Throughout your university studies, and throughout your lives in the USA, you’ve been quietly inculcated with a rather specific worldview concerning technology, ethics, and society. Some of its tenets are that technology is about the gadgets that we build and use; that it’s an outgrowth of the sciences; that, overwhelmingly, technology makes things better; that it liberates us, empowers us, and helps everyone to prosper; and that our technology is fundamentally apolitical, areligious, and amoral. The same worldview holds that the individual is the agent that drives technological change, and the locus of responsibility for that change. Correspondingly, the individual scientist or engineer behaves ethically and appropriately when he abides by the law, by professional standards, and by cultural norms.

Sadly, it is all, I’m afraid, far more false than it is true. Each of the tenets listed above is ultimately, I would suggest, a widely-accepted falsehood. Yet the stated beliefs are so deeply embedded into our culture, our institutions, and our identities that we can hardly even see they’re there.

This blindness imperils our very existence.

Many of the readings I’ve assembled here are intended to push you, at least a bit, to question the assumptions asserted above. Hopefully one or two of them will do their job.

One of my goals for this class is that you will come think about, and act upon, the ethical implications of your personal and professional choices, and our collective work as technologists. At one level, this may sound kind of easy, perhaps like something you’ve always done. But, in fact, I suspect that this kind of critical analysis is something people rarely do—and a very hard thing to do. Overturning this rock will reveal a world both difficult to understand and uncomfortable to see.

A colleague once commented that he had never met anyone who regarded his own behavior as anything but proper and good. And yet, collectively, it seems to me that we do massively wrong, and in a routinized way. Is it really possible that we could each behave well and yet, somehow, our collective behavior should end up so rank? I will leave you to ponder your own answer to this riddle, and close by wishing you wisdom—certainly more than I have ever found—in your own struggles with the issues of this note and of this course.

Kind regards,

Davis, California, USA
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