Research line: Synthesis: Ethics of Technology, Practical Philosophy, and Modern Technology-Driven Societies

Coordinators	Brey, Düwell, Meijers
Participants	All

CHALLENGES

This research aims to develop more synthesizing perspectives on the entire topic of the gravitation programme. The challenges as described in section 2 are therefore particularly applicable to this research line. The relevant moral, political, and anthropological concepts have to be investigated in a systematic and interconnected way. This has to be done in intense interaction with the other research lines. Particularly challenging are the following three aspects:

First, the aim is to develop normative frameworks that are able to provide normative responses to the challenge of SDTs. This does require the reconceptualisation of basic concepts as well as the development of methodologies that are sufficiently embedded in fundamental research in practical philosophy and capable of providing normative orientation with regard to concrete technologies. Secondly, the current fragmentation of practical philosophy in highly specialized sub-disciplines makes it difficult to develop overarching conceptual and normative frameworks that address these challenges. It is necessary to put the questions of the ethics of SDTs more central on the agenda of practical philosophy.

Third, these normative frameworks should find a place in the construction of new technologies and the development of regulatory frameworks. Ethics of technology is not only an academic exercise but it strives for enhancement of the discourses and decisions in the public realm, by engineers and by policy-makers and lawyers. This requires the developments of methods that ensure appropriate interaction and knowledge transfer.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1) How can we understand, in an integral way, the synergetic and emergent disruptive effects of a variety of SDTs on our understanding of nature, society, and human beings, and the challenges they create for the normative principles on which modern societies are based?
2) How can we connect philosophical and ethical reflection on technology more intricately with technology development, implementation, and use? What innovations in the wider field of philosophy are suggested by our analysis of socially disruptive technologies? In which ways do socially disruptive technologies provide new opportunities to investigate old philosophical concepts, such as 'nature', 'life' and 'the human being' from new perspectives or in new ways?
3) What new philosophical concepts, theories, and methods are required for the critical evaluation of socially disruptive technologies? What new normative concepts and principles are required to guide the development of SDTs? How can we develop new modes of interaction and integration between the philosophy and ethics of technology and relevant subfields of practical philosophy (applied ethics, political philosophy, philosophical anthropology, and meta-ethics)?

RESEARCH AGENDA

1. Integrative interpretation of the nature of socially disruptive technologies

How can we understand in an integrated way the disrupting effect of SDTs? The three first research lines provide insights about disruptions in our relation to nature, society, and ourselves. But how can these insights be integrated into a comprehensive understanding of disruptive technologies? In this subline, we will categorize various types of SDTs and disruptive effects, and will also investigate their interrelations. For example, disruptions in the human-nature relation may also engender new social institutions. Moreover, effects of SDTs are synergetic and emergent; if AI is combined with synthetic biology it may allow the creation of new intelligent hybrid (human-technology) life forms that create conceptual and ethical questions that remain invisible if technologies are studied in isolation. We will also critically investigate different existing grand narratives about socially disruptive technologies that can be found in literature and popular science.

2. Ethical analysis of SDTs

In this sub-line, we will develop new methods for the ethical and political philosophical analysis of SDTs. We will build on existing approaches, many of them we have (co)developed, such as experimental moral philosophy of technology (Alfano and Loeb 2016, Van de Poel et al. 2018), ethical impact assessment (Palm and Hansson 2006), anticipatory ethics (Brey 2012), structural ethics (Brey, 2014) and technological mediation theories of ethics (Verbeek 2011). But we will also build on the methodological discourses in other parts of applied ethics, particularly bioethics, over the last decades (Düwell 2013), political philosophy (Robeyns, 2017), the broad range of discourses in meta-ethics and normative ethics, and we will also consider foresight, technology assessment and social impact assessment approaches. The ultimate aim in this subline is to develop approaches that are capable of offering a comprehensive normative assessment of both SDTs and the contemporary technology-driven world and to understand whether and in which regard the normative starting points of contemporary normative institutions would have to be modified or revised. Most existing approaches to ethical analysis are only capable of covering specific parts of technological innovations (e.g. engineering ethics or medical ethics) and are insufficiently prepared for the complexities and dynamics of current technological developments. The subline will take a more comprehensive approach.

3. Responsible innovation and governance of technology

In this subline, the aim is to develop new collaborative methods for responsible innovation, especially at the intersection of ethics, engineering and policy. Based in part on existing approaches that we have developed and on new insights gained in the programme, we will develop new piecemeal and integrated approaches for responsible innovation, including models for collaboration between ethics, engineering science, and social science fields, with the purpose of developing new approaches for responsible applied research, responsible design (using methods of design for values, ref.), responsible introduction of technology to market, responsible utilisation, and responsible regulation. Later in the programme, we will also pursue some studies to consider the wider implications of our work for the engineering sciences and social sciences. We will investigate how collaborative studies with ethicists in responsible innovation research may enable innovation in the social sciences and engineering sciences by introducing new concepts and approaches that center around values and normativity.

4. Reconceptualizations and the research agenda of practical philosophy and other fields

In the first three research lines, we will investigate how different concepts in practical philosophy are challenged by social disruptive technologies: concepts like agency, autonomy, responsibility, vulnerability, or finitude. Here we will investigate how these challenges can be investigated from a broader philosophical perspective. This requires that synthesizing perspectives like philosophical-anthropological theories, concepts of nature and human nature, and concepts of human agency acquire a more prominent place on the agenda of practical philosophy. In all of those contexts the perspective of technologies should have a prominent place. This will make it necessary to rethink current distinctions between philosophical discourses – the strong divide between so-called analytic and continental philosophy may turn out to be unproductive in this regard. It is also important to embed the current discourse on technology in the way those concepts were discussed in earlier periods of the history of philosophy. For example, it can be observed that over the last decades practical philosophy has avoided engaging in discourses about contested fundamental topics such as human nature or the nature of history. It could turn out to be advantageous to take earlier philosophical traditions about these topics seriously. The global application of SDTs makes it furthermore necessary to study how the moral dimension is conceptualized in non-Westerns philosophical traditions.