

New book explores how technology changes what it means to be human

January 8 2014, by Mike Krings

Technology is often touted as being able to change our lives, to make them easier, more efficient or to simply make life better. But what happens if technology has the ability to change what it means to be human? That question is at the heart of a University of Kansas professor's new book.

F. Allan Hanson, professor of anthropology, has authored *Technology and Cultural Tectonics: Shifting Values and Meanings*. The book examines recent technological advancements such as fertility treatments, DNA technology and artificial intelligence, and the ways in which they change how a culture addresses fundamental questions of how people live.

"Human beings try, when faced with something new, to assimilate it to something familiar," Hanson said. "The book is focused on cultural meanings and values, the way we look at the world and give things meaning and how that changes with [new technology](#)."

The book begins with a specific look at [reproductive technology](#). For the majority of human history reproduction was possible only sexually. However, with the birth of the first [test tube baby](#) in 1978, things have changed dramatically. It is now possible to cultivate and freeze both sperm and eggs, to create embryos and store them indefinitely. This has changed the very nature of what it means to be a father or a mother. It is no longer a given that one person will be a genetic, gestational and nurturing mother to a child. Hanson addresses such questions as what

these technologies mean in terms of current social models, examining the established role of nuclear and adoptive families.

Larger philosophical questions also come in to play with such technologies. For example, there is not an accepted answer to the question of what to do with [frozen embryos](#). Some countries will only allow two embryos to be produced; others will only allow creation of embryos to be raised by what would be considered a "traditional family," and still others will not address the question at all.

In examining such questions Hanson also discusses the boundaries technology can cross, such as the line between nature and culture. While many technologies influence things normally under our control, others—such as in vitro fertilization—begin to take on things not naturally under human control. He also explores the dual nature of technology's use: On one hand technology is used by humans to accomplish a task, such as using a calculator to solve a math problem. But technology is used on humans as well, such as DNA evidence used to investigate crimes. In some cases the questions raised by these newfound abilities are easy to address, but in others they are not. Cultural mores and differences complicate matters.

While technology can radically change what humans are capable of achieving, Hanson argues that ultimately it increases human control. While some are of the mindset that [artificial intelligence](#) eventually will surpass human intelligence, Hanson, a cultural anthropologist, views a more symbiotic nature between humans and technology. And while they can ultimately change cultures and ways of life, the two will continue to function together, even if they bring about fundamental changes.

"What humans and [technology](#) can do together is far greater than what either can ever do on their own," Hanson said. "It makes us fully accomplished beings, yet what this also does is change the concept of

what it is to be human."

Provided by University of Kansas

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