Globethics.net – Promoting a global conversation about ethical values.

Over recent months CBET staff have been pleased to meet and establish links with Dr Christoph Stückelberger, Founder and Director of the project Globethics.net. We invited Dr Stückelberger to write about the project, outlining its aims and objectives as well as ways in which individuals can get involved in this exchange of information and knowledge resources.

Access to information is key to empowering people to manage their lives and to participate in society. It is also central to ethical orientation and decision-making on such diverse and complex issues as health-ethics, business ethics, food security, climate change, conflict resolution, emerging technologies and bioethics. However, there is a global imbalance in access to information. As such, a genuinely worldwide discussion on ethical issues often does not take place.

At the World Summit on the Information Society in Geneva in 2003 it was found that the global conversation is hampered by factors such as the lack of access in the global South to good and relevant knowledge resources on ethics, and that people from the global South often lack the opportunity to participate in the global ethical dialogue.

Globethics.net – a global network on applied ethics – aims to provide access information and communication technology to address this challenge. It was founded in 2004 as one response to the Information Society summit and as a platform to promote ethical reflection and action for national, regional and international leadership. Central to Globethics.net is the search for the common values that are needed for common action and interaction in a globalized world, balanced with respecting and strengthening cultural, religious and linguistic diversity and contextual values, which are crucial for human dignity and identity.

Globethics.net provides electronic access to knowledge resources through its Global Digital Libraries (www.globethics.net/web/global-libraries). Furthermore it facilitates the inclusion of the global South in the global ethical conversation through its electronic networking platform.

GlobeEthicsLib

The Global Digital Library on Ethics (GlobeEthicsLib) was launched in 2006. It is the leading global online library on ethics, and now offers registered participants free-of-charge access to almost 700,000 full-text documents on ethics. These documents include articles from commercial journals and books, documents from partner institutions, and texts from open access sources. Documents in a wide variety of languages are already available in the library.

The project’s uniqueness

What is unique about this project is that the various libraries share the same database, infrastructure and software. While each library has a distinct identity, it is also possible to search all the libraries at the same time and using the same tools, allowing interconnections between the libraries and their holdings. So, as such, the online libraries help people from academic, policy and media institutions to deepen their interdisciplinary understanding of the role of values and ethics in the world today, and to live this knowledge to a range of policy issues, communities, and wider publics.

Moreover, registered participants have the possibility to submit their own documents – articles, books, dissertations, newsletters – to the libraries. This offers participants, especially from the South, whose fund development options are often not available, an opportunity to make that knowledge production more visible and accessible, thus facilitating a global conversation.

In addition to the libraries, Globethics.net offers participants the opportunity as its website to join and form electronic workgroups for networking or collaborative research. The networking platform enables registered participants to identify other participants who share their interest in a specific field of applied ethics.

Getting involved

There are many ways to get involved in the work of Globethics.net. Individuals can sign up free of charge to access the library, take part in online discussion groups, and network with other registered participants. Individuals and organizations can take part in the annual Global Ethics Forum meetings. Globethics.net has regional programmes in China, India, Indonesia and East Africa with plans to develop in Latin America, Francophone Africa and Eastern Europe.

“Human dignity is a useless concept” asserted Prof Ruth Mackie in an editorial written for the British Medical Journal (BMJ) in 2003. She deemed it to be merely a slogan and said that it would be lost if the concept was eliminated from discussion of important issues. Mackie’s editorial ran against a long history of the term in its special philosophical use and consideration in various religions and more recently explicitly referred to in international documents such as the Council of Europe’s Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Dignity of the Human Being with regard to the Application of Biology and Medicine and the UNESCO Declaration on the Human Genome and Human Rights. But, is Mackie right?!

Over 50 delegates and guests from across Europe gathered at The L珊瑚bury Centre, Twickenham, London over the weekend of 9th-11th September 2011, to explore this very question and begin to assess whether human dignity (H.D.) is useless or has universal value.

Hosted by the Centre for Bioethics and Emerging Technology (CBET) at St Mary’s University College, the conference was one element of a funded project to create an impactful network and media monitoring observatory across Europe in association with these other European partners: The Arcosiris Bioethics Centre, Oxford, the Catholic University of Leuven and the Scottish Council on Human Bioethics.

The conference opened with a reception in the Waldegrave Drawing Room at St Mary’s University College, London where delegates were warmly welcomed by both the Principal, Prof Philip Eller and CBET Director, Dr Geoff Hunt. Following the reception, two plenaries, “Human Diversity: Useless or Universal?” and “Science, Ethics and Emerging Technologies: What are the implications?” were held in the Grand Hall, led by Prof Dr Christoph Stückelberger, Founder and Director of the project Globethics.net. Professor Dr Christoph Stückelberger, Founder

Activities in Brief Continued ...

