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On the Question concerning Animatechnics

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Abstract
This essay for the inaugural issue of *Technology and Language* explores the notion of animatechnics in its two meanings: living technology and animal technology. On the one hand, there is a fiction or utopian component in this notion, on the other hand, it raises the question about technical life beyond the human: Can technology be alive – other than metaphorically? How does animal technical life work? These questions can be fused into one and suggest the notion not of the command but of the request as a technical operation.

Keywords: Animatechnics; Fiction; Animal; Tool; Request

Аннотация
В этом эссе для первого выпуска журнала *“Технологии в инфосфере” (“Technology and Language”)* ставится вопрос об аниматехнике, о двух возможных значениях этого термина: живые технологии и технологии животных. С одной стороны, в этом вопросе содержится элемент фикции и утопии, с другой стороны, он возникает как вопрос о технической жизни за пределами человеческого, об инструментальном поведении животных. Может ли техника – не метафорически – быть живой? Как устроена техническая сторона жизни животных? Две вопросительные линии соединяются этим эссе в один вопрос: в вопрос о просьбе как технической операции

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0. The question I intend to raise has two dimensions. The first dimension is best mapped out by fiction; the second by some contemporary discussions in the philosophy of technology. Two dimensions and two points of view: one can be called alien, the other animal. Both of them lead beyond the human, all too human – to representations of technology, and they unite in what, following Thomas Nagel, can be called *sympathetic imagination*, puzzled by the question about 'what is it like ...': What is it like to use tools as aliens would use them? What is it like to use tools as animals would use them?

1. The fictional story *The Universe of Things* by Gwyneth Jones (1992/2011) is part of the "Aleutian" trilogy, a story about the colonization of the Earth by aliens, the Aleutians. It describes how an Aleutian arrives at a service station in car from Earth and asks a (human) mechanic to fix it. This is strange, since the Aleutians usually do not use Earthling technologies. Not only are their own tools and vehicles better and more environmentally friendly. Though they have been created, they are *alive* (they are built with bacteria from the aliens' intestinal flora). Moreover, it turns out that in the language of the Aleutians there is no concept for animals, for designating a life that would differ from their own. They communicate by way of telepathy – among themselves and with all living things – the messengers of "a talking world, a world with eyes." While repairing the car, the Earthling mechanic reflects on the differences between the tools of humans and Aleutians. Even if we ever were to invent a self-aware machine, he thinks, we will not be able to give up our creative role, discard ourselves as creators and rulers over our own creations. Our animals can become pets, but never one of us. We are unable to overcome this separation and isolation of each individual being, and no technical means will help us do so. Our "machines promise, but they cannot perform. They remained things, and people remained lonely." It turns out that the Aleutian's car is infected with alien "technical bacteria." The mechanic begins to work with it as a living creature, and, thus experiences a revelation (albeit frightening) of the aliens' *living technology*: The car speaks to him, the spanner or wrench in his hands grows skin, pulsates, breathes and merges with his body. "He had seen another world come into his life, reached out to grasp the wonder, and only found something worse than empty air. He had wanted the alien to give him dreamland, somewhere over the rainbow. Instead, he had found an inimical Eden – a treasure that he could no more enjoy than he could crawl back into the womb."

So, in the "inimical Eden" a first part of the question about animatechnics presents itself. Can technology be alive – other than metaphorically?

2. Perhaps, in order to get in touch with the "inimical Eden," it is not necessary to wait for the arrival of the Aleutians, who will undermine our naive isolationist narcissism. The animal world of our own planet constantly insults human self-esteem. In the first half of the last century it was generally believed that tools and instruments reliably indicate that they belong to humans and mark human emergence, that is, an active and intelligent

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attitude to the world. Humans were thought to be the only creature leading an instrumental life – until the 1970s and especially the work of Jane Van Lawick-Goodall (1970) on the tool behavior of birds and primates. The border separating and isolating humans from animals began to thin and melt before our eyes. After half a century of research on animal tool behavior it became clear that technical life is found, as in the *panpsychist* expression of Thomas Nagel, *all the way down*.

