

Panel Proposal: The Necessity of Critique I

Organizer: Darryl Cressman, Maastricht University

Back to Behind the Things Themselves! Coming to Grips with the Algorithmic Thing through Combining Postphenomenology and Critical Constructivism

Dr. Yoni Van Den Eede

Centre for Ethics and Humanism, Vrije Universiteit Brussel

In the debate between critical constructivism and postphenomenology, my stance has been that we need both, to perform different but interrelated tasks. Contemporary technological developments, i.e., the emergence of the *Algorithmic Thing*, make this even more pertinent. While postphenomenology looks at how perceptually, hermeneutically, praxically and morally technologies mediate a user's experience, critical constructivism rather focuses on how wider power (im)balances are implicated and ingrained in technologies' design and implementation.

Now, with developments toward more and more "algorithmic mediation," we see these two dimensions in fact coming together, getting fused *in the things*: things are turning into "more-than-objects"; a whole constellation of code, data and other components goes hiding right behind their perceptual appearance.

While approaches in ethics of AI and related domains amply investigate algorithmic structures, they often take a standpoint "above" the issue, not coming down to the basic level of day-to-day engagement. Yet when algorithm-mediated environments become the "new normal," how is it in the first instance possible to *notice* something going on behind the scenes? How does one even begin to criticize potential injustices, inequalities, biases and so on, when these do not even penetrate the screen of awareness? There are questions cut out for a framework in which critical constructivism and postphenomenology are *combined* in ways fit for researching the double-faced character of the Algorithmic Thing.

In this paper, I explore what such a framework should look like, finding a perhaps unexpected catalyst for the combinatory reaction in *object-oriented ontology*, and eventually aiming to revive the famous slogan of Husserl, but now suited to the era of algorithms: *Back to behind the things themselves!*

Bio

Yoni Van Den Eede is senior researcher and lecturer affiliated with the Centre for Ethics and Humanism at the Free University of Brussels (Vrije Universiteit Brussel). He is among others the author of *The Beauty of Detours: A Batesonian Philosophy of Technology* (SUNY Press, 2019) and *Amor Technologiae: Marshall McLuhan as Philosopher of Technology* (VUBPRESS, 2012), and co-editor of *Postphenomenology and Media* (Lexington, 2017).

All Watched Over by Machines of Loving Grace: Critical Theory of Technology and Democracy in the Smart City

Dr. Ryan Wittingslow

University of Groningen

Smart cities are urban areas that use data collection sensors to supply information that is then used to more efficiently manage assets and municipal resources. Thanks to the transformative power of information and communication technologies, smart cities purport to offer managers and bureaucrats a more harmonious and efficient means of reducing traffic, managing assets, and increasing public safety. Pilot programmes are already underway in a number of countries worldwide. It is a tempting prospect: the optimisation of urban space, seemingly unburdened by ideology or politics. In this presentation I argue that smart city technologies have the non-trivial potential to compromise the necessarily slow, methodical, and pluralistic processes that legitimate structures of democratic governance, unless designed and implemented with adequate deliberative oversight and critical attention. Consequently, rather than leaving these technologies in the hands of city managers and bureaucrats, they need to undergo what Feenberg calls a “democratic transformation from below” (2002, 17): a transformation whereby citizens bring these technologies under collective control, whilst simultaneously preserving the legitimacy of democratic systems.

Bio

Ryan Wittingslow is an assistant professor of aesthetics at the University of Groningen, and received his PhD in art history and philosophy from the University of Sydney in 2014. Most of his research sits at the intersection of aesthetics, philosophy of technology, and philosophy of design. He also has devastating opinions about art.

Beyond Efficiency: A Comparison Between Andrew Feenberg & Byung-Chul Han's Philosophy of Technology

Dr. Federica Buongiorno, TU Dresden, Germany

My aim in this paper is to compare Andrew Feenberg’s philosophy of technology with that of the Korean-born German philosopher Byung-Chul Han in order to show that, although their *diagnoses* about the contemporary social and political status of technological development may be similar, their *prognoses* about how to deal with it differ radically. I will develop my argumentation by showing that this substantial difference between the two is based on:

