Many people have questioned the connection between morality and technology, asking how we as a society can justify the use of technology developed for a morally repugnant purpose, or if we can truly separate a technology or idea from the creator. This idea of the separation of politics and technology is at the core of several readings presented here, and I aim to demonstrate that this question, while at first appearing simple and direct, is slightly more adjacent to the questions we, as a society, should actually be asking ourselves.

To start exploring the separation of technology and political ideals, we should establish a few basic facts about the influence technology has on our lives. Many technological innovations in the pre and post-industrial eras are built around the idea that technology saves time or labour. Often when new technologies are poised to impact our daily lives, the expectation is set that it will save time, effort, and indeed present in the words of Langdon Winner, the "...salvation of a free society."[1]. This habit still persists today, with the commercialization of what is being marketed as 'artificial intelligence', and the integration of large language models into almost every appliance or device available. Ostensibly, the product's appeal is to save the consumer time by doing mundane tasks or speeding up daily tasks and rituals with a level of automation that seemed out of reach from the common consumer just a few short years ago. The media consensus a few short years ago was that many jobs would simply not need to exist due to the advent of LLMs, however, the models provided require massive amounts of energy to train, and the information ingested by these battery-binging behemoths is outdated as quickly as the model is trained.

The energy and engineering required to provide an insightful answer to the question 'What's the weather like today?" has simply shifted the workload from the questioner sticking their head out the closest doorway, to a team of engineers tuning generative models, and handing the product to a team of engineers who adapt it to hardware driven by the energy produced by a mountain of fossil fuels and an equally burgeoning stack of eager engineers. In many ways, this shift of labour, energy, and resources, is analogous to the detailing of the rise of household appliances in America. Ruth Cowen[2] illustrates a portrait of the American household, bereft of modern conveniences at the cusp of rapid technological adoption. This enameled army arrived with the sole purpose of reducing the painstaking labour required by the, in period-accurate terminology, 'housewife', and freeing her up to live her dreams. However the promise was left unfulfilled, the modern wonder appliances served mostly to shift the work being done from agencies outside the home, like milk delivery or laundry services, to the very person they were supposed to be freeing up [3]. This shift in labour served to redirect the energies of the served to work more, and the servicers to work less.

The redirection of energy resulting from service providers to in-house work represents an unintended consequence of a promising technology. The goal of saving time and money is one worth pursuing, however, we find that often the outcome misses the mark. Tales of adverse reactions by society or unpredictable ramifications litter the highway of human progress. One example, as relayed by Benjamin Labatut is the discovery of the colour 'Prussian Blue' which provoked a shift in art, providing painters the opportunity to present a new side of the world

containing this colour with the impact to evoke a kind of raw emotion in both subject and observer, since it was first used on ‘The Entombment of Christ’ [4].
This discovery was the fountainhead for a trail of chemical discoveries both deliberate and accidental, from paint, to cyanide, to poisons used in war. There is no conceivable way that Diesbach, staring at the deep and powerful shade of his discovery, could have reached into the future and foreseen the atrocities enabled by his pigment. No one reasonable, when lamenting the genocide committed by the Nazi government, would say ‘This never would have happened if Diesbach hadn’t discovered that darn blue!”.

There are, in contrast, good discoveries made by people with bad intentions. Fritz Haber worked to develop chemical weapons knowing full well the ramifications of their use in war against soldiers and civilians alike, however, he also brought about the isolation of Nitrogen for use in fertilizers worldwide [5] in the effort to maintain the torrent of Germany’s river of ammunition in the first World War. Reportedly, Haber showed no remorse for the agonizing deaths caused by his weapons, by all indications deserving the label of war criminal issued to him by Allied command. This doesn’t mean that we should stop using the Haber-Bosch process to produce fertilizers, nor should any technological developments that branch from the knowledge passed on by Haber inherit the guilt of war crimes.

The idea of a technology's morality is complicated, as some technology is developed for a good purpose, and subjected to the whims or politics of an outside party. The parkway system described by Winner is an example of a human artifact that may have benevolent origins, in providing clear passage to a popular destination, only to be designed in a manner that deliberately created obstacles to people of certain social standings or races [6]. The parkway system, and much of the transportation system Robert Moses had influence with, is mired in this ‘good idea, evil execution’ paradigm, as is much of the North American transportation network. This doesn’t mean that in using these roads or tracks, the goods or people traveling inherit the guilt or credit of the creators anymore than those that paved a pathway to cyanide described earlier.

There exists a middle ground of responsibility, where we can acknowledge the work being done to examine the intersection of technology and politics described by Winner without automatically assigning duty to any who make use of a technology. We can study and discover the “...virtues or evils…”[7] involved in the development of technology and how the world we live in was shaped, and use that as a guiding principle for the future developments we create moving forward. All human invention, no matter the size or structure, simply by being conceived, is derived from a mountain of past work and is capable of enabling both positive and negative change further down the line. It’s not possible to predict all possible uses of a work, instead of justifying using or not using a technology, it’s up to humans as individuals to recognize the path we took to arrive here, and reconcile that with how and why we’re using the technology and to ensure that we aim to develop new technologies in a way that will make future generations think that at least our hearts we in the right place.

References

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[2] R. Cowen, “Less Work For Mother?,” *American Heritage*, vol. 38, no. 6, p. 69 [pdf], Sept/Oct. 1987.
[3] Cowen, p. 3 [pdf]
[4] B. Labatut, “Prussian Blue”, *When we cease to understand the world*. A. N. West, Ed. New York: New York Review Books, 2021. p. 17.
[5] Labatut, p. 27
[6] Winner, p. 123/124
[7] Winner, p. 122