
A Brief Note to the Student

Throughout your university studies, and indeed throughout your lives in the USA, you've been quietly inculcated with a rather specific world view concerning technology, ethics, and society. Some of its tenants are that technology is about the gadgets that we build and use; that it's an outgrowth of the sciences; that, overwhelmingly, technology makes things better; that it liberates us, empowers us, and helps everyone to prosper; and that our technology is fundamentally apolitical, areligious, and amoral. The same world view holds that the individual is the primary agent that drives technological change, as well as the locus of responsibility for that change. Correspondingly, the individual scientist or engineer behaves ethically and appropriately when he abides by the law, by professional standards, and by cultural norms.

It is all, I am afraid, far more more false than true. It is a kind of fiction we have spun to make it easier to do the things we do. At the same time, the viewpoint I have sketched is so much a part of our culture, our institutions, and our selves that we can hardly even see it's there. And, now, this blindness imperils our very existence.

Many of the readings I've assembled here are intended to push you, at least a bit, to question assumptions like those above. Hopefully one or two of them will do their job.

At the end of the term, when you do your course evaluations, the statement of course goals will say, in part, that I wanted you to think about, and act upon, the ethical implications of your personal and professional choices, and our collective work as technologists. At one level, this may sound kind of easy, perhaps like something you've always done. But, in fact, I suspect it's rarely done, and a terribly hard thing to do. Overturning this rock reveals a world both difficult to understand and uncomfortable to see.

A colleague once commented that he had never met anyone who regarded his own behavior as anything but proper and good. And yet, collectively, it seems to me that we are routinely committing a massive amount of wrong. Is it really possible that we could each behave well and yet, somehow, our collective behavior should end up so rank? I will leave you to ponder your own answer to this riddle, and close by wishing you wisdom—certainly more than I have ever found—in your own struggles with the issues of this note and of this course.

Kind regards,



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