Dr. Pak-Hang Wong

Beautifying Technological Mediation

Mediation theory promises another means of doing ethics by focusing on the ways technology mediates human experience and practice and foregrounding the necessity to think about morality with and through technology, thereby opening up the possibility to answer the questions of how we ought to act and live by (re)shaping our human-technology relations. More specifically, in elaborating the mediation theory's relevance to ethics, Verbeek identifies three steps for mediation theory to examine technology ethically, namely (i) to understand (and anticipate), and then (ii) to assess, and finally (iii) to design technological mediations. There is, however, sparse discussion on the quality of technological meditation in terms of the characteristics that make specific human-technology relations as 'right', 'good', 'appropriate', or 'preferable'. In a recent paper, de Boer et al. offer a weak and a strong reading of mediation theory and draw attention to the tension between mediation theory—either in the weak or strong reading—and normative assessment of technology, which is instructive to answering the questions about the evaluation of the quality of technological mediation. As they point out, the weak reading uses external, pre-defined normative standards to evaluate different forms and possibilities of technological mediations, thereby rendering the evaluation of technological mediation merely instrumental based on its efficacy and efficiency to achieve the external, pre-defined values. The strong reading, on the other hands, emphasises our (human) responsibility of self-making with and through technology in light of our existential concerns that continuously shape and are shaped by technology and, therefore, should not be normatively evaluated from outside. Unfortunately, it is unclear in the strong reading what are, or whether there are, normative criteria for evaluating our human-technology relations given the indeterminacy and open-endedness of self-making. I am concerned with the criteria to evaluate technological mediation normatively, which, I think, are important to the meditation theory insofar as it is an attempt to 'do ethics', i.e. it answers the questions how we ought to act and live with and through technology. I contend that the answer can and should go beyond instrumentality, i.e. efficacy and efficiency; and, my answer to evaluating the quality of technological mediation is beauty. Drawing primarily on Confucian philosophy, I offer an account of 'beauty' and defend the view that technological mediation can and should be evaluated aesthetically and that aesthetic evaluation of technological mediation is not issued from without and thus fitting to the strong reading. I shall also defend my view from the objection that 'beauty' can be co-opted by the powerful and therefore unsuitable as an ethical standard for evaluating technological mediation. In short, my goal is to argue for the ethical significance of beautiful technological mediation.