

The Problem of Technology

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Technology is a problem because we cannot do without it, and our use of it clearly makes us both better and worse. Human beings are—among other things—technological or tool-making animals. We use our brains and our freedom to transform nature, and in doing so transform ourselves. We also have a perverse capacity to make ourselves unhappy and a singular pride in our misery. We are both proud of and wish to free ourselves from the burdens of our technological success. So we find it almost impossible to judge how much and what kind of technology would be best for us. In principle, we should be free to accept or reject various technological developments. Technology, after all, is supposed to be means for the pursuit of whatever ends we choose. But, in truth, it might be our destiny to be moved along by impersonal and unlimited technological progress. We do not have much evidence of significant numbers of human beings resisting technological changes for long periods of time. (The peaceful and admirable Amish, for example, are a very small exception to a general rule.)

From a purely natural view at least, we do not know why human beings alone among the species are technological animals. Only we human beings can freely negate nature to satisfy our desires; only we human beings can create new and harder to satisfy needs through our technological success. Our technological acquisitions make us less happy than being deprived of such acquisitions—of, say, air conditioning—can make us miserable, not to mention whiny. We do not know why we, through our inventions, came to dominate the rest of nature. One of the best pieces of evidence of our fundamental difference from the chimps and the dolphins is we

can so easily control them if that is what we want to do, but they cannot give orders to us. We do not know why we have the capability and the desire to threaten the very existence of all life on our planet. It is almost impossible to call what we have achieved through technological success—from a natural view—progress.

Technological change really is progress from another view. It is the increase in the human power to control or manipulate nature. The general rule is that societies that encourage or are open to such change overwhelm those that are not. That is why the modern West has exerted its control over the whole world, and why the Europeans almost eliminated the Native Americans in our country. But this control, of course, is quite ambiguous. Technology is characteristically the imposition of human will over nature; we comprehend nature insofar as we control it. But our control and our comprehension are always far from complete. When we dam up a river to produce power or end flooding, we have often discovered, to our surprise, that we have transformed a flourishing body of water into a dying one. We did not know enough to anticipate the destructive effects of our control, but that knowledge does not usually free us to remove the dam on which we have come to depend. We now know enough, though, to be very reluctant to build dams.

Another reason we are not free to relinquish control once we have achieved it is that we cannot dispose of technological knowledge once we have acquired it. Surely we regret, on balance, our invention of nuclear weapons. But it would be crazy for America to destroy its nuclear weapons or even to stop trying to produce better ones. The knowledge of how to build them is everywhere, and otherwise insignificant powers such as North Korea and even transnational terrorists groups are going to find it progressively more easy to use that knowledge. So whatever our desires, we are going to both become progressively more afraid and in need of

nuclear weapons. In general, we are not free to reject military technology, and because so much of technology has military applications maybe we are not even free to reject technological development as such. Even nuclear weapons also have unanticipated good consequences; the “balance of terror” they created surely was indispensable to avoid a World War III that would have reduced much of Europe and Asia—and maybe America—to rubble.

It seems reasonable to speculate that we eventually will be freed from our Promethean excesses through a catastrophic high-tech war that will destroy most human life and most of the products of our technological development on the planet. But that speculation cannot free we Americans from our destiny of using high technology to do what we can to fend off that possibility. And it is very unlikely that such a war would bring technological progress to an end. Because the knowledge we acquired over time through technological thinking will probably remain with us, it will probably take surprisingly little time to rebuild the complex world we almost destroyed. And, yes, we will not hesitate to repeat our mistakes, thinking we have learned from experience.

But the example of nuclear weapons—which more or less inevitably will be used somewhere in the world soon—reminds us that the progress of technology is in many ways not simply good for human life. We can think about the change from hunter-gatherer to agricultural society, the one behind the conflict between the Native Americans and the Europeans in America. Or we can think about the change from agricultural to urbanized, machine-based society, one that was completed or largely completed in America only in the late 20th century. Both forms of technological development caused huge amounts of human displacement and human misery, and each change seemed like worse than death for many. We can say that any rapid technological advance is always a cause of human disorientation, and that its initial effect

is to cause at least almost as much misery as it alleviates. Such change seems to become on balance beneficial only after it becomes routinized, only after it assumes a place in a relatively settled way of life. Technological change might become an increasingly unambiguous evil as it becomes too rapid for we habit and tradition dependent beings to live with it well. Technology would become an unambiguous good only if its progress culminated in some sort of human perfection, if we were to become satisfied with the present level of technological development.

Technology and Democratic Liberation: Theory

The technological utopias described by Marx and others seem to assume some kind of technological perfection; the possibility and need for further advance fades away because human scarcity is definitely overcome. The result is that human beings are freed from the hard work and emotional disorientation caused by the fear of being left behind by technological progress. Work itself in the precise sense fades away, because machines have become so advanced that people need not do much at all to keep them going. This vision is of a world in which technology has freed us all equally from natural necessity. Technology has allowed us to leave the realm of necessity and enter the realm of freedom or leisure. We are finally totally at home in the world; we never have to do anything that smacks of alienation or compulsion.

