

# **Cultivating Humanity**

## *toward a non-humanist ethics of technology*

*Peter-Paul Verbeek*

### **1. Introduction**

Ever since the Enlightenment, ethics has had a humanist character. Not ‘the good life’ but the individual person now has a central place in it, taken as the fountainhead of moral decisions and practices. Yet, however much our high-technological culture is a product of the Enlightenment, this very culture also reveals the limits of the Enlightenment in ever more compelling ways. Not only have the ideals of manipulability and the positivist slant of Enlightenment thinking been mitigated substantially during the past decades, but also the humanist position that originated from it. The world in which we live, after all, is increasingly populated not only by human beings but also by technological artifacts that help to shape the ways we live our lives – technologies have come to mediate human practices and experiences in myriad ways (cf. Verbeek 2005a).

This technologically mediated character of our daily lives has important ethical implications. From an Enlightenment perspective, ethics is about the question of ‘how to act’ – and in our technological culture, this question is not answered exclusively by human beings. By helping to shape the experiences and practices of human beings, also technologies provide answers to this ethical question, albeit in a material way. Artifacts are ‘morally charged’; they mediate moral decisions, and play an important role in our moral agency (cf. Verbeek 2006b). A good example of such a ‘morally charged’ technology – which will function as a connecting thread through this article – is obstetric ultrasound. This technology has come to play a pervasive role in practices around pregnancy, especially in antenatal diagnostics and, consequently, in moral decisions regarding abortion. Decisions about abortion, after having had an ultrasound scan (and subsequent amniocentesis) showing that the unborn child is suffering from a serious disease, are not taken by human beings autonomously – as fountainheads of morality –

but in close interaction with technologies that open up specific interpretations and actions, and generate specific situations of choice.

Within the established frameworks of ethical theory, this moral role of technology is hard to conceptualize. Lacking intentions and freedom, objects can hardly have moral relevance, not to mention moral agency. Moreover, human behavior that is steered or provoked by technology cannot be called 'moral action'. In order to do justice to the moral relevance of technology, therefore, the humanist foundations of ethics need to be broadened. To be sure, this is not to deny the importance of humanism as an ideological movement, which has brought forth a set of values that of which the importance cannot be underestimated. The modernist metaphysics behind humanism, however, appears to be ever less suitable to understand what is happening around us. In their modernity critiques, authors like Bruno Latour (1993) and Martin Heidegger (1947; 1977) elaborated the thesis that the rigid separation of subject and object in modernist thinking makes it virtually impossible to see the many ways in which subjects and objects are actually interwoven. And taking into account this interwoven character is crucial to understand our technological culture, in which human decisions and practices increasingly get shape on the basis of the role technologies play in them.

Against the modern, Enlightened image of the autonomous moral subject, therefore, an amodern, heteronomous moral subject needs to be articulated whose actions are always closely interwoven with the material environment in which it plays itself out. In order to do this, I will engage in a discussion about a critique of humanism that has caused a great deal of controversy: Peter Sloterdijk's 'Rules for the Human Park' (*Regeln für den Menschenpark*, 1999). Sloterdijk's text is a reply to Heidegger's 'Letter on Humanism' (1947), which Heidegger wrote as an answer to the Frenchman Jean Beaufret. Beaufret asked Heidegger to clarify the relations between his philosophy and existentialism, which was rapidly gaining importance and which Sartre declared a form of humanism. Heidegger, however, did not take the side of Sartre – which could have helped him in his process of rehabilitation and denazification (cf. Safranski 1999) – but rather distanced himself radically from humanism, which, for him, was a too narrowly modernist approach to humanity. In 'Rules for the Human Park', Sloterdijk takes up this critique of

humanism, and radicalizes it in such a way that, fifty years after Heidegger's text, he came to be associated with the same fascism that Heidegger could not shake off.

In what follows I will join this discussion. This contribution can be read as an answer to Sloterdijk's 'reply letter on humanism'. In order to clear the path, I will first investigate the humanist character of contemporary ethics and its supporting modernist ontology. Second, I will elaborate the moral relevance of nonhuman reality, by discussing the mediating role of technology in moral practices and decisions. After this, I will engage in a discussion with Sloterdijk's 'posthumanist' position. I will dispel all associations with fascism from his approach, while using his critique of humanism as a basis for a non-modern approach to ethics, which does justice to nonhuman forms of morality and to the ways in which humans have to deal with them.

## **2. Humanism in ethics**

Humanism is surrounded by the same phenomenon as what Michel Foucault witnessed regarding the Enlightenment – there is a form of blackmail in it: whoever is not in favor of it, is against it (Foucault 1997). While criticizing the Enlightenment usually directly results in the suspicion to be hostile toward the rationalist world view and liberal democracy, criticizing humanism evokes the image of a barbarian form of misanthropy. Humanism embodies a number of values – like self-determination, integrity, pluriformity, and responsibility – that are fundamental to our culture in articulating human dignity and respect for human beings. Yet, these humanist values do not need to be jettisoned when criticizing humanism as a *metaphysical* position. And precisely this humanist metaphysics behind contemporary ethics needs to be overcome in order to include the moral dimension of objects and their mediation of the morality of subjects.

### *Humanism and Modernism*

Humanism is a very specific answer to the question of what it means to be a human being. As theorists like Bruno Latour and Martin Heidegger have shown, modernity can be characterized by the strict separation it makes between subjects and objects, between

humans and the reality in which they exist. Heidegger's work emphasizes how this modern separation of subject and object forms a radically new approach to reality. When humans understand themselves as subjects as opposed to a world of objects, they detach themselves from the network of self-evident relations which arises from their everyday occupations. Whoever reads a book, is engaged in a conversation, or prepares a meal, just to mention a few examples, does not direct oneself as a 'subject' toward some 'objects', but finds oneself in a web of relations in which humans and world are intertwined and give meaning to each other. To understand oneself as a subject facing objects, an explicit act of separation is needed. Humans are not self-evidently 'in' their world anymore here, but have a *relation* to it while being also distanced from it.

