

## *Technology and the Human Person*

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OCCASIONALLY, WE CATCH GLIMPSES OF WHAT THE FUTURE might hold. We read of Jeffrey, Leslie, and their son Derek preparing to become the first “cyborg family” with microchips storing medical information injected into their arms. We hear of a drug that may become the next Prozac or Viagra, as it promises to give human beings the ability to fend off sleep for almost two days, with virtually no effects of drowsiness or fatigue. Scientists speak of downloading human consciousness onto hard drives and of genetic materials being moved across species boundaries. These are just a few of the growing number of “posthuman” technologies that suggest new horizons of human capability.

From biotechnologies involving the Human Genome Project, stem cell research, and cloning, to the computer technologies of artificial intelligence, virtual reality, and robotics, there is a growing sense that many longstanding notions of what it means to be human may soon be obsolete. The ambivalence often felt about such developments is expressed in the assortment of technological visions found in both the popular and scholarly press. Whether utopian or apocalyptic, these visions boil down to differing degrees of admiration and fear, awe and uncertainty: awe toward the new possibilities in technology and uncertainty about the potential human consequences.

The distinguishing qualities of the human person have been denoted by the *natural* and the *real* over and against the *artificial* and the *virtual*. As contemporary technological advances increasingly blur and confuse these distinctions, we are compelled to consider new and troubling questions about what is unique to the human person and deserving of protection and what is negotiable. How does a life enhanced by biotechnologies alter our basic notions about what we consider to be a life worth living and about mortality itself? As computer technologies grow in their capacity to simulate personhood and reality, how are we to understand authentic experience? The answers to these questions have not only inherent significance, but also profound consequences for the everyday ordering of our social and moral lives. For how do these technologies influence our vision of the good life? What is the logic at work in the design and implementation of technologies and what kind of world does this logic lead us towards?

While previously we had fears of technologies being used as a means of government control, now we bear the burdens of the benefits and challenges that come with technologies developed and distributed through mainstream commercial and academic institutions. Under these circumstances, what resources exist to protect the socially and economically vulnerable from scenarios of inequality or exploitation? How do we, as a society, work towards ensuring that freedom and justice can both prevail in our development and use of technology? Who will decide how these technologies are used and distributed? And on what basis? These issues are not only relevant to the social and political ordering of our life together in North America, but are of increasing importance within the broader context of the entire world as well.

In this issue of *The Hedgehog Review*, we are concerned to address how computer and biotechnologies challenge the ways we understand the human person and to explore the line between pursuing technological possibilities and protecting what is integrally human. We know that these technologies offer great promise; we are also increasingly aware that the outcomes of their development could challenge and endanger who we are and what life means. Because what we have at stake is both ontological and social in nature, it is crucial that we take a broad view in considering how we might effectively respond to and direct technological change and scientific research in the interest of human flourishing. This issue brings together the works of scholars from varied perspectives to begin much needed conversation about the impact of contemporary technological development on our social order and very being.

— T. H. R.