On Technical Alterity

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Abstract

This commentary introduces the notion of “technical alterity” in order to address the following questions: is it possible that technical objects can become “others” in analogy to Levinas’ ethics and can this relation provide solutions for the subject in the Anthropocene? According to Levinas, the human subject’s only break from having to be itself is in the consumption and enjoyment of things. Objects constitute thus an “other” that can be consumed, i.e., appropriated and be made one’s own. But, in times of the Anthropocene, where the entanglement of human and non-human actors becomes increasingly obvious and intricate, and a question of survival for human beings in the face of the climate crisis, it is necessary to develop a relation with non-human actors that does not reduce them to mere means to an end. This ethical relation with technical objects relies upon an epistemic act, since technical objects precisely do not have a “face” in the Levinasian sense. Technical objects as “technical others” have therefore—in light of Simondon’s philosophy of technology—to be *invented*.

Keywords Technical alterity · Gilbert Simondon · Emmanuel Levinas · Technological humanism · Post-marxism

It is well known that one of the purposes of the use of digital technologies is to control the behavior and the desire of its users, a fact that has been summarized by Shoshana Zuboff as “surveillance capitalism” (Zuboff 2019), theorized in terms of post-marxist theory and/or psycho-analytic terms (e.g. Berardi 2017). Subjectivity in the Anthropocene means to be subjected to one’s own “compulsive consumerist behavior” (De Preester), facilitated by capitalism itself, and to be subjected to the increasing immediacy and inevitability of climate change. Simultaneously, the subjects in the Anthropocene—we—know that the consumerist behavior further fuels climate change. Helena De Preester asks in her article the important question why human subjects do not act differently in the Anthropocene.

Helena De Preester does not patronize the consumerist subject. She claims that we as subjects are well aware of the aporias we live, i.e., we know that our consumerist behavior

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has to change, but are seemingly unable to act differently. This inability to transform one's own behavior is according to De Preester due to the structure of subjectivity in the Anthropocene itself and cannot be overcome by knowledge. She provides a convincing argument in line with Flusser's conception of "the end of history," i.e., the opposition of alphabetic writing and digital writing, and Robert Pfaller's notions of "interpassivity" and "illusions without owners." She introduces this conception against McKenzie Wark and Bernard Stiegler, and also Flusser, who all presuppose an underlying "desire" of the subject "to elevate oneself and not to become enslaved to commodification." Yet, the wish to become a subject might itself be a modern myth, and commodification and consumption fulfill rather the desire of modern subjects of "not having to be oneself," i.e., to be able to flee the existential exposure of being a self, as Levinas points out (Levinas 1987).

While one could claim that the structure of human subjectivity has always remained the same, De Preester's analysis points to a specific problem which is, if not generated by, at least accelerated by digital technologies. The consumerist behavior becomes compulsive, i.e., negative tendencies and positive tendencies unite because of an unconscious conflict, namely, the desire to consume and the better knowledge of its negative effects. This vicious circle is echoed by technology, which further deepens the gap between action and thought: we do not understand ourselves and the technologies surrounding us any longer, while we are continuously acting and consuming within them—consumption seems to be the only possible act with technologies.

Instead of providing a criticism, I would like to provide a complementary perspective addressing the problem from the perspective of the technical object. I concentrate on the role of technology and its relation with the human subject. In order to do so, I introduce the conception of "technical alterity." Technical alterity crystallizes the following question: is it possible that technical objects can become "others" in analogy to Levinas' ethics and can this relation—even if it remains an ideal—provide solutions for the subject in the Anthropocene?

The structure of subjectivity as a triangular structure between knowledge, desire, and behavior is analogous to Levinas' conception of subjectivity. The tragedy of human existence is that the subject has to be itself and has to face the "there is" (*il y a*), i.e., the overwhelming presence of being, in phenomena such as insomnia, boredom, or the anticipation of death (Levinas 1998). This is also the reason why the subject is compelled to consume. The subject's only break from itself is in the consumption and enjoyment of things. The encounter of objects constitutes thus a first form of experience with an "other." Yet, this otherness is of a specific kind: it can be consumed, i.e., appropriated and be made one's own.