Heidegger emphasizes that the word 'subject' is derived from the Greek 'hypokeimenon', which he literally translates as "that which lies before", and "which, as ground, gathers everything onto itself" (Heidegger 1977). The modernist subject becomes the reference point for reality; real is only what is visible for the detached and objectifying gaze of the subject. For such a subject, the world becomes a picture, a representation of objects in a world 'out there', projected on the rear wall of the dark room of human consciousness. This is not to imply that the modernist metaphysics of subjects versus objects would not have any legitimacy. To the contrary; it is at the basis of modern science and has made possible a vast field of scientific research. But this modern 'world picture' should not be made absolute as the only one valid. The subject-object separation is only one of the possible configurations in the relations between humans and reality – only one specific way to think this relation, which emerged at a specific moment in time.

In his book *We Have Never Been Modern*, Bruno Latour (1993) interprets modernity in a closely related way. For him, modernity is a process of purifying subjects and objects. Whereas the everyday reality in which we live consists of a complex blend of subjects and objects – or 'humans' and 'nonhumans' as Latour calls them, in his nonmodern vocabulary – modernity proceeds as if subjects and objects would have a separate existence. The modernist metaphysics divides reality into a realm of subjects, which form the domain of the social sciences, and a realm of objects, with which the natural sciences occupy themselves. As a result, the vast variety of hybrid mixings of humans and nonhumans among which we live remains invisible. The ozone hole, for instance, is not

merely 'objective' or 'natural': it grants its existence to the human beings who make it visible, who might have caused it, and who represent in specific ways when discussing it. But it is not merely 'subjective' or 'social' either, because there does exist 'something' that is represented and exerts influence on our daily lives. The only adequate way to understand it is in terms of its hybrid character; it cannot be reduced to either objects or subjects, but needs to be understood in terms of their mutual relations. In Latour's words: "One could just as well imagine a battle with the naked bodies of the warriors on the one side, and a heap of armours and weapons on the other" (Latour 1997, 77 – translation PPV).

Latour indicates the rise of the modernist approach to reality as "the strange invention of an outside world" (Latour 1999, 3). Only when humans start to experience themselves as a consciousness separated from an outside world – as *res cogitans* versus *res extensa*, as Descartes articulated – the question of the certainty of knowledge about the world can become meaningful:

"Descartes was asking for absolute certainty from a brain-in-a-vat, a certainty that was not needed when the brain (or the mind) was firmly attached to its body and the body thoroughly involved in its normal ecology. (...) Only a mind put in the strangest position, looking at a world *from the inside out* and linked to the outside by nothing but the tenuous connection of the *gaze*, will throb in the constant fear of losing reality (...)" (Latour 1999, 4; emphasis by Latour).

By making humans and reality absolute – in the literal sense of the Latin 'absolvere' which means to 'untie' or to 'loosen up', modern thinking about the human can congeal into humanism, and modern thinking about reality into realism. In the world in which we live, however, humans and nonhumans cannot be had separately. Our reality is a web of relations between human and nonhuman entities that form ever new realities on the basis of ever new connections. In order to understand this reality, we need a symmetrical approach to humans and nonhumans, according to Latour, in which no a priori separation between both is made. The metaphysical position of humanism is by definition at odds with this principle of symmetry. In Latour's words:

“(…) [T]he human, as we now understand, cannot be grasped and saved unless that other part of itself, the share of things, is restored to it. So long as humanism is constructed through contrast with the object (…) neither the human nor the nonhuman can be understood” (Latour 1993, 136)

### *The humanist basis of ethics*

From their metaphysical and ontological analyses of modernity, Heidegger and Latour only sporadically draw conclusions regarding ethics. Yet, once reality has fallen apart in subjects with consciousness ‘within’ on the one hand, and mute objects in a world ‘out there’ on the other, this has direct implications for ethics. After all, ethics now suddenly has to be located in one of the two domains. And almost automatically, that domain is the one of the subject, which asks itself from a distance how to act in the world of objects. The core question of ethics then becomes ‘how should I act?’. Ethics is the exclusive affair of *res cogitans*, which considers judging and calculating to what extent its interventions in the outside world are morally right, without this world having any moral relevance in itself.

The development of modern ethics sharply reflects its modernist origins. Two principal approaches have developed, each centered round its own pole of the subject-object dichotomy. One, a *deontological* approach came into being, which focuses on the subject as a source of ethics; and two, a *consequentialist* approach came into being, which seeks to find grip in objectivity. Or, put in different words, while deontology directs itself at the ‘interior’ of the subject, consequentialism emphasizes the ‘outside’ reality. And in this way, both options are used that become possible on the basis of a metaphysics of subjects with consciousness ‘within’ versus objects in a world ‘out there’.

The way in which Immanuel Kant formulated the principles of deontological ethics preeminently embodies the inward movement of the modern subject. Ethics here is centered around the question of how the will of the subject can be subordinated to a universally valid law, while also kept ‘pure’, i.e. free from the influence of accidental circumstances in the outside world. Because of this urge to purify the subject, only reason

itself can provide something to go on, while any interference from the outside world must be rejected as pollutive. In Kant's own words:

From what has been said, it is clear that all moral conceptions have their seat and origin completely a priori in reason (...); that they cannot be obtained by abstraction from any empirical, and therefore merely contingent, knowledge; that it is just this purity of their origin that makes them worthy to serve as our supreme practical principle, and that just in proportion as we add anything empirical, we detract from their genuine influence and from the absolute value of actions. (Kant 1997, 60; trans. Thomas Kingsmill Abbott).<sup>1</sup>

In its striving for pure judgment the subject here isolates itself from reality and attempts to derive moral principles from the workings of its own thinking. From this approach, morality does not get shape in practices from which humans are involved with the reality in which they live, but in a solitary and inner process of autonomous judgment that may not be disturbed by the outside world.

Consequentialist ethics, on the other hand, does not seek to find grip in the pure will of the subject but in determining and assessing as objectively as possible the consequences of human actions. To be sure, consequentialism does pay attention to the *ways in which* moral assessments can be made – for instance in the distinction between act-utilitarianism, that balances the desirable and undesirable consequences of an action against each other, and rule-utilitarianism, that seeks to find rules that result in a predominance of desirable consequences over undesirable ones. But the primacy is with determining the value of the consequences of actions. In order to make a moral assessment, one needs to make an inventory, as complete as possible, of all consequences of the action involved and of the value of these consequences.