In biology, there is a general scheme for defining an animal tool: it is a modified material object – at least separated from the environment or from the animal's body – that is used for the purpose of a presumably effective impact on the environment or other objects. In the variety of animal tools, there are several groups: *proto-tools* (unmanufactured objects that are used as tools: stone anvils, baits), *tools* themselves, *meta-tools* which are used for making or obtaining other tools, *associated* or *sequential* tools which are applied in a specific order, and finally, *social* tools which involve the use of other living bodies as tools. To this last and most astonishing group of tools, we venture to add *anti-social* tools, which involve using a dead body as a tool where *instrumental 'change' amounts to mortification*.

Now, the second part of the question of animatechnics is the question of nonhuman (animal) technical life. How does animal technical life work?

3. We can catalogue the tools used by different animals throughout time. Primates actively make – often in four or more steps – wooden and stone tools. New Caledonian crows accurately select and use sticks, hooks, their own feathers and leaves to hunt insects. Leaf-cutting ants make technical objects from leaves, subjecting them to rather complex processing, and so on. Note that research on the technical life of animals suggests extremely ephemeral tools, such as water jets used by spinner fish (banded archerfish) to hunt insects – as well as by freshwater stingrays (*Potamotrygon castexi*) to extract food from hard-to-reach places – or such as the extracellular mucus of slime molds (*Physarumpolycephalum*), which plays the role of 'external memory.' The difficulty that appears in connection with such tools is the difficulty of definition. As Christopher Baber points out, if we consider the tool as an external extension of the body, the question arises how to distinguish one from the other – how to distinguish the body from its tools. He himself suggests that a distinction should be made on the basis of "cognitive activity": the tool is not innate, it requires discovery, invention and a certain athleticism in use, going through trial and error (Baber, 2003, p. 7-8, 2). The tool is not given; it requires that the body *adapt* to its use. The implicit presumption on which Baber's argument rests, however, is that *the instrument cannot be alive*. This is the reason why there is no place for social tools in his research. A tool can be considered something that *was* a living body or part of it (feather, bone, skin), but cannot be considered a living body. As with the auto mechanic in *The Universe of Things*, tool use must not begin until we are sure that the spanner is not breathing.

4. In social tools, we find the unity of the two parts of the question about animatechnics. In them, animals use *a living body as a tool*. The real virtuosos of social instrumentality are ants, who build bridges and other arched structures, roads, bivouacs, rafts, and traps

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out of their concatenated bodies. It is not only a fact that these complex objects are alive and ephemeral (they do not exist separately from use), but it is also a fact that they do not have an owner, there is no individual who is their privileged user. This is a tool without a master, a wedge (living its own life) without an auto mechanic. In order to demonstrate what the 'argument of animation' contributes to the definition of an instrument, it is enough to conduct a thought experiment. Imagine that the ant bridge was built by living ants – from the dead. This bridge would be much easier to recognize as a technical object. Thus, the protective and camouflage carapace, which is made from the corpses of ants by the assassin bug Acanthaspispetax from the family of Reduviidae, is obviously a composite tool. In contrast, it is more difficult to determine as such a bivouac composed of interlocked live ants of the subfamilies Dorylinae and Ecitoninae for the protection of the uterus and brood, which breaks up for further movement of the nomadic colony. Why is that? The main reason can perhaps be found in the structure of the very concept of 'tool.' As Heidegger wrote, the tool disappears from the (theoretical) field of vision when it is in use – it becomes an object of contemplative comprehension only in case of failure, loss of use. However, in the case of *The Universe of Things*, the animated spanner becomes – egregiously – noticeable. It literally catches the eye not because of breakage and failure, but on the contrary, due to its *excessive serviceability* and life which puts its handy and obedient instrumentality into question.

