

The Moral Status of Technical Artefacts

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The Moral Status of Technical Artefacts is a 13 chapter book discussing the morality of technology. It has a very interesting concept: can the influence of technology on human actions and decisions be considered morally good or bad, or is it the technology itself that has some moral value? Are technical artifacts (machine guns, electric chairs, nuclear bombs) just passive instruments to be used for good or bad or does their very existence actively shape the human condition? Another way of putting it is: are the morally positive (or negative) aspects of technology due to the way humans use it or the way technology affects human life? No clearer example of the latter is the ubiquitous use of cell phones in airplanes, classrooms, bus stops, and so on. The editors note that stories that stress the positive aspects of technology tend to praise humans for their astute use of technology while those stories stressing the negative aspects place blame on the device(s). So the issue is whether artefacts are particularly good or bad agents.

In the past, and traditionally thought, there was no issue. Only acts of agents, or agents themselves, would be considered morally good or bad. (I am leaving out the possibility that some sort of “god” determines anything.) The thing, artefact, used was inconsequential. In a way, this makes sense for we would have problems calling a stop sign good and a gun bad. But then, it is clear that technical artefacts do influence human behavior. (Hmmm. Here is a semi-automatic rifle, I need to make a statement, and I will go to the school and kill a bunch of kids and then myself. That will show them.)

So, if technical artefacts do affect actions, maybe they can be thought of as morally good or bad. But keep in mind that technical artefacts are things built by people for some purposes, or some ends, and these ends cannot be separated from the artefact.

List of the 13 chapters, done by a variety of authors, including some by the editors:

- 1 – Introduction
- 2 – Agency in humans and in artefacts: a contested discourse
- 3 – Towards a post-human intra-actional account of sociomaterial agency (and mortality)
- 4 – Which came first, the doer or the deed
- 5 – Some misunderstandings about moral significance of technology
- 6 – “Guns don't kill, people kill”: values in and/or around technologies
- 7 – Can technology embody values
- 8 – From moral agents to moral factors: the structural ethics approach
- 9 – Artefactual agency and artefactual moral agency
- 10 – Artefacts, agency, and action schemes
- 11 – Artefactual agents and their moral nature
- 12 – The good, the bad, the ugly. . .and the poor: instrumental and non-instrumental values of artefacts
- 13 – Values in chemistry and engineering

The chapters are condensed and references follow each. The book does not provide answers but rather a compilation of arguments (to me, both sides legitimate) on the morality of artefacts. For example, should some artefacts be destroyed because, by themselves, they are “bad” like ICBMs, nuclear power plants(?), and chemical weapons? Lots of people would agree. Similarly, do people kill people or do guns kill people? In a way, both are true.

The Moral Status of Technical Artefacts is a tough but great read. But it is an important book, for it gives insight as to the role of what we as engineers produce and how that is used, in a moral sense, by our customers.

Highly recommended.

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