Communism described by Marx is the same as democracy described by Socrates in the *Republic*. An equally effortless way of life for all human beings was known to be impossible in the ancient world; Socrates knew that the democratic regime he described would exist only in a book. But the characteristically modern hope is that technological progress will make this regime or, better, a complete absence of regimentation possible. This democracy is nothing like a stern republic where every citizen is equally ready to sacrifice everything for his country and his

fellow citizens. It is not even in any sense a democratic community. Marx's misled us by calling communism communism.

The liberation from alienation Marx and Socrates describe includes liberation from dependence on or duties toward other members of society. Every human being is on his or her own, able to design his or her life as he pleases. The young owe nothing to the old; citizens owe nothing to their cities; students owe nothing to their teachers or vice versa, and apparently children do not need to be raised or criminals kept in line. We would be freed from our conformist dependence on habituation and tradition. It is certainly hard to know why such a democracy would make us feel at home, because we would not feel the joys or burdens of being attached to a particular people or a particular place. Apparently we would be free from the oppression of love, which seems to make us feel hated and lonely more than anything else. It would also free us from being moved by the prospect of one's own death, what causes us to be especially anxious in the midst of prosperity. But Marx does not say we will literally stop dying; no materialist could be so deluded. He also does not say we will stop being self-conscious mortals. Still, he is emphatic that material scarcity and alienation can be overcome while we are aware of our scarcity of time.

Someone might say that a visit to Malibu or the Hamptons shows that this seemingly incoherent life is really possible. We have all met people who have plenty of everything and are little plagued by anxiety and do very little work. For our libertarians today, as Tyler Cowen explains, the "secret" history of the West culminates in a cosmopolitan world where each individual enjoys an unlimited "menu of choice" concerning whatever hobby will occupy his or her time, and Cowen does present some significant evidence that community or our "irrational longing for the particular" is increasingly seen to have only "aesthetic benefits."¹ But the truth

still is that it is very hard to see how the extreme displacement or rootlessness of cosmopolitanism actually leads to the withering away of the state. “If the [cosmopolitanizing] process continues with the same degree of intensity,” William Leach predicts, “we can only expect greater reliance on state power—more prisons, more police, more attempts to manage or manipulate minds—to compensate for the failure of Americans to remember and protect their places.”²

Technology and Democratic Liberation: Practice

The modern liberation of technological progress from moral and political controls has had democratic liberation as its goal. Its success, although far from complete, has been real. Most people are free in the sense of having unprecedented material abundance, which they may use as they please. This abundance, combined with real advances in medical science or technology (doctors, on balance, probably hurt more than helped people prior to the 20th century) have kept babies and children alive, freed us all from disease, disabling pain, and most physical suffering (think about teeth, to begin with), and extended dramatically the length of the average human life. More people than ever are freed from drudgery enough to have the opportunity to develop their natural capacities through education and to decide for themselves where and how to live. Technology certainly has been good for individual health, wealth, and freedom.

More of life is given over to personal choice for more people than ever before. The personal mobility made possible by cars and planes ought to amaze us; not so long ago, most people rarely journeyed more than 20 miles from their home. Even in cities, people in a particular working class neighborhood in New York or Chicago were pretty much confined there most of the time. Everything was available in the neighborhood because it was so hard to leave the neighborhood. But as emotionally satisfying as the old neighborhoods surely were,

Americans and in fact most people throughout the world have characteristically chosen to leave them in pursuit of the new opportunity, mobility, and prosperity technological progress makes available.

Alan Ehrenhalt, in *Lost City*³, describes one particular ethnic, Catholic Chicago neighborhood where families were strong and parental authority respected, children were raised by the whole neighborhood, homes were arranged in a way that made personal or familial isolation all but impossible, mothers were moms (and not wage slaves), and authoritative spiritual roots were provided by the neighborhood Catholic parish (church and school). The neighborhood was a remarkably self-sufficient communal whole. Even jobs, shopping, and banks were all there, and they all respected persons and traditions and offered very personal service. As attractive as this picture is, there is no denying that these people didn't choose this community; they were stuck with it. There was no easy way to get downtown, to shop or work elsewhere, and there was nowhere else those working-class Catholics could afford to live. With the coming of cheap cars, highways, suburbs, and new employment opportunities, the people from the neighborhood typically chose the liberation—including personal liberation or privacy (square feet and one's own room)—that the suburban living offered.

