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Human-machine ethics beyond the Actor-Network

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Abstract

The growing governance of algorithms and the rapid emergence of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and the 'Internet of Things', has intensified discussions about the relationship between humans and machines, and the ethics of everyday life with technologies. It raises questions such as: How should we live with technologies? Can humans still make decisions? The earlier taken for granted authority of humans is clearly debatable, and sometimes also dismissed, particularly within Actor Network Theory (ANT). In this paper, I look into the basic premises of the ethics of ANT, explore suggested ethical perspectives within ANT such as 'disclosive' ethics, and continue by penetrating the relation between agency and ethics, as well as between morality and ethics in ANT. ANT is further discussed as on the one hand a sociological perspective and on the other hand an ethical approach. Based on this analysis I propose the anthropological perspective of an 'ethics of the ordinary' as a possible way to learn from the basic premises of ANT while maintaining a human notion of ethics in a technology-conflated culture.

1 INTRODUCTION

When I bought myself a new iPhone a couple of years ago my daughters loved to play with Siri – ‘the intelligent personal assistant that helps you get things done’². They asked her to do things for them, made her call them silly things, say dirty words, and they laughed themselves to death when they made Siri beatbox (she wasn’t very good at it). This childish game troubled me; on the one hand my children obviously had a lot of fun with the toy. But at the same time the way they played with Siri nagged me, and I repeatedly had to tell them to treat the poor thing nicely and to not take advantage of the fact that she had been programmed to obey their least wishes. Several times I tried to make them stop and finally ended the game by simply removing Siri from my phone, since I realised I could not always be there with my ethical concerns when they interacted with her. My kids are older now, they have their own Siri’s on their own iPhones, and I know very well that I will not be able to always be there to guide them in their technology-conflated everyday lives.

The ‘Siri-incident’ is a good example of what Joanna Bryson discusses in her provocative essay *Robots should be slaves* (Bryson, 2010: 63). She raises questions about the relationship between humans and intelligent technologies, how we think of, socialise with, and treat them (see also Gunkel, 2017), and opens up questions about how we live with technologies today. Siri, and her human-like tech-friends, are only one example of the increasingly close interconnection between humans and machines. Algorithms and the broader notion of the datafication of mundane everyday practices (Couldry and Hepp, 2016), social relations, information seeking, etc. has sparked increased attention to the ethics of technologies in everyday life, and the role of human decision-making in algorithmic cultures (Striphas, 2015).

I have, for the last couple of years, approached the ethics of digital media from a user perspective (see Bengtsson, 2018). This means looking into the ethical dilemmas that people struggle with in their everyday lives, but also the various ways to negotiate, handle and escape these dilemmas. How do we handle social relations that are governed by social network media and think and act in relation to commodification and technification of self and others in the same platforms? How to address (or not address) close and distant others online and handle the difficult question of anonymity? In such discussions people share stories about situations when technologies have acted in ways they could not foresee, sometimes on behalf of them, and when algorithmic curation of media content have transformed environments into places they would not like to inhabit.

² See URL: <https://support.apple.com/en-us/HT204389>

Thinking about ethics in a digital culture pushes us further and further into the ethics of media technologies (Introna, 2016; Sandvig *et al.*, 2016: 4984) and some voices, predominantly based within Actor-Network-Theory (ANT), claim technologies in themselves have ‘a capacity for ethical behaviour’ (Light and McGrath, 2010: 239) why it is no longer meaningful to separate the ethics of humans from that of machines. Others have developed new ethical perspectives, such as ‘disclosive ethics’ in order to approach the ethics of technologies (Introna, 2005/2007).

In this paper, I use such discussions as a vantage point for four arguments that leads us to alternative ways of thinking about ethics in technology-conflated algorithmic cultures. Starting out from the theoretical background of Latour and ANT, I suggest that Latour does in fact not argue against the existence of a human subject (only against a human subject that is master of the world and in charge of the world). Then I examine the idea that what Latour dismisses is a Kantian morality, based on obligation, and not morality as such, and that what Latour dismisses is (again, Kantian) morality, as distinguished from ethics. After that I argue that Latour’s own anti-anthropocentric approach to the world is highly value-based and normative, and as such ethical. I finally suggest an ‘ethics of the ordinary’ based in Aristotelian ethics, is an ethical perspective combinable with the technology-conflated subject of contemporary algorithmic culture. The purpose of this paper is hence to critically examine ANT approaches to ethics, and to suggest alternative ways of thinking about ethics in technology-conflated, algorithmic cultures.

