

Research line: The Human Condition

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CHALLENGES

In this research line, we will investigate how and to what extent socially disruptive technologies have implications with regard to humans, humanity and the human condition (cf. Rosenberg and Verbeek, 2015; Aagaard et al., 2018; Ihde, 1990). Some SDTs will make an impact on our biological and mental make-up and our interactions with our social and material environment and are therefore challenging basic aspects of human self-understanding and self-constitution, including notions like autonomy, sociality, corporality, mortality, and transcendence. We will particularly focus on new biomedical and digital technologies.

Biomedical technologies that play a central role in the programme are particularly those aiming for an enhancement of human capacities. CRISPR and gene editing are examples of genetic technologies that are extending our knowledge about the human body and our power to change it significantly (Sharon 2013, Kass 2002). Deep-brain stimulation or brain implants have the potential to intervene deeply in human (self)-experience, the creation of human-animal hybrid embryos and xenotransplantation transgress the boundaries between humans and animals, and organ-on-a-chip trespass on the boundary between human beings and machines.

Digital technologies that will most likely have a disruptive impact are Artificial Intelligence and robotic technologies that are starting to inhabit our life-world, showing human-like capacities, either replacing or supporting self-organised activities of human beings (e.g. complex decision making or context-sensitive goal-oriented behaviour), and increasingly intervening in human practices, ranging from work and education, to journalism, law, and healthcare. The Internet of Things and other digital technologies are increasingly reconfiguring our material environment, interacting with us in the background of our experience. These developments challenge central features of the social world, like the private-public distinction ('smart cities'), the nature of interpersonal communication ('smart homes'), and the character of professional practices ('smart hospitals', 'smart classrooms') (Stiegler, 2015).

These technologies bring challenges at various levels. First of all, on a societal level they have the potential to bring about new human vulnerabilities, for instance to societal and political control (e.g. the Social Credit System in China) and to create new dependencies on (smart) systemic structures. They may result in alienation and a diminished sense of responsibility. Second, these technologies are challenging basic anthropological assumptions about the character of human existence, though the creation of animal-human hybrids (see box) and human-machine hybrids. The distinction between human beings, animals, and machine belongs, however, to the normative basis of modernity. Finally, those developments are challenging the idea that humans can understand themselves as beings with the capacity for self-governance and autonomous and responsible decision-making. This is, ultimately, the most fundamental challenge insofar as ethical assessments generally assume that there are agents to which responsibility can be ascribed.

Example: Animal-human hybrids. The creation of animal-human hybrid embryos allows researchers to study biological processes without the need to use human embryos. This is important for stem cell research and potential therapies against neurodegenerative diseases like Parkinson's, but can also be used to enhance human traits and overcome biological limitations of the human species. But when we do so, we blur the distinction between human and animal, which is rather fundamental in moral and legal traditions. What would a normative order look like in which this distinction is no longer maintained? What would it mean for recognizing each other as equals? And what would resulting legal systems look like (Badaura-Lotter and Düwell 2009)?

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- 1) In which ways and to what extent are the SDTs really disrupting the human condition and our self-understanding as human beings?

- 2) How do these disruptions challenge existing conceptualisations of 'the human', moral and anthropological theories, and corresponding legal frameworks?
- 3) Which ethical theories and normative frameworks are better equipped to provide normative guidance in responding to those challenges?

RESEARCH AGENDA

1. Conceptualising technological reconfigurations of the human being

To understand the nature of the disruptive challenge, we will first investigate in which ways and to what extent socially disruptive technologies will have an impact on central elements of the human condition, like (a) human self-experience and self-understanding, e.g. regarding natality and mortality, the self and personal identity, the relationship to one's own body, vulnerability and perfection, contingency and finitude; (b) interpersonal relationships, e.g. our changing perception of each other, the virtualisation of communication, potential changes in the experience of bodily presence and absence, and the changing role of biomedical knowledge in the public, economic, and interpersonal sphere; (c) human interactions with the natural world, including the role of technologies in the resilience of human beings to respond to environmental challenges; (d) the social structure of the world, including the possibilities to make distinctions between humans, animals, and machines – distinctions on which the entire grammar of our moral, social, and legal convictions rest; (e) human agency, as the basis of fundamental ethical concepts like ascribing 'responsibility', having 'autonomy', and perceiving ourselves as 'agents'; and (f) the epistemological, metaphysical, and ontological presuppositions that are underlying all these discussions.

