

The End of Ethics In A Technological Society

Lawrence E. Schmidt with Scott Marratto

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Dr. Schweitzer, may I introduce Dr. Frankenstein

Images of the miracle-working white-coated scientist are embedded in contemporary Western culture. The hoped-for miracles are various. Medical scientists, we believe, are on the verge of bringing us a cure for cancer, along with a vaccine for AIDS. Agricultural scientists are creating genetically modified crops whose fecundity will, they promise, save the world's poor from starvation. Teams of biologists are working to create forms of microbial life that will save us from the dire effects of the next oil spill. Coal Industry scientists promise that in ten years or so they will give us "clean coal" by developing a technology to sequester greenhouse gases.

That's on the one hand. But another, less attractive, image competes for the science-and-technology niche in our consciousness. In this alternative iconography the scientist is named Dr. Victor Frankenstein, or perhaps Dr. Henry Jekyll, rather than Dr. Albert Schweitzer or Dr. Jonas Salk, and he (or occasionally she) is creating technologies that will degrade our humanity or, worse, technologies that threaten to make our planet inhospitable if not entirely uninhabitable. Think: weapons of mass destruction, human reproductive cloning, nuclear power or industrial agriculture. The latter, for example, with its heavy reliance upon pesticides, herbicides and artificial fertilizers, threatens to destroy the quality of both our soil and our water.

These rival tropes – white-coated saviour vs. white-coated villain - might be classified, respectively, as technophilic and technophobic. The technophiles berate the technophobes for being mired in the stagnant past;

the technophobes accuse the technophiles of putting at risk everything we hold dear.

It would be misleading, however, to think of these warring camps as comprising two entirely distinct groups of people. It would be misleading because the battle of competing images is often internal rather than external. Each of us feels hopeful and optimistic some of the time, attracted by the vision of a better world through better technology. At other times, we feel fearful that efforts to achieve mastery over both Nature and human nature will produce a catastrophic result that no one could desire. In our anxious moments we remember the ancient Greek warning that Hubris is inevitably followed by Nemesis. When we are feeling hopeful, however, we imagine a world in which the ancient scourges of poverty and disease have been banished by modern technology or at least a world in which fewer of our fellow human beings suffer unremittingly.

Ours is a society marked by general affluence, in a world marked by general poverty. Despite the shameful existence of a sizeable minority of our own citizens which continues to live in abject poverty, we are proud of the fact that per capita income (adjusted for inflation) has been doubling roughly every generation over a period of almost two centuries. In other parts of the world, notably China and India, hundreds of millions of people have recently made the great leap from starvation to poverty and they have done so by following a technology-dependent path similar to ours. Many hope that their next leap will be from poverty to comfort and then onwards and upwards to Western-style luxury. Our exhortations - that they seek a more modest path to development, so as to spare the global environment from further (possibly fatal) damage - strike many in the developing world as hypocritical. Billions of Chinese and Indians, after all, remain mired in poverty, as do billions of others in Africa and South America.

Scientific discovery and technological innovation are indisputably making an important contribution to growing prosperity, thereby providing evidence for the claim that life goes better in a technological society. As Francis Bacon famously remarked, "knowledge is power". Bacon was writing at the end of the 16th century, but his aphorism presciently captures the spirit of the 18th century European Enlightenment. A century later, faith in the liberating power of scientific knowledge was echoed and amplified by such otherwise disparate 19th century thinkers as the liberal John Stuart Mill and the socialist Karl Marx. Mill and Marx share a striking confidence that

civilizations progress through the advancement of scientific knowledge. Both believe in Progress (with a capital “P”) and both insist that modern science is critically important if humankind is to ameliorate such evils as disease and starvation. Equally important, Mill and Marx share the conviction that scientific thinking will, more or less rapidly, transform modern men and women into well-educated, reasonable, and tolerant citizens. Ignorance, irrationality, superstition and intolerance (all associated with traditional religious faith) may never be totally abolished but they will surely yield, over time, to the Enlightenment forces of science and reason.

