Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars

THE HASTINGS CENTER

Contact: Natalie Chin
Phone: (202) 691-4318
natalie.chin@wilsoncenter.org

News Release

Release No. 47-09
June 24, 2009

Does Synthetic Biology Need Synthesized Ethics?

New Report Calls for a Broad Ethics of Emerging Technologies

WASHINGTON – The emerging field of synthetic biology will allow researchers to create biological parts and systems that do not occur naturally as well as to re-engineer existing organisms to perform novel and beneficial tasks. As the science and its applications develop, a comprehensive approach to addressing ethical and social issues is called for, especially if scarce intellectual resources are to be used optimally, according to a new report authored by Erik Parens, Josephine Johnston, and Jacob Moses of The Hastings Center. Synthetic biology promises significant advances in areas such as biofuels, specialty chemicals, agriculture, and medicine but has also raised concerns about potential ethical, social, environmental, and security implications.

Commissioned by the Synthetic Biology Project at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars and supported by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, ***Ethical Issues in Synthetic Biology: An Overview of the Debates*** analyzes how the ethical issues raised by a variety of emerging technologies are often similar and familiar. The authors find that these similarities are abundant enough to justify an effort to develop an ethical framework that cuts across emerging and converging technologies. "Rather than stovepiping ethical questions into the hyphenated areas of bio-ethics, nano-ethics, neuro-ethics and so on, it is time to begin developing an ethics of emerging technologies as a whole," said Erik Parens in a discussion of the report's findings at the Woodrow Wilson Center on June 24.

"Given the rate at which new technologies are emerging, a comprehensive ethical approach should be developed to more readily identify and address ethical challenges and foster a productive public dialogue about social implications," said David Rejeski, director of the Synthetic Biology Project. "Synthetic biology provides both a test case and an opportunity to get in front of these issues."

The report explores the differences between physical and non-physical harms and pro-actionary and pre-cautionary frameworks, in an effort to better define the ethical issues around an emerging area such as synthetic biology.

Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars

THE HASTINGS CENTER

To download the report and find more information about synthetic biology, see: www.synbioproject.org.

About Synthetic Biology
According to the U.K. Royal Academy of Engineering, synthetic biology aims to design and engineer biologically based parts, novel devices and systems as well as redesign existing, natural biological systems.

The **Synthetic Biology Project** is an initiative of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars supported by a grant from the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation. The Project aims to foster informed public and policy discourse concerning the advancement of synthetic biology. For more information, visit: www.synbioproject.org

The **Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars** (www.wilsoncenter.org) is the living, national memorial to President Wilson established by Congress in 1968 and headquartered in Washington, D.C. The Center establishes and maintains a neutral forum for free, open, and informed dialogue. It is a nonpartisan institution, supported by public and private funds and engaged in the study of national and international affairs.

The Hastings Center (www.thehastingscenter.org) is an independent, nonpartisan, and nonprofit bioethics research institute founded in 1969. The Center's mission is to address fundamental ethical issues in the areas of health, medicine, and the environment as they affect individuals, communities, and societies.