This liberation from neighborhoods and fairly self-sufficient local economies is reducing the amount of real diversity in the world. Everywhere in America, for example, locally owned stores and services and distinctive downtown shopping areas are being replaced by more or less indistinguishable "malls." The mall and Wal-Mart and Old Navy are always just a short drive away. From one view, this means that technological progress has reduced our country to an aesthetic wasteland; by making every place look and "feel" the same, suburbs and malls keep people from being able to experience themselves as being from any place in particular.

Technology makes it increasingly difficult for human beings in many ways to be able to experience themselves as particular beings at all.

But from a more democratic view, a wide array of economically priced products are now conveniently available to everyone. Barnes & Noble may not be as good as the best old-fashioned locally owned bookstores, and the mega-chains may have forced those charming and quirky stores out of business. But each Barnes & Noble store is stocked with more good books and periodicals than any of us could ever read (not to mention the large and diverse collection of CDs), and those stores serve far more customers than those old bookstores ever did. We have to add that malls are usually very pleasant and very reliable places, and little Marx wrote predicted them. They are certainly not cesspools of proletarian misery. The taste of the average American for gourmet coffee and other such food and drink has, in fact, been awakened by malls; McDonald's is on the decline in our country. Starbucks may be an abomination to someone with genuinely aristocratic tastes, but it has also made more people than ever snobs about caffeinated beverages.

We have the comfort of knowing that almost wherever we are in America we can go to the mall, a home away from home. Nobody may know your name there, but you can still reasonably expect to be treated well. The technological reduction in diversity represented by the mall is arguably the price to be paid for something like universal freedom in prosperity. The aesthetic aversion to the mall is arguably aristocratic nostalgia for a world in which most human beings were much more confined, for a world in which most people had little access at all to the good things the world has to offer. But in that limited world, surely, people had a greater appreciation for the goods given to us by God, tradition, and nature; a properly moral and spiritual world may have to be a fairly fixed one.

We do know that the prosperity produced by relatively unimpeded technological progress has both good and bad aesthetic and ecological effects on the world. One reason we work so hard on historical preservation is that we know we could not re-create now the remnants we have of a more artistically excellent time. But we can appreciate that excellence: Prosperous Americans today are educated enough to at least be an audience for beautiful deeds and noble leisure. So they are sophisticated enough to read the real and often old books Barnes & Noble sells, and they are aesthetically minded enough to be repulsed by suburban sprawl and to be moved to refurbish the beautiful buildings from earlier times found in our cities. Consumers such as these have even caused mall architecture to become more stylish or “neo-traditional.” Not only that, the basically postindustrial environmental movement depends on technological success; it is led by people smart and rich enough to think of themselves as rising above merely material concerns. The rich and selfish capitalist countries have reduced the amount of pollution and so forth in the world in recent decades. Those who want to see really brutal environmental devastation have to go to the formerly communist countries or cities in what used to be called “third world” countries where technological progress was slowed to a crawl by corrupt tyrants and ideological tyranny. The impact of technological progress has arguably shifted; the world is becoming less rather than more of a wasteland in its most technologically advanced area.

The most unnatural and surely environmentally friendly freedom offered us by television, computers, and so forth is even more amazing. We have immediate access to the whole world; what we can know and experience extends far beyond local and national boundaries. We can do all our shopping in front of a screen, without even having to waste time talking to another human being. (I enjoy going to the Lands’ End website—where I can take care of all my clothing needs with quality, reasonably price products and where I can enter my exact measurements to get

tailored pants without having to be touched in any way by some salesperson. And I buy just about all my books on Amazon; my only complaint is its convenience and low prices tempt me to buy more than I can afford.)

Our dependence on the Internet actually shows us technology's contradictory tendencies: It increases our openness to all the people of the world while freeing or isolating us from other, particular persons. It makes us skeptical of the pretensions of all real human communities; it has turned out to be an effective weapon against both tyranny and the family. And it surely increases our tolerance for human diversity while contributing to the reduction of that diversity. There are, of course, "online" communities too, and they do sometimes save the lonely and misunderstood (maybe most of us in our technological time) from some of their misery. We also know, of course, that people who cannot tell the difference between virtual and real community are pretty pathetic. Or maybe they're just flexible and free; "virtual" communities challenge us to consider to what extent human social life depends on physical proximity. Even the objection that virtual sex cannot lead to reproduction might fade if reproduction is separated from sex. Indirectly this freedom contributes in another way to America's technological domination. Being on-line allows more people than ever to work from their homes and live anywhere they like, and so they are bringing their demand for sophisticated, high tech services to the most "backward" parts of our country.

Our Technological Republic

The freedom at the mall or on the Internet that Americans now enjoy might be understood as the realization of the intention of our Founders. America, the first nation devoted in its fundamental law to the promotion of technological development or invention, also gave the world the first form of government that was explicitly a form of technology aimed at freeing the individual

from all forms of oppression. Our Constitution was understood by our leading founders as a human artifice or invention consciously constructed to remedy our miserable natural condition. It was constructed to be an instrument or means for the individual's free pursuit of his own chosen way of life.

