

Session 4

Will Science and Digital Economy Really Change the World?

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The session is based on the 18th-century idea of progress. It presupposes: 1) that science and technology exert major influence on the nature of existential experience; 2) that they invariably contribute to human well-being. Both assumptions are historically, logically, and psychologically unwarranted.

The unprecedented rapid development of science and technology in the last 150 years left the character of humanity –its passions, desires, aspirations– fundamentally untouched. We still seek meaning, stability, and security and the advancing understanding of the physical reality and technology controlling it fail to provide us with them. Ambition and status-envy remain the predominant modern passions; new technologies offer them new outlets but do not assuage them. The nature of human suffering has changed, but its amount has likely increased. There is less physical suffering today thanks to the advances in medicine, but physical pain is replaced by mental anguish. Improved agriculture and medicine increase the world population, but growing numbers wish they were never born and contemplate suicide, the burden of mental illness being the heaviest in the most developed countries, most dependent on advanced technology.

As we learn to control nature and reduce the amount of suffering it may cause (physical hardship and disease), we increase the amount of man-inflicted suffering. Ways to kill and injure have been advanced far beyond the means to save and improve lives; most lives profoundly changed by technology so far were changed by destructive technology. It was technology that made possible the devastation of the two world wars and the perpetration of the Holocaust. Today, it is technology that enables terrorist organizations and holds vast populations in fear. Advances in science do not necessarily translate into technological innovations. When they do, these innovations are much more likely to be in the interest of powerful collective actors concerned with preserving their power-positions vis-à-vis other collective actors, i.e., military and surveillance technology, than in the interest of individual consumers. From the invention of the wheel on, technology has always served political power first, empowering individuals only as a side-effect in a trickle-down manner. To change this pattern is not a matter of technology, it is a matter of social values. Neither the benefits, nor the costs of technology have been ever spread equitably. Since the costs of *scientific* technology generally outweigh the benefits, its potential dangers should be considered first.

Our admiration for science is not based on its contribution to human well-being, as is commonly believed. It is based on its centrality as a basis of national prestige: implicitly, science stands for the nation's IQ. This, as well as the fact that advances in science do not automatically translate into technological innovations, and that development of technology does not imply improvement in the quality of life and has often had the opposite effect, must be kept in mind while discussing issues raised by this session.

The session also raises questions about regulation of scientific research and its public funding. Historical experience and the logic of social processes suggest that creativity (scientific as any other) cannot be regulated and the main effect of its *public* funding has been to smother it and foster intellectual conformism – the opposite of creativity – instead. Most scientific breakthroughs of the past (think of Einstein, Darwin) came from outside bureaucratic systems within which public funding must occur. It is

normal science – science within the framework of accepted ideas (right or wrong) that profits from such arrangements.