Lester Embree/ Philosophy/ Florida Atlantic University/ Boca Raton, FL 33431/ USA/ 02/29/04; 03/08/04; 03/09/04; 04/25/04; 07/01/04 (3,560 words)

Indirect Action and Technology Reflectively Analyzed

ABSTRACT

After both direct and indirect actions are shown to be volitional, the role of intermediaries, services included, in indirect action is analyzed in terms of extrinsic and intrinsic uses. Comparison and contrast with similar components in valuing and indirect experiencing are relied on in the exposition. Ultimately, technology qua equipment using is shown to be a species of indirect action.

INTRODUCTION

1. Among other things, "indirect action" will be explored in this essay as an expression for a generic concept under which the expression "technology" denominates a species. Some members of the phenomenological tradition are preoccupied with the ontological disclosure foundational for human life and see the increasingly complex and powerful types of technology of modern times in these terms. But for all its cognitive foundations, technology itself is predominantly a practical phenomenon. And against the tendency of designating merely equipment as technology, the present writer has characterized it as the *using* of equipment.[1]

2. If indirect action is spoken of, the questions immediately arise of what direct action might be and how they differ. In the case of direct action, courses of events in the surrounding worlds of individuals and groups are affected in omission as well as commission through bodily movements and without resort to any intermediary. To build a sandcastle on the beach with one's bare hands is direct action, while additionally resorting to bucket and shovel will make that endeavor a mixture of direct and indirect action. To scratch an itch is also direct action, bodily movements then being used on the same body in which they occur. Some use the term "action" to include cases of distinctly *mental* activity, e.g., struggling to remember a name, but the expression "mental operation" can include that, leaving

[1] Lester Embree, "A Perspective on the Rationality of Scientific Technology or How to Buy a Car." In *Lifeworld and Technology*, ed. Timothy Casey and Lester Embree (Washington, D. C.: Center for Advanced Research in Phenomenology and University Press of America, 1989), pp. 145-163.

"action" for processes that include overtly recognized bodily movements. A bit of pondering can lead one to recognize that direct action—which is frequently overlooked, although quite valuable (much lovemaking omits specialized equipment)—occupies a relatively small part of life. In contrast, indirect action occupies an enormous part of life, so much so that it would be easy to conclude that all action is indirect, although, as just indicated, this is not the case.

3. The question of what is involved in technology conceived as a species of indirect action can be approached through reflective analysis.[2] The present essay will attempt to distinguish and describe various aspects and types of indirect action, as well as its objects, subjects, and intermediaries. Emphasis will be on the individual self and her action because for historical as well as methodological reasons this is the easiest point of entry to the topic. But this is not to say either that reflection on others is impossible or that types of passivity in which subjects are objects of actions performed by others might not be more common in a given life than the activities the individual herself performs. This essay may not reach what many thinkers consider the big philosophical issues of technology, but contributes to laying the foundations needed for doing so clearly.

4. "Reflective analysis" denominates what the present writer considers essential to the phenomenological approach in general, i.e., *prior to* the

[2] Cf. Lester Embree, *Análisis reflexivo*, trans. Luis Román Rabanaque/ *Reflective Analysis*, bilingual edition (Morelia, Mexico: Jitanjáfora, 2003).

disciplinary specification of this approach as ethnological, medical, philosophical, psychological, sociological, and so on. To perform reflective analysis, one adopts the theoretical attitude, and then within it turns from the straightforward to a reflective attitude. Thus one turns from the attitude in which things-as-encountered (constitutive phenomenologists speak of "noemata")—as well as, more conspicuously, the encounterings of things ("noeses")—are *overlooked*—and turns instead to the attitude in which encounterings and things-as-encountered are focused on. In the latter attitude, one can then recognize many differences among things (taking "things" in the broadest signification whereby anything is a thing) and produce descriptions in which many distinctions are expressed by a writer for readers to attempt to verify. These descriptions may be factual, but fictive cases are more often offered to help clarify universal essences or *eidē,* i.e., one does not need seriously to perceive or remember the building of sandcastles with or without tools in order to gain some clarity about what "direct action" designates. Such an analysis succeeds to the degree that the things in question comes to be understood with greater articulation and clarity.

