

Decisions a computer can't make

By Father David K. O'Rourke, OP
NC News Service

Several months ago I purchased a personal computer. Until then, I never had anticipated how helpful it could be. I am even using it to write this article.

But I have a question: How does a computer discover the difference between right and wrong?

Make no mistake, the question is important. From the assembly lines of big automakers to the vineyards of California, the stainless-steel hands of computerized machines are hard at work. Technology is reshaping the world.

Yet, I suspect that ethical dimensions of the technological revolution are being seriously overlooked. Charles Muscatine, an educator at the University of California, made this point at a 1983 conference of the American Association of Colleges.

He said universities are becoming expert at helping students master modern technology. But, he maintained, these institutions are not teaching what is perhaps the greatest need — how a person makes ethical decisions.

Before asking how questions of right and wrong enter the world of technology, let's be clear on definitions. We talk about technology. What does it mean?

Think of technology and you may think of a computerized world. We readily draw mental pictures of it — complete with elaborate control panels and techni-

cians who quietly watch over their oscilloscopes and robots.

But what technology is really about is something different, something we can't put into images. Technology isn't principally about machines.

Technology above all is about information. It has to do with storing, controlling, communicating and using information.

Today information can be processed almost instantaneously. Knowledge can be put to use in ways that change the world and change people's lives.

This raises ethical questions. Several weeks ago a commission of U.S. bishops conducted a hearing in California. The hearing concerned the national pastoral letter on the economy being developed by the U.S. bishops.

An expert on world geography, agriculture and climate conditions told of some ways knowledge is put to use to change the world. He cited the Green Revolution — the development of new food plants to increase production.

He also talked about how the unplanned effects of science and technology commonly turn out to be greater than anticipated.

For instance, the Green Revolution is bringing a new dependency on a very narrow genetic pool in the plant world. Once there were many varieties of rice. When stronger strains were developed, they gradually replaced the many varieties.

That might mean that, in the event of a new rice disease, a huge part of the world's rice crop would be wiped out. The risk needs to be considered now, not later.

Then there is the ongoing removal of trees in the world's tropical regions as the march of modern civilization proceeds. Some fear that the large-scale loss of trees in the tropics will cause harmful climate changes, possibly great enough to affect the world.

Experts who addressed the bishops' commission pointed out that complex issues in technology cause many people to throw their hands up in the air, saying, in effect: "This is too complicated. Leave it to the experts."

That is the greatest danger. The issues must be addressed.

This brings me back to my original question. How does a computer recognize the difference between right and wrong?

Obviously it doesn't. Technology relies on human beings for decisions about ethical matters.

(Father O'Rourke is on the staff of the Family Life Office in the Diocese of Oakland, Calif.)

FOOD...

...for thought

The campsite was nestled on a heavily wooded mountainside. In it, young Girl Scouts moved happily about from one activity to another. They made pottery jars and they wove placemats on 100-year-old looms. They swam, they biked, they sang — and they programed computers.

They programed computers? Yes. In a cabin alongside a gurgling mountain stream, a group of computers awaited groups of the girls each day. A computer instructor was on hand to help introduce the young learners to skills increasingly regarded as essential in the electronic age.

Today, more and more schools are finding a place in the curriculum for computers. Among parents computer skills are a frequent topic of discussion.

Parents are worried that children who lack the right kind of computer background will lack a necessary skill for survival in adulthood.

Parents and educators have a sense that computer technology is changing society in profound ways.

Computer technology often is regarded as one way humanity currently carries on the work of God's creation. The assistance computers provide in meeting worthwhile goals speedily — e.g., in planning and monitoring

valuable social programs, or in assessing emergency medical needs — can be seen as a way human beings carry out God's desire that they extend dominion over all the earth.

But risks accompany almost every new effort to extend humanity's earthly dominion. People may grow apprehensive, fearing they will become victims of their own creations. Some begin to wonder what kind of place will exist for them in the world 20 years into the future.

In the midst of the pluses and minuses of an emerging world, people can lose perspective. Some then may make decisions about the future much more on the basis of their fear of what is happening in the world than on the basis of their real values and hopes in life.

It seems that a chain reaction occurs. Humanity extends its reach into the world through technology. But the changed world of technology reaches back, changing the ways people live, the ways they use their leisure time, the kinds of jobs they find — even, it is said, the ways they think.

The new world around us calls for new kinds of decisions from us. What does "maintaining perspective" mean in this changing world?

...for discussion

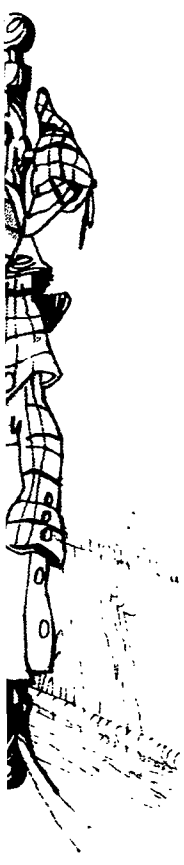
1. Television is probably the major means by which the modern electronic age makes its way into homes. How has television changed homes? What advantages do you find in television? What are its disadvantages?

2. Can you think of a time when you faced a moral question because of a scientific or technological development in society? Perhaps it was a medical question concerning the care of a sick relative. Perhaps it was a question about how to spend your leisure time. Perhaps it concerned children's activities or the education of children. What happened? What were your concerns?

3. Katharine Bird's article suggests that technological developments can be very good, provided they keep in mind the dignity of the human being. What is meant by "the dignity of the human being?"

SECOND HELPINGS

"The Bible, the Church and Social Justice," by Redemptorist Father Richard Schiblin. This little handbook on social justice includes discussion questions and recommended readings. This makes it useful for discussion groups and families that want to explore the justice dimensions of Christian ethics. Actions to promote justice are included too. "The Bible is not aloof from the problems of justice that plague society," Father Schiblin comments. He discusses poverty in America, Latin America's cry for justice, the roles of grassroots communities and other questions in this easy-to-read, 64-page booklet. (Liguori Publications, 1 Liguori Drive, Liguori, Mo. 63057. \$1.50.)



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theirs: "Everything is lawful for me." Paul responded: "That does not mean that everything is good for me" (1 Cor. 6:12).
The same principle applies to Christians today.
The fact that we "can" do all sorts of things does not mean that we should. For instance: We can harness atomic power today. But what right have we to use that power to incinerate human beings?
We "can" control fetal development. But what right have we to use those techniques for the production of a select master race?
We "can" do so many things today. But freedom demands that we count the cost to human society. The only acceptable freedom is responsible freedom.
(Father Castelot teaches at St. John's Seminary in Plymouth, Mich.)