

Robert Song asks
what is driving medical
developments?

BIOTECHNOLOGY and theology

key points

The drive for new technologies is driven not primarily by commerce, government or health-related goals but the deep cultural desires and needs that technology fulfils.

This drive has its origin in the 'Baconian project', which considered suffering as pointless and sought to eliminate it by the instrumental control of nature.

Medicine thus runs the risk of no longer simply being a response to diseases of body and mind, but a response to a set of consumer demands to eliminate whatever an individual may regard as a burden.

An appropriate Christian response must be based on prayer, an appreciation of grace, putting aside sin, learning to live in love, displaying the fruits of the Spirit and building and modelling therapeutic Christian communities.

The suggestion that technology is constantly outstripping our ability to react ethically and morally has been a frequent refrain in recent decades.

This is not a superficial phenomenon, but goes right to the heart of our deepest commitments as inhabitants of modern Western culture. How should Christians think about technology? What does it mean to call ourselves a technological society?

Attitudes to technology

I want to start with three observations about new technologies.

First of all, many of the new technologies we face today potentially have both good and bad consequences: for example, it can't be denied that there must be at least some moral questions about nanotechnology - the manipulation and engineering of minute systems at an atomic level - otherwise we wouldn't need to think about regulating it. Cybernetics, merging living tissue with the mechanical, or ultimately man with machines, certainly helps those with disabilities, but on the other hand there is also the prospect of 'cyborg' human beings.

Sometimes those who discuss technology as a general phenomenon can seem opposed to all technology. But there is something disingenuous, even self-deceiving about such an approach. After

all, do we not all benefit from anaesthetics? Do we not all drive cars? The task is rather one of discernment. What should we reject? What should we embrace?

Secondly, it is often quite difficult to discern what is good and what is bad. Consider, for example, the distinction between therapeutic and genetic enhancements. The good and the ethically ambiguous often come from the same source: a prosthesis that might help a person with wasted arm muscles could also be used to confer super-human strength.

Thirdly, there is an underlying sense that technological developments are ultimately unstoppable; they will happen more or less whether we like it or not. This is shared by both those who applaud them and those who fear them. Technology sets the agenda and we have to respond.

Ethical analysis

Modern Western societies have traditionally responded to these three features of technology by what one might call the 'ethics route': we deliberate, then we legislate. When we are faced with a problem such as the morality of germline gene therapy (altering the DNA of sperm or eggs), we typically ask a high-level commission to consider the question, and on that basis recommend legislation or regulation.

I want to suggest that the ethics route is an inadequate response to new technologies, certainly if we are to think through technological phenomena at their deepest level. The most important reason for this is that even if a society enshrines its views in law, laws themselves can change: the fact that we have legislated now tells us nothing about what will happen in the future. In other words we need to understand the underlying dynamics that give rise to the laws in the first place. What are the social, economic and cultural commitments driving technological innovation and development?

A textbook list of influences on technological development might include the needs of commerce, government policy, military demands or the achievement of various social and health related goals. All may fuel policy, although there is also the internal logic of scientific research: the desire for knowledge or perhaps the less healthy desire for scientific prestige, recognition or wealth.

These factors help explain a lot of what drives technological innovation, but fail to capture the most fundamental point: developments are related to our desires for ourselves and our society.

The Baconian project

It is simply inadequate to refer only to the interests of corporations, science and governments. We must seek to understand the desires and needs that are fulfilled by our technologies. These are profoundly influenced by deep cultural commitments that go right back at least to the seventeenth century, to a way of thinking that is sometimes associated with the writings of the philosopher of science Francis Bacon. This way of thinking, which we might call the 'liberal-technological paradigm' or the 'Baconian project', considered suffering as pointless and sought to eliminate it by the instrumental control of nature.

Many characteristic features of modern medicine, and indeed technology more generally, can be attributed to this. For example, we now place enormous faith in technology as the prime means of therapy, and typically marginalize medical disorders that cannot be cured; whilst those health care professions concerned with caring often take second place to those concerned with curing. Alongside this, the human body is increasingly being regarded as infinitely manipulable in accordance with individual tastes and desires, while at the same time more domains of life become medicalised (think for example of Viagra).

Medicine runs the risk of no longer simply being a response to diseases of body and mind, but a response to a set of consumer demands to eliminate whatever an individual may regard as a burden of finitude. Standard modern philosophical bioethics - what one might call the bioethics establishment - is fully bound up with this. It has inherited Kantian and utilitarian ways of thought and, in my view, is thereby rendered incapable of

understanding modern technology, or giving the radical critique of it that we need.

It is therefore not surprising that we should find, for example, more research into life extension technologies, or increasing political pressure for euthanasia. In fact, far from being surprised by new technologies, we can actually predict what will happen by identifying the currents within society that will drive the production of new technologies.

A Christian response

Clearly we benefit profoundly from many technologies, but they also shape us, and thus all of us are moulded to some extent by this paradigm. It is precisely because technology has done so much good that it is very difficult to discern where things are adrift.

For this reason our first response should be one of prayer: prayer that God's kingdom will come; prayer that we will be faithful in our discipleship, knowing that we are not justified by scientific, medical, or technological works, but because God is gracious towards us. Together with this comes all the other features of the Christian life that are necessary for good discernment: putting aside sin, learning to live in love, displaying the fruits of the Spirit and so on.

Ultimately the way we act will influence the way we think. If we instinctively regard certain things as morally unacceptable, it is because we have learned to behave in certain ways. If the desire of our contemporaries is to improve themselves cybernetically or genetically, and this is driven by a competitive desire to outdo others, how can Christians witness to a different non-competitive way of living?

What are the communities that will bring about a different way of being? Many members of the 1994 House of Lords Select Committee that examined euthanasia were broadly in favour of it until they heard a presentation from palliative care and hospice staff. In the light of that, they concluded that euthanasia is simply unnecessary. The idea that a different way of living and a different way of dying is possible, demonstrated here through the example of the hospice movement, was what made the difference.

Christian witness is about witnessing to the truth God has given us in Christ. As Dostoyevsky said, 'the whole world will be outweighed by a single word of truth'. The question to us is: what will be the words and the actions that will convey the one word of truth?

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