THE VARIOUS AND SHIFTING POSITIONS OF THE PHILOSOPHER IN A TECNOLOGY CULTURE. A JANIC LOOK AT THE BI-ANNUAL CONFERENCE OF THE SOCIETY FOR PHILOSOPHY AND TECHNOLOGY

LAS DIFERENTES Y VARIABLES POSICIONES DEL FILÓSOFO EN UNA CULTURA TECNOLÓGICA. UNA PERSPECTIVA "JÁNICA" DEL CONGRESO BIANUAL DE LA SOCIEDAD PARA LA FILOSOFÍA Y LA TECNOLOGÍA

ANTONIO CALLEJA LÓPEZ
Universidad de Exeter, UK
acalleja@asu.edu

FEDERICA LUCIVERO
Universidad de Twente, Holanda
f.lucivero@utwente.nl

The SPT 2011 meeting

Walking around the University of North Texas (UNT) campus at noon in late May can be a very solitary experience. The academic semester is over and no students are around, the air is immobile under the burning sun and the university buildings seem abandoned. The atmosphere changes when one walks into the Environmental Education Science and Technology Building: a structure with a high ceiling and naturally lighted, which is the location of the department of Philosophy and Religion Studies, host this year of the 17th International Conference of the Society for Philosophy and Technology. Scholars from all over the world gathered there to attend this biennial conference, presented as "the leading international event devoted to the philosophical examination of technology."[1]

The event ran from May 26th through May 29th in the city of Denton, north of Dallas, Texas. Although the theme of SPT 2011 was "Technology and Security," the conference hosted a broad variety of interventions beyond the

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[1] https://spt2011.unt.edu/

main topic. The list of sessions or tracks gives an idea of the diversity of subjects matter: "Information, surveillance, and cyber security", "Environmental and agricultural security", "Terrorism, warfare, and emerging military technologies", but also "Development and globalization," "Technology, justice, and the good life," "Sustainable technologies, energy, and built environments," "Philosophy of engineering and design," "Ethics and technology," "Philosophy/history of technology," "Technology, gender, and culture," "Religion and technology," "Emerging and converging science and technology," and more. Such a multiplicity of themes attracted participants with different backgrounds. Besides philosophers, social scientists or historians, engineers, filmmakers, policy advisors, and military officers also attended as speakers or part of the audience.

Any attempt of providing an exhaustive review of such a large event would exceed the limits and purpose of this commentary. Instead, we want to devote this space to reflect on some questions concerning the present and future of Philosophy and Technology, questions that recurred in many formal and informal talks throughout the meeting. In that reflection we commend ourselves to the old Janus, Roman god of all beginnings and transitions, guardian of passages and processes, always looking backwards and forwards to what once was and what is to come.

Ex post assessment: some trends in philosophy of technology

As a start, we want to recall the retrospective glimpse at the meeting that appeared in the President's column of the SPT newsletter.[2] In there, after acknowledging the heterogeneity of topics and participants at the conference, Sven Ove Hansson outlines two interconnected trends in recent philosophical studies of technology. First, he points to the "closer attention to ongoing technological developments" displayed by many studies: detailed investigations of specific technologies appear as the basis for building-as well as for criticizing-philosophical theorizations on technology. Secondly, Ove Hansson stresses the growing interdisciplinary character of the analyses and collaborations that philosophers of technology undertake these days. Recurring to the example of other fields, such as philosophy of physics and medical ethics, he considers interactions and cooperation with professionals from other disciplines promising for the future of philosophical studies of technology.

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[2] http://www.spt.org/newsl2011-035-02.pdf

We see these two trends as developments of the so called "Empirical Turn" in philosophy of technology,[3] which carries along relevant challenges for the field. Unsurprisingly, debates around the present and future profile of philosophy of technology were frequent in Denton. These debates could be the mark of the traditional philosophical affinity for self-reflexivity, perhaps a result of the shaking of disciplinary identity resulting from interdisciplinary collaborations, it could also be just a normal thing to do in a professional meeting, a bias of the authors of this commentary, or maybe the result of still other causes. Be it one way or another, the truth is that the opening plenary panel of the conference focused on the future of Philosophy and Technology. We want to make some comments on this event. In so doing, we move from retrospective reflection on present trends in philosophy of technology towards the future that six investigators in the field foresee for it.

Ex ante visions: the future of philosophy of technology

This plenary panel, chaired by Luciano Floridi, editor-in-chief of the journal "Philosophy and Technology" was the grand start for the meeting. During a crowded plenary session, several senior researchers in philosophy of technology[4] were asked to elaborate in 5 minutes their ideas for the future of the field. This challenging and engaging format, inspired by the non-profit TED conferences,[5] doesn´t allow any time for digressions or disclaimers. The speakers have to go straight to the point of their "big" idea, and so they did.