This is also the reason why the subject is always falling back on itself. Once a good is consumed, it cannot provide the satisfaction anymore to distance the subject from itself. The subject is no longer "in the moment" of consumption, it is no longer with the things, but falls back and has to suffer its own being. This structure of the consuming subject also holds for acts of knowledge. Here, objects are appropriated to explain causal relations or to consider them in light of one's own subjectivity, i.e., to be able to handle them.¹

¹ "It is an ecstatic existence—being outside oneself—but limited by the object. This relationship with an object can be characterized by enjoyment [*jouissance*]. All enjoyment is a way of being, but also a sensation—that is, light and knowledge. It is the absorption of the object, but also distance with regard to it." (Levinas 1987, 63).

Yet, there is an “other” that cannot be consumed, even though it is desired. It is the face of the other, which evades the structure of consumption, but presents an *aporia* in itself. Even if we try to dominate and to consume the other, its existence as other that has possibilities to consume, to act and also has to be itself, resists our attempts of consumption. It exceeds all forms of knowledge and provides the experience of “infinity” (Levinas 1979).

This “other” of Levinas is typically considered as a human being and within Levinasian terms it might be difficult to construct a technical other.² But, in times of the Anthropocene, where the entanglement of human and non-human actors becomes increasingly obvious and intricate, would it not be necessary to develop a relation with non-human actors analogous to this relation? And, more importantly, can this relation go beyond a mere relation of knowledge?

Technical objects differ essentially from human or living others, they are the results of inventions and are not living beings. They, therefore, remain on a different ontological plane. However, while keeping this distinction between animate and non-animate beings, Gilbert Simondon provides a model of how to relate to technical objects as others. His philosophy attempts, as he states in the very first passage of *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects* (Simondon 2017), to play an analogous role for the technical object as philosophy has played in the abolition of slavery and the affirmation of the value of a person as such. Technical objects have to be conceived as carriers of sense and as expressions of life:

Even if the techniques had neither utility nor goal, they would have a *sense*: they are within the human species the most concrete mode of the power to evolve. They express life. (Simondon 2014, 321)³

The participation *in* and expression *of* life provides the means to consider technical objects as “others” of a specific kind. Simondon attempts to conceive of technical objects in their genesis, i.e., in their inherent—and to a certain extent—autonomous becoming. To free technical objects means to liberate them from the constraints of commodification and to grasp their specific mode of existence, i.e., to affirm their being as “other.” While it is true that contemporary digital technologies are (ab)used to exert power and control and to steer the consumerist behavior, i.e., that “technology may have never before echoed this ambivalent core of subjectivity so strongly” (De Preester), it is also accurate that contemporary technical objects, algorithms and technical infrastructure are based upon an “ontology of power” instead of an “ontology of potency” (Berardi 2017). Technical objects are thus built to control, but can technology also be part of an open, creative relationship with nature?

The potential of most technical objects to become an “other” in the strong sense is hidden, since technical objects are perceived and constructed either as commodities or means to an end, i.e., they are “social objects [...] in which the user presents himself” (Simondon 2009, 23). This user is already anticipated in the production of the technical object as commodity and a distance between the act of production and the act of usage is introduced,

² I am very well aware that one of the problems a further analysis of “technical alterity” would face is how time is conceived. While Levinas is very clear that the “other is the future” (Levinas 1987, 77), i.e., the impossibility to grasp the future provides a phenomenon of otherness, Simondon holds—as Bergson—that anticipation of the future is an essential function of the living being (Simondon 2005, 282). I am nevertheless convinced that a more detailed discussion of the alterity of technology will be fruitful.

³ All quotes, except Simondon 2009, are translations by the author of the French editions cited in the bibliography.

allowing merely social, inessential norms to enter the technical object (Simondon 2009, 23f.).

This contrast is mirrored in the structure of technical objects. They consist, according to Simondon, of three different layers each corresponding to a specific relation with the technical object: An external layer (*couche externe*), intermediary layer (*couche intermédiaire*), and an internal layer (*couche interne*). The external layer signifies a mere semantic relationship between the human being and the objects. The intermediary layer mediates between this technicity and the application of a user. It is, as Simondon puts it, halfway “technical” and halfway “semantic.” Only the internal layer is the truly technical one, where “a direct and immediate adequacy between the act of invention and the created object is realized” (Simondon 2008, 167).

This structure of the technical object enables a complementary perspective to the description of subjectivity in the Anthropocene. The subject addresses technology merely on the external and the intermediary layer. Here, social and psycho-social values are introduced to technical objects and transform them into mere commodities. The technical nucleus, however, provides the stability for the other layers to exist. The intermediary and the external layer develop as parasites of the technical essence (Simondon 2008, 167). Without it, a technical object could neither be used nor sold.

