

OWL RESEARCH & INNOVATION



The Technological Future

Recent Hire Leads New Philosophical Center for the Future Mind

By Bethany Augliere

If you could upload a microchip to your brain to give you savant-level mathematical abilities, would you do it? And if you kept enhancing your brain with this artificial intelligence (AI), at what point do you diminish your entire conscious being and no longer exist?

Florida Atlantic University plans to tackle those questions and more with its new Center for the Future Mind.

To lead the center, FAU has named philosopher Susan Schneider, Ph.D., to the position of William F. Dietrich Chair in Philosophy in the Dorothy F. Schmidt College of Arts and Letters, in collaboration with FAU's Brain Institute. Schneider studies the nature of the mind, with an interest in emerging technologies and how they will shape the future of humanity.

Answering such questions does not just require knowledge of cutting-edge research.

"There are philosophical issues here that lie beneath the algorithms," Schneider said. To her, these issues require a rich understanding of the nature of the self and mind, as well as deep interdisciplinary dialogues on human flourishing. The new Center for the Future Mind brings philosophical and social considerations together with scientific innovations "to help humans better navigate our brave new world."



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"The College of Arts and Letters is excited to welcome Dr. Schneider to our Dietrich Chair in Philosophy and to partner with the FAU Brain Institute to create this multidisciplinary, university-wide endeavor on the future of human cognition and its relationship to artificial intelligence," said Michael Horswell, Ph.D., dean of the College of Arts and Letters.

Schneider did not always plan to be a philosopher. She studied economics as an undergraduate at the University of California, Berkeley. But while studying abroad in a communist country, she began reading philosophers who were exploring deep issues involving the structures of authoritarian systems. When she returned to California, she continued to pursue philosophy and enrolled in graduate-level courses. After graduating, she attended Rutgers University to work on her doctorate with the AI skeptic Jerry Fodor. It was there that she began to delve into issues of AI and consciousness. "I've been very fortunate, and able to work with some of the very best philosophers in the world," she said. Schneider comes to FAU from the University of

Connecticut, where she was a professor of philosophy and cognitive science and director of the AI, Mind and Society Research Group. She is also the NASA-Baruch S. Blumberg chair and a Distinguished Scholar Chair at the Library of Congress. Her work has been featured in the New York Times, the Scientific American, the Smithsonian, the History Channel, the BBC and other leading media outlets. Her most recent book, published in 2019, "Artificial You, AI and the Future of Your Mind," explores the moral and ethical issues related to machine consciousness.

"Dr. Schneider's scholarship reminds us of the poverty of our language in describing mental states and intelligence, biological or artificial, and the serious ethical issues we face as we consider brain-machine mergers," said Randy D. Blakely, Ph.D., executive director of the Brain Institute and professor of biomedical science in the Charles E. Schmidt College of Medicine. "Neuroscience and philosophy have so much to gain from each other as we move forward."

Schneider's work has taken her

to Washington, where she meets with members of Congress and gives presentations on AI and on topics such as data privacy, algorithmic bias, technological unemployment, autonomous weapons, and more. "The proper use of AI technology isn't just a matter of what we can do, it's a matter of what we should do," she said.

That's why Schneider says it's important "to step out of the ivory tower" and engage with the public, as well as policymakers, about the ethical issues and future surrounding AI. That's exactly what she plans to do at the new interdisciplinary center. "I'm optimistic that we'll be able to engage the public." The center will consider both the scientific and social impacts of emerging technologies, with an emphasis on classic philosophical issues.

Schneider is currently working on a book on the shape of intelligent systems. She'll explore intelligence ranging from the octopus to the human brain, and the human brain when augmented with technology. "It's going to be really fun to write, I'm looking forward to it." ♦