Several variants of consequentialist ethics have developed which all attempt to assess the value of consequences of actions in specific ways. They range from hedonist utilitarianism (which considers valuable what promotes happiness) and pluralist utilitarianism (which also recognizes other intrinsic values beside happiness) to preferential utilitarianism (which does not seek for intrinsic values but aims to meet the preferences of as many stakeholders as possible). All these variants share the ambition to

determine which action in the world ‘out there’ has the most desirable consequences for the people ‘out there’. They put effort in determining and assessing these consequences, in order to make a substantiated decision.

Each of these approaches in modern ethics therefore embodies one of both poles of the modernist subject-object dichotomy. In this way, they both represent a humanist ethical orientation in which humans are opposed as autonomous subjects to a world of objects. Both approaches take as their starting point a solitary human being that is either focused on the workings of its own subjective judgments, or on the objective consequences of its actions.

This humanist orientation radically differs from its predecessor: classical and medieval virtue ethics. Here, not the question of the right action was central but the question of the good life. This question does not depart from a separation of subject and object, but from the interwoven character of both. A good life, after all, does not only get shape on the basis of human decisions, but also on the basis of the world in which it plays itself out (De Vries 1999). The way in which we live is not only determined by moral decision-making but also by the manifold practices which connect us to the material world in which we live. This makes ethics not a matter of isolated subjects, but rather of connections between humans and the world in which they live.

Obstetric ultrasound, or antenatal diagnostics in a broad sense, can be an example here (cf. Verbeek 2006a). Ultrasound and amniocentesis make it possible determine to already during pregnancy if the unborn suffers from *spina bifida* or Down’s syndrome. The very availability of such tests determines to a large extent which moral questions are relevant or even which questions can be posed at all, in practices surrounding pregnancy. Moral questions regarding, for instance, aborting fetuses with congenital defects can only arise when these defects can be discovered and when abortion is an option at all, both from a technological and from a cultural-ethical point of view.

To a certain degree, the moral charge of antenatal diagnostic technology can be expressed in the vocabulary of humanist ethics. Questions like ‘is one allowed to abort a fetus with serious congenital defects?’ and ‘is one allowed to give life to a child while knowing that it will suffer severely?’ are entirely phrased in modern, action-ethical terms, just like the



more reflexive question ‘is it morally right to delegate to parents the moral responsibility to decide about the life of their unborn child on the basis of an estimation of risks?’. A closer analysis of these moral questions, however, directly jams the modernist purification machine. For if ultrasound indeed helps to determine which moral decisions human beings make, this immediately breaks the autonomy of the subject and also the purity of its will and its moral considerations. Not only do we then appear to have failed in keeping the outside world ‘out there’, but this world also appears to consist of more than ‘res extensa’. Ultrasound imaging ‘does’ something in this situation of choice; an ultrasound scanner is much more than a mute and passive object which is only used as an instrument to look into the womb.

Technology appears to be able to ‘act’ in the human world, albeit in a different way than humans do. By doing so, they painlessly cross the modernist border between subject and object. A humanist ethics, in Harbers’ words, departs from a ‘human monopoly on agency’ (Harbers 2005, 259). Because of this, it is not able to see the moral dimension of artifacts, which causes it to overlook an essential part of moral reality. In Latour’s words: “Modern humanists are reductionist because they seek to attribute action to a small number of powers, leaving the rest of the world with nothing but simple mute forces” (Latour 1993, 138). This is not to say, to be sure, that Latour thinks artifacts are *moral* agents. In fact, Latour seldomly addresses ethics (except in Latour 2002). Moreover, he always approaches agency as part of a network of relations, for which reason artifacts can never ‘have’ moral agency ‘in themselves’. Yet, this does not take away the fact that the ‘action’ of artifacts which Latour thematizes can actually have moral relevance. Artifacts, after all, do help to shape human actions and decisions. Only a non-humanist approach in ethics is able to address this moral relevance of nonhuman reality. But what could an ethical framework look like in which not only humans but also artifacts ‘act’ and in which the actions of human beings are not only the result of moral considerations but also of technological mediations?

### 3. Cultivating Humanity: Sloterdijk's escape from humanism

As a starting point for articulating a non-humanist approach to ethics I will critically discuss Peter Sloterdijk's highly contested but equally fascinating lecture *Regeln für den Menschenpark* ('Rules for the anthropic garden' – Sloterdijk 1999)<sup>2</sup>. This text was the focus of a fierce and vicious debate at the end of 1999, in which Sloterdijk was accused of national-socialist and eugenic sympathies. Sloterdijk flirted with what can be seen as one of the biggest taboos in post-war Germany: the *Übermensch*, the 'overman'. His text, therefore, is certainly not danger-free.

*Rules for the Anthropic Garden* – or *Rules for the Human Zoo*, as it has also been translated – is usually read as a text on biotechnology. But in fact, it was written as a critique of humanism. Sloterdijk's lecture is a sparkling and contrary answer to Martin Heidegger's *Letter on Humanism*. In this text, Heidegger distanced himself resolutely from the suggestion that his work could be seen, just like Sartre's existentialism, as a form of 'humanism' – however convenient this would have been for the rehabilitation of both his work and his person after the second world war. According to Heidegger, humanism entails a far too limited understanding of what it means to be human. Characteristic of humanism (also of its premodern variants), for Heidegger, is its approach to the human in terms of the animal: as *animal rationale* or *zoon logon echon* – an animal with speech and reason, or an animal with instincts that can and need to be controlled. Humanism, according to Heidegger, "thinks the human from *animalitas* and does not think toward *humanitas*." (Heidegger 1976, 323 – trans. PPV).