The specific mode of existence of technical objects relates back to their participation in life. Neither commodity nor mere usage signify the specificity of the technical. Technical objects instigate—as expressions of life—specific and new relations with nature. This specificity is the condition of possibility to entertain a symmetrical relation with the technical object as “other.” It requires an epistemological and simultaneously ethical act.

The “otherness” of the technical object is an operational one: a mental operation was crystallized into concrete structures. This analogy between the human sphere and the technical sphere has to be realized in order to conceive technical objects in their own right. Simondon calls therefore for a reformation not only of our attitude towards technical objects, but also of the process of production itself:

If the technical object is corrupting and alienating, it is so, because it was built to provoke fierce motivations: it creates needs, since the constructor charged it with secondary, inessential, venal, social aspects, addressed at the most corruptible part of the user. [...] A purifying psychoanalysis of the technical object does, however, not suffice. It has to be accompanied by a constructive work of anthropo-technology, which aims at making technical schemes cultural content and to make technology the equivalent of symbolic logic or aesthetics. This perspective finds all of its significance when the technical object is no longer considered as mere utensil, a thing to use, of utility, pure means to an end [...], but rather as condensed human effort [...] being virtually available, potential action. To do so, not only our point of view has to be reformed in order to be purified, but also the technical operation has to be reformed: it has to aim at the constitution of an open, perfectible and neotenic object, i.e., a depository of evolutive potential. In this sense, being a depository of a human reality, a human companion and not a mere thing or pure object, free relation with him/her though linked to him/her, it augments the density of the field of human activity: it is really like a social being and does not constitute a supplement of the society and of the power to act: it is the couple of human-machine which is the concrete ensemble. (Simondon 2014, 364f.)

The openness to change and transformation is not only an ontological feature of life but also an ethical criterion. Each period has to invent and search for new ways to open closed systems. This does not mean that it happens automatically, following an Hegelian logic, but that an ethical attitude towards human and non-human actors is the result of a philosophical effort. Simondon calls this effort an encyclopedic spirit, which leads to a new humanism:

To be encyclopedist is to define humans by their operation and not their structure. It means to refuse to consider the human as enclosed in a fixed state, which binds it to a power other than itself. It means the will to liberate the human of all alienation, since alienation is the inherence of a being to an insatiable structure, which chains it to and necessitates its actions. To replace the transcendental status with a contract of immanence, relating humans to their equal, means to escape the *fatum* of individual solitude in order to lead the being to discover its participation in the open human adventure. To prefer the operational to the structural order, the method to the system, that means to found the universal humanism. (Simondon 2016, 121)

This new, universal humanism is based upon Simondon's ontology. It is crucial to understand that the contract of immanence that relates human beings to their equal, means not only to relate human beings amongst each other, but also to liberate any being from the constraints of totalitarianism. This holds equally for human-animal relations as it holds for the relations that human beings entertain with the technical world. As Xavier Guchet and Jean-Hugues Barthélémy suggest, Simondon is aiming at a "technological humanism" (Guchet 2010; Barthélémy, 2010).

Yet, this "new humanism" still hinges upon the ontological presupposition that human beings are problem-solving beings that need and want to make sense of the world. My argument is therefore in line with Flusser, Stiegler and McKenzie Wark, who all seemingly assume an underlying, ontological striving of the subject to go beyond itself. Yet, this striving cannot only be directed at the human subject itself; it should also be directed at technical objects. It might allow to establish new relations of otherness, with new, open technical objects. One might object that this ethical relation with technical objects cannot be magically established, but rather relies upon an epistemic act, since technical objects precisely do not have a "face" in the Levinasian sense. But what could it mean to have a face for the technical object? Having a "face" cannot mean to reduce technical objects to the image, i.e., the face, of their creators. Already the famous study of Mori, coining the term "uncanny valley" (Mori 2012), showed that the "otherness" in its ethical sense is lost, if technical objects (e.g., robots) resemble too much the human being. Inventing or creating a "face" does not mean to create a mask. The analogy to the Levinasian "face" would be for the technical object in Simondonian terms its operational mode. This operational mode is also, as Simondon stresses, an expression of life. The epistemic act has therefore, in order to acknowledge the otherness of the technical object, to grasp the inherent vital normativity of the technical object. Or, in other words, if the ethical otherness is not given in the phenomenological immediacy of the "face", then it has to be *invented*.

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