Beyond The Body? Perspectives on Enhancement


Overview

The prospect of human enhancement, of making better people (and making people better), continues to arouse much public interest – excitement for some, fear for others – as well as considerable academic debate and scholarship in fields ranging from bioethics and philosophy to law and social science. Prominent technologies often considered in relation to enhancement include genetic modification, chemical enhancers such as ‘smart drugs’ and regenerative medicine. There is, in addition, another class of enhancements which may have more immediate application, many of which indeed are already in common use and are changing – have already changed – the face of society: mechanical enhancements. These range from the ancient (tools such as the stone axe) through the everyday and accepted (automobiles, personal computers) to emerging and future technologies such as robotics, bionics and artificial intelligence.

We live today in a world that is increasingly dependent on machine-based technologies. While futuristic visions of human-machine cyborgs, robots with true artificial intelligence or “going digital” by uploading our minds into cyberspace may still be more science fiction than fact, cybertechnology is already an extension of human functioning. Tools and accessories such as personal computers and mobile phones have become almost essential for life in the modern world, while the meteoric rise of internet usage has revolutionised the very way in which we conduct our lives. Moreover many of these changes have taken place in a relatively short time span. This raises pressing and intriguing questions about how we deal with such changes and what the implications of both current and possible future cybertechnologies might be, for how we view ourselves now and how we might view ourselves (and what sort of creatures we might view as “ourselves”) in the future.

How should we view these sorts of enhancements, mechanical or biological? What implications do they have for our understandings – philosophical, legal and sociological – of who we are, how we live and how we ought to live; and for our conceptions of the human body and its boundaries?

The Conference will approach these issues under the following themes under which various questions arise. It particularly aims to foster interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary perspectives and use their different methodological and analytical approaches to inform debate.
From mechanised humans to human machines

- What implications might the development of artificial ‘cyber-intelligence’ have for philosophical concepts of personhood, self-hood etc?
- How have our attitudes towards machines developed over time and what implications might this have for the integration of cybertechnology (body-modifying or otherwise) into society and culture?
- What effect might the development of human-like machines and artificial intelligence have on our understanding of concepts such as ‘the person’, ‘the body’ and ‘human’?

Bodies and Boundaries

- To what extent does our conception of the body as boundary affect our perceptions of and attitudes towards various “enhancement technologies”?
- What distinctions are and should be drawn, in philosophical and sociological contexts, between enhancements that ‘invade’ the body and enhancements that remain separate to it? For example, spectacles versus contact lenses or laser surgery/corneal implants; mobile phones and computers versus bionic communication sensors or implantable brain chips. What are the philosophical and sociological implications of technologies that blur or erase the boundaries of ‘the body’ as understood from these perspectives?
- What is the role of human agency in crossing these boundaries by mediating between technology and the body – for example in our choice to take or not take a drug or dietary supplement, to accept or refuse medical treatment, or to use or not use technology?
- What is the nature of the boundary that exists (if indeed it does exist) between biological enhancements such as genetic modification and tissue engineering, and mechanical enhancements? How might our considerations of “biological” enhancements inform bioethical and sociological discourse over mechanical enhancement?
- With the possibility of ‘digitising’ our consciousness, philosophical questions regarding identity are raised, e.g. how might personal identity translate across the body-byte interface?
- How would and how should we view the possibility of disembodied humans, in philosophical, legal and social contexts?

Cyber-enhancement and the body

- What are the ethical and philosophical implications of new and existing cybertechnologies?
- How do technologies such as machine-brain interfaces impact on our conceptions of self and identity?
- How has the increasing use of (cyber)technology changed our expectations and experiences of life and our perceptions of embodiment as humans?
Cyber-culture and social evolution: philosophical, ethical and sociological issues

- Does the internet change how we relate to others? In what way – is this necessarily for the worse? How should we relate to others?
- Is the use of social networking sites leading to changes in social interaction and cognitive processing?
- As the internet, social networking, etc. change culture and society, which status quo are worth preserving?
- If we ‘become’ different people online, if we interact with others differently or present a different persona, should this be considered inauthentic?
- To what extent has cyber-culture e.g. online identities, use of avatars, participation in virtual communities, etc. already had an impact on how we view ourselves and our bodies?