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Novel Tech Ethics

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1. Introduction

As Susan Sherwin and Françoise Baylis argue, unjust relations and structures permeate our social institutions, public policies and common practices.¹ Identifying and addressing these injustices (which affect both individuals and groups) is the business of bioethics. On this view, bioethicists are agents for change. Sometimes change is much needed at the local level, sometimes the focus must be global. In either plane, we must attend to the needs and interests of the individual, the community, and (on occasion) the species.

In ethics we often think about “what should be done” in response to discrete opportunities or events. Sometimes, more broadly, we think on where we’ve been, and how we should live. Too often, however, we forget to look more closely at questions that would have us seriously reflect on who we are, and who we could, and (perhaps) should, aim at becoming. These are key issues in thinking through what kind of world we want to live in.

How can we properly consider these questions without getting ahead of ourselves, trading away the possibility of real moral imagination for simplistic, intellectual fantasizing? How can we train ourselves to see what is on the horizon, without losing the important ability to gauge the future by looking to the present and perhaps even the past?

In considering the ethical implications of embracing or shunning novel technologies, we need to ask not only local questions about how their novelty might expand or contract what we already value. We also need to consider how these technologies might aid or foreclose alternative courses of valuing and caring that do not, but could, command our attention. This way of trying to better see the ethical challenges of novel technologies with prism-like attention to the here and now as well as to the future (paradoxically reflecting and refracting the issues at the same time) is central to much of the work undertaken by members of the Novel Tech Ethics (NTE) research team.

NTE is a dynamic, interdisciplinary [research team](#) based at Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada. It is an international group of scholars collaborating on research at the interface of ethics, health policy, and the life sciences. NTE focuses specifically on technologies that are current, or on the “horizon”, including neurotechnologies (e.g. neurodiagnostics, psycho pharmaceuticals, biologics, psychosurgery, electrical stimulation, and neuro-prostheses), and reproductive and genetic technologies (e.g. chimera production, embryo manipulation, cloning, genetic diagnostics, gene transfer, and stem cell research). Our grant-funded projects in these areas address individual, social, and intergenerational concerns.

¹ S Sherwin and F Baylis, “The Feminist Health Care Ethics Consultant as Architect and Advocate” (2003) 17 *Public Affairs Quarterly* 141-158.

2. *The Intellectual Commons*

2.1 An Informal Environment Fosters Interdisciplinary Teamwork

A cadre of national and international scholars (mostly postdoctoral fellows with representation from philosophy, health law, anthropology, sociology, science and technology studies, public health, and disability studies) makes up the current team at the on site location in Halifax. A collegial working environment (named *The Intellectual Commons*) is key to the success of NTE. All core members enjoy office space within a newly renovated, vintage house on the Dalhousie University campus conveniently located half a block away from the University's main library. Working in close proximity to one another makes communication between members commonplace, efficient, and characterized by all the advantages of face-to-face, daily contact. Ongoing, informal dialogue allows for personal and academic growth as stimulated by the multiple viewpoints brought to the fore by the diverse backgrounds of our members. What is more, new scholars seeking to establish a research track that is significant, relevant, and successful enjoy open access to on site senior scholars who act as their mentors on an ongoing basis.

2.2 Weekly Meetings: Structuring Feedback and Group Learning

A structure of regular weekly meetings between all local NTE members (at times including [visiting scholars](#), e.g. David Benatar, Susan Dodds, Carolyn McLeod) facilitates critical and creative thinking, investigation, writing, and the management of the various ongoing research projects. Occasionally, [alumni members](#) are also included in tele- and video-conferencing. At these meetings, members collectively review drafts of their working papers, conference abstracts, posters, and presentations, thus making available to one another the benefits of internal, pre-publication peer review. Members also apprise one another of - and then critically reflect together upon - local, national, and international news relevant to bioethics. Sometimes this involves sharing strategies for politicising, problematising, or facilitating research by ethicists and scientists in the various communities of bioethics scholars. The result has motivated continuous self-reflexive dialogue questioning the present state of bioethics, the goals of the field and the roles of its various constitutive disciplines and stakeholders. Commonly this review process and ensuing conversations have been critical in establishing writing partnerships between members, including alumni.

3. *Knowledge Production and Dissemination*

3.1 Academic Networking and Publications

Peer reviewed scholarly publications, conference presentations, and policy review, design, and creation—see, for example, [Navigating the ethics of human research](#)—are among the various means by which NTE members share their research with professional colleagues. This year, NTE embarked on an ambitious project to further academic discourse in the emergent field of neuroethics by organizing an international conference entitled [Brain Matters: New Directions in Neuroethics](#). The conference included participants from fifteen countries (across four continents) and proved to be a successful vehicle for fostering multidisciplinary collaboration and discourse

between a diverse group of scholars drawn from the many highly specialized fields that intersect within neuroethics.

