

# Technoethics and Public Reason

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## ABSTRACT

*Public reason specifies the rules under which a political community collectively conducts ethical reasoning. Technoethics needs to incorporate an account of how the technologies it aspires to govern bear on these rules. As the case of biobanks shows, technologies have the capacity to change the exact meanings of concepts that play central roles in ethical reasoning. By consequence, a revision of the rules to which this ethical reasoning about the very same biobanks is subject, becomes inevitable. Thus, reasoning in technoethics becomes essentially reflexive, as it is to discuss its own rules at the same level at which it discusses its primary object, namely new technologies. Technoethics is thus not only about how human values are to be incorporated into technology design, but also about what kind of political world is constructed through technology.*

*Keywords:* Biobanks, Critical Theory of Technology, Democratization, Human Values, Public Reason, Reflexivity

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## THE SELF-REFERENTIALITY OF TECHNOETHICS

Technoethics, being the reflection on how social, moral and political concerns can and should be incorporated in the development of technology, is profoundly situated in societies of perpetual sociotechnical change. Not only does it aim to inform technological enterprise and to open it up for moral deliberation and thereby emancipate human values. Technoethics is, as a practice, inextricably intertwined with the technological infrastructure and the essentially technological culture of which it is part. Thereby, the way we discuss moral issues of technology development, is inseparably connected to that development.

As our technological culture and our moral discursive order are so tightly connected,

technoethics is an essentially reflexive or self-referential affair. Because of this reflexivity, it needs to develop a permanent awareness of how its own rules and procedures co-evolve with the sociotechnical developments it tries to accommodate. This paper identifies the challenge posed by this reflexivity, and investigates how moral discussion could be accommodated, if the rules of that very discussion are perpetually challenged.

Programmatic approaches to technoethics have emphasized the need to address and resolve moral issues at early phases of technology design, rather than trying to repair ethical issues *post-hoc* (Jelsma, 1992; Schomberg, 2011; Stahl et al., 2010; Verbeek, 2006). The bottom line of these approaches is the recognition that human values are entangled with technological arrangements, rather than the two being separate

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spheres. A straightforward early extension of this recognition from ethics into the political has for example been provided by Sclove (1995), who argues that indeed the design of technologies must be aligned with democratic values at an early phase.

An underdeveloped consequence of these visions, however, is the fact that not only technologies are to be adapted to democratic and other ethical ideals, but that also democracy and ethics are to be adapted to technological change. As such, reflexivity in the ethics of technology has indeed been observed. For example, Swierstra and Rip (2007) identify the reflexivity in ethics of technology at the level of new issues and new repertoires to discuss them. They argue that disagreement is not just the consequence of the moral pluralism that characterizes modern societies, or of any unwillingness to arrive at consensus, but of the fact that new technologies are ambivalent: what they 'are' and 'do' has not been sufficiently stabilized. Hence, moral opinions about them will vary widely. Similarly, Keulartz et al. (2004) argue that the permanent state of change in which technological societies find themselves, entails that any ethics of technology must be anti-foundationalist and pragmatic.

From this vantage point, it is only logical to move forward and focus even more explicitly on the ethical discussion itself, and how it *evolves* with technological change. As Anderson and Peterson (2010) show, early ethical assessment is subject to uncertainty because the effects of a certain development are hard to predict. They show that this uncertainty is used strategically, by parties framing technologies in particular ways and trying to get particular vocabularies dominant. The present paper continues this train of thought, and brings not only those uncertain consequences under scrutiny, but also the uncertainty that is engendered in the moral order itself.

While considerable attention has thus been paid in the past decades to the moral perils presented by technological development, further attention needs to be paid to the rules of debate. In this paper, I confine the argument to one

subset of such rules: the idea of *public reason*, which specifies how issues could be contained *politically*. In a general sense, conceptions of public reason give normative advice regarding the demarcation of the content the political, as well as regarding the way political issues should be discussed in the public sphere. As I will start to explain in the next section, existing notions of public reason cannot seem to cope with the self-referentiality of technoethics in particular, and of ethics in a technological culture in general. I will explore how the concept of public reason is to be revised against the dynamical background that a technological culture offers.

A first step in my argument will be to show how existing notions of public reason are not particularly geared towards dealing with a technological culture and how it operates on public speech. Then, by means of an example from the field of human biotechnology, I will expose the general capacity of technology to destabilize political routines. In the end, some avenues will be pointed out which technoethics could explore. If the consequences of technology development for the conduct of debate are to be taken seriously, then technoethics has a task in making not only a connection from the moral towards the technological, but also from the technological to the politico-moral.

## Elements of Public Reason

Present-day industrialized societies are typically characterized by a pluralism of ideas of the good. When asked what is of ultimate importance, people will produce a wide array of different answers. They may disagree, even strongly, on points that they consider essential for their life to be a good and dignified life. They disagree over what John Rawls (1993, p. 13) has called their *comprehensive doctrines*: conceptions of what is of value in human life, ideals of personal character, and ultimately anything else that provides guidance to our lives. (In the following, I will simply speak of moral pluralism, and take this to be interchangeable with a 'pluralism of comprehensive doctrines' or a 'pluralism of conceptions of the good'.)

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