The Americans for whom the Constitution is a means are thought of much less as citizens than as individuals. Government is mostly a *mere* means for each individual's pursuit of his own ends; it exists through *my* consent to secure *my* rights. Americans ask more what the government can do for them as individuals than what they can do for it as citizens. The Constitution relies more on mechanisms or techniques invented by Montesquieu and others such as the separation of powers and checks and balances than on natural or cultivated virtue or piety to protect individuals from the tyranny rooted in human nature itself. Political technology in surprisingly large measure can free us from what seemed to be the necessity to exercise personal self-restraint to live freely.

Partly due to the stunning progress in technology since the time of the founding, we believe we can push liberation further than even the most "enlightened" founders imagined. Today we understand the free pursuit of happiness under the Constitution to include mindless self-indulgence, stupefying diversions, almost unlimited sexual freedom, and even drug-induced euphoria. Today we say "there's nothing wrong with that" about activities that even Thomas Jefferson regarded as criminal. In our laidback nonjudgmentalism we really have come close to believing in the goodness and possibility of Socrates's democracy, and our libertarians now really believe that history is on their side and the state is withering away. The founders believed that the political liberation made possible by the Constitution would be constrained by the discipline required to earn a living (usually by farming), run a household, and raise a family, and

that people would be ranked in local communities by the virtue and skill they exhibited in those necessary, difficult, and time consuming endeavors. Ordinary life was necessarily much more demanding and so resistant to liberation in that relatively low tech and dangerous time.

Our democracy is a combination of the political technology of the Constitution with the success of the technological project it unleashed. The result is we believe it possible to apply what used to be regarded as the fairly narrowly political principles of consent and egalitarianism to all areas of life. Our women's liberation, for example, depends on both parts of America's technological combination. As Alexis de Tocqueville reports, Americans used to believe that the necessary constraints of the division of labor compelled the woman to be more or less stuck at home.⁴ We all now believe that such a narrow and alienating view of a woman's possibilities is unnecessary and unjust; women, like men, should be able to do whatever they want whenever they want. Marriage and parenting are lifestyle choices that should never define a whole life and are not for women more than men.

From the beginning, our constitutional/technological principles pointed in the direction of the individual's liberation from material and emotional dependence on others. *Federalist 10*, for example, shows how America's "large republic" would moderate the tyrannical passion characteristic of all previous democratic or republican government. Size and diversity—the distance of the citizens from their representatives, for example—would promote psychological detachment. People would increasingly vote according to their interests and less according to their passionate attachments. And they would prefer the relatively impersonal and secure liberty protected by the national government to the comparatively unreliable and intrusive communal ties that animate local government. From this view, as Carey McWilliams explains, "All

attachments are suspect, since the bonds of love and community limit liberty, tying individuals to particular persons, places, ideas, and institutions without regard to their usefulness.”⁵

Tocqueville connects this technological or utilitarian view to the nature of democracy itself: Any view of truth or virtue—any view of science or theology—that aims higher than materialistic utility is really a claim of the few to rule over the many. So we can only achieve freedom by reducing all human relationships to “self-interest rightly understood.”⁶ Even in the most high-tech times we will still need the cooperation of others to achieve our personal goals. A free human being achieves that cooperation without the oppression of emotional dependence by applying the proper technique of human relations. The passion that sustains friendship is replaced by the calculating detachment of “networking.” Arguably the history of America, from one view, is all human relationships gradually being reconstructed according to that liberationist or technological view. Democratic liberation requires that human beings not really be dependent on each other in any way.

Anti-Technological Theory

Technological thinking in the modern world moves from being a mere means to an end in itself. According to the philosopher Heidegger, technology is what defines all of modern life. That means our world is, in a way, a rational one. Our view is that what is real can be comprehended by reason; it is what can be calculated or predicted or manipulated. Anything that cannot be objectively known—known as an object—by reason is not real. It is, as Socrates’s democrats say, merely subjective or whimsical or weightless. So ours is a democratic age insofar as we accord no weight or reality to what used to be considered difficult and necessarily unequal manifestations of the human soul—piety, loyalty, community, art, poetry, philosophy, and so forth. We also, as good democrats, do not accord any truth or virtue to anything that reminds us

of our finitude—of our mortality and contingency—or of the mystery of our very existence. Heidegger, more than Socrates, objects to the ugliness of the self-denial of technological democracy.

