



## **Virtue and Practicality**

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## Virtue and Practicality

In Melvin Kranzberg (ed.), *Ethics in an Age of Pervasive Technology* (Boulder, 1980: Westview Press), 193

Realizing that technology is one of the major characteristics of our time, and keenly aware of the moral problems that attend the applications of technology, the Technion—the Israel Institute of Technology—invited some intellectual leaders of the Western world to consider ways of thought and behavior, individual and societal, that might alleviate the present crisis. The idea was to survey the social, political, economic, and perhaps most important, the moral abyss into which Western civilization seemed to be slipping, without any footholds to stay its descent.

A representative group of major thinkers thus was gathered for an international symposium titled “Ethics in an Age of Pervasive Technology,” held in Haifa and Jerusalem in December 1974. This symposium, also known as the Wunsch conference, was the eleventh event in a series of annual lectures established at the Technion by Dr. Joseph W. Wunsch of New York. The specific aim of the symposium was to examine the role of ethics in the modern world—a world characterized by pervasive technology—through an interdisciplinary approach. Humanists, social scientists, engineers, and natural scientists, were included.

*Excerpt from p. 2 of Melvin Kranzberg's Introduction*

Sir Isaiah Berlin warned against the hope of obtaining ethical perfection in the real world. Some goods might have to be sacrificed to obtain others.

NOT ALL VALUES are compatible. It is quite clear that – this is an a priori proposition – one cannot have everything. Not everything can be done. Instead, we must sacrifice some things to obtain others. In *The Prince*, Machiavelli stated very clearly – and truly – that one cannot both lead what he called a Christian life and also be effective in public life. By that he meant that ideal virtue is incompatible with being effective in practice, and that in public affairs something, therefore, must be sacrificed. This uncomfortable truth is something that people on the whole are not prepared to face.

The only conclusion I should like to draw from this fact is that I think in general it is very desirable for those who go into dangerous professions, namely, medicine, technology, biology, physics, chem-

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istry and the like, to be aware that their inventions and discoveries are likely to have some effects that they may regard as deleterious; and yet progress in the acquisition and dissemination of knowledge cannot, and should not, be stopped until all humankind is morally purified. The dilemmas leading to extreme anxiety, the agonies Nobel went through, and then Oppenheimer, Einstein and others, are not accidental.

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