Heidegger, therefore, rejects humanism because it ultimately fixates humanity on its biological basis. A biological understanding of the human ignores the radical distinction between human and animal, which for Heidegger exists in the ability to think the being of beings. Heidegger does not want to think *humanitas* from the animal, and even less from Sartre's 'existence' which would precede 'essence', like matter being molded into a form. Heidegger thinks humanity in terms of ek-sistence: the 'being open' to an always historically determined understanding of what it means to 'be'. Elaborating what Heidegger means by this would fall way outside the scope of this article, but what matters here, is Heidegger's rejection of an understanding of humans as animals-with-added-

value. For it is precisely at this point that Sloterdijk turns Heidegger's argumentation upside down. Sloterdijk shares Heidegger's resistance against humanism, but, contrary to Heidegger, he does not elaborate his resistance into an *alternative* to the image of humans as 'animals with reason', but into a *radicalization* of this image. As opposed to the emphasis Heidegger puts on the lingual aspect of being human ("Language is the house of being" – Heidegger 1976, 313), Sloterdijk emphasizes the *bodily* aspect of the human. What it means to human, for him does not only get shape from language but also from corporality.

Sloterdijk shows that language has been the most important medium of humanism. Humanism has always made use of books, which he interprets as a kind of letters; they are written by people who are confident that their text will actually arrive somewhere and that people will actually be prepared to read it. For this reason, Sloterdijk states that behind all forms of humanism there is the 'communitarian phantasm' of a literary society, a 'reading group' (Sloterdijk 1999, 10). The literary character of our society, however, is rapidly decreasing – and therefore our society is also rapidly becoming post-humanist. To establish connections between people, letters cannot do anymore. We need "new media of political-cultural telecommunication" because "the friendship model of the literary society" has become obsolete (Sloterdijk 1999, 14).

The literary epistles of the humanists aimed to cultivate humans. Behind humanity, therefore, for Sloterdijk, hides the conviction that humans are "animals under the influence" and that they need to be exposed to the right kind of influences (Sloterdijk 1999, 17). But which media can take over the role of books? What can be appropriate to tame the human when humanism has failed? At this point, Sloterdijk takes a path that gave some German intellectuals cause to bring his work in connection with Nazism. Therefore this path needs to be trod carefully. I will briefly sketch the outlines of Sloterdijk's proposal, and after that I will make a counterproposal which makes his critique of Heidegger relevant for the ethics of technology in a broader sense than Sloterdijk himself did.

Sloterdijk develops the thought that Heidegger's approach systematically overlooks the biological condition of humanity. He elaborates the thought that Heidegger's analysis of

the *Lichtung*, the ‘open space’ where ‘being’ can manifest itself, ignores that this open space is no ‘ontological natural state’ but a place that humans actually have to enter, as physical beings. Being-in-the-world is only possible on the basis of coming-in-the-world, the biological and physical act of birth. This opens an entirely new space to understand what it means to be human, and what shapes our humanity. Not only lingual forces that ‘tame’ us are relevant then, but also physical and material forces that help to ‘breed’ us. Both aspects of shaping humanity are contained in the word ‘cultivation’. Human culture is both spiritual and material; it is the outcome of both ‘producing’ and ‘refining’, of ‘breeding’ and ‘civilization’. Not only the ‘lections’ of the humanists help to shape *humanitas* but also the ‘se-lections’ of the growers of humans that we have always been and that we will be ever more explicitly now that we have biotechnology (Sloterdijk 1999, 43). Because of the possibilities offered by new technologies, we cannot confine ourselves to disciplining humans. Inevitably the question will force itself upon us: which human beings will procreate, and which ones will not? This also lays bare a new social conflict: who are the breeders and who are the ones being bred? (Sloterdijk 1999, 44)

Nietzsche already pointed out that western culture has developed a smart combination of ethics and genetics, because of which it is no longer only the strongest that procreate, but rather those who are collectively weakened by an ethics of solidarity. We already have an implicit ethics of breeding, therefore. The question that Sloterdijk raises for the future is: what will this ethics look like when it needs to be made explicit in the biotechnological revolution? Humanity is suddenly facing the need to make political decisions about the properties of its own species (Sloterdijk 1999, 46). When comparing society to a zoological park – which is the metaphor that forces itself upon us when thinking in biological rather than lingual terms about humanity – the issue is not only to determine the rules we need to follow for ‘keeping’ ourselves in this park, but also the rules to arrange procreation and the growth of the population. The main question biotechnology raises is to what extent the humanist tradition will be able to guide us here. Classical texts often abandon us here. They are on shelves in archives, “as ‘poste restante’ which is not collected anymore (...), sent by authors of whom we cannot say anymore if they could still be our friends. Letters that cannot be delivered anymore stop to be sendings to possible friends – they change into archived objects. (...) All the signs are that the

archivists and filing clerks are the successors to the humanists” (Sloterdijk 1999, 55-56 – trans. PPV).

Especially because of its explicit references to Plato’s *Republic*, which I did not include in this discussion, Sloterdijk’s text was associated with the eugenic program of the Nazis. Against this interpretation, however, I propose to read Sloterdijk’s text as an attempt to face the ultimate consequences of the biotechnological revolution. Appealing to the archives of the tradition allows philosophers to comfortably position themselves outside of reality, and to simply refuse to discuss the breeding of humans. But as soon as the technologies to do this become an explicit part of society, the discussion Sloterdijk attempts to open becomes inevitable. Moreover, who sees with Nietzsche that also the predominant humanist approach of humanity has genetic consequences, has no argument to stand aloof from the posthumanist space opened by new technologies. Sloterdijk simply makes explicit the questions evoked by new technological possibilities, by placing them provocatively in front of us. He does not propose to design a specific transhuman entity, or to breed a specific variant of the human. He merely shows that the simple fact of our biological birth, added to our ability to alter our biological constitution, implies that the rules that have always organized our reproduction implicitly might have to be made explicit in the future and might ask for a reorientation.

With this article, however, I do not aim to contribute to the discussion about the biological future of *homo sapiens*. My interest here is the ethics of technology, and the question how to move beyond the humanist bias in ethics in order to make room for the moral relevance of technological artifacts. And for answering this question, the proposal to develop rules for the human zoo – however important it is – is the least interesting part of Sloterdijk’s discussion with Heidegger. Much more interesting is Sloterdijk’s ambition to think about ethics and technology beyond humanism. In Sloterdijk’s analysis it becomes clear how the biological and ‘material’ aspect of the human has been neglected in the humanist tradition, and how the media used by this tradition are losing their self-evident relevance. Precisely this ‘material’ turn in approaching humanity creates points of application for a nonhumanist ethics of technology. Not the ‘transhumanist’ development toward an enhanced version of *homo sapiens* is central then, but the ‘posthumanist’

development beyond humanism as a predominant way of understanding what it means to be human.

