

To: Dean Rudolf Svoboda, Faculty of Theology, USB

From: Dr. Martin Peterson

Re: Ehsan Arzroomchilar's doctoral dissertation

Date: 30 September 2022

I am writing to report my assessment of Ehsan Arzroomchilar's doctoral dissertation "On the Influences of Technology on Morality", submitted to the Faculty of Theology at University of South Bohemia.

The dissertation has four chapters. The first chapter sets the stage and formulates Arzroomchilar's research question: In what sense, if any, does technology "impact" morality? Arzroomchilar writes that "technology does not just gently partake in our actions, i.e., it is more than an aid for our doings. Should it [have been] just that, there would have been barely anything worthy of philosophical reflection with respect to technology." (p3) One immediate question I have about Arzroomchilar's point of departure is the following: What should we say if we think that technology *is* a mere tool that is morally neutral? Philosophers of science routinely claim that scientific theories, such as Darwin's theory evolution or the latest theory of black holes, are worthy of philosophical reflection. And (sufficiently many) philosophers of science believe that these theories *are* morally neutral representations of the world. Yet, these theories are worthy of philosophical reflection, despite their inability to impact morality. Couldn't something similar be possible for technological artifacts? Arzroomchilar seems to assume that there is an important difference between technological artifacts and, say, scientific theories, but he does not clearly explain what this difference is. Technical artifacts of course have a material dimension, unlike scientific theories, by why is this material dimension of such obvious moral relevance?

Arzroomchilar goes on to write that "Technology may also change values" (p4). He gives an example of the length of the tube of vacuum cleaner that was perceived by male

customers as being too short. However, here it seems important to keep in mind that what changed was people's *perception* of certain values. It is not clear whether any values *as such* actually changed.

In chapter one, Arzroomchilar summarizes some of the highlights in the recent literature on philosophy of technology. This summary is to the best of my knowledge correct and relevant.

Chapter two offers a summary of an argument for the claim that technological artifacts influence morality that has been proposed primarily by Peter-Paul Verbeek, influenced by the work of Don Ihde. I understand the structure of this argument in the following way (see Peterson and Spahn 2011; the premises are quotes from Verbeek):

1. "technological artefacts ... actively co-shape people's being in the world"
2. "humans and technologies do not have a separate existence any more"
3. "technologies ... have an intentionality"

4. "moral agency is distributed over both humans and technological artefacts"

The part of chapter two that is devoted to assessing and critically discussing Verbeek's argument is relatively brief. Arzroomchilar raises several challenges, which are meant to be "internal" in the sense that he is sympathetic to the basic premises of the argument. Arzroomchilar's first challenge is that "Verbeek has misdescribed the moral status of artifacts by equalizing their contribution to moral acts. The conditions for an event to obtain ought not to be taken as a proper part of the event itself. ... If I look at some beautiful scenery through a pair of binoculars, although this instrument does partly shape the framework of my experience, it is only *me* who is looking at that scenery, not me-plus-binoculars." (p 68). I agree with this, and I take this to be very strong reason for not accepting Verbeek's argument.

Arzroomchilar's second point is also good. He writes that "Verbeek's views on moral agency undo the distinction between artifacts and natural objects as well. If the only criterion that is at work in ascribing moral agency to a thing is whether it somehow affects the morality of actions, then (at least) some natural objects also qualify as moral co-agents." (p. 69) This is an excellent argument (which is similar to a point made in Peterson and Spahn 2011). Arzroomchilar expands the argument in a series of well-constructed thought experiments. Ideally, he could have devoted a bit much more effort to discussing the implications of these arguments for Verbeek's theory. What could Verbeek say in response? And is it still possible to retain any significant element of Verbeek's position if we accept Arzroomchilar's seemingly devastating objections?

Chapter 3 is devoted to an exposition of Bruno Latour's Actor-Network Theory. As far as I can tell, the summary is a fair representation of Latour's position (which is itself not terribly clear).

Chapter 4 is arguably the most important chapter. This is where Arzroomchilar develops his own ideas to a higher extent than in other chapters. In Chapter 4, Arzroomchilar develops what he refers to as "a Schema for an Ethics of Technology". He distinguished between the ethics of use and the ethics of design. He writes, perhaps surprisingly, that "Concerning the *ethics of use* I don't have much to say. As already mentioned, I agree with Dorrestijn's treatment." (p. 112) Dorrestijn, in turn, is inspired by Foucault which strikes me as a somewhat narrow approach to the use of technology.

Arzroomchilar's main focus in Chapter 4 is on the ethics of design. One of the ideas he puts forward is what he refers to as "causal chain mediation". This is a new form of mediation not discussed by Ihde and Verbeek. A distinguishing feature is that causal chain mediation does not merely impact the actions or observations of a single person at a specific point in time. Arzroomchilar uses Galileo's telescope as an example: "not only did the mediation of Galileo's telescope go beyond its first user, namely Galileo, but it lasted for a long time, far more than Galileo's life span." (p. 132) I agree that this is true, but it is not immediately clear to me what the ethical implications of this form of "causal chain mediation" might be. Arzroomchilar applies his schema to an interesting real-world example, namely credit cards issued by banks. Arzroomchilar writes that the recent transition from cash to cards impacts the way we value goods and services. He writes that "When someone is paying with a card the physical appearance of the card does not undergo any change to signify for instance the level of money in the respective bank account. Unlike cash, there is nothing on the outward appearance of the cards to indicate the purchasing power of the holder." (p 147)

I agree that there is some truth to this, but it also worth pointing out that the kind of card one has sends a signal to the person one is doing business with. For instance, I have five credit and debit cards in my wallet: AmEx Platinum, AmEx Blue, Chase Visa, First Financial Visa, and SHB Mastercard. Of these cards, the AmEx Platinum is the most prestigious card with no pre-set credit limit. The annual fee for keeping this card is \$700 and I mostly use it for buying expensive goods that cost thousands of dollars. At the other end of the spectrum, we have the Visa debit card, which works precisely as well. The annual fee for this card is \$0. Arzroomchilar correctly points out that these bank cards "invite to a consumerist style (mediation of the behavior)" and then goes on to list a number of positive effects of using cards (comfort, lower the chance of virus spread, and equality). What one might feel could be missing here is a detailed discussion of why these effects of the technology we use for paying for goods and services should be said to impact morality.

In conclusion, I believe it is fair to say that Arzroomchilar has read nearly all significant parts of the relevant literature. His summaries of the literature are far as I can tell correct. There is also plenty of evidence that Arzroomchilar's understanding of the literature is deep and comprehensive. In my view, he also writes reasonably well. I never struggled to understand what he wanted tell the reader, although I found a few typos here and there (not many) and a few formatting errors and odd sentences. However, if I compare Arzroomchilar's dissertation to the *best possible dissertation anyone could ever write*, I believe such an ideal dissertation would put more emphasis on developing the author's own ideas and theories and spend somewhat less energy on summarizing the literature. I hope that Arzroomchilar will be given opportunities to develop his own ideas further in the future. My overall conclusion is that Arzroomchilar's manuscript meets reasonable expectations of a doctoral dissertation at a research university.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Martin", followed by a long, sweeping horizontal line that extends to the right.

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