3.2 Public Engagement and Community Interaction

NTE is also dedicated to building bioethics literacy. This involves expanding the context for learning beyond traditional academic fora and institutions to engage the broader public. Given that many of the policy and ethical issues dealt with by NTE are of great relevance and personal importance to many Canadians, our team takes seriously its responsibilities as researchers for translating our work into accessible formats that work to inform the voting public on complex bioethical problems and to build ethics competence² in the process. In this way, NTE sees itself as accountable to the general public and doing its part in building responsible, participatory democracy. Examples of this include regular [contributions by Baylis](#) to *The Mark News* as well as other print and electronic media.

The engagement of NTE with the public follows both traditional and non-traditional mechanisms, including [media work](#) (radio, television, print journalism) and public speaking grounded in clinical research and policy-making practices. Importantly, we are also committed to outreach at the community level. NTE provides a variety of [public education initiatives](#) such as an annual film series (*States of Mind*) on the ethics of mental health, panel discussions, public forums, and public talks, all of which have been very well attended and received. This coming winter we will be hosting two Café Scientifiques: i) [Treating Alzheimer's Disease: What to Take, and Who to Trust?](#) and, ii) [Making Babies One at a Time: When Two is a Crowd](#). Further details about these events are forthcoming on the [Events](#) section of our website.

A continuously updated website is another critical piece of the commitment of the team to knowledge dissemination and public engagement, and it serves as a resource for academics and members of the public interested in bioethics. Each of the sections on [Neuro](#), [Genetics](#), [Justice](#), and [Health Policy](#) describe the respective teams, research projects, publications, reports, webnews, weblinks and resources, as well as NTE members' poster presentations. The [Events](#) section of the site details notice of upcoming bioethics and relevant scientific conferences, as well as NTE's own upcoming and archived public education initiatives. Scholars and other professionals making a career in bioethics can find dedicated, up-to-date sub-sections of the [team page](#) dealing with relevant employment opportunities, fellowships, training and grant opportunities, workshops and symposia, as well as honours and awards relevant to bioethics. An alumni page details where our former members have gone since their time with us: it is useful both for tracking the history of NTE membership and for providing ongoing networking information. As a result, NTE has been successful in fostering writing and research partnerships that have extended, and continue to extend, between its current and past members and/or affiliates.

² See for example, T Krahn, "[Building a Mental Health Ethics Film Series, Building Mental Health Ethics Literacy](#)" (2009) 4(1) *Journal of Ethics in Mental Health* 1-6.

4. History

The NTE team was initially set up in February 2002 by Françoise Baylis (Canada Research Chair in Bioethics and Philosophy) following her vision of a team-workshop approach to research that would more effectively manage the expanding consortium of young investigators and trainees who (at the time) were collaborating with her on grant-funded projects. Since then, collaborations on grants have yielded five research projects in [neurotechnologies](#), thirteen in relation to [genetics and reproductive technologies](#), three projects in [intergenerational justice](#), and eight [health policy research projects](#). The partnerships on these diverse projects involve organizations from across the globe, including involvements with REMEDiE (Regenerative Medicine in Europe, The University of York, UK), PARTS (Provision and Acquisition of Reproductive Tissue for Science, Newcastle University, UK), and CBAS (Centre for Biomedicine and Society, King's College London, UK).

5. Future Directions

In reflecting on challenges facing bioethics in the twenty-first century, long time NTE member Sherwin has stated that bioethics “is (or ought to be) concerned with ethical questions relating to health and life, so at least some bioethicists should be engaged in critically evaluating the ways in which society seeks to promote and protect health.”³ “Almost in answer to this, Baylis comments on the absence of bioethical discussion of clear objectives over and above concerns for individual and/or local applications of recent, forthcoming, and projected biotechnologies. What seems lacking is “[Big Picture Bioethics](#)”. In her words:

If we care at all about our future, we have a moral obligation to try to direct the novel technologies. Once certain paths are taken, we will not be able to retrace our steps and so we have before us an important moral challenge in trying to figure out which path(s) to take. How we face these challenges will help us better understand who we are, where we want to go, and what we want to become.

By helping to map the field of bioethics in a manner that is forward-looking and directive while at the same time responsive and caring (in the broadest sense of the term), members of NTE (as a collective) hope not only to write about, but also *do*, bioethics for now and for the future.

NTE Goals and Objectives

As a team, NTE stands committed to:

- Expanding the gaze of bioethics by considering the political, cultural, legal, and socio-economic contexts in which novel technologies are produced, applied, and understood.

³ S Sherwin, “[Moving with the evidence: challenges for twenty-first century bioethics](#)” (14 June 2009) *Plenary Session, Associated Medical Services, Canadian Bioethics Society Lecture*, Hamilton Ontario.

- Engaging with scientists and the public to advance critical inquiry into the ethical implications of novel technologies in a way that is anticipatory, not reactionary.
- Creating a framework for social justice that is forward-looking and recognizes responsibilities to future generations.
- Influencing policy and contributing to public education.
- Training the next generation of bioethicists with particular attention to issues of social justice.

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