INDIRECT ACTION AND ITS SUBJECT

5. More will be said about action than that it involves bodily movement will be returned to in the second part of this essay, but it can be added here that bodily

movement in the broad signification includes cases where the body does not move in whole or part. A so-called "poker face" resorted to in order to reduce the experiencing by others of whether one likes or dislikes the cards one has been dealt, how strongly one plans to bet, etc. is a case of especially one part of the body being kept from moving (but of course nothing should be betrayed by other parts either). Thus we can say that ceasing a particular bodily movement is a form of movement in the broad signification, which does seem a reasonable use of words. Deceptive behavior, e.g., to stimulate belief by others in one's confidence about the value of one's cards when one is actually bluffing, can also involve bodily movements, which can include an intensified stillness. More could be said about bodily movement, but this may suffice to show its place and role in direct and indirect action.

6. What of the mental process that makes a bodily movement an action? Indirect action— and indeed, action in general—is practical because the abstractly discernable thetic, or better, positional component best called, in a broad signification, "willing" predominates in it. This is not the only component necessarily involved in action, but the positional components of valuing and believing as well as those of experiencing, are subordinate here. Moreover, it needs to be recognized from the outset that willing in general is immediately directed at—or, better, intentive to—things that are real, i.e., things in time (in contrast to

atemporal idealities), and more specifically, to things lying in the future of the process of willing. That is to say, one cannot will things in the past or in the now, much less ideal objects such as numbers, immediately, though of course one can will a future remembering of a past event or some future calculating with numbers and thus mediatedly will things that are not future realities.

7. In other respects, immediate willing is like believing and valuing. Thus it can be positive or negative, i.e., willing-for or willing-against, or neutral, and is thus like valuing, disvaluing, and apathy or indifference. Then again, the positive and negative modes of positionality can be firm or shaky, i.e., certain or probable for believing and resolute or hesitant for willing. There are analogous parallels in the things-as-intended to, e.g., positive and negative values, on the one hand, and the positional characteristics of things willed-for and willed-against things, which seem best called uses, whereby some things are ends and others means. And there are intrinsic and extrinsic uses just as there are intrinsic and extrinsic values. These matters will be returned to.

8. Willing in the broad signification includes what seem best called "volitional *operations,"* which are willings in which an I is engaged actively or passively. These include choosings in a broad signification also covering cases that do not involve considering and selecting among alternatives; rather something that arises is passively accepted, i.e., simply gone along with willingly rather than

resisted. (Note that an I is actively engaged in willing-against when she resists something being imposed upon her.) In addition to operations, specifically *habitual* willing falls under the broad or generic signification of intentive process or encountering and there is indeed far more of this than there are operations. Habitual willing is affected by past experience such that similar actions (whether direct or indirect, or some combination of the two) are performed in similar situations without any I engaging in them, not all actions being, then, operations. Often, for example, one brushes one's teeth routinely while thinking of other things.

9. Thus far the emphasis in this analysis has been on action in individual human life, but of course humans belong to groups, and in many of these a collective willing often called cooperation occurs (which is not to deny that a group member can act against the wills of other group members). For groups it is best to speak of "customs" and even, where they long endure, "traditions," reserving the term "habit" for individual mental lives. Thus all the members of a skilled sports team adjust themselves in a coordinated way to changes in the actions and preparations to act they encounter in the opposition, as when a left-handed batter approaches the plate in baseball and the defense shifts in accordance with the game situation, the hitter's skills, etc. In this case the tradition is not especially deep, while a society devoted to monogamy for millennia has a deep or

long-standing tradition. (It deserves mention that there is habit and perhaps tradition among some non-human animals as well, but no more needs to be said about this here.)

10. The habitual and/or traditional stratum of human life underlies or founds the operational stratum. Thus to engage in answering the telephone, one must already live in a world including telephones, which is to say a cultural world, and things like telephones (and the desk on which it is kept, and the chair on which one sits at the desk in the room where one works, etc.) have cultural characteristics. These are constituted in tradition for the family, the business, or other social organization concerned, and in habit for the individual who lives and/or is working there.

11. However, even more fundamental than the stratum of habit and tradition, which Husserl called secondary passivity, is the stratum of automatic mental processes, which he called primary passivity. It is in these processes that nature is constituted, including other animate things. And just as operations presuppose the cultural things constituted in habit and tradition, habitual and traditional processes presuppose the constitution of natural things, which operations thus also indirectly presuppose. Thus a knife must have a size and shape and above all an edge for it to be able to cut whatever it is used for cutting (and perhaps specifically designed for

cutting). But a knife is typically an artefact, i.e., something deliberately shaped by human action.