The most important contribution of Sloterdijk's text to the ethics of technology therefore consists in opening a nonmodern space to think about ethics. Precisely such a space is needed to escape from the humanist points of departure of contemporary ethics, and to make room for the moral relevance of nonhuman entities. By approaching human beings not only in terms of their being-in-the-world but also in terms of their coming-in-the-world, they do not only appear as 'subjects' but also as 'objects', not only as the *res cogitans* of their consciousness but also as the *res extensa* of their bodies with which they experience and act in the world. Such a posthumanist approach to the human is at least as important for understanding the everyday life of the *homo sapiens* we still are, as it is for the transhuman forms of life at which Sloterdijk primarily directs himself in this text.

#### **4. Humanities and posthumanities: new media for cultivating humanity**

In order to elaborate the contours of a posthumanist ethics, we need to bracket Sloterdijk's ideas about 'breeding' human beings, and focus again on 'taming' humanity. In *Rules for the Anthropic Garden*, Sloterdijk exclusively associates the activity of taming with the humanist tradition. Yet, his observation that the lingual media of humanism are getting ever more obsolete because of new technologies, does not necessarily justify the conclusion that we also need to replace the humanist 'taming' of humanity with a posthumanist 'breeding'. A non-humanist approach to humanity, which does not separate the 'objectivity' and 'subjectivity' of human beings, also reveals points of application for new forms of 'taming' that remain undiscussed in Sloterdijk's lecture.

In our technological culture, it has become clear that *humanitas* does not only get shape by the influence of ideas on our thinking, or by physical interventions in our biological constitution, but also by material arrangements of the technological environment in which we live. Humanity and ethics do not exclusively spring from the cerebral activities of a consciousness housed in a bodily vessel, but also from the practical activities in which human beings are involved as physical and conscious beings. By associating the 'taming' of *res cogitans* only with texts, and associating technology only with the 'breeding' of *res*

*extensa*, Sloterdijk ignores – at least in *Rules for the Anthropic Garden*<sup>3</sup> – how human beings, as *res extensa*, cannot only be bred, but are also being *tamed* by technology. If the lingual media of humanism have indeed become obsolete, as Sloterdijk observes, material media have taken their place. Beside the anthropotechnologies of writing and human engineering, there is a vast field of anthropotechnologies that need to be taken into account for understanding what it means to be human: the pile of technological artifacts that help to shape how we experience the world and live our lives, ranging from television sets and mobile phones to medical diagnostic devices and airplanes.

Again, obstetric ultrasound is a good example here. By the specific way in which this technology represents the unborn, it helps to shape a specific *practice* of dealing with uncertainties regarding the health of unborn children. This new practice has important implications for the moral considerations of expecting parents. First of all, ultrasound imaging disconnects the unborn from the body of its mother. It is made present as an individual person, as if it could exist apart from the woman in whose womb it is growing. As Ingrid Zechmeister put it, this creates a new ontological status for the fetus (Zechmeister 2001), in which it has a quasi-autonomous existence, rather than forming an organic unity with its mother. Secondly, obstetric ultrasound (re)presents the fetus in terms of medical norms. Ultrasound devices are programmed to measure specific dimensions of the fetal body, which are all indications of the unborn's health.

Because of the specific way in which ultrasound helps to shape how the unborn is experienced, new interpretations of pregnancy arise, and new practices of dealing with the risk of congenital defects. After all, the very possibility to determine already before a child is born if it suffers from a specific disease raises the question if this pregnancy should be continued<sup>4</sup>. This is not to say that ultrasound would only *stimulate* expecting parents to have an abortion when serious congenital defects are found. On the one hand, ultrasound imaging unmistakably has this effect, since an abortion can prevent suffering for both a seriously ill child and its parents. But on the other hand, ultrasound imaging also establishes an intimate relation between parents and their unborn child, which enhances their bonding and rather makes abortion more difficult. In both cases, though, the very possibility to have an ultrasound examination done constitutes an entirely new ethical practice. Also *not* having such an examination done is a moral decision now, since

this implies rejecting the possibility to spare an unborn child an incurable disease and possibly dead-end suffering. An ultrasound scan of an unborn child is never a neutral peek into the womb. It helps to constitute the unborn as a possible patient and its parents as decision-makers about the life of their unborn.

Ultrasound, therefore, is a non-lingual medium of morality; it 'tames' human beings in a material way. Ironically, in this example the 'taming' of humanity is also directly relevant to practices of 'breeding'. This immediately makes clear that Sloterdijk's work is not only relevant for analyzing wild scenario's of a transhuman future, but also for making visible how also the current everyday breeding practices of *homo sapiens* (which we still are) are thoroughly post-humanist in character. Moral decisions about pregnancy and abortion in many cases get shape in interaction with the ways in which ultrasound imaging makes visible the unborn child. Apparently, moral action cannot be understood here in terms of a radical separation of a human moral agent on the one hand, acting in a world of mute material objects on the other. Ultrasound imaging actively contributes to the coming about of moral actions and the moral considerations behind these actions. This example, therefore, shows that moral agency should not be seen as an exclusively human property; it is distributed over human beings and nonhuman entities. Moral action is a *practice* in which humans and nonhumans are intricately connected, generate moral questions, and help to answer them.

In these connections, not only is *res extensa* more active than the modernist approach makes visible, but also is *res cogitans* less autonomous. From a modernist orientation, it is impossible to classify an action induced by behavior-influencing technology as moral action. Who, for instance, slows down near a school because there is a speed bump on the road, shows steered behavior rather than acting morally and responsibly. The ultrasound example, however, shows that morality has a broader domain. Here, technology does not *impede* morality, but rather *constitutes* it. Ultrasound imaging organizes a situation of moral decision-making while also helping to shape the frameworks of interpretation on the basis of which decisions can be made. As soon as we see that morality is not an exclusively human affair, material 'interventions' in moral judgments of the subject are no pollutions of a 'pure will', but media of morality. To paraphrase Kant: ethics without subjects is blind, but without objects it is empty. In the pure space of subjectivity the



subject cannot encounter a world to find a moral relation to; as soon as this world is there, practices come into being that help to shape the moral space of the subject. Mediated action is not amoral, but rather the preeminent place where morality finds itself in our technological culture.