2 A DISMISSAL OF THE SOLITARY HUMAN SUBJECT

As a background to the critical discussion I am first going to summarise the basic assumptions of ANT ethics; the way it understands the relation between humans and machines; the social and the technical. ANT takes as its vantage point that humans and machines have developed together in a long historic process, dating back to eras preceding human language and culture (Latour and Lemonnier, 1994, cited in Latour and Venn, 2002). This common and intertwined development of humans and technologies means three fundamental things:

Firstly; *technologies are not tools*. This means technologies are not something humans use in order to construct things faster and more smoothly than they would have done otherwise. ANT fundamentally questions what is sometimes called the ‘tool view’ of technology (Introna, 2007: 12ff; Orlikowski and Iacono, 2001). This implies that technologies are tools; artefacts or systems which are designed by and for humans to achieve certain objectives and outcomes. This perspective separates ‘non-humans’ in two different units; human-made entities where technologies belong and natural entities (such as plants, animals, etc.) (Johnson, 2006: 96). Lucas Introna (2007: 13), means the ‘tool

view' is anthropocentric and claims 'tools constitute us as much as we constitute them; and [that] they fold into us as much as we fold into them' (Introna, 2007: 14).

This leads over to the second premise, namely that *technologies are not 'clean'*. This means technologies are not at human disposal; free for humans to define for the purposes they need. Latour puts forward two basic dimensions of the regime of technology that helps understand humans' relations to technologies; the first is the concept of *fold* (and unfold), and the second the idea of technological *detour* (Latour and Venn, 2002). Folding is the spatial and temporal dimensions inherent in all things; the connections and affordances it offers those who engage with it (Latour and Venn, 2002: 249-50). Folded in my pencil are not only the tree that was used to construct it, and the wood where it grew but also the work that was necessary to put it together. All actants can be unfolded to reveal their multidimensional spatiality and temporality. *Detour* is a way of understanding technologies opposed to that of instrumentality; technologies never take those who use them exactly where they aim to go, but translate intentions and purposes so that they end up somewhere else than expected from the start (Ibid: 251). Human innovations often start in mistakes, intentions that go wrong but may end up in something better than the original idea. Without technologies, thus, humans should not be what or as they are, i.e. *without technological detours, the properly human cannot exist* (Ibid: 252).

Thirdly, this means *humans and technologies cannot be fully separated*; their interconnectedness is reciprocal and not a relation where one agent (humans) controls the other (technologies) (Introna, 2007: 13). Catherine Hayles refers to this coevolution of humans and machines as *technogenesis* (Hayles, 2012: 10) in which, Hayles argues that all objects should be acknowledged as technical individuals enmeshed in networks of social, economic and technological relations, some of which are human, some non-human (Ibid: 14). Hayles (2012) builds her conclusions on historical studies of the transformations of media technologies and how they relate to the way humans think and act; environmental and mental changes she claims have had significant neurological consequences; 'epigenetic changes' for human beings (Ibid: 11). ANT hence, John Law claims, 'does not celebrate the idea that there is a difference in kind between people on the one hand, and objects on the other' (Law, 1992: 381).

Thinking about technologies as if they precede or have co-developed in history together with humans fundamentally challenges the idea of them as created by humans, at human disposal, or even separable from humans, and means it is impossible to claim technologies are neutral and that humans bring to them their good or bad intentions (Introna, 2007: 12). This also opens up the question of morality and ethics in relation to humans and machines and Ben Light and Kathy McGrath (2010: 293) claim ANT affects where a capacity for ethical behaviour can be located.

There are many things we can learn from this. Firstly, that *technologies are entangled with humans and as such part of the human*. This means it is practically impossible to trace the border between the realm of the human versus that of technologies and that 'technologies belong to the human world in a modality other than that of instrumentality, efficiency or materiality' (Latour and Venn, 2002: 248). This also means that *technologies are not subordinate to humans and in their command*, as is often implicit in discussions of the relationship between humans and machines. Instead both parties are co-constitutive in the construction of reality and of each other. To this we can add, however, that this does not automatically imply that humans are *not* creators or inventors or developers of technology, because they/we obviously are in some sense, only that *technologies likewise and simultaneously create, invent and develop them/us*. What constitutes 'the human', according to ANT is not the free, solitary, and self-determined actor, but the interlinkage with other actants she, or we, coexist with.