Sven Ove-Hanson presented technology as a substantial component of the human condition, and affirmed that we cannot understand what is specifically human from the perspective of any philosophical domain if we abstract from the human-technology relation. As a corollary, he assigned to philosophers of technology the task of making technology present in the mainstream philosophical discourse (in philosophy of mind, bioethics, philosophy of science, etc.).

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[3] Achterhuis, H (2001).

[4] Luciano Floridi (moderator), Universities of Hertfordshire and Oxford, UK; Sven Ove Hansson, Royal Institute of Technology, Sweden; Peter-Paul Verbeek, University of Twente, NL; Peter Kroes, Delft University of Technology, NL; David Goldberg, University of Illinois, National University of Singapore, & Three Joy Associates, Inc.; Langdon Winner, Renssealer Polytechnic Institute, US; Diane Michelfelder, Macalester College, US.

[5] http://www.ted.com/pages/about.

Along the same lines, Peter Paul Verbeek suggested that understanding technology is necessary for understanding human beings. But an "anthropology of technology" is possible only if philosophers leave their armchair and go into the field to grasp and analyze specific techno-social systems. In this they can learn from the fellow scholars in Science and Technology Studies. However, Verbeek reminds us that this case-study and empirical approach should not prevent philosophers from addressing "big" questions.

Peter Kroes went further in connecting philosophy and empirical work. He pointed out that, while thinking through complex sociotechnical systems is necessary for designing better technologies, engineers lack the conceptual tools to do so. For Kroes, part of the future of philosophy is to contribute to a better understanding and modeling of those systems.

In line with Kroes and drawing from his experience in engineering education, David Golberg defended the idea that philosophers have the role of training and supporting the education of creative engineers and bringing them into a better understanding of the social context of their research.

Rather than contributions to engineering practice or education, Langdon Winner emphasized the critical role that philosophers could have in scaling down attitudes of techno-triumphalism, tied to narratives of prosperity, desirability, innovation and sustainability. Since these attitudes often end up in what he calls the "great fiasco" of technological stagnation and triviality, philosophy should help to dismantle these myths.

Finally, Diane Michelfelder posed the question of how might developments within information and communication technologies impact ethical capital-that is, the capacity to identify, reason about, and act where matters of moral import are concerned. Some of those developments arguably serve to diminish what is accidental and aleatory about human existence, eliminating factors that are key in building that capital, including resources of empathy and curiosity.

Challenges and boundaries of the Empirical Turn: philosophizing (in) the contemporary

Many of these "big ideas" align with the two trends discussed in the presidential ex post reflection on the meeting. Nevertheless, unlike what Ove Hansson´s brief assessment may suggest, closer proximity to technologies and interdisciplinary collaborations prove rather challenging and ambivalent as soon as one reflects on them, or better, as soon as ones tries to perform them. Let's comment first on the task of investigating specific technologies in detail. This kind of work makes

ever clearer that understanding science and technology -as STS has shown- implies more than examining ideas, theories, (hand)books, or reports. It requires approaching and thinking through technoscientific practices.[6] When the approach moves from observation and low interaction to collaboration, things get ever more complicated. To start with, the lack of scientific and technical expertise[7] in the specific domain of study sometimes represents the mark of a radical flaw in the philosopher, especially to the eyes of the experts.[8] In this context, the very process of building bridges across disciplines, avoiding gaps in knowledge, overcoming suspicions or dismissals, clarifying misunderstandings, dealing with value conflicts, negotiating authority, etc. is a process as problematic and emerging as many of the technologies under study.[9] Some paths after the Empirical Turn bring philosophers of technology into relationships that are not easy to figure out,[10] whose very possibility and profile is open, frequently on the verge of collapsing. We believe these few notes may be considered a brief index of the practical-empirical boundaries of the Empirical Turn.

But besides practical-empirical challenges for achieving understanding, original reflection and, potentially, influence on technical realities and processes, there exists the question regarding the ethical sphere too. By ethical sphere we refer not only to values and judgments, analyses and discourses about them, but

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[6] Pickering (1992).

[7] With "scientific or technical expertise" we refer here to "formal" or "certified" as well as to "informal" expertise: philosophers do not necessarily have an academic nor experiential background in the field they study. Beyond that, Collin and Evans (2002) have distinguished between "contributory" and "interactional" expertise. This distinction builds on the idea that somebody-such as a philosopher-might not have the expertise, formal or informal, for practically contributing to the area of study (say, nanotechnology or molecular medicine), yet they do hold a form of interactional expertise. This means that, through social interactions with contributory experts, they might become knowledgeable about the topic, communicate and ask pertinent questions on a specific technical or scientific domain, among other things. Collins, H.M. and R.J. Evans, (2002).

[8] We speak here from the viewpoint of our own experience as participants in the Socio-technical Integration Research Project. More information in "http://cns.asu.edu/stir/", see Calleja (2009) for a synthesis in Spanish.