Sloterdijk's conclusion that the influence of the media of humanism is declining, therefore, does not need to imply that the 'taming' of humanity is about to be replaced by 'breeding'. Many more media appear to tame us than only the texts of humanism, and especially these new media need to be scrutinized: the technological artifacts that help to shape our daily lives. After all, the cohesion of the literary society in which humanity attempts to tame itself might be diminishing, but the attractiveness of the human park in which humanity attempts to breed itself in sophisticated ways is far from big enough yet to consider the literary society completely obsolete. Rather, the posthumanist and nonmodern space opened by Sloterdijk shows that this literary society has never been as literary as it thought. The texts that were written, read, interpreted and handed through have always been the product of concrete practices in which they were considered relevant and in which the humanity of humans got shape not only on the basis of their self-written texts but also of their self-created material environment in which these practices got shape. The human of modernist humanism has never existed.

## **5. Toward a non-humanist ethics**

How to augment the ethics of technology in such a way that we can include this post-humanist and amodern perspective? The most important prerequisite for such an expanded ethical perspective is the enlargement of the moral community so as to include also nonhuman entities and their connections to human beings. Only in this way, justice can be done to the observation that the medium of ethics is not only the language of subjects but also the materiality of objects. This implies a shift of ethics. Beside developing lingual frameworks for moral judgment, ethics then also consists in designing material infrastructures for morality. When matter is morally charged, after all, designing is the moral activity *par excellence*, but simply 'by other means'. Designers materialize morality. Ethics is no longer a matter of etheric reflection but also of practical

experiment, in which the subjective and the objective, the human and the nonhuman are interwoven.

From this interwoven character, two important lines of thought can be discerned in a posthumanist ethics: *designing* mediating technology (designing the human into the nonhuman) and *reflecting* on the moral role of things (making visible the human in the nonhuman). These two lines seem to reflect the modernist distinction between an actively reflecting subject and a passively designed world. But rather than reinforcing this distinction, a posthumanist ethics aims to think both poles together by focusing on their connections and interrelations.

### ***5.1 The ethics of design***

The insight that any technological artifact will inevitably play a mediating role in human experiences and practices makes designing a highly morally relevant activity. Rather than being merely functional instruments that help human beings to realize their intentions, technologies actively contribute to human interpretations and actions. In doing so, they help to shape not only the quality of our lives, but also the nature of our moral decisions and actions. The designers of these technologies, consequently, have the responsibility to help to shape these mediating roles in desirable ways. Instead of shying away from the implicit mediating roles of technologies, designers should make these roles explicit and incorporate them in their design activities.

This is not a self-evident thing to do, however. When the Dutch philosopher Hans Achterhuis proposed to start moralizing *technology*, rather than only *human beings*, he was immediately criticized for being a technocrat trying to undermine human freedom (Achterhuis 1995). After all, no democratic deliberation but technological intervention then determines human behavior. Yet, this criticism is too shallow to be adequate. After all, we saw that technologies inevitably mediate human experiences and practices – and this implies that it would rather be immoral to ignore this by focusing on the functionality of artifacts only. Human beings inevitably ‘tame’ themselves with the help of the material world they design themselves, to phrase it in Sloterdijkian terms. And once this is clear, it becomes impossible *not* to consider a responsible design of the material environment a

central task of ethics. After all, this would imply that the ethical charge of technologies is deliberately left an implicit byproduct of the work of designers. This would result in precisely the kind of technocracy that opponents of a ‘moralization of technology’ fear. From a nonhumanist perspective, therefore, explicitly designing mediating technologies is not the amoral activity it might seem to modernist eyes. It rather is the moral activity *par excellence*. When the modernist separation of human subjects and nonhuman objects is overcome, ethics can move beyond the fear that nonhuman objects will start to suffocate human subjects and direct its attention to the moral quality of associations of subjects and objects. In their activities, ethicists are not limited to choose between either language or matter – as Sloterdijk’s dilemma between ‘taming’ and ‘breeding’ suggests – but rather face the challenge to find an adequate language for making moral decisions about materiality and to inspire adequate designs that fit the moral considerations we express in language.

As I elaborated elsewhere (Verbeek 2006b), designers have two ways to take technological mediation into account. One, they can try to anticipate mediating roles of their designs, in order to make explicit what would otherwise have remained implicit and to assess if the resulting mediating roles are morally acceptable. Two, they can deliberately ‘inscribe’ or build in’ specific forms of mediation into a technological artifact.

Anticipating technological mediation is a highly complicated affair. The actual mediating role of technologies, after all, cannot be entirely reduced to the intentions of a designer. Technologies have to be interpreted and appropriated in order to be used, and in this process they can acquire different meanings and identities than intended in their design. Well-known examples are the telephone and the typewriter, which were intended to be aids for the hard of hearing and the visually impaired, but acquired different functionalities for a different group of users. Moreover, unintentional and unexpected forms of mediation can also arise when technologies are used in the way their designers intended. A good example is the revolving door which keeps out both cold air and wheelchair users. Technological mediations, therefore, are products of a complex interaction between designers, users, and technologies.

This implies that not only the *anticipation* of mediations is a complicated affair – requiring a sophisticated form of moral imagination, assisted by insights in the phenomenon of technological mediation – but also the explicit *design* of mediations. Actually, the metaphor of ‘inscribing’ morality suggests too much of a central steering role of the designer. Moralizing technology can never be the work of a ‘prime mover’ (cf. Smith, 2003), but comes down to establishing connections between three ‘agents’: the designer who shapes the technology and its intended mediating role; the user who interprets and appropriates the technology; and the artifact itself, which can give rise to ‘emergent’ mediations, which were not intended by the designer and cannot be reduced to unexpected interpretations of users either.

