BOOK REVIEWS


In political decision making about technology, ethics nowadays seem to have been reduced to consequentialism. As we can no longer agree on virtues or duties, the only thing that remains is to conduct a technology assessment study into possible consequences of introducing a new technology, in many cases even further reduced to risk calculations, and then decide on the basis of the outcomes of that study. A poor ethical consideration indeed, particularly from a Christian point of view. Brock's book argues against this sort of ethics and pleads for a much richer approach. A welcome book in times of pragmatist politics concerning technological developments.

Brian Brock is a lecturer in moral and practical theology in the School of Divinity, History and Philosophy at King's College, University of Aberdeen, Scotland. He has a particular interest in technology-related issues, such as environmental questions, medicine and mass communication. _Christian Ethics in a Technological Age_ is his first book in the domain of ethics of technology. That is perhaps why he is not known that well in philosophy of technology circles. Yet, this book shows that Brock definitely has a message for this domain. Perhaps the fact that he is a relative outsider as a theologian, this gives him an advantage and the opportunity to raise issues that traditional engineering ethics tends to overlook. In the book, he does show, however, to be well acquainted with some important philosopher’s writings about technology. Chapters dedicated to Martin Heidegger, George Grant and Michel Foucault give evidence of the author’s broad orientation on the nature of technology and the ethical issues that are at stake. Other names, such as Albert Borgmann and Arnold Pacey get less attention, but do feature in Brock’s book. The only obvious one-sidedness of this book is the orientation on more analytically inspired philosophers of technology. Gives the themes that are addressed, one would perhaps also have expected some attention for important people like Andrew Feenberg and Don Ihde. But even with those names missing, the book has a lot to offer for those who are interested in seeing an alternative for a narrow consequentialist, technology assessment based ethics of technology.

From the very start, Brock leaves no doubt about his philosophical position. Brock is shamelessly ontological realist, methodological antireductionist, and epistemological anti-foundationalist. He rejects the claims of positivism, empiricism, social constructivism and moral relativism. Particularly the realist, anti-reductionist, and anti-relativist stances would certainly have appealed to Herman Dooyeweerd and the school of reformational philosophy in general. It is from this position that Brock has great difficulties with technology assessment as the primary basis for an ethics of technology. The anti-foundationalist stance functions when Brock denies ethical prescriptions to be derivable from basic ideas or doctrines. Later in the book, it seems Brock cannot always avoid
building upon certain basic ideas in the Bible and in theology, although he tries as much as possible to stick to his ideal of ethics as “the lived testing and encounter in which what is good and true is proved” (p. 5). This almost suggests a pragmatist approach and as such is difficult to combine with Brock’s other commitments, and it would seem to be that in the end, certain foundational ideas do play a role in the author’s ethical considerations.

It may seem an odd choice for a book on Christian ethics to start its philosophical orientation with Martin Heidegger. But Brock finds at least one good reason to do so: it was particularly Heidegger who in an early stage of philosophy of technology pointed out that technology is not primarily a set of neutral instruments that we can use as we want, but that it is a way of life, something that pervades our whole existence. This immediately makes clear why technology assessment alone can not be an adequate approach for developing a Christian ethics of technology: it deals with technology in an instrumental way and ignores the deep impact that technology has on the way we live. Brock uses the example of the invention of the clock. Since we have mechanical devices that tell us hours and minutes, our whole awareness of time has changed dramatically, and consequently also our way of living in time. Technology also constantly reminds of the materiality of reality, an awareness that much of ancient Greek thinking made us forget easily. Brock also sees a weakness in Heidegger’s philosophy in that he never made a serious effort to derive ethical consequences from his ontology.

Brock then turns to George Grant, a political philosopher, who continues Heidegger’s reflections on technology as a way of life and applies it to the way technology has changed under the influence of modern science. Science, according to Grant, is knowledge about the way things must be. Gravity is as it is and our research into it does not change that. Technology, on the contrary, is about the contingent, about what need not be as it is but can also be different. This fundamental difference is denied when technology becomes like science. A scientification of technology means that we think there is only one, necessarily optimal solution to a technological problem. This optimal solution can be found by reducing the problem to numbers, and then the computer enables us to find that solution. This approach fits well with a strive for control, instead of using technology to counteract suffering. Brock could have used the example of the current ‘human enhancement’ ideal: medicine in the service of making better (stronger, smarter, longer living) people rather than curing sick people. Brocks shows that for Grant this means a meager anthropology as a result of an assumed neutrality of technology. But again, Brock is disappointed when it comes to ethical consequences of these considerations. Grant does not get beyond a vague Platonic ideal of truth, beauty, justice and reverence. So Brock turns to his next point of orientation: Michel Foucault.

Brock describes how Foucault, in line with Heidegger, recognizes our tendency to see the world around us in the perspective of control and manipulability. He speaks of this as the ‘grammar’ of power and control. Brock adds to Foucault’s analysis the role of implicit norms and the importance of the promises of technology as a driving force behind technological developments.