The tyranny of technological thinking is, for Heidegger, above all *nihilistic*; everything noble and beautiful that gives human life its seriousness or dignity is regarded, literally, as nothing. The deep thought of technological thinking is that we can only know what we can control. As Heidegger says, the ancient science of Aristotle understands a cause as “that to which something is indebted.” We can know what—our debts from nature and our political order—has caused us to be the way we are. But modern science denies that we really have or can know such debts. So the modern or technological thinkers understand a cause as “that which produces an effect.”⁷ All we can know is what is effective, what we can control through reason for whatever we will. The modern view is that technological thinking frees us from the irrational illusion of indebtedness. It can be at the service of what we now call “free choice,” because we have no knowledge of any purposes or ends or limits that we have been given. Unconstrained human choice or willfulness depends on a debt-negating or nihilistic foundation.

Heidegger makes the undemocratic denial that we really can freely use technology for whatever goal we please. What is really true (technology) can hardly be controlled by what is arbitrary and contingent or, really, nothing (each of us). And thinking about how we can control technology does not free us from technological or control-oriented thinking. So “democratic choice” is overwhelmed by the impulse of technological thinking to conquer nature, to kill God and the gods, discredit tradition, and to rationalize or standardize all of human life. That impulse overwhelms or flattens out all the human qualities to which technology might be subordinated or serve. Heidegger in this way agrees with Marx: The technology-driven, urbanized, and

progressively less diverse West seems to be the destiny of the whole planet or species. The result will be, according to Heidegger's best student, "the unity of the human race at the lowest level, the complete emptiness of life, the self-perpetuation of doctrine without rhyme nor reason, no leisure, no cultivation, no withdrawal; nothing but work and recreation; no individuals and no peoples, but instead 'lonely crowds.'"⁸

The danger is that human beings will have no existence at all that is not somehow or another regulated by applied reason or technology, reasoning that does not acknowledge the existence of anyone in particular. According to Socrates or Marx, technological progress is supposed to be the cause of a world where human beings will enjoy an abundance of leisure. Freed from necessity, they will be freed to pursue any choiceworthy activity they please. But in truth, technological thinking, by making leisure pointless, makes it impossible. There is no longer any foundation, any reality, to the idea of a genuinely inner or private life. So there now seems to be a therapy or technique to rationalize every human activity—even for relaxing (being without stress), for love (or predictable and reliable bodily satisfaction), and even for grief (another process to be managed). There is nothing that the technicians or experts cannot tell us how to do.

There are many reasons, in fact, why technology, by itself, cannot make leisure possible. As Jacques Ellul points out, "it is simply not the case that the individual, left to his own, will devote himself to the education of his personality or a spiritual or cultural life."⁹ Leisure depends on a cultivation that has its roots in non-democratic or non-technological education. As Socrates says, democracy is good for the philosopher insofar as nobody there has any objection to the philosopher's liberated thought, whereas in every other regime there is traditional or political or pious opposition to such liberation. But democracy is bad for genuinely liberated thought

because it does not provide for the education or habituation that is at the foundation of every serious human endeavor. And genuine human liberation depends on the critical examination of serious moral opinions, but in a democracy nobody defends the truth or nobility of his or her opinions. As Allan Bloom famously complained, if students are laidback but dogmatic relativists on every question but the value of technological progress, then it is impossible to teach them anything more than how to be soulless, competent specialists.

Leisure is impossible for people who deny that human beings really should and can pursue truth, virtue, and God, who do not believe they really can know the truth about their debts or responsibilities. Technology cannot free us from the boredom and anxiety that is the result of the uncultivated leisure that technology can actually give us. So we seek refuge in the diversion of what would otherwise seem to be unnecessary work. We invent necessity to free ourselves from nihilism; technology liberates us from meaningless leisure for meaningless work or recreation (which is not good in itself but merely a break from work).

Technology vs. Settled Community

Wendell Berry explains that our dogma or “conventional prejudice” today is the uncritical acceptance of the goodness of technological liberation. Our intellectuals or our education means to prejudice us “against old people, history, parental authority, religious faith, sexual discipline, manual work, rural people and rural life, anything that local or small or inexpensive.”¹⁰ We are prejudiced against all that is required to acquire moral virtue, to what we must have to subordinate technical means to human ends. We are prejudiced against “settled communities,” against anything that has not been uprooted by the impersonal universalism of technological thinking. But it is only in the routinized and moralized context of such communities that any technology might be viewed as good, as not merely displacing or disorienting human beings for

no particular purpose.¹¹ We are prejudiced against the prejudices or tradition or common view of reality that allows human beings not to be so disoriented that they cannot think or act well.

Berry agrees with Heidegger that the laidback or relativistic egalitarianism is not the result of technological liberation. The truth is that “If we have equality and nothing else—no compassion, no magnanimity, no courtesy, no sense of mutual obligation and dependence, no imagination—then power and wealth will have their way; brutality will rule.”¹² The democratic destruction of virtue paves the way, as Socrates says, for tyranny. Those who are best at manipulating others as objects will rule without restraint. Technological democracy tends to bring into existence a new sort of tyrannical ruling class; the clever and liberated or communally irresponsible meritocrats employ technology to impose a humanly destructive uniformity on those they rule. These meritocrats—believing maybe more than any prior ruling class that they deserve to rule—are full of contempt for those they control. And they themselves don’t realize the extent to which they are controlled by technological thinking, by a way of thinking that has devalued all standards except wealth and power.

