Dominic Smith, *Exceptional Technologies: A Continental Philosophy of Technology*

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In this compact and very well-structured book, professor Dominic Smith, lecturer in Philosophy at the University of Dundee, UK, provides a compelling introduction to a new concept in the philosophy of technology with potentially broader philosophical implications. Beside philosophers of technology, the book may appeal to philosophers interested in diversifying philosophical theories and methods. The idea of "exceptional technologies" aims at recovering a transcendental approach to enrich our understanding of the empirical reality of technologies. Through the five chapters that make up the book, Smith pursues three main goals: to argue in favor of a transcendental method of argument in philosophy of technology—not in opposition to, but in alliance with empirical approaches; to introduce the concept of exceptional technologies as a new valuable topic in the philosophy of technology; and to caution against a picture of philosophical method in terms of "turning", proposing instead one of "mapping". The introduction and conclusion of the book and of each chapter provide useful summaries to navigate comfortably through the various sections. In developing his arguments, Smith touches upon and engages with a number of different fields, theories and authors such as Edmund Husserl, Michel Foucault, 4E Cognition, media studies and the speculative turn in continental philosophy, situating them in relation to a transcendental method.

Smith builds upon a set of limits he individuates in the aftermath of the so-called empirical turn in the philosophy of technology. The empirical turn took place in the 1990s thanks to the work of Dutch and American philosophers such as Hans Achterhuis, Don Ihde, Peter-Paul Verbeek and others. The main reasons for the necessity of a turn in the philosophy of technology came from critiques directed at the approaches typical of the continental tradition, such as those found in the "classic" philosophies of technology of the likes of Heidegger, Jaspers, Jonas, Ellul and Marcuse, who were accused of limiting their analyses to the transcendental aspect of technology, that is its conditions of possibility. According to the philosophers of the empirical turn, classic philosophy of technology had become too interested in the abstract essence of *Technology* in general, to pay attention to the particular reality of concrete technological artifacts. By focusing exclusively on the transcendental conditions of possibility of technology, they missed the concrete social and

material effects that technologies exert in contexts of design and use, leading them to consider technology only as a monolithic force that ensnares human beings to follow its biddings.

According to Smith, such a turn has had problematic consequences. It reified and essentialized the transcendental method into a detached realm of its own, repeating the same mistake they attributed to classic philosophy of technology; it invited philosophers of technology to rely on common-sense ideas of technology, rather than to problematize the notion; and it created a precedent to describe philosophical progress in terms of "turning". These three critiques form the starting points which Smith's arguments build upon, addressing them, respectively, by recovering a sense of the transcendental; by discussing the idea of exceptional technologies in order to provoke us not to take the meaning of "technology" for granted; and by promoting a picture of philosophical argument in terms of mapping rather than turning.

The discussion about the necessity and validity of recovering a transcendental method in the philosophy of technology is developed in the course of the first three chapters, where Smith gets to the core of his methodological proposal (Chapter 1), addresses potential critiques of infinite regress (Chapter 2) and offers evidence of this method being already visible in approaches to embodiment conditions in media studies and 4E Cognition (Chapter 3). In chapter 1, Smith argues for the possibility to decouple the formal structure of the transcendental argument both from epistemological interpretations based on Kant's transcendental idealism, and from ontological interpretations based on Heidegger's positions in *Being and Time*. Such a methodological and formal concept of the transcendental takes the following form: "given X, an approach is 'transcendental' where it enquires into *a priori* conditions for X". In the empirical context of technological artifacts, a transcendental method entails an inquiry into the different conceptual schemes through which we make sense of a given artifact. These include its logical presuppositions, its social, historical and material preconditions and so on, as the studies presented in Chapter 3 illustrate. Taking the adjectival form of a transcendental method of argument, Smith avoids the danger of essentializing the transcendental into a separate realm, employing it to question how we make sense of the empirical givenness of technologies.

