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Ethical Issues for the Twenty-First Century

Predicting the concerns of a new century is a risky business that may reveal more about the forecasters than it does about what they forecast. Philosophers have always been more at home with issues less tied to the particulars of a historical place and era — issues that, for want of a better term, have been called “timeless.” The word is unfortunate both because of its air of mystery and pretension, and, more seriously, because it suggests that philosophers need not concern themselves with the “real world” nor the real world with philosophy. Nevertheless, some philosophical questions — those concerning distributive justice, human rights, and the value of nature and cultural diversity — arise for every age and every society.

Yet there is also a great deal of contingency, and fortuity, in the form these issues take in a given time and place. As the twenty-first century approaches, policymakers and the public face an array of ethical issues shaped by the technological and political developments of the last half of the twentieth century. Dramatic advances in the technologies for manipulating the natural world in general and human life in particular have radically expanded the scope of what we *can* do, thereby raising serious questions about what we *should* do. The growth of an international human rights movement and the liberalization of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union reflect an emerging consensus about certain basic requirements for a just political order. At the same time, the increasing recognition of the claims and contributions of racial and ethnic minorities force us to examine how cultural diversity can be accommodated within such a political order.

In this special issue of the *Report*, four scholars at the Institute for Philosophy and Public Policy discuss the impact of these trends on some of the ethical issues we confront as we enter the twenty-first century. This issue has been produced with support from the Maryland Humanities Council, which is sponsoring a conference on “Challenges and Choices for the 21st Century” in December, 1991.

To make its research readily available to a broad audience, the Institute for Philosophy and Public Policy publishes this quarterly newsletter. Articles are intended to advance philosophically informed debate on current policy choices; the views are not necessary those of the Institute or its sponsors.

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