3 MORALITY AND THE END OF MEANS

The above way of historically rethinking the relation between humanity and technology also leads to a rethinking of the relation between technology and morality in relation to means and ends, what Latour calls *the end of means* (2002). Means combined with ends are essential components of the philosophy of morality. A mean refers to something that is used in order to achieve something else (an end). The mean has no other purpose than reaching the goal (end) and can consist of an action, a tool, a human being, or whatever we use to reach our purposes. In Immanuel Kant's deontological moral theory, condensed in the categorical imperative, it is stated that it is always immoral to use another human being as a means to an end, and that it is our moral responsibility to always treat other humans as ends in themselves (Kant, 1785/2012).

As ANT discards the idea of technologies as human tools, it also rejects the common notion that technologies always belong to the realm of means and morality to the realm of ends (Latour and Venn, 2002: 247). As the inherently human does not exist, morality is no more human than technology in the sense that it would originate from an already constituted human being who is master of itself as well as of the universe. Latour instead claims morality traverses the world just like technology and engenders in its wake different forms of humanity, choices of subjectivity, modes of objectification, and various types of attachments (Ibid: 254). He argues that, '[m]orality too, is a mode of existence, a standpoint on being-as-another, a predisposition, an original regime of mediation' (Latour and Venn, 2002: 254).

Morality, hence, cannot be seen as fixed, a given goal in any possible situation, but a mode of existence; an approach to the world. Latour's way of prescribing technology a dignity equal to that

of morality in order to escape the simple notion of morality as that between the intention (human) to that of the tool (technology) is reached by redefining the technical (and thus the moral) from a substantive to an adjective. As technology is everywhere, and should be considered a regime of articulation, a mode of existence, or more precisely a way of exploring existence, it is in Latour's view pointless to define certain situations as technical in opposition to moral, political, economic, etc. (Latour and Venn, 2002: 248). Introna (2007: 15) takes this discussion further from morality to ethics and adds that 'ethics is not something that comes afterwards – when we already have humans and 'technologies' – rather it is always and already present in a fundamental way'.

Latour further questions why certain Western traditions always speak of technology as something that is amenable to mastery, and why that which appears unmasterable in the end finds itself regrouped in the realm of simple means (Latour and Venn, 2002: 251). He claims:

Behind the tired repetition of the theme of the neutrality of 'technologies-that-are-neither-good-nor-bad-but-will-be-what-man-makes-of-them', or the theme, identical in its foundation, of 'technology-that-becomes-crazy-because-it-has-become-autonomous-and-no-longer-has-any-other-end-except-its-goalless-development', hides the fear of discovering this reality so new to modern man who has acquired the habit to dominate: there are no masters anymore – not even crazed technologies. (Latour and Venn, 2002: 255)

Following Souriau (1943), Latour implies that both morality and technology are ontological categories that define the human and are not defined by it. And, morality as well as the human, is not for itself or by itself, but exists always by other things and for other things (Latour and Venn, 2002). Morality is 'a concern which ceaselessly works upon being-as-another to prevent ends from becoming means, mediators from being transformed into simple intermediaries' (Ibid: 256). A mediator, in ANT terminology, is something which multiplies difference, and whose output cannot be predicted by their inputs, while an intermediary makes no difference for, or transform, the state of affairs we are studying and can thus be ignored (Latour, 2005). This perspective of morality means humans cannot and should not define what is an end and what is not, since they are not hierarchically organised above other species or things. Everything hence is an end, and cannot and should not be used or regarded a means by anyone.

This perspective is formulated in opposition to the earlier mentioned 'tool view' which sees technologies as moral entities, with moral importance and moral character, but not as moral agents, as their behaviour lacks one of five criteria necessary to meet the requirements for 'behaviour to be

regarded action (and as such appropriate for moral evaluation)' (Johnson, 2006: 198). This criterion is to have an internal state that is a mental state³. As Johnson (2006: 200) stresses:

the internal states of a moral agent are mental states; one of the mental states must be an intending to act. The intending to act is the locus of freedom; it explains how two agents with the same desires and beliefs may behave differently.

Central to the critique of a Kantian notion of morality by Latour and ANT more broadly, is this very idea of human mastery. According to Introna (2007: 14), the moral perspective of ANT understands 'agency to be *simultaneously human and material from the start*'. Given this, the anthropocentrism of Kantian morality and the way it hierarchises different actants in the world is considered unethical in itself (Introna, 2007). Latour argues that 'Kant succeeded in registering moral equality, even though he reserved it to humans alone.' (Latour, 2013: 461).

