



ACADEMIA ENGELBERG

2nd Dialogue on Science – 15 - 17 October 2003
in Engelberg, Switzerland

Welcoming address

Dr. Berchtold Müller

Abbot of Engelberg Abbey



Conference Participants, Ladies and Gentlemen

I bid you a warm welcome to the annual conference of Academia Engelberg and in particular to the Opening Ceremony in the large hall of the abbey. I am pleased that this conference is taking place and I believe the subject, the pervasiveness of the computer in our daily lives, will prove an extremely interesting and important one.

Computer-controlled processes, whose governing laws and procedures we are no longer able to see or influence, are increasingly shaping our everyday lives. We are now only confronted with the result and we either "profit" from the result of technology or we are overtaxed.

When I was inadvertently confronted for the first time with an automatic ticket machine with a touchscreen and was of course in a hurry, I was initially rather happy to find that the train journey was not as expensive as I had feared it would be. In the train I was then of course promptly caught unsuspectingly presenting the ticket collector with a child's ticket. In the meantime I have learned a thing or two and now carefully tap through the questions which the computer presents to me on the screen.

It is certainly important and necessary to think about the advantages of speed, safety and comfort which computing provides us with, but it is just as important to pose critical questions to determine where the limits are or where the benefits on the one side create serious disadvantages on the other.

This critical questioning and careful weighing of the advantages and disadvantages and of the limits to the development of pervasive computing are possible and essential. And these questions must not be suppressed by the invoking of constraints or the need for progress. The process of weighing and consideration should take place rationally and without prejudice.

I do not believe it is a question of anxiously imposing restrictions: Disaster scenarios and calls for protest are not helpful. After all, our civilization has "coped" with other upheavals and advances in the past, for example the advent of the steam engine and the railway in the 19th century or the "atomic euphoria" in the 60s of the last century.

I believe rather that it is a question of becoming aware of the problem and a question of watchful awareness that the computer-controlled world offers many possibilities, but also clear limits beyond which quality of life, individuality and freedom are compromised. It is worth giving this some consideration, and for this I wish you all every success and enjoyment.