

The Public Thing: On the Idea of a Politics of Artefacts

Mark Coeckelbergh
Department of Philosophy,
University of Twente

Abstract

Is there a politics of artifacts, and if so, what does it mean? Defining the issue as a problem about the relation between the human and the non-human, I argue that our common philosophical concepts bar us from an adequate understanding of this problem. Using the work of Hannah Arendt and Bruno Latour, I explore an escape route that involves a radical redefinition of the social. But the cost of this solution is high: we would lose the metaphysical foundation for our belief in the absolute value and dignity of humans. We should pay that prize only if we gain a better understanding of what we are doing and what we want to do together – with things.

Keywords: Politics of artifacts, non-humans, the social, Arendt, Latour

Introduction

In 1980, Langdon Winner made a famous argument about the relation between politics and artifacts. He suggested that bridges leading from New York to the beaches of Long Island were intentionally designed so low as to keep poorer people (many of them Afro-Americans) out: they would use public transportation, but buses could not pass under the bridges (Winner 1980). Although Winner's interpretation turned out to be counterfactual (Joerges 1999), the story illustrates that artifacts *can* have political consequences, whether or not such consequences are intended. As Verbeek puts it, things *do* things (Verbeek 2005). In this sense, there can be something like political studies of artifacts: empirical studies of the political consequences artifacts have.

I suspect, however, that the problem is not sufficiently explicated and described by such an approach. In order to understand what is at stake, we must track down the problem's roots, roots that reach deep into the conceptual resources of our culture. In this essay, I reflect on the relation between politics and artifacts by defining the issue as a conceptual problem concerning the relation between the human and the nonhuman. I argue that the philosophical concepts we use bar us from an adequate understanding of the politics of artifacts and of related notions such as the idea of a technological culture. Although many philosophers of technology have paid attention to the consequences of things and have developed new concepts to discuss this issue (for instance Heidegger, Ihde, and Borgman – for an overview see Verbeek 2005), few have drawn the full implications for our conception of the social. Hannah Arendt and Bruno Latour are an exception. Using their work, I will explore a route towards a politics of artifacts that involves a radical redefinition of the social that transgresses the human/non-human boundary. I give the example of humanoid robots to illustrate the approach. However, I also show that the price to pay for this solution is high.

Humans and Things

Much of our modern thinking assumes a strict distinction between humans and artifacts. Consider dualisms such as freedom and necessity, humans and things, subject and object, and spirit and matter. On this view, a ‘politics of artifacts’ is a contradiction in terms. Politics has to do with human affairs, with society, not with things. There is no conceptual space for a politics of artifacts.

Let me first clarify the problem by using Arendt’s work. In *The Human Condition* (1958) Arendt makes a distinction between labour, work, and action. Let me limit my summary of these distinctions to a brief description of work and action. Action is what politics is about: it is about speech, about acting in the public sphere. Work, by contrast, is the making of things, artifacts. It is a label for the sphere of technology – understood as the *techne* of craftsmanship, not as industrial production, which resembles the process-character of labour – different from the sphere of politics. With words we reveal who we are, with words we give shape to the collective, which in Arendt is defined as the *polis*, that is, a political community. Thus, there is a strict distinction between humans and artifacts, between words and things, between the creation of meaning (culture) and the making of objects (technology), between political subjects that speak and mute objects that are in no way part of the political.

Bruno Latour has described this as a problem of the separation between things and humans (Latour 2004, p. 36), nature and society (p. 37), matters of fact and matters of concern (p. 22), risk-free objects and a risky social order (p. 22), facts and values (p. 30), the external world and the prison of the social, the ahistorical and the historical. Latour’s concern is with a politics of nature; the main problem he addresses is the possibility of a political ecology. My concern in this paper is the politics of artifacts. Where are artifacts located in these conceptual schemes? Do they belong to nature? No, because they are human-made. Do they belong to the human, cultural sphere? No, because they are objects, not subjects. They do not speak. Thus, holding on to these distinctions, there is no way in which we could conceive of a politics of artifacts or related terms such as a technological culture. Both are, within this framework, contradictory terms. Neither do they fall within the categories Arendt distinguishes and wishes to separate, nor do they correspond to the distinctions Latour discerns and wishes to criticize.