Democracy, in fact, cannot destroy human distinctions based on technical cleverness; it, in fact, liberates that cleverness from limits imposed by common decency. “Technology,” Carey McWilliams explains, “is more than gadgets and machines; it is associated with a frame of mind, a preoccupation with getting results, a dangerous spirit that strains against limits and rules.”¹³ The first unreserved technologist—the first human being to identify the whole truth simply with what works—was Machiavelli. The most tyrannical doctrine ever invented, it turns out, is that there can be no real or weighty human objection to whatever technological success brings. Nobody, it turns out, is exempt from that amazingly impersonal tyranny. In our technological

republic, it often seems that choices are automatically made in favor of greater efficiency. So no one in particular—certainly no Machiavellian prince—is in charge.

In America, according to Berry, members of every established community “sooner or later become ‘redskins’—that is, they become the designated victims of an utterly ruthless, officially sanctioned and subsidized exploitation.”¹⁴ The example of the Indians or Native Americans is real evidence of how callously modern or technological democracy exterminates competing ways of life. But, as Tocqueville explains, Berry’s claim for victimization is exaggerated because “indigenous” peoples—including the Indians—opened themselves to destruction by being corrupted by the modern temptations of unearned luxury and ease.¹⁵ There is nothing weaker than a people who have developed modern tastes without the modern or “bourgeois” habits of technology-driven work. There is something romantic and paternalistic in the belief that America’s largely agricultural population could have been protected from such corruption. Most of our farmers had neither the illiterate isolation of European peasants or the quite un-American and atypical religious and cultural resources of the Amish.

Heidegger and Berry, not without evidence, tend to view America as some sort of technological tyranny; the unlimited pursuit of money and power that is the result of technological thinking leads the few to lay waste to the communal and moral world inhabited by the many. Technological progress tends to make true or communal democracy almost impossible, as even Tocqueville showed. (Technological progress, it is true, has given many Americans the time to get involved in public spirited organizations, but that involvement seems to have peaked prior to most educated women entering the workforce in the name of liberation.) Berry compares the way of life of the Europeans who came to America—who were anxious and dissatisfied “road builders” from the beginning—to that of the indigenous Indians of our

continent and the “Old World Peasants.” The ways of life of the latter “had evolved slowly in accordance with their knowledge of their land, of their needs, of their own relation of dependence and responsibility to it.” They lived according to “deep earthly wisdom of established peoples”; they “belonged deeply and intricately to their places.”¹⁶ They were dependent on and responsible to a certain small part of the earth. Because they had no desire to go any other place, they had no need for roads.

From the view of low-tech Indians and peasants, “We [Europeans] *still* have not, in any meaningful way, arrived in America.” We “road builders” remain “*placeless* people.” Berry explains that we characteristically “behave violently” toward the land and particular places because from the beginning we “belonged to no place.”¹⁷ We have regarded the land or nature as an alien or hostile force to be conquered, and not as our home. For Berry, what we modern Americans regard as the natural human propensities for wandering and violence are not really so natural at all. Our anxious dissatisfaction can at least be checked by our natural capabilities to be bound by habit and familiarity.¹⁸ As even Heidegger says, the existential view that the truth is that we human beings alone have no natural place in particular is not shared by people who have the experience of belonging “deeply and intricately” to some place.

The same technology that has brought us liberation and mobility—which are more wonderful and exhilarating and a fulfillment of a natural human potential that Berry will allow—also brings us, Berry rightly says, an experience of “strange loss and sorrow.”¹⁹ We don’t have to be as anti-technological or as anti-American or as un-Christian (Berry’s affirmation of the natural world opposes itself to the anthropocentric tendency of Christian otherworldliness²⁰) as he is to agree that “[s]urely there should be a more indigenous life than we have.”²¹ Our fundamental human experiences and longings persist despite the technological denial of their

existence, and surely we remain free enough to create a more settled world that can make more sense of them. But a more settled or indigenous world in our time cannot dispense with our postindustrial technology. We can agree with some of the “agrarian” criticism of our nihilistic displacement without thinking for a moment that any significant numbers of Americans are really going back to the farm. They are, in fact, not even going back to the factory. But we have reason to hope that, for example, our Christian counterculture will find ways to promote deep and intricate communal belonging that are much less rooted in the soil.