- (i) a different evaluation of modernity and, in particular, a different appraisal of both Michel Foucault’s and Karl Marx’s thought. While Feenberg suggests to reassess the notion of rationality in the light of critical theory, thereby re-interpreting Foucault and Marx’s notion of technology in the light of current societal development, Han assumes that Foucault’s disciplinarity paradigm holds for an outdated account of contemporary societies, which are now ruled by psychopolitics (a category that would also rule out any possible reference to critical theory nowadays—see Han’s *Psychopolitics*, 2017);
- (ii) an anti-essentialist stance about technology on Feenberg’s side, which results in a kind of constructivism that does not reduce the essence and function of technology to efficiency and which seeks to bind it to a dimension of meaningfulness; on the contrary, Han shares an essentialist view of technology which considers—in a fundamentally pessimistic way—efficiency and performance (*Leistung*) as the essence and goal of technology;
- (iii) a different political answer to technological challenges: democratizing technology is a realistic (and desirable) possibility in Feenberg’s view, while democracy has proved an

outdated model for Han, who promotes an ‘idiotistic’ stance that seems to share most of the limits of traditional individualism.

Bio

Federica Buongiorno (1985) is a “Habilitation” candidate at the Technische Universität Dresden (Germany): her research in the field of Philosophy of Technology aims at developing a phenomenological account of digital subjectivation practices (with special regard to lifelogging and QS practices). She received 2013 her Ph.D. from the University “Sapienza” of Rome with a dissertation focused on the precategorical thinking in Husserl’s early works. Her previous scientific experience include research activities at the Istituto Italiano per gli Studi Storici of Naples (2012-2013), at the Freie Universität Berlin (2014-2017) and at the Istituto Italiano per gli Studi Filosofici of Naples (2017). She collaborates as a member of the editorial boards with several philosophical journals (“Azimuth”, “Filosofia Italiana”, “Philosophy Study”), coordinates the philosophical book series *Umweg* (Inschibboleth edizioni) and works as translator for various publishing houses in Italy. She received 2017 the Italian “Habilitation” as associate professor for Theoretical philosophy.

Technology and the critical theory of the common good

Hans Radder, VU Amsterdam

The aim of this chapter is to develop a critical theory of the common good and apply it to technology. Section 1 addresses two major questions concerning theories: how they relate to reality and how to interpret the meaning of their central concepts. I provide an answer to these questions and I discuss the relation between theory and the world in the views of Habermas and Feenberg.

The second section starts with a brief review of the history of critical theories, with a focus on the problem of the normative justification of critique. The main aim of this section is to develop a critical theory of the common good. Its two basic ideas are: the nonlocality of the meaning of theoretical and value concepts (in the spirit of Marcuse) and a notion of public interests based on a substantial account of democracy.

The final section then defines the notion of technology and examines the implications of the critical theory of the common good for the case of technologies. I provide a detailed theoretical characterization of technologies and an analysis of their material and social realizability. I also discuss how this theory relates to Foucault’s later work and to Feenberg’s instrumentalization theory. Finally, the critique of technology is illustrated by a detailed analysis and assessment of the recent Dutch debate on a specific (digital) technology: the use of a so-called tracking app for the purpose of containing the corona virus and limiting its impact.

Bio

At the moment, I am professor emeritus and affiliated researcher in the Department of Philosophy at VU University Amsterdam. The subject of my teaching and research is the philosophy of science and technology, broadly conceived by substantially including socio-political and moral issues. I hold degrees in physics (BA and MSc.) and in philosophy (BA, MA and PhD). Major themes in my teaching and research are: scientific observation and experimentation, the historical, epistemological and ontological meaning

of concepts, scientific realism, metaphilosophical issues related to historical and sociological approaches to science and technology, the social and moral significance of science and technology, the commodification of science, and the alternative of science in the public interest and for the common good. My publications include the edited volume *The commodification of academic research: Science and the modern university* (2010) and the books *In and about the world* (1996), *The world observed/The world conceived* (2006), *The material realization of science: From Habermas to experimentation and referential realism* (2012), and *From commodification to the common good: Reconstructing science, technology, and society* (2019). The volume *Building bridges: Connecting science, technology and philosophy* (Essays presented to Hans Radder), edited by Henk de Regt and Chunglin Kwa (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 2014), includes discussion of a range of aspects of my work. For more about my work, see the full publication list and the list of lectures and presentations on my personal website <https://hans-radder.nl/>.