Implantable Brain Technologies and The Creation of Cyborgs

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What is a Human?

- Equated with the body: biological skin-and-skull boundaries (Buller, 2013)
- Establishes a normalcy & authenticity - “organic” self
- I refer to this view as “body essentialism”
  → Corporeal integrity = human identity
- Hierarchical boundary: privileges internal over external
- Fear: Tech inside body = fundamental personality change
- Recent bioethics study: over 60% of DBS patients felt: “Strangeness and unfamiliarity regarding their view of themselves” (Johansson, 2014)
DBS: Feeling... Different

Why might patients feel differently post implant?

- Maybe just aware of having implant?
- Maybe able to live a more “normal” life?
- Maybe identity as a person changed because of non-organic technology implant?

Question: what does it mean that they felt differently?
Therapy vs. Enhancement

- Approve of the use of implantable technologies to cure disease or disability
  - Restores someone back to their *original* self
    - Enables having a “normal” body
    - Unlikely to label self or be labeled a “cyborg”

- Support using technologies to enhance or extend traditional human abilities
  - Okay to use these technologies on “normal” bodies
  - Body Hackers: create specialized technologies & self-label as cyborgs
  - Human right to do with their body as see fit
DBS and Implant Ethics

• DBS socially accepted even if transcend skin-and-skull boundary - therapeutic use

• If therapeutic uses result in patients feeling differently about their identities...is it still okay?

• Doesn’t there use alter what defines a human?

• If either type of use alters human identity, then why is there a limit to their social acceptability?

• Even if use is socially accepted...aren’t we still creating cyborgs?
Cyborg: To Be or Not To Be...

- Cyborg: “a hybrid of machine and organism”
- Regardless of social acceptance, DBS creates a fusion between human and machine
- Identity changes complicate the ethical debate
- Anytime a technology is incorporated into the body it creates something new (Shildrick, 2015)
- Not just “replacing” or “adding” something but creating a new embodiment (Bennett, 2009)
- Does using therapeutic implants signal a type of human evolution?
- Skin-and-skull boundary – still use as ethical justification for limiting the use implants?