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Ethics of Cybernetic Enhancement: A Somatic-Embodied Perspective

Norbert Wiener defined the term cybernetics as the attempt to find the common elements in the functioning of automatic machines and the human nervous system. His theory of cybernetics aimed to develop a comprehensive theory covering the entire field of control and communication in machines and living organisms. Yet, this schema reduces the biological to forms of information. Hence, Wiener mused that, it is conceptually possible for humans to be sent over a telegraph wire, because the essential human attributes can be coded and transmitted as information. This suggestion seems increasingly plausible in our internet age, where all of human behavior is increasingly reduced to sophisticated algorithms and circular feedback and feedforward processes. An analogous process of disembodiment in cybernetics is also evidenced in Brain-Machine Interfaces that allow manipulation of external devices without involvement of overt motor actions. Arguably, the transmutation of embodied physicality into streams of information at one reduces the physical constraints associated with living organisms, but also reduces the possibility of real human volition, since processes of free-will are reduced to largely unconscious algorithmic processes, which may be manipulated by external sources. One also finds this alienation from the lived human body present in the philosophical literature on cognitive enhancement. So, arguments in favor of cognitive enhancement are often presented using the language of an abstract rationality free from the constraints of phenomenological lived experience and human praxis. This presentation will advance a somatic-embodied approach towards reflecting on the ethics of cybernetic enhancement.