In order to conceive of a politics of artifacts, then, we must move beyond the dualisms built into our thinking. But what does this ‘going beyond’ imply? Does it mean that we ‘bring artifacts into politics’ or ‘bring politics into artifacts’? That seems a ‘natural’ response to Winner-type demonstrations. Politics must be concerned with artifacts, since they have political consequences. But is this response radical enough, given that our thinking is saturated with the conceptual distinctions outlined above? How radical should our conceptual change be?

Towards a Politics of Artifacts

Let me argue why we must go further than ‘bringing artifacts into politics’ by drawing on Arendt and Latour again.

While Arendt’s distinction between work and action certainly represents the conventional dualisms outlined above, *The Human Condition* offers another view of technology as well, which I shall summarize as the claim that things act politically. To construct my interpretation, let me select two arguments from Arendt.

First, the political needs things, since they build a common world. Influenced by her teacher Heidegger, Arendt notes about the public realm:

To live together in the world means essentially that a world of things is between those who have it in common, as a table is located between those who sit around it; the world, like every in-between, relates and separates men at the same time. The public realm, as the common world, gathers us together and yet prevents our falling over each other, so to speak. What makes mass society so difficult to bear is not the number of people involved, or at least not primarily, but the fact that the world between them has lost its power to gather them together, to relate and separate them.' (Arendt 1958, p. 52-53)

Thus, technology is necessary for action. The 'community of things' gathers us together (p. 55). Common sense needs common things.

Second, the political does not only depend on things, but things become also political. In this argument, Arendt understands the broader, cultural significance of technology. Although Arendt identifies politics with speech and big deeds, at several places in the book she supports exactly the opposite view: technology speaks and does things; technology has great political significance. This is already apparent in her (often disregarded) prologue, which starts not with the story of a 'political' deed but the story of a 'technological' deed: the launch of Sputnik. For Arendt, this launch is yet another event that marks our efforts to escape the earth. Since elsewhere deeds and events are identified with political action, we are led to conclude that Arendt's example demonstrates not the silence of technology, as she suggests, but its scream: a loud voice calling for escape from the earth. Of course this is not meant literally; Arendt argues that technology assumes a political dimension – 'political' understood in an Arendtian sense as action and speech.

However, a more explicit acknowledgment of the political role of artifacts can be found in Chapter 6. Here we are offered another technological story – a term that would be contradictory according to Arendt's distinction between work and action: the story of the telescope. She locates the invention of that instrument at the beginning of the story of modern culture, which she interprets as a story of alienation. The telescope changed our way of thinking, since it made us treat the earth from outside, from an Archimedean point (Arendt 1958, p. 262). With the help of technology, Arendt argues, modern man has 'removed himself from the earth to a much more distant point than any Christian otherworldliness had ever removed him' (p. 320). The implication of this story is that technology is viewed as having a political role. What scientists did and do in 'the unseen quiet of the laboratories' turns out 'to have greater news value, to be of greater political significance, than the administrative and diplomatic doings of most so-called statesman' (p. 324). Work and action (understood in an Arendtian way) are blended in the political significance of things. Technology acts. I conclude from Arendt that artifacts are 'public things': they gather us together and change the world and our thinking.

Interpreted in this way, Arendt is entirely in line with Latour. Latour has studied 'the unseen quiet of the laboratories' and concluded that what happens there is of the highest political significance and should be of political concern to us. He is known for the Actor-Network theory, according to which both things and humans are *actants*. In *Reassembling the Social* (2005) he tries to re-define the social and in *Politics of Nature* (2004) he provides a systemic account of what he calls a 'political ecology'. Here I will use the latter work, which offers clearer arguments directly relevant to my topic.

