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“Why not post-political? A Comment on Gert Goeminne”

• Abstract
This commentary elaborates on the subpolitics of technology as a basis for dealing with sustainability issues. It questions the “sustainable technology” phrasing of the issue and focuses on the political/post-political debate to eventually suggest that the politics of sustainable technology is a possible post-political question. Minor disagreements on some philosophy of science references are briefly expressed.

This paper by Gert Goeminne gives a valuable account of “postphenomenological” tools for a better understanding of the vast and confusing area of issues called “sustainable technology.” The link between effective philosophies of technology, neither utopian nor dystopian, and sustainability research is obvious, since unsustainability is the upshot of a very poor understanding of modern technology. Moreover, our current quasi-impotence to implement sustainable real change is a consequence of a very poor understanding of the coevolution process now commanding our civilization. In this perspective, the tools presented and clarified by Gert Goeminne are so relevant that they even induce further reflection.

This paper characterizes some of the most innovative stances in postphenomenological philosophy of technology, the main one being the orientation: back to the question itself and to the fundamentals involved. More than a definite school, this orientation is the raison d’être of philosophy itself, in modern times. Inspired by Don Ihde’s methods, Gert Goeminne focuses on “the technological mediation of the co-constitution of subjectivity and objectivity,” and thus he finds a vantage point from which he can address the “in-between” of the human/technology relationship. The most interesting result of this inquiry is a critique of scientism in both technical and sociological approaches. This clarification helps since sustainability is currently inflated with scientism, misconstrued as “rationality.”

Yet, R. Boehm’s epistemology of “topical truth” might be a disappointing elaboration of this anti-scientist plan. The free-fall parallel case is a very narrow comparative description because by improving Galileo you can reach an accurate model for both book and paper falling, whereas by improving Aristotle you go nowhere. The progressive capacity is a strong characteristic of science. Thus, “topical truth” is a very “local” theory of explanation and gives no real account of the scientific dimension of theories. The danger here is relativism, an undervaluation of science.

Even worse, the real Galileo is quite different from the current textbook equation and certainly did not mention g as a “gravitational constant”…. To make a point, is it allowed to be so an-historical? The danger here is scientism, the “Legend of science” (Philip Kitcher), an overvaluation of science.

Investigating “the powerful subpolitics of science and technology” means more than an excellent account of Ihde’s philosophical achievements. As far as the interpretation of Ihde is concerned, “the degree of normative inquiry present in Ihde’s philosophy” echoes a larger issue, pending since Heidegger’s Being and Time: such an illuminating ontology and brilliant existential analysis must lead to some renewal of ethical views, and maybe political views too, even if that was not the
author’s intention, and even if the author would not approve. Gert Goeminne’s search for a path from Ihde’s relational ontology to a relational normativity is a suggestion to apply philosophy of technology to the framing of the new set of values that sustainability demands.

Technology and sustainability is an important question, but is it “sustainable technology”? I wonder if taking “sustainable technology” as a given starting point is as value-free as it seems to be. Doesn’t it take for granted that technology itself must be sustainable? Are we looking for a technology that would be in itself sustainable? The alternative is the sustainable use of technology, a broader domain of investigation, including possible “sustainable technologies,” but relevant for non-sustainable technologies too. The sustainable use of non-sustainable technologies is: not to use them, or to use them as little as possible. This is not playing with words, but refers to the gap between traditional politics and micro-actions, and is the first hint of my “why not post-political?” comment. The way to sustainable technology is long, indirect, slow, tricky... The way to sustainable use is as simple as the simplest action in our way of life. This difference is not exactly an alternative because there is a dynamic relationship between the two: sustainable micro-actions are one of the most important (maybe the one and only) means to change technology, economy, politics. The paradigm for this bottom-up influence is the collaborative, peer-to-peer, and open-source culture that shaped the Internet.

The main question for the subpolitics of technology, concerning sustainability more than any other issue, is suggested by this paper: is it political or post-political? Here again, the dispute is not about words. “Political” still refers to something, including politicians, laws and regulations, political parties, vote, campaigns, polls... The assumption “everything is political” cannot lead to the statement “political means everything,” which is semantically equivalent to “political means nothing.”

Gert Goeminne on subpolitics (3.1) mentions Michel Foucault and Andrew Feenberg, authors who would understand politics in a rich and innovative sense, but, as far as I can tell, without excluding “regular” political engagement. He refers also to my book Homo Sapiens Technologicus and the micro-actions theory in it. I would like to say that in my view micro-actions are not instances of a political engagement. They induce an ethical move, a retreat from any political engagement. My idea is a way to prove that ethical engagement in micro-actions replaces traditional politics and leaves the political scene as it is: a show-business industry. Micro-actions do not intend to change politics, but to do without politics. So this subpolitics is not political, in any reasonable sense of the term.

We can do without the “topical truth” assumption. Why import such a heavy notion as “truth”? It refers back to the cognitive myth we want to depart from. The action itself is by definition topical. Let us consider “topical action,” where topical means not only “local,” but appropriate, and not only appropriate as meaning suitable or efficient, but as meaning inhabited, re-appropriated after a time of misappropriation (by political delegation, by delegation to expertise, by neglect). Where Gert Goeminne suggests a bottom-up rethinking of the politics of sustainability, my question would be: why “up”? I suggest a bottom-to-bottom approach. From this point of view, the difficulty met in 3.2 can be addressed otherwise. The paper wonders: is everyone ready to “engage” in “engaged participation”? Participation means: being a part, a member of a group, with shared ideas and ideals, belonging to a party. Participation is political, never far from traditional politics, and political participation, most of the time, is not a bottom-up, but rather a deceptive top-down process. So the answer can be: no, citizens are not ready for engaged participation, but they want engagement anyway, post-political engagement.

In his concluding remarks, Gert Goeminne’s observation that sustainability is an undefined concept is very suggestive. I agree that sustainability has no established definition because it is still an open and living political question. Nevertheless, political questions are often closed and dead as
are the official trends of “sustainable development”. But sustainability in itself, I suggest, is not a political theme. It is an ethical inspiration, the practise of which does not refer back to political engagement, but rather to new forms of self-development, sustainable building of the self, bottom-to-bottom interactions between selves and the local environment. The question of the good life *construed as a political question* was the mistake of an era of unsustainable industrial development and war and the ending of an epoch in our civilization. To inaugurate a new era, we need to accept that the good life is no longer a political or economical question. I construe sustainable technology as a paradigmatic post-political question.