



Introduction to Philosophical Dialogue

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Carleton Christensen's paper 'What is so sustainable about services? The truth in service & flow' first published in Design Philosophy Papers no 3–4, 2007 (and republished here) was a philosophical intervention into the debate about whether services have lower environmental impacts than products. He contested the economic rationalist approach to this question, arguing that it rests on a very limited conceptualisation of rationality. He then went on to reveal a more nuanced understanding of rationality that inhabits an everyday 'commonsense' understanding of products versus services, an understanding that doesn't insist on simple substitutability and which makes room for decisions.

The paper prompted a response from William McNeill. This developed into a dialogue exploring some of the philosophical underpinnings of the paper. This 'philosophical dialogue' is published in this issue. It ranged across questions such as: the distinction between technology and technicity; different orders of rationality; what is meant by 'the everyday'; and the relevance of Heidegger and Aristotle to thinking sustainability

now. As the exchange is dense and complex in parts, I am providing here an introductory 'sign-posting' for readers who may not be familiar with some of the concepts addressed. What I have to say should not be taken as a comprehensive summary.

McNeill begins by affirming Christensen's analysis that the reductive rationality of much of today's political and economic discourse "tends to exclude from the start ... the possibility of fundamental transformations in our very ethos that need to be part and parcel of a shift toward long-term sustainability."

He asks if Christensen has drawn on Heidegger's thought, especially "his critiques of technicity and of calculative rationality", his early analysis of the 'tool being' of equipment and his later analysis in 'The Question Concerning Technology' in which all things come to be, increasingly, in a condition of orderability.

You could think of this as a discussion on 'the nature of stuff', taking as given a phenomenological approach which seeks to understand things as they are encountered in their context (most often, 'the everyday') rather than according to abstract (metaphysical) categories – such as defining the 'essence' or 'reality' of something as its 'physical properties'. It's important to remember that this is not just a question of picking and choosing (or of 'methodology'). What's at stake in the shift from metaphysics to phenomenology is what gets regarded as primary (or 'primordial') and implicitly, what it is to be, and to act in a world, while having dealings with things.

In his response to McNeill's first question, Christensen acknowledges the parallels with Heidegger's thought, while indicating that his own analysis of serviceability derives more from critical theory's critiques of consumer capitalism in which the product-world enables 'convenient', unreflective dealings with things. He then goes on to indicate how Heidegger's concern in 'The Question Concerning Technology' was with the activity of making, and how 'technological development' doesn't just cumulatively 'improve' material culture, but ushers in changes in the nature of production (from e.g., craft to industrial production) and fundamentally reconfigures the relation between form and matter – in the direction of "totally pliant matter" (that is, many kinds of modern materials) as well as the relation between maker/user and the made world (towards a condition of total orderability and total convenience).

The discussion then moves to the distinction between technology and technicity.

Christensen:

.... there is nothing wrong with 'modern technology' if by this one means those modern, sophisticated tools, devices and materials for making life easier. 'Modern technology' is objectionable only if it is understood to be the social, hence politico-economic organisation of life around the development and use of such tools, devices and materials.

McNeill:

Yet precisely this social, politico-economic organization of life is becoming thoroughly technical, or technocratic, today. “Modern technology,” in this sense, is not just, and not primarily, about technological products—this is part of Heidegger’s point in insisting that the “essence” of technology is itself nothing technological. The “essence” of technology, one might say, is technicity, understood as an all-pervasive way of being. The attempt to regulate, not just beings, but the very presencing of all beings as belonging to a network of standing reserve appears to be the ideal toward which modern technicity is unswervingly headed.

McNeill asks whether it’s a question of restricting technicity to “its proper sphere, where it would no longer encroach upon social and politico-economic existence”. He asks whether sustainability could be “be secured through scientific-technological means” or

..... can technology (in the supposedly benign sense) really be separated from technicity (as the pervasive, technocratic organisation of life)?

Christensen replies by pointing out that technocentric approaches already dominate contemporary discourse on sustainability and that this is a problem because they are conceptually deficient. But rejecting these reformist approaches doesn’t necessarily imply a rejection of “modern technology”. He argues that on a conceptual level it’s possible to make a distinction between technicity and technology, but on a practical and political level, the two may be impossible to separate. He suggests that technicity is a diminished form of rationality, in which means are foregrounded at the expense of ends. The implication is that it is vital that ends be open to revision and rational re-consideration “in the light of changed circumstances”. He then suggests that the concept of technicity only makes full sense if it is supplemented with a conception of economic agency, in particular an account of capitalism.

McNeill’s final question raises doubts about the appeal to ‘everyday’ or ‘commonsense’ reasoning in Christensen’s paper, because such reasoning is inevitably “historically, economically and politically determined and inflected”. He asks whether Aristotle’s notion of *phronesis* (“prudence” or practical wisdom) might be needed here, because:

Aristotle insists that *phronesis*, or true wisdom in practical human affairs, can flourish only if it is attuned by an openness to seeing the whole picture, to considering what is necessary with a view to “living well as a whole.”

He then raises the additional difficulty that Greek philosophy itself, according to Heidegger, was already tending towards a restricted 'technical' conception of rationality.

In his detailed reply, Christensen elaborates on the concept of the 'everyday' and on the limits and potentials of Aristotle's phronesis for deliberating on ends and means in contemporary contexts, emphasising that:

... distinctively phronetic deliberation about means-as-well-as-ends will be ... most successful, if it is undertaken at the political level, as the general search for a new way of our all living well – a way which is better adapted to, hence more optimal in, changed circumstances.