Having rejected the dualisms mentioned above, Latour proposes a new conception of the social. Rather than having an 'outside' nature separated from society, he proposes a 'one-house' collective (Latour 2004, p. 37). There is no longer a separate 'assembly' of things and an 'assembly' of humans, no two separate worlds of scientists and politicians. As an example he mentions the Kyoto 'conclave' (which made the climate treaty), which included facts and concerns, scientists and politicians (p. 56). Both the issues we are now dealing with (such as global warming) as well as the parties involved (scientists and politicians) require a different conceptual framework. There is one collective that mobilizes, recruits, and domesticates new nonhumans. Neither scientists alone, nor politicians alone can resolve the issues (p. 38). This also changes the meaning of the term 'discussion': 'speech is no longer a specifically human property,' nature is no longer mute (p. 65). Things speak. There are spokespersons that represent all kinds of entities, whether scientific or political. Things are no longer 'objects', since they make a difference, speak, provide value, animate actions, and give form to humans (p. 88). A different vocabulary has to replace that of facts and values (p. 111). There is no longer a fact-value distinction; there is no longer a nature separate from culture or society. The challenge is to incorporate new nonhumans in the collective, and to live together with them. In this conclusion of *Reassembling the Social* he summarizes this task: the progressive composition of one common world (Latour 2005, p. 254).

This renders Latour's conception of the social very different from that of Arendt. For Arendt, the social is a deplorable mix of categories that should have been separated (labour, work, and action). She writes about what she calls 'the rise of the social': the emergence of 'that curiously hybrid realm where private interests assume political significance that we call "society"' (Arendt 1958, p. 35). In Arendt's modernism, hybrids are to be avoided. In Latour's amodernism, there are many hybrids (Latour 1993), and we are urged to adapt our concepts to that reality.

Hybrid Politics: Intelligent Robots

A new hybrid that may illustrate the approach suggested here is the case of intelligent robots that interact with humans. Consider companion robots, pet robots, household robots, care robots, sex robots, military robots, etc. Although such robots are only just emerging, they provide an interesting case, since they are more explicitly 'political' than many other artifacts. If they are really going to be part of our daily lives, as some scientists predict, then this raises the question of how to live together with them.

Now if we took the 'old' approach, we would have to see them as 'mere things', as objects that stand in sharp contrast to our human subjectivity. The political consequence we would probably take is to see them as slaves. This is what we have done with some animals, women, and other entities that we (first) considered as nonhuman (not-man). In this case, there could be only a Winner-type politics of artifacts, for instance concerned with who gets access to such robots (most probably the rich). Such discussions are necessary and useful, but they do not touch the more fundamental problem regarding the relation between the human and the non-human. The Arendtian-Latourian alternative I sketched above has the ambition to tackle that issue. The way in which intelligent humanoid robots may be 'political' in Arendt's and Latour's sense is that they can have a significant impact on our thinking and on the way we live together. First, intelligent robots may change our self-definition as humans, especially if they resemble us in some ways. In the West, we typically define the human by distinguishing ourselves from non-humans, for example animals and machines. We insist that we are not ('merely') animals and not ('merely') machines. These self-definitions tend to follow scientific and technological developments. For instance, Darwinism has forced us to re-define ourselves. Today we typically define ourselves in

relation to computers. It is likely that in the near future we will define ourselves in relation to intelligent humanoid robots. Thus, just as the telescope or space travel is related to wider cultural change and change in thinking, some robots may have the potential to play an equally significant 'political' role. In this (Arendtian) sense, they might 'act'.

Second, such robots are likely to have a more direct impact on 'politics' in the sense that their introduction into society is likely to change the way we live together. This is a two-way process. For instance, today the development of care robots is often justified by reference to financial considerations, which are linked to our conception of elderly care and of society. Once such robots are introduced, they then change our practices of care and, ultimately, our conceptions of living together. Politics, then, becomes a hybrid realm that includes humans and non-humans such as robots.