4 FROM DEONTOLOGICAL TO DISCLOSIVE ETHICS

In his take on the moral question, Latour argues for a 'missing mass of morality' (1992), which means we must recognise that a substantial part of our everyday morality rests upon technological apparatuses, as they are intimately intertwined with our existence and sets the limits (as well as provides possibilities) for human action (Latour and Venn, 2002: 253). He puts forward an example of the moral role of things by discussing his own desk that has been constructed so that one drawer cannot be opened without the other two being carefully closed. And even though Latour is annoyed by this condition, he obeys 'this meddlesome moral law' of his desk since he is not authorised to leave all three drawers open at the same time (Latour and Venn, 2002: 253). Following from this he divides between two different moral dimensions; the super-ego of tradition, and the under-ego of technologies, and argues that these dimensions account for the correctness, the trustworthiness and the continuity of our actions (Ibid: 253-254). Building on this, Introna (2005), following Brey (2000) introduces an ethical approach to information technologies; '*disclosive ethics*', which seeks to help understand the ethical dimension of our technology-conflated lives (see also Light and McGrath 2010). In order to explain disclosive ethics Introna (2007) uses the concept of 'closure'. Closure is

³ The other four criteria are 2) there is an outward embodied event (the agent does something, moves his or her body in some way), 3) the internal state is the cause of the outward event, 4) the outward behaviour (the result of rational direction) has an outward effect and 5) the effect has to be on a patient, a recipient of an action, a recipient that can be harmed or helped.

described as ‘the telos of this ethico-political site – the nexus of ongoing human and technology-relations’ (Introna, 2007: 15).

Closure has similarities with hegemonisation and describes what happens when a mass of different possibilities is narrowed down to one single alternative, which gradually will turn into a fixed state and be regarded natural and neutral. Unlike hegemony, closure is necessary in order for societies and groups to be able to act and to move forward; decisions must be made, selections have to be done, and in these processes doors are shut and alternatives buried. Nevertheless, all closures are violent acts which necessary lead to acts of exclusion (Introna, 2007: 15). These implicit, naturalised, and violent processes of closure, inherent in all political sites and all social orders, are the concern of disclosive ethics, aiming at revealing the profound consequences for those excluded from various positions, situations and arenas by seemingly pragmatic decisions. It hence aims at tracing the moral implications (of closure) at the level of code, algorithms, and the like through to social practices, and ultimately, to the production of particular social orders, rather than others (Introna, 2007: 15-16). Introna concludes, ‘the co-constitutive nexus of human and technology relationships is a political site’ that must be unfolded or disclosed (see also Winner, 1980). Disclosive ethics have been used to reveal the governance of algorithms (Introna, 2005/2007), and how Facebook organise everyday sociality (Light and McGrath, 2010), and has thus been important for our understanding of our contemporary world.

In an article about the ethics of algorithms Sandvig *et al.* (2016) discuss different ethical approaches valid in the analysis of technologies; deontological, consequential and virtue ethical approaches. They stress, quoting Latour, that even if we accept that technologies, exemplified by algorithms, can have a disposition or a character, intentionality or mind-set is the key component of virtue ethics, and while we may grant a nonhuman algorithm agency and power, granting it intentionality (or a mind) seems a bridge too far (Latour 2005, quoted in Sandvig *et al.*, 2016: 4981; see also Johnson, 2000). This means when we ethically analyse technologies such as algorithms we reference either its consequences or some absolute norm of fairness, and not that the algorithm itself has innate virtue (Sandvig *et al.*, 2016). In line with this Introna (2007: 15) describes disclosive ethics as:

the ongoing questioning of the actual operation of hegemonic closure in which the interests of some become in/excluded as an implicit part of the material operation of relations of power – in codes, plans, programmes, technologies, and the like.

Light and McGrath (2010), in their analysis of the ethics of the social networking site Facebook, also conclude disclosive ethics is descriptive in its character, and as such more analytic than normative.

The advantages of a disclosive ethics of technology is that it takes technologies seriously from an ethical perspective and does not approve of a world-view where humans are the crown of the world and stand above everything else. Its backdrops are however that at the same time disclosive ethics can only be used to uncover power dimensions in retrospect and is thus mostly meaningful to think of as a kind of ideology critique, revealing the power dimensions inherent in artefacts, technologies and 'the material' and hence is not of much help when we want to look to the future and change the world. This is in line with Winner (1980) who argues that technologies (or artefacts more generally) have *politics* rather than ethics, as politics or political consequences do not require intentionality (also Beer 2005). Conducting disclosive analyses also requires a trained and educated eye in order to be fully conducted, which also means it is a scholarly, rather than layman, or mundane, approach to ethics.

