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ABSTRACTS

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Towards a global ethics of technology

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Most traditional approaches to ethics (Denise et al, 1996) have centred on individual behaviour, actions and consequences (Mitcham & Duvall, 1999). Recently there have been calls for a different approach – that of social ethics (Devon 1999; 2004; Devon & Van De Poel, 2004). In this essay however I am going to take a step even further by considering the conditions of possibility of a global ethics of technology. I am going to argue, tentatively, that a global ethics of technology, along with the social ethics of technology, form an integral part of the ethics of technology. Perhaps, to a certain degree, this is a matter of renaming some current philosophical activities, but this is also intended to explicate the global ethical approach to technology as a distinct and valuable approach in need of further development and consolidation.

The global ethical approach advocated here can be defined, strictly for current purposes, as an ethical approach towards the kinds of technology the proper ethical analysis of which requires taking into account of moral and ethical issues arising in the context of economic, cultural and political globalisation. These may include, but are not limited to, issues such as indigenous people's right to free, prior and informed consent; ethical issues arising from the globalisation of clinical research and development, as well as the globalisation of pharmaceutical trials; global institutional regulation and decision-making concerning technology, global redistribution of risks, harms and benefits of certain technology; issues pertaining to global (social) justice; ethical problems concerning geo-engineering practices; etc. Put differently, a global ethical approach is about ethical issues arising from the globalisation of technology, and thus concerns itself with the technologies the effects and consequences of which transcend the national borders.

The essay will consist of four sections. After a brief introduction, in section one, I shall argue that the scope of the social ethical approach of Devon and Van de Poel is too narrow, because of its biased and exclusive focus on the arrangements for decision-making concerning technology, which, given the co-construction of technology and society thesis (Geels, 2005), entirely leaves technology out of the picture. Instead, what is needed is an approach with a focus on both the former and the latter. In section two, I shall elaborate on the relation between ethics and politics in order to clarify the relation of social and global ethics to that of moral and political philosophy. In section three, I shall consider the possibility and desirability of a global ethics of technology in light of the claim that 'global ethics' in any form is not global, but simply the imposition of one form of local ethics – often Western ethics – and thus is a nothing but a form of moral neo-imperialism (Widdows, 2007). In section four, I shall briefly discuss those existing instances of ethics of technology that have a global ethical focus. For example, some approaches to environmental ethics, as well as research in bioethics with its recent project of developing global bioethics (Engelhardt, 2006) are some of the existing instances of global ethics of technology. In section five, I shall briefly discuss existing approaches to

global ethics. Drawing on which discussion, I shall outline and defend my own – the power relations – approach to the global ethics of technology. In the final section, I shall further dwell on the rationale for the development of a global ethics of technology, as well as the implications of such a project for future ethical research and practice. I shall conclude that a global ethical approach to technology is a practical necessity of our technological age in the increasingly globalising world.

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