[9] The challenges multiply for the philosopher as well as for the technical expert: since the lack of knowledge and the uncertainties surrounding a new technology are connatural to its emerging state, they haunt not only the former but the latter as well. This argument has been compellingly made in works such as Latour (1987) and Pickering (1995).

[10] This became particularly evident in the SPT post-conference workshop entitled Assessing the Broader Impacts of Science and Technology: Case Studies in Interdisciplinary Philosophy, in which one of us participated.

also to the profile and character of existence as such.[11] Strong and continuous interactions-not to say collaborations-with scientists and engineers put philosophers at risk of losing their outsider's viewpoint, their weird condition or foreign identity, so to say. This is a well studied issue among anthropologists and sociologists, yet philosophers do not have-as the former two do-a disciplinary reserve of methods, strategies, or reports of previous experiences to face this situation.[12] A clear possibility is, therefore, that of getting so close to technical processes, realities, logics or values as to start losing perspective, the position or ability needed for seeing and making visible what is visible.[13] There is a chance of abolishing the distance, the foreignness or independence necessary to notice or question the assumptions, principles or biases built-into technological processes and designs, entrenched in disciplinary knowledge and identities, and so on. To say it with an ancient adagio attributed to Empedocles: "Like is known by like." Approaching and understanding technoscience may require or make philosophers to be more like its practitioners. For this reason, philosophers will have to make themselves visible to avoid *looking like* technologists.

The possibility of philosophers becoming mere contributors to technoscience may be a matter of concern only to the extent that one expects them to embody a distinct ethos, to articulate alternative perspectives, or to pursue goals independent of those of the technologists they interact or collaborate with. Interestingly, after hearing the SPT roundup of big ideas and tasks attributed to philosophers of technology-not only in the panel commented on above but in the meeting more broadly-one may wonder what it ultimately means to philosophize today. Something to note on this regard is that the practical answer to that question may not rest only on the shoulders of philosophers. The study of R&D policies, information networks, new models of university,[14] and the like makes philosophers of technology especially aware of

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[11] Therefore, we are thinking here not only of authors such as Aristotle or Kant, but also others such as Heraclitus or Heidegger-especially when he interprets Heraclitus' aphorisms on the human *ethos*.

[12] This point has clear pedagogical implications for the existing curriculum philosophicum in academia.

[13] In this regard, Foucault's (1994) perspective is interesting: "For a long time one has known that the role of philosophy is not to discover what is hidden, but to make visible precisely what is visible, that is to say, to make evident what is so close, so immediate, so intimately linked to us, that because of that we do not perceive it. Whereas the role of science is to reveal what we do not see, the role of philosophy is to let us see what we see".

[14] Etzkowitz, H. et al. (2000).

the political economy of knowledge we live in, and, sometimes, live by. Philosophy-and philosophy of technology is a conspicuous example-is connected to technical and socio-economical logics as much as to any ethical imperative, and will be more so, to the extent that it endures as an academic discipline. Even if it does not, even if philosophy ends up disappearing from schools and curricula, asking the reflexive question of what it means to philosophize today brings us back into the sociotechnical world we inhabit, the world philosophy of technology is called to think and act in, to think and act upon. In this way, the questions emerging from philosophers' positions within interdisciplinary interactions and within the broader technological culture point not only towards the empirical-practical, but also towards the ethical boundaries of the Empirical Turn.

Conclusion

From SPT 2011, a figure of the philosopher emerges shifting and stretched between different positions: those of the detached scholar, the helpful adviser, the interdisciplinary team member, the translator, the critical voice, the mediator, the meditator, and more.[15] This variety of positions, the fact that many of them do not seem philosophical in character should be a cause for meditation. The hybridization and multiplication of identities-or rather the constitution of identity as multiplicities-is a condition shared with other ways of living in the contemporary. The philosopher is no exception on this regard. This multiplication is part of the texture of today's world and existence, but the Empirical Turn-exemplified in Ove Hansson's two trends and the big ideas mentioned above-seems to highlight that truth for philosophers of technology, making it a central experience for many in the field. This situation requires from them a recursive effort or tension to remain able to see and make visible what is visible, to think and act in and on the spaces they inhabit. Such a tension is an ethical condition for philosophy of technology to exist in the future. Any future

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[15] Recurring to Foucault (1984), the mode of the detached scholar can be connected to the classical figure of the "sage," one of the four figures of truth-speaking subjectivity that he finds in the ancient world. The role of advisor or even interdisciplinary team member may be connected to the figure of the "teacher-technician," while the position of critical voice could be tied to the figure of the "parrhesiast." We cannot go into much detail here, and will just stress the heterogeneous roots and realities of the positions that philosophers of technology are taking. We thank Anthony Stavrianakis and Chad Monfreda for their comments on earlier versions of this commentary.

existence seems, in turn, meaningless without a retrospective look into earlier identities and positions of the philosopher. A Janic sight is necessary because the task ahead is as old as philosophy itself: the task of figuring out, once again, what it means to see, to think, and to act, and how to do it.

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