



CARL MITCHAM

Professor of Liberal Arts and International Studies
Colorado School of Mines, USA

Extract from interview

5. With respect to present and future inquiry, how can the most important philosophical problems concerning technology be identified and explored?

It is by means of interdisciplinary engagements among historians, scientists, engineers, philosophers, and social scientists — not to mention physicians and lawyers — that many philosophical problems or issues concerning technology have been identified. These issues include the need for conceptual clarifications among different types of technology, relations between science and technology, the theory of technological (including medical and engineering) knowledge, the ontology of artifacts, the mutual interactions between technology and culture (including religion, politics, work, art, entertainment), the anthropological foundations and historico-philosophical origins of technology, and questions focused on goodness, obligation, justice, and the beautiful in and about technology.

The exploration of these issues nevertheless remains to be pursued and deepened especially in relation to on-going technological or technologically influenced change in multiple dimensions and at various scales: economic, environmental, global, genetic, and nanomaterial. That philosophy and technology studies has not precipitated out into a strong academic discipline after the manner of the philosophy of science, of religion, or of art may reflect how much there is to do. What has happened instead is the emergence of what might be called regionalizations of the philosophy of technology: environmental philosophy, philosophy of medicine, philosophy of computers, etc. In all instances what will continue to be crucial is interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary, and transdisciplinary work — which is why the theory of interdisciplinary, too, has a role to play in philosophy.

One way to pursue and deepen philosophy and technology studies would be through an interdisciplinary history of ideas involving what might be called an existential comparison and contrast. One of the under-considered issues is that of suffering. Consider, for example, a possible comparative assessment of the existential implications of Christian and Buddhist world views of suffering in relation to modern technology.

It is extremely difficult to compare the moral orders of the Christian versus the Buddhist cosmos. In the Christian view, at least as it has developed in the modern West, human suffering is seen as a phenomenon not to be accepted but to be heroically struggled against. There is something horrible and unacceptable, for instance, about letting an ill-formed infant or sick child die, about not donating an organ to someone in need, about not donating one's body to science so that death can be transmuted into a possible means for the cure of illness or disease. This is especially true insofar as those who might accept such events for others would not themselves forego medical interventions or live with their own suffering and death. In the words of Paul Farmer, founder of Partners in Health (PIH) and a humanitarian health activist, this is an "area of moral clarity":

When a person in Peru, or Siberia, or rural Haiti falls ill, PIH uses all of the means at its disposal to make them well — from pressuring drug manufacturers, to lobbying policy makers, to providing medical care and social services. Whatever it takes. Just as we would do if a member of our own families — or we ourselves — were ill (Partners in Health, Vision Statement).

From the Buddhist perspective, by contrast, the struggle against suffering takes a much more interior form. Suffering is viewed as a result of internal cravings more than external circumstances; internal desires are to be assessed and transformed more than the world in which they seek satisfaction. Indeed, to the Buddhist there are even respects in which there could appear to be something horrible and unacceptable about trying to keep an ill-formed infant or sick child alive by all available means, about donating one's organs or body to science out of a determined commitment to do good. The human desire for life is to be acknowledged, but we must struggle to place it in proper perspective, to avoid excessive attachment, even while experiencing and expressing compassion for life and its attachments. The Buddhist world is suffused by what might be described as a kind of compassionate melancholy. Buddhist compassion, in contrast to Christian charity, does not entail the relief of suffering so much as the cultivation of an insight into its foundations that allows for a stepping aside from both pleasures and sufferings.

The anthropologist Michael Carrithers, in an ethnographic study of the way of life of *The Forest Monks of Sri Lanka* (1983), offers one entre into a perspective that is deeply foreign to European world views. At one point Carrithers describes how the traditional Jataka tales of the many lives of the Buddha weave together "the other-worldly values of asceticism and the this-worldly values of the family" (p. 90) so as to combine a serious compassion for the family and the suffering experienced when one of its members renounces the world, with the presentation of such renunciation as a heroic act that the family accepts through its own painful but heroic affirmation.

As Carrithers summarizes the situation:

The struggle for perfection by the Bodhisattva in the Jataka cycle is cast so that the dearest and most common desires of the flesh and family life are called upon to bear witness to the heroism of sacrifice and renunciation. If your own wife and child are dear to you, say the Jatakas, how much more precious must it be to renounce them? And if your own flesh is dear to you, how much more precious must it be to sacrifice it? Hence, through the countless births, the Bodhisattva sacrificed a mountain of flesh, an ocean of blood, as the Jataka poets are fond of saying; while the woman who was his wife in so many births, and whom he left in his last birth to become the Buddha, wept an ocean of tears for him. The [hearer of such tales], of whatever condition or sex, can therefore identify with underlying Buddhist morality because the emotional charge inherent in worldly life animates the (more noble) values of renunciation. ... It is quite possible ... to use the supreme status accorded the Buddha and his wilful renunciation to cast a glorious, if melancholy, light on family life itself... (p. 92).

In his interpretation of the Jataka tales, Carrithers emphasizes how renunciation is presented in a doubly erotic context: the love of the mother for her son and the eros of renunciation itself, and "how asceticism and renunciation — the taking of special vows, the voluntary submission to pain, the leaving of the pleasures of the world — appear over and over again" (p. 94). The trick is to accept actively and not to become passive in the acceptance of evil. One must struggle within limits to save dying children, and genuinely suffer the loss of children on those occasions when they die. One must not replace a compassion within limits with a dispassionate or unfeeling acceptance of death.

Despite the apparent foreignness of this Buddhist sensibility to the Christian world view, one can find traces of it in the Christian tradition, especially the early stories of Christian martyrs. One example would be the story of Saint Perpetua. In the 2nd century Perpetua, a young mother, who was condemned to death because of her faith, was implored by her father, for his sake and the sake of others, to forswear the path of martyrdom. "Look upon your brothers; look upon your mother and mother's sister; look upon your son, who [because he still nursed at her breast] will not survive after you." The response, contained in the *Vibia Perpetua* that she wrote in prison, has a zen-like quality: "Do you see this pitcher? Can it be called anything other than what it is? No, he answered. In the same way I cannot call myself other than that which I am, a Christian."

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