In Chapter 4 Smith presents three illustrative cases of exceptional technologies. An exceptional technology consists of a marginal artifact or technology, an *exception* to a received sense of what constitutes a technology in a given context of design, implementation or use. The purpose of this concept is to help draw out and challenge often implicit conditions of possibility that make up the received sense in a certain context. By applying a transcendental method to investigate empirically given technological artifacts, Smith focuses on their conditions of possibility not

at the expense of the empirical, but rather with the aim of problematizing their empirical condition in a richer fashion. In other words, by looking for and inquiring into technological exceptions within a defined context, Smith argues it is possible to reveal implicit preconditions that might challenge widespread beliefs about it, opening up the discussion to address issues currently disregarded in mainstream debates. The case studies chosen for Chapter 4 are particularly illustrative because they represent technologies that are merely imagined, failed, or with an impossible aim. It is precisely in virtue of their marginality in comparison to more common technological artifacts that these technologies function particularly well as focal objects that may help philosophers question how we make sense of less exceptional artifacts and practices in current debates. By inquiring into such illustrative cases, Smith aims to show how exceptional technologies could, in a general sense, help focus attention to crucial political, economic, aesthetic, epistemological and ontological aspects of current technologies and practices.

One of the most refreshing points addressed in *Exceptional Technologies* is probably found in chapter 5. In it, the author assesses the widespread idea that philosophical debates progress (and should do so) through a series of thematic and methodological twists and turns of focus that progressively refine and sharpen the concepts investigated. This tendency is represented in the philosophy of technology by the long series of "turns" that followed the empirical turn, such as the ethical turn and the ontological turn, and on the continental side of philosophy by the recent speculative turn. However, Smith points out that a crucial consequence of adopting a methodological picture in terms of turning is that, while moving attention *towards* a certain topic, a turn also moves it *away* from others, with the effect of marginalizing theories and approaches that do not fall into the mainstream. Such an understanding is descriptive as much as normative, as it is meant both to portray how philosophers have addressed philosophical discussions, and to sanction those who stray out of the purview of the most recent "turn" by clinging to older concepts or attempting novel approaches. According to Smith, a methodology of turning conveys a narrow picture of philosophical discussion that fails to recognize the historical reality of debates and the philosophical potential of alternative theories. In contrast, Smith proposes an idea of philosophical method in terms of *mapping*. Different theories and disciplines within and outside of philosophy may follow different methodologies and yield different results, creating a rich and diverse field for debate not limited by a single approach or understanding, and produce potential for cross-disciplinary work. Smith's own proposal does not represent a "transcendental turn" precisely in this sense, as he explicitly denies that exceptional technologies constitute the single most important topic in philosophy of technology. Smith's intention is simply to add them to the toolbox of useful concepts that philosophers

of technology may employ. In this way, Smith shows how mapping, as a method, should be a collaborative and open-ended enterprise, and not a way to aim at an absolute God's eye view. His ultimate aim seems to be to keep the debate open to different theories, approaches and disciplines.

As a last point closer to the interest of EJJP readers, *Exceptional Technologies* explicitly acknowledges that adopting a picture of mapping as philosophical method enables the possibility to explore and draw from different philosophical traditions, whether continental, analytic or non-Western. Yuk Hui has indeed started to pave the way in this direction with his 2016 *The Question Concerning Technology in China*. The interest in Japanese and other non-Western philosophies can be bolstered precisely by viewing philosophy as a kind of contingent mapping of the conceptual spaces it inhabits. When comparative philosophers, like cartographers, communicate the results of their forays into the "thoughtscapes" of different cultures, they enrich the philosophical debate with fresh and original views, broadening the range of theories and concepts that philosophers can adopt and adapt to tackle contemporary issues.

In conclusion, Dominic Smith's book presents an interesting and promising continental approach to provide timely analyses of concrete technologies, while making a case for broadening the philosophical method to include alternative approaches and cross-disciplinary work. As a small critical note, perhaps for a follow-up work, it would have been interesting to read a chapter-long elaboration of Foucault's discussion of the panopticon, which I think represents a honorable precedent that illustrates how the mapping of an exceptional technology could be conducted, and makes a strong case in support of Smith's approach.

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