Thus, both Arendt's suggestions about the political and cultural significance of technology and Latour's political ecology go beyond Winner's or – to some extent – Verbeek's approach.¹ According to my interpretation of Arendt and Latour, the question concerning the politics of artifacts is not merely and not only about what political consequences a particular artifact has in a particular context; it concerns the more fundamental question of how to redefine politics itself.

Note that in my interpretation of Arendt and Latour, to say that artifacts 'speak' and 'act' has a specific meaning that is different from ascribing *agency* (e.g. Floridi and Sanders 2004) or *intentionality* (Kroes 2002; Verbeek 2008) to things. Some artifacts can both 'speak' and 'act' in Arendt's or Latour's sense; perhaps some future intelligent robots that have both great cultural significance and become part of the political sphere. But most things that 'speak' and that have political significance (in Arendt's or Latour's sense) lack *agency*. Consider the telescope Arendt refers to: it cannot be called an agent by any description, but it has 'acted' in Arendt's sense. Agency is not required for things to join the collective, to gather us together or to change the direction of our culture. Moreover, while the collective and the politics is hybrid – consisting of things and humans – the entities themselves need not be hybrid or have 'hybrid intentionality' (Verbeek 2008). One should not confuse the claim concerning the hybridity of the social with claims about cyborgs and other hybrid entities.

Note also that this approach to robot politics is very different from giving (some) robots rights. If we want to do that, we have to engage in discussions about whether or not robots have agency or whether or not they are political or moral subjects. Within the alternative conceptual framework, the politics of artifacts has no need to bother with such tiresome debates. It has replaced the old political concepts with new ones. The subject-object distinction is no longer the most relevant distinction here. The question is whether or not, and how, to draw robots into the social sphere, the collective. Giving robot rights is merely the opposite of enslaving them. The conception of one collective reaches beyond such master-slave choices.

In my experience, this approach is rather close to, for instance, the way Japanese culture tends to view humanoid robots and the distinction with humans. One scientist told me that he simply does not understand why the human/non-human distinction is as relevant as we (in the West) think it is. And Latour argues that his approach is close to that of non-Western cultures. These remarks, by themselves, do not constitute an argument for the approach. Moreover, cultures are neither homogeneous nor static, there is no sharp Western/non-Western divide and all cultures are always (a) modern to some extent. However, these comments signal that there is much to learn from empirical anthropology – not in order to glorify difference or to indulge in exoticism, but in order to fine-tune the suggested conception of a politics of artifacts. If it is hard for us to imagine the

social as one collective, rather than a sphere of humans (culture) as opposed to a sphere of non-humans (nature), then this is so since we are used to a modern metaphysics that separates both spheres. It can be enriching to engage with views that view human/non-human relations differently and that have a different blend of modern and amodern elements than our own. Of course this may not lead us to change our view. The social metaphysics proposed by Latour is hard to swallow. I return to this issue below.

The Cost

Imagine we are attracted to the above sketch of a politics of artifacts as a redescription of the political. Are we fully informed about its costs? Are we prepared to pay the philosophical bill? Before drawing conclusions, let me provide some consumer guidance.

The dualisms rejected by Latour are not exclusive to the issue of a politics of artifacts, but form the basis of much of our moral and political thinking, in particular modern thinking and humanist thinking. The human/nonhuman distinction as a metaphysical distinction, the freedom/necessity dualism, the nature/society dualism, the fact/value distinction – without them, modern philosophy but also humanism would be quite lost. Let me limit my discussion to one issue only. Rejecting the dualisms, as Latour does, means that we would have to let go of the metaphysical foundation of our belief in the absolute value and dignity of humans. It means letting go of humanism. For instance, it is only on the basis of a strict human/non-human distinction that we can say that humans ‘as such’ should have alienable rights. An entirely amodern and non-humanist culture (if such an idea is intelligible at all) could know moral concern for human suffering, but would not voice this concern by using the human/non-human distinction.