5. In philosophy (especially after Heidegger's *The Question Concerning Technology*), criticism of the instrumental understanding of technology prevailed. However, it seems that to get to the question of animatechnics, we need to go back to instrumentalism. First of all, Aristotle used the concept of "animate instrument," which he introduced in the *Politics*, to define the slave. The slave is described *physically* as a special *body* that is located in the gap between nature and the master, rendering – through his use as a tool – the latter a (free) human being. The slave instrumentally mediates the master's relationship with nature, being in the zone of indistinguishability between the human and non-human. Moreover, the slave is defined by Aristotle by the syntagma "use of the body" (ἡ τοῦσώματος χρῆσις, 1254b 18). In other words, the slave himself *uses his body as a tool*. The development of the concept of instrumentalism in Aquinas makes an interesting correction: Thomas considers the instrument in the context of the doctrine of the sacraments, revealing, in addition to the four causes of Aristotle, the fifth, *instrumental cause*, which assumes that something participates in action not by its own power, but instrumentally, so that it acts by the power of another. The instrumental cause is autonomous and operates according to its own internal law. The paradigm of the instrument in theology is Christ; in liturgy, it is the priest. The tool is divided into two operations: the one that depends on its shape and the one that is imposed on it by the master. The most remarkable thing here is that the tool is autonomous and does not depend on the principal cause: the axe does not know the object that is being made with it, but it cannot be made without the axe. In the future, the logic of instrumental cause fluctuates between absolute obedience (Francisco Suarez) and self-willed autonomy, absolute control and getting out of control. Summarizing the development of the idea of

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instrumentality in Western thought, Giorgio Agamben states that it is the concept of an absolutely obedient instrument that constitutes the paradigm of modern technology, outlining the symmetry between the slave and the machine. Slavery is to ancient humanity what technology is to modern humanity: both, as *bare life*, are beyond the threshold that opens access to the truly human condition (and both show themselves inadequate to this task: the modern way turns out in the end to be no less inhumane than the ancient one) (Agamben, 2015, p. 77-79).

6. In the midst of plants, slime molds, ants – and Aleutians, the history of the question of the animate instrument seems to be paralyzed or in a *freeze* (in the technical sense of the word) between its two poles – prehistoric and posthistoric, prehuman and posthuman. The restart of this history could begin with a reference to the accounts of technical thought, where the question of the tool is put in a fundamentally different way, perhaps with the American philosopher Steven Shaviro who wrote the foreword to Gwyneth Jones's *The Universe of Things* – thus, as it were, in a mirror of his own book of the same name. Conceptualizing the "inimical Eden" he comes to radical panpsychist conclusions, to the need to recognize that the feeling is found *all the way down* (Shaviro, 2014, p. 101). However, he does not ask the question of the animated spanner, that is, the question of how to lead a technical and instrumental life in a world in which everything has feeling. What does it mean to use a living body as a tool – or, more precisely and radically – what does it mean to use an instrument as a living body?

7. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the outline of an answer to this question was suggested by the pananarchist philosophers Wolf and Aba Gordins, who developed a very peculiar ontology of technology. According to the Gordins Brothers technology plays a role similar to that played by the technology of fire in stoic ontology (πῦρ τεχνικόν). In this perspective, the whole technical (pantechnical) world is indistinguishable from the panpsychical one: everything feels, everything leads a technical life – that is, on different levels everything invents in invention, everything adapts itself athletically to everything else. In this world, the spanner that the Earthling mechanic holds in his hands is *already alive*. How to handle it? By means of a word, but a special one – a word which leaves no room for a command or an imperative mood; by means of a *request*:

> we do not think of power and impact […] as the violent influence of an object on an object, we think of it as a property, as an internal entity. And this is why the word here means "a request"; we request something of an object. Simply, it perceives our action freely, voluntarily, according to its inner properties. (Gordins, 2019, p. 121)

8. Perhaps
the request as a technical operation
– this is what we must first *learn*
in order to approach *the question of animatechnics*
– and to make *the machines' promises*
come *true*.

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