5 A CRITIQUE OF KANTIAN MORALITY, NOT OF MORALITY PER SE

Summing up the discussion so far then, the basic assumption of Latour's notion of morality is that what constitutes 'the human' is not freedom, intentionality, or an autonomous subject, but the interconnection of human and other objects (actants), an interconnection that fundamentally turns the moral question upside down. In his later work Latour (2013: 454) asks:

If I exist only through the other, which of us then is the end and which the means? I, who have to pass by way of it, am I its mean or is it mine? Am I the end or is it my end?

This moral perspective is sometimes used to prescribe agency to technologies or machines and to suggest they have 'a capacity for ethical behaviour' (cf. Light and McGrath, 2010: 293). A more plausible interpretation of this perspective however is that human agency should not be understood as hierarchically superior to that of other actants and that the essence of Latour's critique is directed towards a Kantian universal, anthropocentric and hierarchizing notion of morality, not towards the idea of morality in itself. Such a position is even more obvious in a later outburst against *the moderns* whose disconnection from a wider universal community Latour (2013: 458) criticises:

The Moderns' claim to stand apart from the other cultures comes from elsewhere: they have sought a universal morality. They can be accused of ethnocentrism, of hegemony, of self-righteousness; they can be mocked for their smugness, and their continuing failure can be pointed out. The fact remains nevertheless that they have committed themselves to this endeavour, and they have drawn their moral philosophy from it. But for morality to be universal, it has to have access to a universe.

Latour further emphasises this when arguing that glaciers, as well as all other actants, have acquired a 'moral dimension' and that those who do not understand that are depriving themselves of any chance to accede to morality, as

*to seek to be moral without moral beings is like seeking to reproduce without having offspring or hoping to believe in God without letting the angels of salvation reach us.
(Latour, 2013: 457)*

This together means it is unethical to even try to hierarchize different actors (actants) in the world, which is what the (anthropocentric) Kantian notion of morality and the categorical imperative obligates us to do. 'Homo Faber', man the maker, who stands above all else in the world, and his rational decision-making processes, is what is at the core of Latour's critique of a Kantian idea of morality. ANT dismisses this rational decision-making process and sees morality in the *effects of an act or a connection*, i.e. identifying morality in *behaviour* and *relations* between actants (see also Walbeers and Dorstewitz, 2014). This dimension is further deepened by digital technologies and Introna (2016) argues calculative practices such as algorithms 'have a certain moral authority because they are taken to impose *objectivity and neutrality* in a complex domain that is already loaded with moral significance' (ibid: 39). The nonexistence of human mastery thus leads to the end of human morality according to Latour, at least of morality as something that deontologically guide our actions so that they have certain effects in the world, and has led to consequentialist developments such as disclosive ethics, avoiding the question of moral agency, or to arguments that technologies are capable of ethical behaviour (Light and McGrath, 2010).

It seems thus that even if we agree with ANT that humans do not control machines (or anything else in the world) to the extent that is often assumed it must not automatically lead to a dismissal of all value-based positions. This as the above discussion points to another ambiguity in Latour's (and his

followers) critique of morality and ethics in relation to humans and technologies; it is formulated, or at least often used, as a discussion of human morality in general, but in fact only critiques the moral perspective of Immanuel Kant, with its universal claims, lack of situatedness and ignorance of cultural variation.

Such critique of Kant is however hence neither new, nor unique. Even some of those who have taken Kant as vantage point for their ethical reasoning question the universal claims inherent in his theory (c.f. Silverstone, 2007). Already in the 1940s Simone de Beauvoir, who developed her existential ethics out of Kant's moral theory, emphasised the situatedness and 'anti-universality' of moral decisions and claimed, 'the good of others is an absolute end, but we are not authorised to decide upon this end a priori' (de Beauvoir, 1948/1991; 142; see also Arp 1999; Slattery *et al.*, 1999). The individual, instead, is defined by his or her relationship to the world and to other individuals. Just as Kant, however, de Beauvoir relied on a *human* subject for ethical judgement.

