

Lay summary Verbeek (016.140)

Despite its explosive growth over the past decades, the philosophy of technology is still in need of a comprehensive empirical-philosophical theory of technology. The objective of this project is to develop such a theory: a theory of technological mediation.

Building such a theory is a radical new step in the development of the 'postphenomenological' approach in philosophy of technology, which has developed over the past decades, partly on the basis of my own work. A central element in postphenomenological studies is the phenomenon of technological mediation: technologies mediate the relations between human beings and the world. Various studies have tentatively analyzed such mediating roles, ranging from the role of the Mars explorer vehicle in the development of knowledge in astronomy to the role of sonography in moral decisions about abortion. Time has now come to develop the postphenomenological approach into a substantial theory of technology.

For this, we need to expand the existing approach. Until recently, the focus of postphenomenological research has been on technologies and their mediating roles in human-world relations. In order to understand the full dynamics of processes of mediation, though, we also need to focus on human beings, and understand how they appropriate and give meaning to technological mediations. To investigate these appropriations, the project will integrate elements of Conversation Analysis in the postphenomenological approach.

In order to develop a theory of mediation, the project will systematically investigate the roles of technology in three dimensions of the relations between humans and world: knowledge, ethics, and metaphysics. This way, the theory of technological mediation will make it possible to conceptualize and investigate in an empirical-philosophical way how technologies help to shape human understandings of the world, normative actions and decisions, and metaphysical frameworks.

The project will develop a theory of mediation by focusing on two empirical domains: imaging technologies and reproductive technologies. Both domains have crucial epistemological, ethical, and metaphysical dimensions. How do imaging technologies reveal the fetus and the brain, and how does this inform our understanding of ourselves and our offspring? How do gender selection technologies reorganize moral and political frameworks and actions? How does the Google Glass project reorganize the character of public space and our understanding of the world and each other? And how do brain imaging technologies and reproductive technologies help to shape experiences of transcendence, reorganizing the boundaries between the given and the made, fate and responsibility?