The technological ‘taming’ of humanity – to rephrase the activity of ‘moralizing technology’ in Sloterdijk’s terms – is therefore a thoroughly non-modern and non-humanist affair. It is not simply a matter of translating the moral beliefs of designers into material objects. Rather, it requires us to cross the boundary between humans and nonhumans. Ethics of technology can only be done by creating alliances between humans and nonhumans, and by taking seriously the specific contribution of each of these. Not only does the *medium* of ethics need to be expanded from language to materiality, but does the source of ethics need to shift from the decision-making processes of autonomous individuals to well-reflected and well-designed alliances of humans with nonhuman entities.

Such alliances, to be sure, do not necessarily aim at steering and controlling human behavior, as obviously ‘moralized’ technologies like speed bumps and tourniquets do. Beside such ‘coercive’ technologies, designers can also aim to develop ‘persuasive’ technologies that try to convince people to act in specific ways, and even ‘seductive’ technologies that entice users into specific actions. Such technologies rather seek an *interaction* with their users, not direct *intervention* in their behavior. The Dutch psychologist Cees Midden, e.g., has extensively investigated how devices that provide users with feedback can influence human behavior (e.g. Midden 2006), like washing machines that indicate how much energy and water they use per kilogram laundry, and ‘econometers’ in cars that show how energy-efficient one’s driving behavior is. Users

preserve the freedom to act as they think right, but are offered extra considerations which might lead them to change their behavior.

Another way in which technologies can effectuate their moral dimensions is by seducing people to act in specific ways. Here, not only the cognitive aspects of human action are addressed but also its less conscious components. In The Netherlands, for instance, the Eternally Yours Foundation has been working on what it calls ‘culturally durable product development’ (cf. Muis 2006). It has been looking for possibilities to design products that discourage their users to throw them away prematurely. This can be done, for instance, by making it better possible to repair or upgrade products. Many products cannot even be opened anymore: they are not closed with screws but sealed. More often, though, it is the visual appearance of products that makes people decide to throw them away; they do not like the product anymore because it looks worn out or obsolete, or they are simply tired of it. This can be prevented in many ways. For instance by avoiding product skins that age in an ugly way, like shiny polished chromium, and by using material age that tend to get more attractive when they age – wood and leather are obvious examples of such materials, but specific synthetics lend themselves to this purpose very well too. Or by letting the product wear out in surprising ways, like the couch designed by Sigrid Smits with an upholstery that reveals a beautiful and initially invisible stiched-in pattern by wearing out – a couch that renews itself by getting old.

## ***5.2 Ethics of use: Technology and Moral Subjectivity***<sup>5</sup>

A second, and equally important, constituent of a nonhumanist approach to ethics focuses on the technologically mediated character of the moral subject. Beside moralizing technological *objects*, an ethical approach that aims to overcome the subject-object dichotomy should also reflect morally on the technological mediation of the *subject*. As the example of obstetric ultrasound showed, an important aspect of the moral character of technologies consists in the ways they help to constitute specific relations between human beings and their environment, in which specific moral questions are generated or even answered. By isolating the unborn from the body of its mother, and by presenting it in

terms of medical norms, ultrasound constitutes the unborn as a possible patient and its parents as decision-makers about its life.

The nature and quality of such mediations are not only to be approached in terms of the design of the mediating technologies involved. The resulting mediation and its moral impact, after all, also depends on the ways the mediating technology is appropriated and taken into people's moral reflection. Addressing this active role of the subject, therefore, forms the necessary complement to enhancing technological design processes. In order to elaborate this, I need to bring in the work of yet another critic of humanism: Michel Foucault. Just like Heidegger and Sloterdijk, Foucault aims to overcome the limitations of humanism and its autonomous and isolated image of humanity. And the ethical analyses Foucault made in the final stage of his work are highly relevant for developing a non-humanist ethics of technology. His work makes it possible to approach technological mediation as precisely what is at stake in ethics, rather than as an alienating force which deprives agents of the autonomy that is needed to do ethics at all.

In the last two parts of his 'History of Sexuality', Foucault elaborates an unconventional approach to ethics (Foucault 1990, 1992). He develops the thought that ethics is not primarily about the question how to act or which imperatives to follow, but about how human beings constitute themselves as "subjects" of a moral code. And rather than aiming to develop a new moral code himself, Foucault investigates what these codes "do" to people and how humans "subject" themselves to it. For this, Foucault reverts to ethical approaches from classical Antiquity, where ethics was explicitly directed at constituting oneself as a specific subject. In fact, the very word "subject" suggestively brings to expression that ethics is not only a matter of being the "subject" of one's actions, but that this person also "subjects" him- or herself to a specific moral code. This "subject-ion" is where Foucault locates ethics.

Moral "subjection" has taken many shapes, with manifestations like the Kantian subject that aims to keep its intentions pure and assesses them in terms of the possibility to let them function as universal laws, or the utilitarian subject that aims to examine the consequences of its actions in order to attain a prevalence of positive outcomes over negative outcomes. The most interesting characteristic of *classical* ethical frameworks for

Foucault is, however, that they were *explicitly* directed at the constitution of moral *subjectivity*, rather than implicitly defining a moral subject by elaborating a specific way to determine the rightness of one's actions. Foucault showed, for instance, that in classical Antiquity sexuality was not organized via a moral code of imperatives and prohibitions, but primarily in terms of *styling*. Ethics consisted in dealing with one's sexual passions and drives in such a way that they did not *determine* the self but became the object of the activity of shaping one's subjectivity. The purpose of such activities was not to subordinate the passions to a code, but to *stylize* one's sexual behavior.

Foucault's views of ethics and sexuality are highly relevant for the ethics of technology. His ethical approach he elaborates connects the radically mediated character of the subject with the ability of the subject to relate itself to what mediates it. Not an autonomous subject is the pivot of ethics here, but a mediated subject that finds a relation to this mediation. And just like the ancient Greek and Romans did not deny or suppress the sexual passions, but rather acknowledged them and actively helped to shape them, people in our technological culture can develop a relation to the technological mediations that help to shape their subjectivity, by actively relating to and intervening in these mediations. In other words: from a Foucaultian perspective, the technologically mediated character of life in a technological culture does not need to be seen as a *threat* to the morality of the subject but rather forms a specific way in which the subject is *constituted*, and which can be morally addressed. The technologically mediated constitution of the subject is not a state of affairs we simply have to accept; it rather is the starting point for moral self-practices (cf. Dorrestijn 2004, 89–104).

