

PHIL 26. Science, Society, and Values

Prof. Don Rutherford

Spring 2020

Science and technology are changing human life at a dizzying pace. In some cases, we are the obvious beneficiaries of the changes. Medical breakthroughs have allowed us to live longer and healthier lives. The digital revolution has given us access to data and information on a scale unimaginable 50 years ago. But not everything science has produced, or may produce, is to the long-term benefit of human beings. Our reliance on fossil fuels for energy production has left us on the brink of a climate catastrophe. Plastics, manufactured from the same fossil fuels, have polluted our oceans and destroyed marine life. Corporations gather data on every aspect of our lives. They target us with ads, facilitate surveillance, and provide platforms for influencing our choices on everything from the food we eat to whom we vote for.

The aim of the course is to begin to think through the social and ethical issues raised by developments in science and technology. We'll do this first in a general way by surveying some of the major challenges we face and acquiring the conceptual tools we need to analyze these challenges from an ethical perspective. An overarching goal is to recognize that each of us has the capacity to stand back from the changes occurring in our world and ask, is this benefiting or harming humanity? Is it likely to make my life and the lives of my children and grandchildren better or worse? Although the scale of change is huge, and each of us is only one person, it is important to develop views on how society should develop and to act, so far as one can, to move society in a desirable direction.

In the second part of the course we will focus on a particular area in which rapid scientific progress is likely to reshape human life. Through pharmaceutical agents and biomedical technologies like CRISPR gene editing, the once mythic prospect of enhancing human powers beyond their "natural" state is quickly becoming a reality. We have the ability to alter our brain chemistry and the expression of our genes in ways that promise to make us smarter, stronger, and more ethical (or more evil!). The availability of enhancement technologies raises a host of questions. Is biomedical enhancement different from other ways of making people better off (e.g. improved living standards, education)? Ought there to be restrictions on what kinds of enhancements people are allowed to pursue? Is the option of enhancement for those who can afford it likely to increase inequality among human beings? Is biomedical enhancement leading us beyond what is recognizable as a human life (toward the "transhuman"), and if so, is that something about which we should be concerned?

All assigned readings will be made available on the class Canvas site.