Technology Dialogue Group

The earliest stone tool predated modern humans by more than 2 million years. Stone tools had clear practical benefits. They could help pre-humans crack nuts and break the bones of a carcass to get to the marrow, along with a myriad of other tasks. But they could also be used as weapons to kill animals and to kill other pre-humans. Nearly every action one takes raises moral questions – technology raises the stakes. Since the Stone Age, humankind has developed technology at an ever-accelerating pace and now the stakes can be very high indeed.

Scientists, engineers and industrialists across the world are running ever faster to spot gaps in knowledge, identify needs, find solutions and deliver. With the need to raise the living standards of the disadvantaged, make the most of diminishing natural resources, address the pressures of climate change, and cope with a host of other sustainability challenges, there is no way to step off this cycle of accelerating technological development without society, and particularly the poorest, suffering a cataclysmic blow.

There are many safeguards in place to ensure: the safety of research and development; the professionalism of scientists and engineers; the wellbeing of human and animal subjects; the standards of products and services; etc. These vital mechanisms are highly refined, but, ideally, the scientist, engineer or industrialist working hard on his or her bit of the puzzle would engage in the broadest thinking about potential long-term consequences at the earliest stage of work. All very well, but how can one person in isolation think through the moral context of his or her work? How can one person influence the consequences of this work? How can one even understand the possible consequences when the work in question is just a single small part of vast technical, social, economic and political systems?

A Hippocratic Oath for technologists or some similar code might provide a useful touchstone, but it is hard to imagine writing a set of instructions that work well in anything other than the simplest situations; nearly every real case would be an exception that the rule book did not quite address.

It also seems unlikely that the answer could be found by the technologist working alone; the pieces of the puzzle held by colleagues, suppliers, customers, the wider public, non-government organisations and policy makers need to be assembled and considered.

The answer might be for more technologists, at all levels of seniority, to have a better set of tools and stronger encouragement to kick start open dialogues about the broader longer-term consequences of their work – dialogues that lead to shared understanding, informed decisions and practical action at the earliest stages.

The questions for this session are:

- Can a technologist, wherever they are placed in an organisation, be given the concepts, tools and skills to initiate dialogue about the responsible development and use of the technology on which they work?
- Is the concept of Universal Responsibility combined with practical skills of facilitating dialogue sufficient to empower a technologist? If not, then what else is needed?
- What would be needed to go from dialogue to firm actionable conclusions on a specific issue?
- What would accelerate progress to empower technologists to initiate productive dialogue about their work?
- What should happen immediately after this event as the first step?