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Taming monsters: The cultural domestication of new technology

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Abstract

Central to public discomfort about new technologies is the notion that they are unnatural. Experts often suppose that better knowledge of technology and risks would help overcome public aversion. This assumption turns out to be fairly fruitless, often even increasing social polarization. The pattern of diverging risk assessments about technology might be improved by a better understanding of the moral gut feelings at stake. However, current technology ethics does not seem to be equipped for elaborating theories to explain public discomfort. Either public fear is not taken seriously, or ethical—“theoretical rationalizations of moral intuitions lead to unsatisfactory, naturalist constructions, such as the intrinsic value of nature.

For a better understanding of current risk controversies, a detour is made to the cultural anthropology of Mary Douglas on pre-modern ideas regarding danger. This offers some clarifying insights into modern perceptions of technological risks. Departing from

clarifying insights into modern perceptions of technological risks. Departing from anthropological observations, a so-called *monster theory* is sketched, which gives an explanation for the fascination with and aversion towards new technology, leaving aside "naturalist" and "nature-skeptic" explanations of technology ethics. Monster theory offers a point of departure for a new, pragmatic approach to controversies about new technology, the approach being named a pragmatist monster-ethics. It tells us we have to reflect on and shift cultural categories as well as to adapt technologies in order to domesticate our technological "monsters".



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[†] This article is based on my book "Monsterbezwinging" [1], published in Dutch. A revised version of this book is now being translated in English and will be published in 2007.

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