

Technology: Is it free of values? by Ann Friou

As the National Endowment for the Humanities Distinguished Teaching Professor, Craig Hanks is bringing together humanists and scientists to explore how technology and values shape each other

Craig Hanks, the 2009-2012 NEH Distinguished Teaching Professor, has exchanged his car for a bicycle.

The philosophy professor's decision to be car-free emerged from his scholarly and personal interests in technology and values and the importance of community interaction in examining problems. While living in Manhattan and traveling in Europe, he had given thought to urban design and how much easier it is to interact with people in cities designed for foot traffic rather than car traffic.

Transportation – whether it's by vehicle or on foot – provides a good example of how technology and values shape each other, Hanks said. It raises big questions: How should we move ourselves around? Do our modes of transportation make us freer, more democratic? How do they affect the environment, the workplace, everyday habits, human relationships?

Pointing to one intersection between cars and values, he said, "If we're in our cars, we don't usually speak to our neighbors. But if we walk or ride a bicycle through the neighborhood on the way to the grocery store, we're likely to see neighbors and people from work. Plus, we may have conversations with people different from ourselves, people we might not have much contact with otherwise. This kind of democratic interaction creates dialogue and builds community; it's good for us." On the other hand, he recognizes that being car-free is not an easy choice for people in most cities to make, particularly people with children.

Hanks is the fifth Texas State professor to be named a Distinguished Teaching Professor in the Humanities, a three-year post supported by an NEH endowment to Texas State. Previous Distinguished Teaching Professors have been Paul Cohen, English; Robert Gorman, political science; Jeffrey Gordon, philosophy; and James Housefield, art and design. Distinguished Teaching Professors are reviewed and recommended by an external board of teacher-scholars, and the final selection is made by the Texas State president.

As the newest Distinguished Teaching Professor in the Humanities, Hanks wants to create opportunities for Texas State's community of faculty and students to engage in conversation about a wide variety of topics related to technology and values. He is organizing special topics courses, invited lectures and faculty seminars around semester-long themes related to technology and values, such as biomedical technologies, sustainability, globalization, architecture and urbanism, technology and everyday life, and technology and democracy. In the fall 2009 semester, when the semester-long theme was "Technology and Values in Latin America," Hanks taught a course in Latin American philosophy. Students and faculty from throughout the campus met to explore representations of technology and development in Latin American film, and Professor Gregory Pappas visited campus, met with students and presented a lecture in Latin-American identity and the future of relations between the U.S. and Latin America. This spring, the semester topic is "Technology and Values in Psychology and Neuroscience." Hanks has planned guest lectures, special seminars for students and panel discussions to complement the campuswide 2009-2010

Common Experience, "The Whole Mind." Topics in future semesters will be "Sustainability and Design" and "Agriculture, Food and Human Values."

Hanks is a seasoned scholar in the field of technology and values. Since 1991, he has taught courses on philosophy of science, philosophy of technology, philosophy of film and media, engineering ethics, and philosophy of biology and biomedical ethics. He's published dozens of articles and book chapters and a book on the subject, and he's won top teaching awards from the University of Alabama-Huntsville and Texas State.

Despite the prevalence of technology in our lives, most philosophers have only recently become interested in technology and technological problems. Hanks identifies a couple of reasons for philosophers' lack of concern with technology. One is found in the traditional bias of the humanities against everyday affairs and applied issues, he said. Another has to do with the newness of technology as a central part of human life.

Summarizing an argument by Joseph Pitt, a founder of the Science, Technology and Society Program at Virginia Tech, Hanks said, "If the technologies we command are central to our way of life and to our future, if they reflect our value system, or even if they merely affect the economic structure of our society, we need to know what this means and how it happens."

Of course, Hanks continued, philosophers disagree on the question of the relationship between technology and values. Is technology itself embedded with values, or is it value-neutral, implying that only



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the use of technology instills it with value? Philosophers’ answers generally fall into three categories, he said:

1. There is no connection whatsoever between our technologies and our values. Tools and techniques themselves are value-free. Only in the use and misuse of technology do value questions arise.
2. Technology is the means to obtain human freedom. As technological capacity expands, human beings will lead lives of greater freedom and ease.
3. Technology is a growing monster of our own making that will increasingly determine the course and

content of our lives and sap what remains of our humanity.

Hanks believes that none of these approaches is wholly adequate to understanding how technology and values shape each other. Whereas the people who work creating technology tend to view technology as the path to improving human life, humanists have traditionally taken the position that technology is a threat to human values; at least, he said, they tend to see technological thought and action as only one aspect of human experience and thus seek to restrict it within a more expansive framework.

“As the 21st century opens, the disconnect between these two cultures appears more and more fruitless, and the need to

bring the realms of the humanities and science and technology to bear on each other becomes more crucial,” Hanks said. “For example, as our culture places more and more emphasis on practicality and productivity through technology, we are also confronting a crisis of the spirit as we search for meaning in life. The humanities, in dialogue with science and technology, can address this issue.

“A main goal of my project,” he concluded, “is to bridge this gap, to foster conversations that bring together humanists and scientists from across the campus and beyond to share their knowledge, to build new teaching and research relationships, and to learn how we can draw on one another.” ★