

## *Reflections*

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### LIBERTY, TECHNOLOGY, AND MORALITY

Throughout history, scientific and technological advances have and continue to provide great benefits, improving the quality of life for people throughout the world. But the effects of their application are not always as intended. The benefits they deliver have often been accompanied by human and social problems. The industrial revolution led to the dehumanizing of jobs and the exploitation of labor; the invention of the automobile has been followed by traffic congestion and environmental pollution; nuclear science has provided means for causing previously unimaginable degrees of destruction and deaths; the Internet has resulted in the invasion of privacy and easy access to pornography.

When man and technology interact, each affects the other. It is important to realize that the very application of science or technology can modify the ends for which it was adopted and can change the values of the people who use it. A technology is usually adopted because it promises certain benefits, such as the improvement of efficiency or effectiveness in the achievement of specified ends. As the technology is widely used, however, it creates new options or makes previously unattainable opportunities feasible. Changes take place in what is being done, and the technology begins to modify the ends for which it was originally adopted. New applications, whether desirable or detrimental, arise not to satisfy a given need but because there is an ability, and an economic motive, to do so.



Pope Benedict XVI has described the issue clearly:

“[F]or now, the guiding principle is that man’s capability determines what he does. If you know how to do something, then you also are permitted to do it; to know how to do something, but not be able to do it, is a state of affairs that no longer exists, since it would run counter to liberty – which is the absolute, supreme value. But man knows how to do many things, and this knowledge increases all the time. If this knowledge does not find its criterion in a moral norm, it becomes a power for destruction.”

Today, since we have the capability, we perform *in vitro* fertilization, freeze, store, and genetically manipulate embryos (a team in England is even seeking permission to create a combined human-cow chimera embryo), grow, experiment with and discard embryonic stem cells, and there are those who wish to clone human beings. The Catholic Church has consistently opposed these and other developments in reproductive technology because they treat people in their first stages of life as commodities and typically destroy living embryonic persons. While bioethical issues are of most concern at present because of the tendency to devalue human life, there are applications in other

areas, such as in weapons development and security systems, that also are objectionable as they disregard or denigrate the worth and dignity of the individual.

What are needed are moral values and an understanding of how they apply to act as a restraint on the unfettered applications of science and technology. This, however, is not happening. A chasm has developed between our rapidly increasing scientific and technological capabilities and our more slowly evolving moral comprehension of their implications. Liberty, unrestrained and unordered, and a sole reliance on rationality have become the standards that trump all others. As a result, science is autonomous and technology is free to satisfy our latest desires, regardless of their moral implications.

We have developed a purely functional outlook that maintains that only that which can be verified experimentally is rational. The existence of God is considered subjective, uncertain, unprovable. Thus, religion, and the morality and virtue which flow from it, have been removed from the public conscience and treated as private beliefs. This condition can have serious ramifications for society. “The attempt, carried to extremes,” states Pope Benedict, “to shape human affairs to the total exclusion of God leads us more and more to the brink of the abyss, toward the utter annihilation of man.”

We now possess or could soon develop means for achieving virtually any ends we wish, including the ability to modify the genetic development of the human race, to control human behavior, and to alter our mental and emotional characteristics such as intellectual abilities, motivations, values, beliefs, and personalities. We can plan, create, and change, by significant amounts, the kind of world we wish to pass on to our children. The fundamental questions that should be asked relating to the application of science and technology revolve not around what we *can* do, but rather around what we *ought* to do. The fact that we now possess the means to revolutionize society – to advance our civilization, as well as to destroy what we stand for -- underscores the importance of raising and answering the moral questions that must be addressed.

American society – indeed, Western civilization -- was founded on a belief in the worth and importance of each person. This belief requires that science and technology in all of its aspects be developed and applied in a manner which protects the rights and dignity of the individual. The basic issue of how to do so does not depend on science and technology, but rather on the values of those who are developing and applying them. It is through the recreation of a public moral conscience that man will be able to remain the master of his science and technology and not their subject.

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