2. Constructions of human diversity: gender and race

Presently emerging SDTs have the potential of affecting existing social categories such as gender and race, while at the same time stimulating the formation of new social categories. Categories such as gender and race are put into question both by new ways of studying and defining them, for instance through human genomics and neuroscience, but also by new ways of constructing them, through genomics, synthetic biology, and human enhancement. SDTs will also suggest new social categories and oppositions, such as the enhanced vs. unenhanced, interfaced vs. non-interfaced, and designed vs. natural-born humans. We will analyse how existing social categories like gender and race could be affected, and we will develop an ethics of technologically mediated diversity that will assess the ethical dimensions of the technological reconstruction of social categories and their underlying bodies and minds.

3. Reworking the notion of the human being as a normative concept

Humans form one biological species among others. At the same time, the concept of 'the human' in the philosophical and moral tradition was never *only* a biological species-concept but also a normative concept. Not only in the religious tradition was the human being seen as 'the image of God', secularly, we also speak about 'humanism' or 'a humane world'. The human being is the object of respect and concern (respect for the dignity of the human person), but at the same time it is the being that can ask moral questions and that can act responsibly. If 'the human' is affected by disruptive technologies and if these technologies affect the way we can ask moral questions (or not ask moral questions at all), this would impact the very possibility of normative discourse. To what extent is human responsibility replaced or modified by technology? And how would such changes allow for a meaningful ethical discourse in the first place? To what extent are disruptive technologies affecting specific 'human' capacities like empathy, religious or aesthetic experiences, and what does this mean for our normative notion of human being?

4. Expanding existing moral and legal frameworks regarding technology and the human being

We will investigate if, and to what extent, existing moral and legal frameworks have to be adjusted or fundamentally need to be rethought. To be sure, the challenges mentioned above are not entirely new. While a lot of those technologies have been in an embryonic stage over the last decades, we have now arrived at a situation where a realistic, rather than a speculative assessment of the nature of the disruptions has become, not only possible, but also urgent and necessary. We assume that current moral concepts, ethical theories, and the corresponding legal frameworks are most likely not sufficiently equipped to perform such an assessment. Political and moral discourses have often relied on the idea that human beings share fundamental moral convictions and that the existing (overlapping) consensus would be

sufficient as basis for political actions and legal regulations. It is, however, quite possible or even probable that technological disruptions will affect these presuppositions on which our basic convictions rest. We need to develop new frameworks that takes into account the dynamic nature of ethical concepts and normative frameworks, and the interaction between technology, law, and morality.

5. Connecting philosophical anthropology to ethics of technology

The ultimate goal of the 'Human'-research line is to develop new ethical frameworks that integrate theories from both ethics and philosophical anthropology. In doing so, we aim to make a substantial and new contribution to already ongoing philosophical discussions about the 'human being', 'humanity', and the human condition in relation to both technology and ethics. Historically, discourses about 'the human' have become central for philosophy in general, certainly since the 18th Century. Older philosophical discourses share the ambition to conceptualize what it means to be human in relation to specific developments in science and technology. Yet, they typically either (a) do not thematise the close interaction between human beings and concrete technological developments, including the challenges that arise from them, and/or (b) rarely encompass the ethical implications of philosophical anthropology, especially in terms of the human-technology relations from which not only new ethical questions emerge but which also inform the epistemological, ethical, and ontological frameworks used to answer these questions.