Berry’s view is that true human experience of the individual’s “inferiority” to the natural world, of “his dependence” on it, and of “its ability to thrive without him.”²² Knowing that “the human race is less important than I thought”—and my particular existence is less important than I thought—frees my “mind” from its unnatural “urgings.” I no longer desire to do “violence” to nature; I now “wish to be as peaceable as my land.” I no longer “may decently hope” to more than the little I really am by nature, and I am ready to “die in my own time” just as the “forest” will.²³ The modern but still anti-technological and proto-New Age philosopher Rousseau says that we must be unconscious to live peacefully with nature. Berry holds that true self-consciousness without God can lead to that peaceful experience, which he compares to the bird’s “serenity of living within order.” Our minds, apparently, can affirm that we’re more alike than different from the birds.

Like Socrates or Rousseau, Berry believes that for human beings, living well is learning well with death. But his own manner of accepting nature as “his source and his destiny” is closer to Socrates’s than a peasant’s or a noble Indian warrior’s.²⁴ Certainly the technological frenzy—the anxious restlessness—that characterizes the modern world is based very deeply in the thought that such natural serenity is not really possible for self-conscious beings. As Tocqueville

says, what is new about American democracy is that restlessness has become common among ordinary people.

That human beings have to be some *place* to live and that technology erodes all particular human attachments is true. Beings with bodies have to be somewhere, and all human experience of the universal truth comes through reflection that occurs in the context of particular communities. But it is unclear to what extent that place has to literally be a piece of land; the Indian community, for example, was often really a band of wanderers. And to some extent or another so too is any Christian community, any community composed of human beings who believe that they are really pilgrims or wayfarers in this world. According to one of the very first modern thinkers, Blaise Pascal, the truth is that human beings exist nowhere in particular for a moment. They are miserably contingent and displaced accidents. The truth, in fact, makes us so miserable that we spend most of our lives diverting ourselves from it.²⁵ The only real remedy for our natural misery, according to Pascal, is believing in a God hidden from natural view. From this view, our disoriented experiences in our high tech world are actually closer to the truth about what we are by nature than those of the Old World peasant.

For Berry, Pascal is simply wrong. We can live well according to nature deeply rooted in a particular place; we are not wanderers by nature. And there is much human experience that supports that criticism. But Berry is not simply right; we are different from the birds because most of us self-conscious beings do not accept our deaths serenely. It seems natural for us to fight and hope to overcome our natural or mortal limits, and it is even noble for us to do so. So longing for a personal God, winning our liberty by dying courageously, and technological resistance to the nature out to kill each of us in particular all seem natural or authentic responses

to what we are fitted by nature really to know. The truth, surely, is somewhere between Berry and Pascal.

We are disoriented by the fact that the truth about nature points us in contradictory directions: It may actually be true to say that nature is in some ways our friend and in others our enemy, and so our judgments about the effects of technological progress are and should almost always be mixed. Even our romantic idealization today of our species' past low tech harmony with nature—which is excellent therapy for the ways in which we are alienated from nature by our unprecedented dependence on technology—has been “made possible only by technology's liberation of people from the harsh realities of wresting sustenance from a recalcitrant and destructive nature world.”²⁶ There is remarkably little evidence—even or especially from the Indians—that human beings ever experienced that harmony.²⁷

But in the decisive sense still Pascal sides with Berry in his opposition to the promise of modern technology eventually to make us fully at home. Heidegger exaggerates the extent to which we have been changed by technological thinking; the deepest thought might be that technological progress finally makes no fundamental difference in our being at all. We are certainly not completely under the thrall of technological thinking; there is no technological remedy to the greatness and misery of being human. The modern hopes and fears about technological progress are the greatest diversion of our time.

Bobo Greatness and Misery

Technological progress and technological thinking can provide no real remedy to our natural homelessness, but only make it seem worse. Technology's goal is to liberate us from the necessity of alienation, and that goal can be achieved only if we are somehow liberated from death. With that liberation, technological progress really would come to an end. But nothing like

that liberation has happened so far. Technological progress has, objectively, made human lives longer and more secure; so, the thinking goes, we should be less moved by the prospect of death than ever before. But the truth is that human beings are more death haunted today than ever before. Death seems less necessary and more accidental, and the result is that we are more risk averse than ever. We are more afraid of death because we have more to lose. And we have done so well in conquering disease that we now regard death itself as a disease to be cured. Almost like cancer or heart disease, we have tended to come to believe that death itself is something we can avoid for the indefinite future if we live according to our best calculations and submit ourselves to the latest technological advances.

The most wealthy, sophisticated, and technologically adept Americans today—those David Brooks calls the bourgeois bohemians—are democrats or liberationists or laidback nonjudgmentalists when it comes to the soul.²⁸ They believe that technological and political progress has freed us from moral oppression, and so they are so prejudiced in favor of liberationism that they are incapable of taking moral distinctions seriously and so of habitually practicing or inculcating moral virtue. They believe that all serious talk about or action on behalf of the soul is meaningless, and so they easily embrace the therapeutic view that feeling good is more important than being good. They do not believe at all that living responsibly means thinking and acting well about what we really know about our limitations, about our contingency and mortality. They at least want to believe that death, like everything else, is a technical problem that has a technical solution. Berry would say, in fact, that, despite their environmentalism and their edifying visits to the rain forest, the bobos have too few experiences that could show them why they should be grateful for what nature has given them, even for their ineradicable dependence and death. Heidegger would say they are nihilists.