Just as the existentialists declared that we must draw and accept the full consequences from the death of God (Sartre 1946), I suggest that post-humanists will have to draw the full consequences from the death of the human – the decline of the belief in the human as the superior entity in the universe metaphysically separated from non-humans. Can any human face that *Angst*? Or should post-humanists continue to live ‘inauthentic’ lives in ‘bad faith’: live *as if* their humanist notions are adequate, while they should know better?

Perhaps the *Angst* can be mitigated by taking an historical and cross-cultural approach. It may be a consolation to know that, just as there have always been people who were very well able to live their lives without monotheism, there always have been people who lived their lives without humanism. So if such lives are *possible*, maybe existential *Angst* should be replaced by the demand to make a judgment about what way of living and what way of living together is preferable, better.² This, certainly, is a responsibility we cannot escape. It is the moral and political question itself.

But why should we become post-humanists? And should we want to be amodern in the first place?

Conclusion

Arendt’s notion of politics excludes artifacts, and Latour’s analysis of the distinction between nature and society shows that that distinction leaves no room for conceptualizing the political significance of artifacts. However, in their own way both authors offer elements that allow us to conceptualize a veritable *res publica*: the ‘public thing’. Things act and speak. The crucial move that makes this concept of a politics of artifacts possible is a redefinition of the social as one

hybrid sphere, one collective in which there is place for both humans and non-humans. Whether or not we embrace that concept, both authors provide good arguments for the existence and necessity of a politics of artifacts. There is already a hybrid common world to some degree. It is now up to us whether or not we are prepared to draw the consequences from this and (re)conceptualize that world. Both Arendt and Latour challenge us to expand our political imagination. But how far are we prepared to go? If we join Arendt, we might initially be under the impression that we can retain our modern framework, but soon find out that her thought is closer to Latour than we might have expected. If we follow Latour's line of thought, we most certainly have to part with our dearest dualisms on which we have founded our modern (and humanist) beliefs. We might want to pay the prize only if it allows us to gain a better understanding of what we are doing and what we want to do together – with things. But that is the criterion. And if we're unsure what direction to take, there is at least this consolation: according to Latour, uncertainty is one of the main characteristics of the new politics.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the anonymous referees for their helpful comments and corrections to the text.

References

- Arendt, H. 1958. **The Human Condition**, Chicago/London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Floridi, L and Sanders, J.W. 2004. "On the Morality of Artificial Agents", *Minds and Machines* 3: 349-379.
- Joerges, B. 1999. "Do Politics Have Artefacts?", *Social Studies of Science*, 29: 411-431.
- Kroes, P. 2002. "Design Methodology and the Nature of Technical Artefacts", *Design Studies*, 23(3): 287-302.
- Latour, B. 2005. **Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory**, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.
- Latour, B. 2004. **Politics of Nature**, Cambridge, MA/London: Harvard University Press.
- Latour, B. 1993. **We Have Never Been Modern**, trans. C. Porter, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Sartre, J.-P. 1946. **L'existentialisme est un humanisme**, Paris: Nagel.
- Verbeek, P.-P. 2005. **What Things Do**, Pennsylvania: Penn. State University Press.
- Verbeek, P.P. 2008. "Cyborg Intentionality: Rethinking the Phenomenology of Human–Technology Relations", *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*, 7(3): 387-395.
- Winner, D. 1980. "Do Artifacts Have Politics?", *Daedalus* 109(1): 121-136.

Endnotes

- 1 Verbeek's post-phenomenological approach is in fact more radical than that of Winner since it involves a redefinition of the relation between subject and object. Latour wishes to go beyond the subject-object distinction itself. However, I will not further discuss the differences between Verbeek and Latour.
- 2 A modernism or post-humanism does not engage in post-modernist celebrations of difference combined with the refusal to make moral judgments and comparisons. For a start, it judges modern culture to be deficient, and Latour explicitly rejects the view that non-modern cultures are better than ours by definition.