In the book under review, Lawrence E. Schmidt and Scott Marratto reject holus bolus the Enlightenment faith in reason and progress and seem personally affronted by Bacon’s aphorism that “knowledge is power”.¹ On the technophilia-technophobia spectrum, they fall near the extreme end of the technophobia pole. Whereas Enlightenment *philosophes* were confident that the advance of modern science would make our world more reasonable, humane and prosperous, Schmidt & Marratto deny that that scientific knowledge brings progress in any form. They do concede at one point that “we cannot turn off the lights and live in the dark.” [p.xiv] Nevertheless, they advocate a “clear and absolute” set of limits “to what human beings may ethically do to themselves, to other human beings or to the environment (nature)” [p.xiv] and they appear to reject most, if not all, of what technology has to offer. Readers who seek rational criteria with which to evaluate the moral acceptability of new technologies will find little more on offer than vague platitudes.

The authors argue at length that liberal (consequentialist) theories cannot offer “any solutions to the moral dilemmas that we face in the technological society”. [p.166] Instead, they ask the reader to accept a “supersensuous, supernatural, or metaphysically transcendent good”. [p.166] The supernatural, they insist, will provide all the answers we need. Disappointingly, however, when it comes to the crunch they fold their tents and slink away into the night. “It has not been our purpose in this book ... to argue for the superiority of transcendental moral realism.” [p.166] Readers who prefer evidence and arguments to dogma are unhelpfully referred to *Real Ethics* by John Rist. Perhaps Schmidt and Marratto ought to have held up on publishing their thoughts until they were prepared to offer some kind of

¹ Unaccountably, they situate Bacon in the 18th Century. [on p. 79 of their book] The aphorism “knowledge is power” occurs in Bacon’s *Meditationes Sacrae*, published in 1597.

reasoned justification for their position. At all events, they either can't or won't tell us how to draw a reasonably defensible moral dividing line between good and bad technologies.

According to the religious traditionalism favoured by the authors, the universe is part of God's benevolent creation, and human beings are assigned a starring role in the cosmic drama. Since no scientific worldview can offer similar assurances, science appears bleak and pessimistic. In place of religion's flattering assumption that heavenly bodies exist as human adornments, science informs us that planet earth is merely one of many planets in a solar system that is merely one of innumerable solar systems in a galaxy that is merely one among billions of galaxies. Thus, science makes it difficult to hang onto the comforting notion that humankind is at the centre of the universe. Worse, biological science tells us that humanity has gradually evolved from a series of animal ancestors over a period lasting millions of years. This doesn't fit well with such religious claims as that the earth is less than ten thousand years old and that God created humankind at one fell swoop and in His own image.

In other words, if one accepts the perspective of physics and evolutionary biology then the theologians' "orderly universe" [p.165] vanishes. If humanity is the product of evolutionary natural selection acting on random heritable variations then appeals to Human Nature as the absolute foundation for ethics will be stripped of their normative force. If there is no divine blueprint then we can no longer denounce scientific developments on the grounds that they are "unnatural" attempts to "play God". Science is subversive precisely because it undermines traditional appeals to Natural Law of the sort favoured by Schmidt and Marranto.

This largely explains why the authors are highly critical of modernity. They see modern ethics as amounting to no ethics at all. That's because modern ethics denies that the meaning of life can be read off from Nature. According to modernism— secular, liberal and humanistic - there is no meaning of life waiting "out there" to be discovered. Progress is possible but first we have to decide what we mean by "progress". For today's secular humanist, progress is usually defined, minimally, as a reduction in pain and suffering for human beings and other sentient creatures. To achieve this, we are obliged to use science and technology in order better to understand ourselves and the world in which we live. The overarching goal is to make life a little less terrible for each succeeding generation. On this secular view, it is we

(rather than God) who must work out what it means for a life to go well or badly. Since we are alone in the universe, it is we who must ultimately decide what is to count as meaning and purpose.

Against this secular approach to ethics, Schmidt and Marratto advocate that we view the universe *sub specie aeternitatis*. They cling unshakeably to their conviction that the universe is ordered according to a (divine) blueprint, designed and brought into existence by a benevolent creator. Once we discover the harmonious design that pervades the universe, we will then also have discovered the key to “objective” ethics. Unlike scientific investigation and experimentation, which merely reveal the nature of the physical world, the doctrine of Natural Law promises to reveal how we should live.