Latour thus means we have to redefine our idea of morality since the human subject neither *is* nor *should be* free to define its own consequences (as when defining other actants as mediators and intermediaries, means or ends). But this redefinition is only necessary if we take Kant and the categorical imperative as vantage point for our critique, and thus search for morality in the consequences of action. Some ethical perspectives, such as that of Levinas', heavily used by, among others, Zygmunt Bauman, means ethics exists in the *existential experience of being in the world among others*, and not in our behaviour, their effects, and the construction of means and ends. As humans in contemporary society cannot overview the consequences of their actions, Bauman (1993) argues that *considering* what it means to act, or not to act as well as the guilt that follows from lack of such considerations, is what is left for the moral subject. Silverstone (2007: 46) similarly means ethics exists in *reflection or imagination*, rather than action, effects or consequences.

Having put forward this point of view, I move further to another proposition; I do in fact not read Latour, or most of his interpreters (c.f. Introna, 2005/2007), as prescribing technologies with intentions or will to change or construct the world. This as Latour explicitly writes 'technical objects do not have an obvious moral dignity in themselves' (Latour and Venn, 2002: 254). Instead of claiming technologies have intentions (that leads to specific consequences) Latour argues that neither have humans. What he rather says, is that the idea of the human as homo faber, man the maker, free to make choices and in charge of the world, is a chimera that hinders us from understanding the ethico-politics of the technogenesis we inhabit.

To sum up then, ANT is often seen as descriptive (c.f. Light and McGrath, 2010; Waelbers and Dorstewitz, 2014), and as such it holds an ethical perspective that is not directed towards change, but works as a way of disclosing power games; uneven relations between actants in the world. This way of understanding ethics is important and meaningful and will help reveal structures of power and unfairness in the world (Waelbers and Dorstewitz, 2014), but it will not help us, as Hayles (2012: 18) put it, to make judgements and decide in what direction we want to walk. Descriptive ethics is plausible when we want to take a stance against power inequalities and bad conditions, but it cannot help us to choose in what direction to move forward.

6 A CRITIQUE OF MORALITY, NOT OF ETHICS

Latour's ethical perspective takes as its vantage point the conflation of humans and technologies so evident in an algorithmic culture and is based on the following premises: firstly *a critique of the idea of human mastery explicitly articulated in relation to Kant and the categorical imperative* (a critique which concludes humans are not free to control and steer the world), and secondly *a critique of an anthropocentric hierarchy* which means humans cannot and should not give themselves the right to construct a distinction between means and ends, and thus hierarchize between different actants, i.e. things, humans, animals, etc. This is particularly evident in Latour's theory of mediators versus intermediaries that means humans, when analysing the world, cannot and should not, based on their own presumptions, define what is an end and what is not, since humans are not hierarchically above other species or things. Following from this, I however mean, in opposition with other interpreters (Light and McGrath, 2010; Waelbers and Dorstewitz, 2014) that if we separate morality as a decision-making practice from ethics as the values that guide practices, it is totally reasonable to think of Latourian ethics as *not* descriptive as there is an implicit normative dimension in his approach to the world and as such a deontological element.

Such reflections open up for another interpretation of the Latourian argument; what Latour discusses is in fact *morality*, as distinguished from ethics, following again a Kantian distinction between the two (Kant, 1920/1987: 9-10; Bauman, 1995: 11&33ff; Silverstone, 2007). Kant understood ethics as a kind of moral philosophy; overarching principles or a moral codex, whereas he saw morality as expressed in specific situations and problems and the choices and actions that was meant to solve these problems (Kant, 1920/1987: 9-10; see also Bauman, 1993/1995: 13, 31, 52ff; Campbell, 1987). This distinction makes clear that morality relates to action, while ethics is the values that *guide* decision-making and action, a kind of moral code. Dismissing morality by way of a Latourian argument that humans lack

mastery and cannot (and should not) separate means from ends, is thus not followed by an immediate dismissal or even transformation of ethics – it is in fact an ethically informed argument.

This would then mean that an ethical approach in Actor-Network-Theory is not as essentially different from other notions of ethics as we would have thought from the start. The passionate, and inherently ethical, analysis put forward in Latour's later work also indicates this (Latour, 2013). Such an interpretation is supported by John Law's clarification of the distinction between 'ethics and sociology', arguing ANT is a sociological perspective, and as such essentially different from an ethical approach:

The one may – indeed should – inform the other, but they are not identical. To say that there is no fundamental difference between people and objects is an analytical stance, not an ethical position. And to say this does not mean that we have to treat the people in our lives as machines. We don't have to deny them the rights, duties, or responsibilities that we usually accord to people. Indeed, we might use it to sharpen ethical questions about the special character of the human effect. (Law 1992: 381)