12. The world today has so many artefacts that one might think that everything is artifactual, which is even more plausible if things non-deliberately affected by human action are considered artifacts. What about the path worn over time in the ground between the house and the well to which people go for water? If the path is merely determined by getting to the well, without any planning of where it should go, e.g., on which side of the big tree that stands in the way—even though the path is worn by human walking, it is not strictly an artifact. And if one is walking across the land by no pre-determined route, then whatever one's feet fall on might be thought natural. Yet the land is already cultural because we have learned that what is flat can be walked on, but it is not artifactual, unless, of course, the land has been deliberately flattened or otherwise shaped, which is often the case. Perhaps the surfaces of bodies of water are more obviously non-artifactual, but they too are cultural because one can encounter them in work and recreation.

13. There is positing—i.e., believing, valuing, and willing—in automatic conscious life, but types of what is best called "experiencing" are foundational there as well as in habit and traditions, on the one hand, and also in operations, on the other. Experiencings in the broad signification can be intentive either to ideal things or to real things. Set aside the intentiveness to ideal things, real things have

three sorts of givenness. Perceiving is intentive to things occurring in the same now as the perceiving; remembering is intentive to things in the past of the time in which the remembering occurs; and expecting has an object in the future. But these are species of direct experiencing. In contrast, there is also an enormous amount of indirect experiencing through depictions, indications, and verbal expressions—so much so that direct experiencing may be as overlooked as direct action is. Expecting and indirect experiencing are especially important for indirect action, which is, as already intimated, mediated and volitional.

THINGS-AS-ENCOUNTERED IN INDIRECT ACTION

14. Probably most philosophy of technology begins with relatively straightforward notions of various sorts of equipment and then focuses on cognitive foundations. Even with simple hand tools, e.g., brooms, there are questions of what is rightly believed in as their objects and how the equipment might or might not cause effects in them, e.g., whether trees can be chopped down with a broom. The emphasis for most thinkers is probably not on hand tools, but on machines with moving parts and non-human power sources, such as windmills, or equipment whose cognitive foundations are scientific, including, of late, electronics.

15. With the preparation in the previous section, however, the approach in the present essay is different. A classification of equipment is good, but much else needs to be understood first. To begin with, indirect action differs from direct action by essentially involving an intermediary. If one flies to another city and takes a taxi from the airport to one's hotel, the taxi, along with the highways and streets one travels on and money to pay for the ride, are all intermediaries. While some thinkers may resist accepting it, the taxi driver is functionally part of the taxi as a means of travel, and thus part of an intermediary. Similarly, in a restaurant, the waiter is central to the set of intermediaries including the cook, manager, table, chairs, dishes, etc., through which the diner gets her food. In these cases, the roles of the human intermediaries might best be called "service."

16. Some comparisons may bring further clarification. Indirect action is like indirect experiencing in that the representation, e.g., a photograph, is reflectively discernable and can be considered a species of intermediary. If one begins from the experiencing stratum, direct or indirect, in concrete encountering, then the typical tendency in much phenomenology of technology is to turn next to the believing that this experiencing founds, motivates, and possibly justifies. But for indirect action, the first component of the encountering properly considered is, as shown above, that of willing in the broad signification. Thus the comparison should run as follows: in indirect experiencing the representatum is originally overlooked, and

what is represented is what is focused on; in indirect action, the intermediary is likewise originally ignored for the sake of what might be called the "final object" of the action, which includes staying in the hotel or enjoying one's meal. Similarly, the focus is not on the bucket and pail, but on the sandcastle being built.

17. Analogously again, practical intermediaries and experiential representations are readily recognized. No matter how intimately connected they are with willing, valuing, and believing, experiencings via depictions, indications, and verbal expressions are not as such positional, while action of all sorts is. If we reflect upon a thing-as-valued, we can likewise distinguish the value from the thing valued. Similarly, the belief characteristic can be recognized as different from the thing believed in and the thing that is willed can be distinguished from its volitional characteristic or, better, its "use." For indirect action, discerning and describing uses is needed not only for understanding the intermediary, but also for understanding the final object.

