

The hermeneutic lemniscate as a technologically mediated account of interpretation

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Abstract

In this paper, we explore the interpretive implications of technology and argue that they have an explicitly moral dimension, forming the basis of moral actions and decisions. Because of these profound social and ethical implications, the interpretive or hermeneutic role of technology requires a framework that makes it possible to analyze it in detail. We will develop such a framework by connecting insights from philosophy of technology and hermeneutic theory and by using the example of IBM Watson, an AI-assisted decision-making technology in healthcare. We rely on the hermeneutics of Gadamer and the material hermeneutics of Ihde and Verbeek to expand the ‘hermeneutic circle’ of classical hermeneutics into a ‘hermeneutic lemniscate’, as a principle for understanding technologically mediated interpretation. The lemniscate principle, in its interconnected fluidity, shows how humans, technologies and their surrounding sociocultural world all actively participate in the formation of meaning. As such, the moral sense-making that we enact when making sense of technologies, also undergoes revision in the process of technological appropriation. Using the case of Watson, we show how technologies are hermeneutic mediators: they help to shape human interpretations of the world. By unraveling this human-technology dynamics, we believe, it becomes possible to analyze the hermeneutics of technology in more detail, and to develop a new account of the moral significance of technology.

Keywords: technological mediation, appropriation, hermeneutic lemniscate