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COMMENT

New Technologies Should not be Treated as Social Experiments

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Van de Poel (2011) argues that nuclear power should be treated as an ongoing social experiment that needs to be continuously monitored and evaluated. In his reports (2009; Jacobs, Van de Poel, & Osseweijer, 2010), he makes similar claims about other technologies. Van de Poel’s main point is that the technology-as-a-social-experiment metaphor has important implications for the ethical evaluation of new technologies. Rather than trying to answer an old question we know to be difficult to answer (‘Is technology X ethically acceptable’) we should replace that question with a new one, which might be easier to answer: ‘Is technology X an ethically acceptable social experiment?’. Put in van de Poel’s vocabulary, the technology-as-a-social-experiment metaphor, ‘shifts the discussion away from a debate about whether nuclear energy technology as such is acceptable, towards a debate about the conditions under which experiments with nuclear energy technology are or might be acceptable.’

Van de Poel is not the first to use the technology-as-a-social-experiment metaphor. This idea was originally developed by sociologists, e.g., Krohn and Weingart (1987) and Krohn and Weyer (1994). In the ethical debate, the textbook by Martin and Schinzinger (2005) has been very influential, and they devote a full chapter to this idea. This indicates that quite a lot of scholars believe that we should replace the question ‘Is technology X ethically acceptable’ with the question ‘Is technology X an ethically acceptable social experiment?’ The aim of this note is to raise two objections to this proposal.

My first objection is that the new question is not any easier to answer than the old one. What is the point of replacing a difficult question by another equally difficult question? It is a mistake to think that it is easier to adjudicate whether a social experiment is ethically permissible than it is to adjudicate whether a new technology is ethically acceptable. Our understanding of research ethics is no better than our understanding of ethics in general.

Note, for instance, that the traditional debate between consequentialists and deontologists tends to pop up in research ethics as well as in many other areas of applied ethics. That controversy cannot be easily solved or avoided. The debate over embryonic stem cell research illustrates this well. Some argue that the fact that stem cell therapies might lead to good consequences for a large number of people is more important than deontological considerations related to the moral status of the embryo. Others take the

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opposite view. How do we decide which camp is right? It seems that it would not help to frame the question as a problem of research ethics. The ethical conflict is still present, unresolved and open for everyone to see.

My second objection is more fundamental. The point is that a good answer to the new question about the acceptability of a social experiment may not be a good answer to the original question whether we should accept the new technology. The two questions do not address the same issue. Therefore, the original question would still have to be answered, even if we would be able to answer the new question. If it turns out that some social experiment would be ethically unacceptable, it does not follow that it would be ethically unacceptable to use the new technology in society. In some cases, a new technology should be accepted (and used!) although it would not pass as an acceptable social experiment. The reason is that other considerations, having nothing to do with research ethics, can be relevant for deciding whether a new technology should be accepted or not.

Let me illustrate the second objection in an example. My aim is to construct a case in which some social experiment would not be acceptable from an ethical point of view, although we nevertheless have perfectly legitimate reasons to continue using the technology in question. I believe President Truman’s decision to drop two nuclear bombs in Japan in August 1945 might be an example of such a case. If we were to evaluate Truman’s decision from a research ethical point of view, there is no doubt that a large number of considerations that are typically considered to be relevant in discussions of research ethics were violated in this case: ‘don’t harm people’, ‘ask for informed consent’, etc. But this does not show that Truman’s decision was wrong, or that dropping the two bombs was ethically unacceptable. In 1945, the USA was at war with Japan and Truman did what he had good reason to think would be the best way to stop the war, which might have saved the lives of millions of innocent people. To think of the decision to use nuclear weapons against Japan from a research ethical point of view would not have been of any help for Truman. The decision he was facing, whether to use a new and potentially very dangerous technology for warfare could only be answered by figuring out whether it was ethically acceptable to use this new technology for that purpose. There was no other question he could have asked, that would have been easier but yet meaningful to answer.

What could van de Poel say in response to these objections? It seems that the best response might be to weaken the claim a bit. Instead of claiming that questions about the ethical acceptability of social experiments should replace questions about the ethical acceptability of technologies, one could argue, in a more cautious manner, that the new question adds new, valuable perspectives to the ethical debate, which would otherwise have been overlooked. So although the old question still has to be answered, and is likely to remain difficult to answer, we might discover some new (equally difficult questions) that may be relevant and which would otherwise have been neglected. By ‘shifting the focus’ of the debate we may not be able to solve the original problem, but we achieve other things that might be valuable. We might, for instance, discover that a question we knew to be difficult to answer is actually even more difficult to answer, since additional ethical perspectives also have to be taken into account.

Another possible response could be to argue that if a technology passes the research ethical test (or whatever test would be triggered by the new question), then it is unlikely to be unacceptable because of some other reason. In contemporary research ethics, nearly no ethical worry seems to be too insignificant to warrant concern. There is arguably no other area in society in which ethical issues are taken so seriously. Therefore, we can use the
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research ethical test for identifying which new technologies need to be carefully monitored. The technology-as-a-social experiment approach would then be a useful heuristics, which we might have good pragmatic reasons for adopting.

My reaction to this type of response can be summarized in a single sentence: if we weaken the claim and no longer insist that ethical questions about new technologies can be replaced by questions about social experiments, then the technology-as-a-social experiment metaphor loses nearly all of its intellectual content. If we were to admit that the original question we set out to tackle still needs to be answered (‘Is technology X ethically acceptable’), i.e. that the new question cannot replace the old one, then the old question still remains to be answered. By bringing up various pragmatic reasons for discussing the new question, we do not solve the original intellectual problem: should the new technology be accepted or not? The technology-as-a-social-experiment metaphor would only be worth serious interest if it could, literally speaking, replace the old and difficult question about whether a new technology should be accepted.

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Note

1. The quote is from van de Poel (2011, p.288). Although van de Poel himself does not use the word ‘replace’, I think that word best captures his intentions. In his (2009, p. 107) he writes that, ‘the introduction [of van de Poel’s proposal] would amount to a large scale societal experiment, to test the hazards of the novel technology.’

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