Foucault's work, therefore, makes it possible to connect ethics with the phenomenon of technological mediation. Ethics of technology then consists in carefully assessing and experimenting with technological mediations, in order to explicitly help shape the way in which we are constituted as technologically mediated subjects. Ethics of technology is not a matter of juxtaposing the human activity of doing ethics and the nonhuman affordances of technologies that will affect human beings. It rather consists in linking the realms of the human and the nonhuman, by taking technological mediations seriously and actively 'styling' to how they affect us.

The example of ultrasound can, again, clarify what such experiments can entail. As we saw, ultrasound substantially contributes to the experience of expecting a child, by framing pregnancy in medical terms, and confronting expecting parents with a dilemma if their unborn appears to have a significant risk of a serious disease. Such dilemmas have a tragic dimension. As explained above, the risk–estimation offered by ultrasound can only be converted into certainty by having an amniocentesis done, which has a risk of provoking a miscarriage—and in many cases this risk is higher than the risk to have a child suffering from Down’s syndrome. Having antenatal ultrasound examinations done, therefore, inevitably implies the choice for a specific kind of subjectivity, in which humans are constituted as subjects that have to make decisions about the life of their unborn child, and in which obtaining certainty about the health condition of an unborn child is worth the price of losing a healthy unborn child.

From a Foucaultian perspective, the ethics of technology should direct itself at this technological mediation of subject constitution. By deliberately dealing with ultrasound imaging, after all, this subject constitution can be modified and refined. For instance, by only using ultrasound to determine the expected date of birth, while refusing further information about nuchal translucency or neural tube defects. Or by only using it to determine the risk of having a child with a specific disease, in order to be mentally and practically prepared for this, without exposing oneself to the risks of having an amniocentesis done. Or by actually having all tests done, as an explicit choice rather than a self-evident part of medical practices around pregnancy. Or by refusing ultrasound examinations at all, refusing to be made responsible for the (cf. Rapp 1998).

For answering the question of what kind of mediated subjects we want to be, to be sure, existing ethical frameworks like classical virtue ethics and modern deontological and utilitarian systems can continue to play an important role. Foucault’s thesis that all ethical systems imply a specific subject, after all, does not take away the fact that the frameworks that were handed down to us from the past can still prove to be valuable for dealing with the technological mediation of our subjectivity. Moral self–practices in a technological culture, in which human beings attempt to give a desirable shape to the technological mediation of their subjectivity, offer plenty of space for the virtue ethical pursuit of the good life, the deontological ambition to meet moral norms, and the



utilitarian goal to reach a preponderance of positive effects over negative effects.

Regarding the case of obstetric ultrasound again, parents can for instance choose to have their unborn child screened for diseases because the birth of a child with a serious disease can have very negative effects on the other children in the family. They can also refuse ultrasound screening, for instance on the basis of the norm that unborn life may not be terminated, or from the desire not to be brought in a position of having to make a decision about the life of one's unborn child.

In all of these cases, however, there is a deliberate shaping of the ways in which humans are being constituted as a moral subject, from the realization that technology plays a mediating role here too. Human beings are not fully autonomous in their subject constitution; they have to accept both the pregnancy and the possibility to have ultrasound screening done as a given fact. But they do have the freedom to let themselves be constituted as a specific subject—a subject that will have to decide about the life of its unborn child; a subject that orients itself on norms which exist separately from the situation in which they need to be applied; or a subject that wants to use the availability of a technological form of contact with unborn life for a careful assessment of all possible consequences of letting or letting a child be born with a serious disease.

## **CONCLUSION**

In order to take seriously the complex role of technology in our culture, the ethics of technology needs to move beyond the humanism that is implicit in most ethical theory, and to give also technological artifacts a central place in moral reflection. In order to make the social and cultural role of technologies more explicit, they should be approached as *res publica*, to use Latour's term; technologies are literally 'public things' (cf. Latour 2005). Just like Heidegger did in his text *Das Ding* (Heidegger 1951), Latour pointed out that the old German word 'ding' did not only mean 'material object' but also 'gathering place', or 'that which brings together'. 'Things' can be seen as entities that gather human and nonhuman entities around itself, as the focus of new practices and interpretations. From this approach, technological 'things' do not only mediate our existence, but are also places where these mediations are made explicit. Things gather

people around themselves; they are places where humans discuss the quality of the ways in which these things help to shape their lives.

This immediately makes clear that a posthumanist ethics does not need to abandon the traditional humanist values. To the contrary. The posthumanism I defend here to augment and criticize Sloterdijk does move beyond humanism, but not beyond the human. It simply gives a central place to the idea that the human can only exist in its relations to the nonhuman. Not the *human* is declared obsolete by this form of posthumanism, but *humanism* as an all too human approach of what it means to be a human being. In order to cultivate humanity, we need to take seriously how also technologies help to cultivate us. Only by approaching the human as more-than-human it becomes possible to adequately give shape to the respect for humanity the humanist tradition has rightly been defending for so long.

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## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> See: <http://philosophy.eserver.org/kant/metaphys-of-morals.txt>

<sup>2</sup> All translations of Sloterdijk's *Rules for the Anthropic Garden* are by the author of this article – PPV.

<sup>3</sup> Other works of Sloterdijk do pay attention to the (technologically) mediated character of humanity. His discussion of humanism in *Rules for the Anthropic Garden* could have benefited from including these earlier insights in order to develop a broader approach to the technological 'cultivation' of humanity.

<sup>4</sup> To be sure: in many cases an ultrasound examination does not provide enough certainty to make such a decision, since it only makes it possible to calculate a *risk* while certainty can only be provided by amniocentesis.

<sup>5</sup> This section incorporates fragments of my forthcoming article *The Material Ethics of Obstetric Ultrasound: A Postphenomenological Analysis*