

Technology, Commonweal, and the Transformation of Humanity

A Four-Day Faculty Seminar

May 2008, Vanderbilt Center for Ethics

Facilitated by:

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Monday May 12 – Thursday May 15, 2008

Fifteen faculty participants, drawing from across the University

Eight modules over four days, morning and afternoon

Each session will have a short set of common assigned readings (e.g., two journal articles or equivalent). Participants will be asked to arrive prepared to read aloud a short (5 sentences or so) “response-piece” on the reading’s themes. Each session would start with this sharing of response-pieces around the table to get the discussion going.

1. Introduction: What is at stake?

- A. The acceleration of technological change: merely an impression, or a demonstrable trend?
- B. Discussion: eight vignettes from the possible future
 - Mood control through chemical intervention
 - The designer baby
 - Unequal access to enhancement opportunities
 - Continual upgrades required to keep up with ever-shifting baseline of “normal” performance
 - Extreme diversity leading to species fragmentation
 - Commodification of humans through genetic manipulation
 - Direct brain-to-brain communication
 - Geoengineering and terraforming
- C. Optimists and pessimists about technology’s impact on humanity

2. Methodological questions about prognostication and human agency

- A. How to think about the future?
 - History of shifting visions of the future through the centuries
 - The role of utopias and dystopias
 - Philosophical considerations in extrapolating into the future
 - The role of unintended effects
- B. Can technology be governed? The question of technological determinism

3. Technology and the commonweal in today's society. The human impact of new communications technologies (email, Web, cell phones, knowledge retrieval, blogs, e-business)

- A. Networks and the private sphere
 - Privacy
 - Family
 - Invention of new modes of communication and interaction
 - Quality of interpersonal communication
- B. Democracy, internet technologies, and the public sphere
 - Dissidence, activism, empowerment
 - Virtual communities: costs and benefits
 - Sense of belonging, rootedness

4. Pharmaceutical enhancements

- A. Where the technology is today, and where it could plausibly be in 40 years
- B. The slippery slope to Lake Wobegon
 - Healing vs. enhancement: the case of Ritalin
 - The medicalization of difference
- C. Mood control
- D. The destabilization of "normal" performance and well-being
- E. Social or civic coercion: enhancing just to keep up

5. Electromechanical enhancements

- A. Where the technology is today, and where it could plausibly be in 40 years
- B. Controlling devices through brain-machine interfaces
 - Sensory prostheses
 - Memory-boosting chips
 - Communications prostheses and the direct sharing of experiences
- C. Privacy implications
- D. The eroding boundaries of the unitary self

6. Genetic enhancements

- A. Where the technology is today, and where it could plausibly be in 40 years
- B. What is human nature? Debates over heredity and environment
- C. Somatic interventions vs. germline interventions
 - Irreversibility of some genetic enhancements
- D. The meaning of autonomy for a partially designed person
 - Ethical frameworks for designing the traits of other people
 - Leon Kass and the “yuck factor”

7. Human autonomy and human nature in this new technological environment

- A. Human enhancement before the 21st century
- B. Human dignity: what is it, and does enhancement threaten it?
- C. The transhumanist perspective. Is there an ethical obligation to enhance?
- D. Broadening the boundaries of moral standing
 - Enhanced animals?
 - Rights for intelligent machines?
- E. Kids these days: Youth culture in an enhanced civilization
- F. Civic culture in a society of enhanced individuals: can the enhanced and the unmodified coexist civilly?
 - A new ethics of personhood?

8. Concluding session: What is to be done?

A. Implications for citizens and governments

The limits of human agency: policy and meta-policy in the green movement as a comparative case study

Individual agency vs. government intervention

Optimists: let the market decide

Government regulation: how effective can it be?

The international dimension

B. Universities, technology, and the commonweal. Giving these issues an institutional and curricular presence