Here’s an example of how the debate plays out. The world’s first “test tube baby”, Louise Brown, was born thirty years ago, in 1978. It would be no exaggeration to say that this event generated a widespread sense of moral panic. Doomsayers abounded, eager to announce that the technology employed by Doctors Edwards and Steptoe was the beginning of the end of human civilization. Religious leaders and some bioethicists stepped smartly to the microphone in order to anathematize IVF technology as profoundly “unnatural”; scientists were accused of “playing God”. Inevitably, the fearful image of Dr. Frankenstein was invoked. To “manufacture” a baby in this way was an unparalleled act of hubris. If IVF technology were not immediately banned it would quickly destroy the mystery of sex, procreation, and childbirth. Marriages would crumble, sex would cease or would lose its significance and respect for the sanctity of human life would erode. We were, it was claimed, on the slippery slope to a dystopic “brave new world”. The only way to avoid these dire consequences would be to impose a world-wide ban on IVF. Eighteen years later, with the cloning of Dolly the sheep, a second moral panic generated similar fearful predictions.

On a consequentialist approach, by contrast, one investigates the facts pertaining to any new technology and then attempts to do a careful balancing of the likely benefits and harms before deciding whether individuals should be permitted to make their own decisions about adopting or rejecting the technology. Admittedly, predicting and assessing the likely future consequences of our decisions, both individual and collective, is no easy task. But this much is clear: the doomsayers were wildly wrong in their fearful predictions about the negative consequences of IVF. Louise Brown is today

a well-functioning young woman and some 100,000 childless couples have been able to give birth to children. Not such a big deal, you might think.

As a secondary theme, Schmidt and Marratto subscribe to Jacques Ellul's version of technological determinism. Technology, according to Ellul, is in the driver's seat and we humans are driven, willy nilly, to whatever destination technology dictates. Whatever can be done, will be done. Because technology is seen as "autonomous and dynamic" [p.148, 150, 176], the ethical questions that might slow down "progress" have become irrelevant. Dental floss and modern pain-free dentistry may help us to keep our teeth into old age and Gore Tex clothing may help us to keep dry but, the authors adamantly insist, we are incapable of accepting the benefits of such benign technologies without getting suckered into such dangerously anti-social technologies as nuclear weapons and genetically engineered crops.

Frankly, I don't find the technological imperative thesis very plausible. Which technologies are developed in any given society and which are not is dictated *not* by the technologies themselves but by the prevailing socio-economic system. Canadians are likely to get oil from tar-sands and a renewed round of nuclear power plant construction, but if that's our sad fate it will be because Big Oil and the powerful nuclear power lobby dominate our society economically and (hence) politically. If these industries were not so overwhelmingly wealthy and politically powerful then the dominant power-generating technologies might be wind, solar and tidal energy and they would be supplemented by a huge push on the conservation front. The mantra "Technology made me do it" is little more than a cop-out.

In short, when Schmidt and Marratto finger science and technology as the prime villains of their story they provide a smoke screen which tends to obscure the fact that our destiny lies much more in the hands of short-run profit maximizing ruling elites, political and economic, rather than in the hands of white coated scientists and technologists.²

The authors occasionally acknowledge that we cannot reject modern technology holus bolus (unless we are willing to condemn billions of people to freeze and/or starve to death). But their favoured alternative – that we ascertain the proper limits of technology by relying on "timeless human

² At a couple of points in the book the authors show glimmers of recognition that socio-economic systems matter, but this does not slow down their incantation of the "technological determinism" mantra.

obligations” [p.xv] - is so vague and ill-developed that it amounts to little more than vapid posturing. The “mysterious dimension of reality” [p. xv] on which they place near-total reliance looks suspiciously like magical thinking, a “black box” from whose inscrutable contents they can extract the absolute prohibitions they seek because of their religious commitments. Finding the optimal balance between our best hopes for technology and our worst fears isn’t going to be an easy task. Appeals to “miracle, mystery and authority”, in the spirit of Dostoevsky’s Grand Inquisitor, are likely to make our task more rather than less difficult.

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