (pp. 120-123). A similar point is made by Rein de Wilde. He opposes the idea that technology is external to ethics, and hence he recommends that pragmatist ethics should enter the world of making and shaping technologies (pp. 243-244). In spite of these correct observations, it is striking that none of the major chapters of the book includes a comprehensive and thorough philosophical account of technology or even a thick description of specific technologies.

In addition, what *is* being said about technology is not always adequate. Thus,

Larry Hickman follows Dewey in defining technology as the study of our tools, habits and techniques and in claiming that technology is good in the same sense that biology and geology are good. Each of those disciplines helps us to find out things that we need to know and to do things that we determine to be worth doing (p. 30). He adds that when things go wrong this is not due to a presumed intrinsic badness of technology as such but to bad—that is: specific, uninformed and/or immoral—human choices.

Such a definition and valuation of technology is problematic for a variety of reasons (see, e.g., Radder 1996, chs. 6 & 7). First, seeing technology as the *logos* of *techne* tends to separate the theoretical study of tools from the investigation of the particular contexts in which the technologies have to be materially and socially realized. Next, a conception of technology as consisting of separate tools underexposes the systemic character of technology. It ignores the fact that, in actual practice, the different "tool*s*" have to be coordinated and integrated within a technological system in order to function properly (cf. Hughes 1983). Furthermore, the plausible alternative to the dystopian assessment of technology as intrinsically bad (the target of Hickman's criticism) is not its valuation as intrinsically good, but rather the insight that it makes no sense to value technology "as such" independently of its contexts of realization. Finally, ethical analyses and evaluations should not be limited to technological failures (p. 31). Successfully realizing particular technologies requires specific transformations of the natural, personal and socio-cultural world in which the people involved will have to live. Hence, a mature ethics of technology should also address the quality and normative desirability of this world.

Taking account of technology is also important in assessing the issue of the private or public nature of moral stances. Swierstra is right in criticizing the "privatization" of substantive moral views advocated by liberal ethicists (pp. 238-239). His arguments can be made much stronger, though, if we include the insights, first, that in our technological culture ethics and technology are intrinsically related, and, second, that the successful realization of technologies is an irreducibly public, and never a merely private, matter. A straightforward example can be found in Gerard de Vries' contribution (p. 162). Predictive medicine not only confronts individual people with new choices (of using or not using a particular medical technology), but it also brings with it new public practices which cannot be 'chosen' by individual people. Thus, being for or against genetic screening is not only a matter of private ethical principles, when insurance companies are allowed to make the acceptance of clients dependent on

their willingness to take such tests.

I would like to conclude these remarks on the relationship between ethics and technology with a caveat. Pragmatists correctly (but also somewhat trivially) claim that new technologies may engender novel moral problems. They are also right in that we may sometimes resolve moral issues through technological means. All this does not, however, imply that technological artifacts, *by themselves*, carry a *specific* normative or political weight. The latter claim may easily slide into the doctrine of technological determinism, which has been convincingly criticized over the last decades (see, e.g., Wyatt 1998). Thus, even the statement that "technological artifacts possess a written-in or built-in normativity" (p. 9) may be misleading. Think away the human context or imagine a radically different context, and the specific normativity of particular artifacts (for example, of the female contraceptive pill) will disappear or change accordingly.

In sum, a cogent pragmatist ethics for a technological culture requires not just appropriate reflection on pragmatism and ethics. If it aspires to be theoretically convincing and practically useful, it needs an equally appropriate philosophical account of technology.

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[1] In Radder (1988, ch. 2) I have shown this in detail for the case of   Habermas' discourse theory of truth. An additional drawback of the evolutionary-pragmatist view is that the notions of 'prevalence' and 'in the long run' are all too comfortably vague. Hence, in practice this view may lend itself too easily to a legitimization of the morally unacceptable idea that might is right.

[2] Cf. Swierstra's point of the transportability of moral vocabularies (Keularz 2002, pp. 225-227).

[3] The restriction to making universal *claims* is important, since attempts at justifying the universal validity of norms and values *per se* will unavoidably lead to foundationalism.

[4] For a sophisticated, non-reductionist account of the relationship between facts, norms and values, see Pels (2003, ch.4).

[5] For a more detailed criticism of evolutionary ethics, see Kirschenmann (2001, ch. 12).