It is a fair interpretation that the 'we' in the sentence 'should sharpen the ethical questions about the special character of the human effect', are human beings. Law's distinction between sociology and ethical position is even more underscored by the fact that Latour has defined ANT as a reductionist theory consisting of three fundamental dimensions; 1) a semiotic definition of entity building, 2) a methodological framework to record the heterogeneity of such a building, and 3) an ontological claim on the 'networky' character of actants themselves (Latour, 1996: 373). This further means that:

When it says that actors may be human or nonhuman, that they are infinitely pliable, heterogenous, that they are free associationists, know no difference of scale, that there is no inertia, no order, that they build their own temporality, this does not qualify any real observed actors to be possible. (Ibid: 374)

From such an understanding ANT is an ontologically inclined methodology to record and understand the world and the actants that compose it, beyond the Kantian (and those who followed him in the development of modern theory) 'Copernican Revolution' placing man at the centre of the universe, and all other objects in a circle around it (Latour, 1992b: 6-7). Another plausible interpretation is then that just as when the early semiotics of the sixties claimed *the author is dead* (Barthes 1994) this did not mean that the author was in fact dead, only that she was not essential for

theoretically understanding the meaning of the text. Statements such as ‘ANT is not a theory of action’ (Latour, 1992b: 374) means that humans and human action are not meaningful in an Actor-Network recording of the world, not that they do not exist outside of its methodological recording of the world. This also explains why Latour in some statements makes explicit distinctions between humans on the one hand and technologies on the other:

Technologies bombard human beings with a ceaseless offer of previously unheard-of positions – engagements, suggestions, allowances, interdictions, habits, positions, alienations, prescriptions, calculations, memories. Generalizing the notion of affordance, we could say that the quasi-subjects which we all are become such thanks to the quasi-objects which populate our universe with minor ghostly beings similar to us and whose programmes of action we may or may not adopt. (Latour and Venn, 2002: 252-253)

Humans are hence clearly separate from other actants (technologies) albeit not master of, or mastering them.

7 LATOUR AND THE ETHICAL SUBJECT

If we agree that Latour in fact has an ethical position then, the foundation of this ethical position is that humans firstly *are* not, and secondly *should* not regard themselves special or singular, or in charge of the world. Such claims have gained more and more attention during the last decades as counter-anthropocentric perspectives have pointed to human shortcomings in controlling and directing the world, especially due to the scale and temporal and spatial reach of human action (c.f. Curry, 2006). In this approach Latour dismisses modern theory as well as the idea of ‘modern man’, claiming, ‘we have never been modern’ (Latour, 2012). By this he means humans cannot and should not give themselves the right to decide in advance the core poles and dimensions of processes and phenomena and to put human beings at centre of everything. Modern man thinks he is in charge of himself and the world, and this position is not only a chimaera, according to Latour, but also highly unethical.

Such a position reveals a huge gap between Latour and (post)modern ethical thinkers such as Bauman, even though Bauman (1993: 195). also claimed that human beings do not control technology and put forward:

The sole totality technology systematically constructs, reproduces and renders invulnerable is the totality of technology itself – technology as a closed system, which tolerates no alien bodies inside, zealously devours and assimilates everything that comes within its grazing ground. Technology is the sole genuine individual. Its sovereignty can be only indivisible and exceptionless. Humans, most certainly, are not excepted.

This relation between humans and technologies led Bauman (1993: 198) to conclude that the (human) moral self cannot survive in a technified world as it disregards rational calculation, disdain of practical uses and indifference of pleasure, and as technology leads to fragmentation of the (human) subject and turns human beings as well as everything else in the world into technical objects (Ibid: 195). However, even though Bauman, just like Latour, discusses the impossible position of a moral subject in the current complex technified world, he, in opposition to Latour, laments this as a loss, as he sees the moral human subject destroyed in a process where technologies have come to play an essential, but negative role. Bauman separates the technical from the human, and laments the transformation of man into a technical object, whereas Latour regards them interconnected from the start. There are however also similarities between the two. In his early works, Bauman (1993) blamed technology for the shortcomings of humanity, but he later on shifted to highlighting the role of cold, rational, commercialism for the ‘moral blindness’ of our times (Bauman and Donskis, 2013). Latour on the other hand always saw all actants, including technologies, as victims of rational (modern) man’s arrogance. In his later works Latour also urgently calls for a human passion that is put in contrast to the economic rationalism of ‘the moderns’ (Latour, 2013). Bauman’s and Latour’s perspectives on the conflation of the human and the technological are thus fundamentally different regarding human ontology, but besides this, their respective critiques of our current civilisation share similar ideas of what a moral human subject *is* and *should be*; they both call for a passionate, irrational, sensitive human subject, without megalomaniac tendencies, and they both put forward economization, commodification and the *lack of ethics* in current culture as the evil we must all fight.

