HOW TO MAKE OUR FUTURE WORLD A BETTER WORLD

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My reply to the questions for this forum builds on my reply to the earlier *Ludus Vitalis* forum (volume XV, number 27, 2007; pp. 195-197), "There is an implicit social contract between professionals and the democratic societies in which they live." But I will save that to the end because my reply also builds on my "Philosophy of technology: In search of discourse synthesis" (*Techne* 10:2, 2007; see spt.org, under journal).

I.

First here I talk about the new types of knowledge needed in our field.

In my *Techne* online book, where I discuss the recent "professionalizing" of our discipline, I argue that the next generation of young philosophers of technology—including those still in graduate school—must master one of several fields outside philosophy. To master the philosophy of biotechnology, for example, a student today must know biotechnology, not just in general, but in detail in some specialty such as agricultural biotechnology (and there are several subdivisions of that field). Similarly for computer and information science, for ecology, for medicine, for engineering design, for cultural studies such as film, even for work in such cross-disciplinary fields as science, technology, and society (for example, on the issue of globalization).

That is my answer to the first question: What types of knowledge will have to be developed in your field? A philosopher of technology, to be prepared for the future, must become acquainted with advances in these rapidly advancing non-philosophical specialties. Not in all of them—that is impossible today—but he or she must become expert in at least one advancing field, must keep up to date with what the experts are learning in some particular field.

One example: To write in an expert fashion about the complexities of "virtual reality," the next generation must become accustomed to new

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computer and information science uses. And I will go even beyond that: to *better* uses.

Similarly for environmental issues: The next generation of philosophers of technology who specialize in those areas must be firmly grounded in the science of ecology—not just the basics but advances in the field, the latest knowledge. And, again, the latest improvements in the field (fields).

And so on for engineering design, advances in medical science and technology, film study, history and sociology of science, technology, and society—and so on and on.

But I emphasize again: typically the young scholar can master only one of these fields if he or she is going to be prepared to deal with the future. The next generation of philosophers of technology (particular technologies) must be specialists in a world of specialized knowledge.

II.

Next, to talk about what types of futures these advances make possible, I will begin with environmental philosophy, including the demand that the next generation of scholars in the field need to learn the *best* ecological knowledge. The future needs better protection of the environment, for example, in dealing with the global warming issue more effectively than we have in the past.

Or on issues associated with species loss, loss of biodiversity not only in the tropics but worldwide; the future demands advances in ecological science, but also in the management of forests, in avoiding deforestation, for example. (The same would be true for the world's oceans, and so on for other examples.)

Or medical science and technology: Clearly a better future will include not only newer medications and better medical technologies, but also better political ways of getting them to broader societies—for example in Africa or other parts of the globe, where sickness and early death have been the norm.

Surely the next generation of philosophers of technology need to think about, but also to prepare for, a better world in these and other senses: Better engineering design, more appropriate to the needs of a changing world; not only more and more widespread use of computers and information science, but more equitable, more democratic uses; even better television and films to educate the public about what their new world is really like and how they can better adjust to living in it in peace and harmony—including harmony with nature.

III.

And third and last I come to your other question: How can such ideas of a better future contribute to its realization?

My *activist philosophy of technology* approach (previous *Ludus Vitalis* contribution) would say that we don't just need the next generation of philosophers of technology to be competent in related fields. We need for them to be *improvers* of those allied fields. And one way of doing so is to devote themselves in an activist fashion not only to learning new knowledge in those fields, and to improving future society by applying that knowledge, but also in terms of getting the various professional societies associated with the specialties they are studying to contribute more effectively to a better world for all.

This is likely to sound like a hard saying to such young scholars. Are you saying that I must not only master another field besides philosophy, but that I must also choose only the best in that field, what will make ours a better world, but *also* try to influence the professionals in the field I am studying to commit themselves, in an equally activist fashion, to improve their professional societies and get them to contribute better than they have in the past to the improvement of the human condition? That seems too much to ask of a beginning scholar!

It's an ambitious goal, I admit. But I argued before in these pages that, "There is an implicit social contract between professionals and the democratic societies in which they live," and the expectation I had in mind was that professionals should contribute to the improvement of society, to the solution of its manifold problems. It would do little to advance this agenda if our next generation of philosophers of technology were to do *no more* than master new knowledge in ever-advancing new fields. In my opinion, democratic societies have every right to expect that the professional societies they support, and the professionals working in them, will try their best to help solve urgent problems facing their societies. And if that is true, say, for the next generation of engineers, or computer scientists, or environmentalists, surely it is equally true for those philosophers of technology who get involved with these efforts.

My call for an *activist philosophy of technology* may not appeal to all. But I am convinced that the problems facing society today—societies (in the plural) in all parts of the world—are so urgent that at least some should answer the call.

And our world—the new world of our unfolding future—will be a better future if they do; especially if they do so alongside equally committed professionals in the variety of fields of expertise in which they choose to become expert. It's a great adventure.

REFERENCES

Durbin, Paul T. (2007a), "Philosophy of technology: In search of discourse synthesis," *Techne* 10: 2; see spt.org, under journal.

— (2007b), "There is an implicit social contract between professionals and the democratic societies in which they live," *Ludus Vitalis* XV (27): 195-197.