

Comments on Rob Reuzel
*Doing by learning: the interactive
approach to ethics in TA*

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Summary of the issues at stake, the interactive approach proposed, and the justification given for this approach, followed by some comments on these issues, approach and justification.

Issues

- Value pluralism and moral uncertainty lie at the core of policy problems relating to technology
- How to accommodate value pluralism *and* support policy-making about (health)technology?
- Foundationalism in (bio)ethics makes no sense
- We have to live with moral issues but may try to escape from moral controversy

In the paper several issues are mentioned as a starting point for a discussion of the merits of an interactive approach to ethics in TA.

- (1) In political decision-making about the introduction of new technologies in society we will always find a pluralism of perspectives and values and also uncertainty about the normative implications of new technology.
- (2) How to accommodate value pluralism and at the same time support policy-making aiming at decisions about what should be considered the best option, for example in regard to new technologies in the field of newborn screening?
- (3) No foundationalism: no pre-given – Archimedean – starting point from which moral judgements can be validly deduced. The relevance and applicability of bio-ethical principles like autonomy and justice always will have to be negotiated, that is, there is no sphere of justice outside the context of actual debate.
- (4) We need not agree about moral issues, but when it comes to political decision-making we somehow should find means to close the debate, to escape from controversy.

Method

- Interactive technology assessment as a process of ‘vicarious’ (mediated) learning
- Elucidation of interpretative frames and underlying normative assumptions and identification of areas of agreement and disagreement (disclosive ethics)
- In process of interaction moral judgements may cohere: wide reflexive equilibrium

Justification

- Reflexive equilibrium as an attempt to produce coherence in an ordered triple of sets of beliefs: moral judgements, moral principles, relevant background knowledge
- No privileged status for any of these sets of beliefs: every set is open for revision
- Coherence should be newly established result of actual deliberation

On what grounds can this approach of reflexive equilibrium be considered as a legitimate response to the issues of value pluralism and moral uncertainty? When the proposed criteria are satisfied, the method provides us with an answer to the problem of *how to create support for policy-making and decision-making about new technologies without foundationalism*.

Discussion: the issues

- How to deal in policy processes with value pluralism and interaction between technology and ethics?
- Why not individual autonomy?

The issues of value pluralism and moral uncertainty in regard to new technology in society are clearly relevant for the theme of this workshop. The paper is interesting because it starts from the notion of a constant interaction between technology and ethics and tries to find both effective and legitimate ways to deal with this interaction in society.

But in (liberal) society there are also other ways to deal with value pluralism and moral uncertainty:

- (1) In terms of *individual autonomy* (newborn screening may again serve as an example).
- (2) Through *flexible design* of technologies thus offering different ways in which users may incorporate a particular technology in their own lives.
- (3) *Constructive technology assessment* as an approach which seeks to interfere in the design process in order to accommodate the design of new technologies to the needs, perspectives and values of prospective users.
- (4) *Materialisation of different values* in alternative technological systems, for example systems of foodproduction in relation to different 'foodstyles'.

The point is that we can think of a variety of strategies to deal with value pluralism and that it is not made clear in the paper why, for what kind of technologies, and in which contexts interactive TA might be the approach to be preferred.

Discussion: method

- TA in context of political decision-making about adoption of ready-made technology: both ‘technology’ and ‘society’ seem to be clearly defined
- What about technology and society in the making: wide reflexive equilibrium as a method for evaluation and design of the co-evolution of technology and society?

Interactive TA should take place, according to the paper, in a context of political decision-making about the adoption of ‘ready made’ technologies and thus is restricted to situations in which both *technology* and *society* can be readily defined as a source of concrete, even acute problems which demand timely action and concern real persons who can easily be identified.

However, the interaction between technology and ethics will often emerge in a situation in which technology and society are in the making, in which the question is at stake how technology and society might take shape in relation to each other and how we should evaluate the moral implications of potential outcomes of this process of co-evolution.

Processes of development and embedding of new technologies in society we may see as complex learning processes involving a great number of different issues:

- (1) Possibilities and characteristics of the technology
- (2) Users to be expected, and their preferences and values
- (3) Infrastructure needed for the provision of the new technology
- (4) Potential impacts of the new technology in society
- (5) Regulation which applies to, or which needs to be developed in response to the new technology
- (6) Wider issues of cultural acceptability

These learning processes do not take place independently of each other. We will see interaction and accommodation between these various processes and thus might use the approach of reflexive equilibrium not only as a support for political decision-making but also as a ‘tool’ for evaluation of the *quality of the learning processes which shape both technology and society*.

Discussion: justification

- What is the problem with foundationalist ethics: principle ethics is also aiming at coherence and reflexive equilibrium?
- Reflexive equilibrium: *coherence* between particular sets of beliefs or *agreement* between all parties involved?

Why not see attempts of individual ethicists to argue for the meaning and relevance of certain principles – like individual autonomy – in a particular case, situation or context as attempts to reach a reflexive equilibrium between principles, knowledge of the particular situation and moral judgements? Then, of course, reflexive equilibrium is established in the form of a specific *argumentation* whereas in the paper reflexive equilibrium is supposed to be the result of *deliberation* among those who will experience the consequences of a particular technology (policy). However agreement between all parties involved (in a process of interactive TA) does not necessarily imply coherence between particular sets of beliefs.