Collin County Community College District
APPLICATION FOR SABBATICAL LEAVE

Instructions
Please complete this application by responding to all items. Attach requested documentation (in the order requested) and secure the appropriate signatures prior to submitting the application to the chair of the Sabbatical Leave Committee. Please submit the original and 10 copies.

Name: Levi (Paul) R. Bryant, PhD
CWID: 110726171

Title: Professor of Philosophy
Division: CH/SBS at PRC

Have you ever been granted a sabbatical? No If yes: Date: 

Please provide a brief description of your previous sabbatical project:

Sabbatical Leave Period Being Requested

Dates: Beginning Date August 2012 Ending Date December 2012
Length: [X] One semester [ ] Two semesters [ ] Other

Applicant’s Agreement

ABSTRACT
Please give a summary description of the project and its significance in a language that can be readily understood by persons in areas of expertise other than your own. PLEASE DO NOT EXCEED SPACE PROVIDED BELOW.

The purpose of this sabbatical is to investigate the philosophy of technology and other related fields in the humanities that inquire into the nature and impact of modern technologies. Technological revolutions in farming techniques, transportation, communications technologies, media, medicine, genetics, and a variety of other fields have arguably transformed every aspect of our lives in the last 200 years. It is my belief that, given the importance of these issues and the profound impact of these technologies on our lives, technology studies should make up a component of my Introduction to Philosophy (1301) and Introduction to Ethics (2306) courses.

My research will consist of extensive reading of the classics of technology studies in philosophy, media studies, and literary theory. This research will be focused on three questions of great relevance to social and political philosophy, philosophical theory of mind and knowledge, and ethics: First, in what way do technologies transform the nature of our social relations and societies? Second, do technologies transform the nature of our cognition or how we think and process information? Third, do technologies transform the nature of our affectivity or our emotive and perceptive experiences of the world?

My objectives are fourfold: First, and foremost, I wish to devise strategies for bringing technology studies into the classroom and discover appropriate texts for my students to read. Second, I would like to present a paper on these themes to the faculty, underlining their pedagogical relevance. Third, I would like to present a paper on these themes at a conference. Finally, fourth, I would like to write an article on these issues.
Sabbatical Leave Proposal
Philosophy of Technology
Levi R. Bryant, PhD
Professor of Philosophy
Collin College
Preston Ridge Campus
5 December, 2011

1. The Context of Investigation

In the last two hundred years advances in technology have fundamentally transformed our world. Moreover, in the coming decade advances in fields such as genetics and nanotechnology are poised to reconfigure the being of animals, ourselves, and the nature of matter. The invention of the steam engine transformed agriculture and production, allowing us to sustain larger populations than ever before and bring mass produced objects to people on a grander scale than ever before witnessed. Advances in transportation technologies transformed the nature of our cities, generated new types of living arrangements such as the suburbs, and revolutionized the nature of national and international trade. The internet, coupled with satellite communications technology, has brought together people from all over the world, changed the nature of war, and rendered copious amounts of information available to everyone. New forms of media technology such as television, radio, video games, and the internet profoundly affect our experience of the world and ourselves. Space travel and telescope technology has profoundly shifted our perspective on ourselves, our place in the universe, and our understanding of the nature of the universe itself. Finally, coming advances in artificial intelligence, artificial life, nano-technologies, and genetic engineering are poised to deliver the possibility of engineering matter itself and of generating entirely new forms of life and intelligence.

With notable exceptions, however, philosophy has had little to say about the nature of technology and its relationship to human existence. It is likely that much of this has to do with an instrumental conception of technology. Beginning roughly around the 17th century, the dominant relation investigated by philosophy came to be the relationship between the subject (mind) and objects. The subject was comprehended as the domain of concepts, norms, and sensations, while the object was conceived as the domain of causes, properties, and substances. Because technology was conceived instrumentally as a means to (human) ends, the investigation of technology as a distinct domain of inquiry took on the appearance of being redundant insofar as technology was merely thought as a vehicle or carrier of human intentions and concepts. The philosopher could safely ignore the careful investigation of technology because, through a reflective investigation of the nature of mind and human existence, one would have already covered all that need be said of the technology. The possibility that has scarcely been raised is that technology perhaps changes the very nature of human being and has an autonomy of its own.

2. The Object of Investigation

This sabbatical research project seeks to determine whether technology can be reduced to a mere instrument of human use. More precisely, it raises the question of whether human nature is historically invariant such that it remains the same regardless of the technologies that we use,
or whether the technologies we use profoundly affect our nature. If the latter is the case, then human being cannot be investigated independent of the technologies it uses, but rather human being must necessarily be investigated in relation to the technologies we use. In this case, technologies cannot be reduced to mere instruments carrying human intentions and ends, but rather must also be understood in terms of how they transform our ends and conceptions.

I am particularly interested in two interrelated questions. First, in what way, if any, do technologies influence our social relations or the form societies take? Does the invention of, for example, highways change the nature of society? Second, do technologies change the nature of our cognition and affectivity? For example, is the mind that develops in a milieu based on print culture different than a mind that develops in an oral culture? Neurology has increasingly revealed that the brain is developmentally plastic, such that cognition and affectivity differ depending on the milieu or environment in which the brain develops. This strongly suggests that we cannot make generalizations about the nature of mind without investigating the technological milieus or environments in which brains develop. Needless to say, this has profound implications for pedagogy and education.

3. Methodology

These questions will be investigated through engagement with the primary literature on the subject of technology (cf. the bibliography). Because the philosophical literature on technology is limited, my research will be multidisciplinary, drawing on research from neurology, media studies, literary theory, and history.

4. Objectives

The first objective of this research is pedagogical. Over the years I have noticed that my students are especially interested in issues relating to how technology affects them, their lives, and the social world. Given the monumental technological transformations our society is currently undergoing, I would like to better able to address these questions. Further, I believe that if introductory philosophy courses are to be relevant it must address these sorts of contemporary changes. This research would give me a broader background knowledge of these issues and would also give me the opportunity to seek out appropriate literature I could teach in the classroom.

My second objective is scholarly. I would like to write an article dealing with these themes, present a paper at a conference, and present a paper to the faculty discussing the pedagogical implications of these issues.

5. Timeline

This research will be conducted over the course of Fall Semester 2012. The conference paper, article, and selection of texts for classes would be completed by the end of Fall Semester 2012. A faculty presentation would be given some time during Spring Semester 2013.
Bibliography