8 BEYOND HOMO FABER IN DIGITAL CULTURE

This far we can conclude that even though Latour’s perspective of morality and ethics differ in fundamental ways from other’s, his critique of the contemporary world also end up in a call for an ethical human subject beyond cold, self-evident rationalism; beyond economic man.

What does that mean for our discussion about humans, technologies, morality and ethics? Firstly, following from Latour’s, but also others’, critique we can conclude that we *need to look beside Kant* and

the categorical imperative for other perspectives of human ethics, perspectives which does not force us into an anthropocentric hierarchizing of the world. Secondly, it is important to problematize the distinction between morality and ethics in order to be able to discuss a human approach to technologies and to the world more broadly. Latour identifies morality in the effects and consequences of human (and other) action but still calls for sound judgement and fair recognition of the other (however not restricted to the human species), why I believe staying with descriptive approaches such as disclosive ethics is not the answer to his call. Following Law (1992) then, leaving the idea of human morality (if restricted to rational agency) behind in favour of ethics (seen as a normative approach) seems plausible when aiming at changing a human-technology-conflating surrounding such as an algorithmic culture.

In order to learn from the anti-anthropocentric perspective of ANT in our attempts to change the world we must look for approaches to ethics that goes beyond the Kantian perspective. Perspectives that understand ethics as not finished and fixed obligations but developed and practiced in particular situations and contexts, articulated in judgements and negotiations rather than principles and rules, and as such adheres to a processual perspective of human development, and oriented towards the connected subject, away from human singularity (cf. Lambek, 2010: 43&55). Such an ethical consciousness must be searched for in what we do as well as in what we say and how we talk; an ethics that is practice-based but not restricted to behavioural consequences, rooted in everyday culture rather than based upon universal claims. Within the *ethical turn* in anthropology (Zigon, 2007, Brown 2016), such an approach is called an ethics of the ordinary (Lambek, 2010, Faubion, 2011), leaning on an Aristotelian perspective of ethics. An ethics of the ordinary is 'tacit, grounded in agreement rather than rule, in practice rather than knowledge or belief, and happening without calling undue attention to itself' (Lambek, 2010: 2). In contemporary ethical anthropology morality and ethics are also often used as synonyms as the separation of the two – practices and the value systems guiding them – is inherently difficult to conduct (Lambek, 2010: 8-9).

Such ethics follows Hannah Arendt's suggestion that *judgment* rather than rationality is the core of human ethics. Judgment is 'neither as free as Kantian reason nor as constrained as conventional morality' and occurs in 'an anticipated communication with others with whom I know I must finally come to some agreement' (Benhabib, 2003: 189; quoted in Lambek, 2008: 26), which makes it resolutely non-individualistic. Aristotelian ethics works with notions of 'the good' as it is developed in specific cultural contexts rather than specified duties signifying a universal 'right' (Couldry *et al.*, 2013: 45). As such, Waelbers and Dorstewitz (2014: 30) argue that this also relates to 'life ethical theories' whereby

the most important starting point is that morality must be trained or developed over time. Moral choices are not made by detached rationality but by involved participation in social life.

This also recognises it is within their networks that people become moral agents, and highlights the social situatedness of ethical thought (Ibid.).

Ethics as part of networks again leads our thoughts towards ANT. The role of non-human agents in (human) ethics has been largely discussed during the last couple of years, for example in the call for an 'ecological ethics' (Maxwell and Miller, 2008), where concerns for the planet is stressed a crucial question for media researchers (as well as for all human beings). Such eco-centric ethics stresses that, 'some or all natural beings, in the broadest sense, have independent moral status' (Curry, 2006: 64). In dialogue with ANT then, we must broaden this ethical notion to include not only 'natural beings', but also 'human-made entities' (Johnson, 2001), where technologies belong – taking into account the rights of Siri in my introductory story.

Building our understanding of ethics on the recognition of the other (in a broad sense) is also a *rejection* of the idea of a unified and delimited individual subject in charge of his or her world. Thinking of (human) ethics as something that requires another to become means we can or even should think of human ethics as different from that of things or machines, an ethics that *exists in communication*, however without 'modern' claims of human world domination.

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