18. Values have long been recognized. It is now common for them to be distinguished into intrinsic values and extrinsic values. These are the values that things have as valued for their own sakes and as valued for the sake of something else. A thing can have values of both sorts simultaneously. Setting a broken leg without anesthesia is quite painful, and the pain has intrinsic negative value. But a healed leg has intrinsic positive value, and the pain occasioned by the doctor's

realignment of the broken bones has extrinsic value for the sake of that expected good condition.

19. Valuing and values are not the same as willing and uses, yet the intrinsic/extrinsic distinction also holds for objects of willing. Indeed, the distinction between ends and means was probably recognized first in the history of thought, and the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic values derived from it. (Whether there are intrinsic and extrinsic belief characteristics in things-as-believed-in can be addressed in another essay.) Although "end characteristics" and "means characteristics" can be spoken of, the parallelism with the two types of values also deserves recognition. To form a parallel locution, the noun "use" can be specified as "extrinsic" or "intrinsic." For example, in the two cases of indirect action given above, the waiter and the taxi (driver included) have extrinsic use, whereas eating the meal and staying in the hotel have intrinsic use. Thus extrinsic and intrinsic uses are what ends and means have and correlate with two related sorts of willing, while extrinsic and intrinsic values correlate with valuing.

20. As the examples given intimate, intermediaries originally have extrinsic use, while the final object of indirect action (recall that direct action does not include an intermediary) has intrinsic use. Can something have both intrinsic and extrinsic uses analogous to the way the setting of the broken leg can have intrinsic and extrinsic values? The answer is yes, provided sequences of action, including

indirect actions and chains of ends and means, are recognized. Flying to the other city, taking the taxi to the hotel, and having a meal are phases in the larger sequence of actions called going to a conference. Then the plane (with pilot), taxi (with driver), and the plate of food (with waiter) are ends for means including tickets and money and thus have intrinsic use at the same time that they have extrinsic uses in a chain of ends and means extending beyond them.

21. Just as values can be positive, negative, and neutral, uses have these modes as well. This depends on whether or not the final object wholly or partly exists prior to the willing: if something already wholly or partly exists, the willing of it can be preservative or destructive; if it is wholly or partly inexistent, then the willing of it can be creative or preventative. Setting aside neutral willing as relatively rare but not unimportant, there is also the question of simply changing things. In this case, things already exist in whole or part, and the addition and removal of parts are again positive and negative, respectively. In many cases, at least a modifying can be analyzed into a combination of addings and removings. This may seem rather mechanical, but readily applies actually to changing of one's habits in learning, e.g., to perform the services of a waiter.

22. The behavior of a waiter soliciting orders, bringing food, collecting money, etc., makes up a case of what was termed *service* above. Service has extrinsic use when the waiter is used as a means to get one's meal, and in that

connection the meal itself has intrinsic use—it is the end. The waiter is the intermediary in this case of indirect action.

DEFINING TECHNOLOGY

23. What now of technology? There is value in speaking of "equipment" and of the using of equipment, where technology is concerned, particularly if the artificial adjective "equipmental" is also accepted. Provided a clear difference can be found for it, equipment can be recognized as a species of intermediary, and can also be used to differentiate a species of indirect action. Probably most readers accept that inanimate things can be equipment and would also accept that things including non-human animals, e.g., horse-drawn wagons, are equipment as well. But what of the taxi, which includes a human driver? Inasmuch as the driver is the most important component of the taxi, the entire ensemble (including both the driver and the vehicle), it can be categorized as belonging to the species of indirect action by means of human intermediaries rather than the species where equipment predominates. If one distinguishes between the driver and the vehicle, the former provides service and the latter is equipment by which the driver provides it. In short, here is indirect action employing other humans predominantly and indirect action employing equipment predominantly and only the latter is best called technology.

24. Analysis can go on further from here to distinguish types of equipment, e.g., by power source that is inanimate, non-human, or human, by form and degree of complexity, etc. In non-technological indirect action there are types of what might be called “functionaries” who perform services, some of whom are highly skilled and perform science-based actions (e.g., engineers and nurses), and are called “professionals,” etc. The practical world is a field of action some of which is direct but most of which is indirect and technology is a species of indirect action.