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EDITORIAL

Emerging technologies and the voice of reason

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In the early days of nanoethics the debate was dominated by grand visions of the manifold blessings that would be bestowed upon us, if only nanotechnology were developed to the full. Simultaneously, however, there were equally vociferous prophecies of doom and gloom caused by self-replicating and all-devouring nanobots. At the time one of the editors of the journal at hand called for the voice of reason in a paper pointing out the need for more balanced ethical assessments "better informed by what is actually going on in specific fields of nanotechnological research" (Gordijn 2005, 527). Two years later, John Weckert started a new journal entitled *Nanoethics. Ethics for Technologies that Converge at the Nanoscale* in an endeavor "to advance the examination of ethical and social issues surrounding nanotechnologies in a philosophically rigorous and scientifically informed manner" (Weckert 2007, 2). In subsequent years the debate made a lot of progress to the effect that we are now seeing interesting and well-informed analyses of particular application domains of nanotechnology. The first paper in this issue is a case in point (Allon et al. 2017). Reflecting on the development of nanoethics two questions come to mind.

Hype

How come reasonable and balanced ethical analyses do rarely pop up in early stage debates about emerging technologies? Upheaval and exaggeration do not seem to be isolated phenomena particular to nanoethics but rather spectacles that can be observed time and again, e.g. in debates about geoengineering, synthetic biology, enhancement, artificial intelligence and in vitro meat. Why all the hyperboles and hysteria whenever a new technology catches the attention of ethicists? Unquestionably, solid information on morally relevant features of any new technology is hard to come by in its early developmental stages. Collingridge (1982) famously describes the following dilemma: when we can still influence the course of a new technology, we lack sufficient knowledge about its effects; however, when we have enough information, the technology is so rooted in society that we are no longer able to significantly shape its development. And yet, can the lack of information by itself account for the commotion and exaggerations on both sides of the ethical debate? Or are there additional factors at work? What are the mechanisms causing the idiosyncratic, often emotionally heated dialectic of these early stage debates?

Uniqueness

In the last section of their paper, Allon et al. (2017) touch on the question of the uniqueness of nanomedicine. Distinctiveness is an issue that seems to pop up a lot when dealing with a new technology: 'Does the technology pose any new ethical questions?' is a question often asked. However, it is not immediately clear whether such a question is very meaningful, given that it seems to be a predominantly semantic quandary (cf. Gordijn and Cutter 2014)? To illustrate this point: Does it make sense to ask whether the iPhone7 is unique; is it meaningful 'philosophically' - and not just for the purpose of advertising? Does the answer to the question not simply depend on the level of abstraction

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with which you analyze the phone's features? For sure, the more you home in on any new technology and examine it closer, the more new details you will detect. The more you zoom out and ignore its particular features, the more it looks like something that you have seen before. A phone is a phone, right? But if this analysis is correct, it is difficult to understand why in early-stage debates about emerging technologies, when only little details are known, the debaters are inclined to detect unprecedented dangers or blessings. And later, when the technology is better known, they tend to conclude there is nothing new under the sun. Isn't that paradoxical?

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