Bioethics

The start of the academic year 2011-12 proved to be one of the busiest ever for the MA in Bioethics & Emerging Technologies programme. With 50 students in the first year, there are four students from last year carrying over to their second year of taught studies with yet another cohort of students working on their dissertations. Programme Director for the MA, Dr Trevor Stammern commented, “With the opening of the Law School at St Mary’s in the autumn of next year it looks as if the programme will continue to expand as a new range of options may then be possible for both MA and undergraduate programme students.”

“The Thinking Bioethicist” is a public lecture series organised by CBET and St Mary’s University College, London. This year’s series has been a huge success and is one of the major events of the academic year. The series features international experts on ethics and bioethics who address ethical issues in the fields of medicine, law, health and the environment.

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Human Dignity: Useless or Univeral? Continued ....

This proposal set the context for Dr Roberto Armstrong, Head of Engineering Governance and Public Affairs, in his presentation at a ‘nano-safety’ conference in Prague, supported by the European Commission’s NanoSafety Cluster. The conference took place at Lloyds in the City of London on Thursday 20th October to an audience of over 100 engineers and environmental scientists was co-ordinated by the British American Tobacco (BAT) and the Health & Safety Commission, with support from the Health and Safety Executive and the Environment Agency. The event was part of a series of nanotechnology conferences organised by the British NanoSafety Cluster.

As part of CBET’s ongoing partnership with the European Commission for European Cooperation in Science and Technology (COST), particularly in regard to COST-FACOT Action, Dr Erden taught a session on ‘Ethics, Communication and Safety in the Use of Polymer Nanomaterials for Food Packages’ at the 11th Annual ‘Food Safety and Quality’ Training School ‘Deepening the Knowledge of the Food Nanomaterials for Food Packaging and Other Potential Uses’ in November 2011. The School was held at University of Malta. The session was co-lectured by M. A. R. Mavridis.

As part of The Society for the Study of Artificial Intelligence and Simulation of Behaviour (AISB) and the International Association for Computing and Philosophy (IACP) (World Congress 2012 hosted by University of Birmingham) in honour of Alan Turing, widely considered to be the father of computer science and artificial intelligence, Dr Eltis hosted Turing’s paper ‘Computing machinery and intelligence’ from a seminar at the Turing Institute in Edinburgh on 17th November 2011.

As part of a European Commission’s European Infrastructure for Nanoscience and Nanotechnology (EURIScope) Conference, which was published in The Beacon, 5-10 in September 2011. On Thursday 27th October 2011 Dr Erden presented in the CBET Bulletin Europe’s Workshop on the PPP Ethics Review (e.g. the impact of procedures on the research community and research institution administration). The aim of the workshop was to improve the review mechanisms and to better understand the future of the PPP Ethics Review and was hosted at the University of Namur, Belgium.

Second in Philosophy Lecture Series Held
On Wednesday 5th October, the second in a series of free Philosophy lectures took place at St Mary’s. In association with the Royal Institute of Philosophy, St Mary’s School of Theology, Philosophy and History is hosting the series which will continue for the next six months at St Mary’s.

Guest speaker at the event was Prof Murray Shanahan, Professor of Cognitive Robotics at Imperial College London, who spoke on the topic ‘Animal minds and robot minds’. Prof Shanahan commented, “To non-human animals think like we do? Are we too simple? Do we build our own conscious robots? These philosophical questions are important because they influence what we do to children and to the potential suffering of non-human animals.”

The Court’s decision has been met with fierce controversy, with opponents expressing concern that the Court’s judgment that it is wrong to profit from destroying human embryos, Jones commented that it is consistent to say it is also wrong to profit from cells that are derived from destroying human embryos. No distinction should be made between whether you have destroyed the embryos or someone else carried this out for you. The ECJ ruled in October that “The use of human embryonic stem cells for research purposes is a matter of public concern in EU Member States and there is a considerable degree of doubt about the legal situation in each.

The findings of a survey of nanotoxicologists on what they perceive to be the main safety issues surrounding nanotechnology have now been published in Nanotechnology (Vol 7, 2011) 62-98. Prof Geoff Hunt designed and coordinated the survey which came out of a ‘nano-safety’ conference in Prague, supported by the British Embassies in London and the Czech Republic. The title of the paper is “Building confidence in the future of nanotechnology”.

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