The bourgeois bohemians are, in fact, as fanatical about their bodies—about health and safety—as they are laidback or indifferent when it comes to the soul. Democracy cannot really liberate us from bodily distinctions or the necessity of death. So they diet and exercise with great discipline and with the latest technology and demand laws against the dangers of unsafe sex, second-hand smoke, and the fast food industry’s empty-calorie culture of death. They aim to regulate or over-organize every moment of their own and their unfortunate children’s lives, and despite or because of their sophisticated pursuit of edifying, “wholistic” lifestyles, they have no idea what leisure or just enjoying life is. They are, in fact, the most work-oriented or compulsively death obsessed or risk-averse people ever. They are remarkably if not completely engaged by technological thinking; they aim to subject every moment of life to calculation and control.

Life is not so easy for our bourgeois bohemians in other ways. Their success depends on keeping up with rapid technological development; they can’t fall behind on either techniques of clever sociability or knowledge of computer applications. They have every reason to be obsessed with obsolescence. The downside of living in a techno-meritocracy is when someone falls, he or she falls hard. The safety nets of the extended family, local community, caring church, inherited wealth, and even the welfare state are all atrophying. Technological development is also the cause of the disappearance of neighborhoods in the strong or morally dominating sense; children increasingly must be raised by parents or often a parent all alone in an alien environment. (That environment includes the television and video/computer games that have largely replaced familiar conversation.) And both of the lonely or at least mobile and isolated parents usually have demanding jobs; they cannot raise their children without employing experts they do not know or really trust.

As Marx predicted, capitalism has made women wage slaves just like men and deprived mothers of the halos tradition had accorded them. So it is not just selfishness or the excessive self-consciousness that techno-liberation brings that causes bourgeois bohemian parents to have so few children. They often have less time and fewer moral resources (which included the “chores” that technology has abolished) with which to raise children than their parents or especially grandparents did, despite their greater wealth, freedom, and mobility. But to be fair, they can also provide their children easily with opportunities for education and edification once only available to aristocrats. And not even the richest Americans in low tech times could take their kids to Europe and back over spring break.

This portrait of our best and brightest achieves clarity through exaggeration. And it is even less true for most Americans. The bobos may torture their children with all sorts of lessons, but that is because they love, worry about, and want the best for them. And liberated women don't call themselves feminists anymore, because they associate feminism with a nihilistic liberation from the natural and lovable goods that are men and children. They certainly have stopped short of reducing other human beings to objects to be manipulated. It is closer to the truth to say that part of misery is that we lack the language that corresponds to our real experiences. We are better or less technological than our technical and therapeutic words. We really aren't anything like beings without souls. And Wendell Berry exaggerates when he says that America is a tyrannical oligarchy; the technological threat to all community—all that is settled and familiar—is impersonal enough to make blame difficult to assess. And the bobos themselves long for community and are receptive to efforts such as the “new urbanism” to mold modern technology to recreate real neighborhoods or familiar places.

Libertarianism and Biotechnology

So far, my thought has been that both the hopes and the fears we have concerning technology today are exaggerated. The limit to both is human nature; technological progress cannot satisfy our deepest longings or make us at home in the world. Nor can it completely uproot us from our human attachments or produce beings without any moral or spiritual life. We remain social beings open to the truth, nobility, and God who love and die, and it is a large exaggeration to say that technology has reduced our world to a wasteland completely inhospitable to beings such as ourselves. It is equally an exaggeration to say that technological progress has been good for moral and spiritual life, or to say that we seem able to control that progress on behalf of properly human purposes. The very idea of technological control is part of a way of thinking that is incapable of making properly human distinctions. Maybe we can thank God that we are still required to live morally demanding lives, and that we seem unable to bring human nature or human self-consciousness under our control.

But with the coming of biotechnology—our new capacity to give orders to our genes—maybe all bets are off. We may be able to bring our natures—our bodies and our moods—under our control. The heart of the biotechnological project will be to reduce radically the places of contingency and vulnerability in our lives. Our aims will be to eliminate genetically based diseases and to extend our lives indefinitely through regenerative medicine. We will be able to consciously and willfully design better human beings, ones that are smarter, healthier, more productive, and happier. Above all the biotechnological project will be driven by the modern goal of keeping particular individuals—*me*—alive.²⁹

Biotechnology threatens to overcome the natural limits to the technological regulation of all of human life. Our libertarians—our technologists—are blind to the fact that if

biotechnological development is unlimited personal control will necessarily give way to impersonal or statist control over the most intimate human experiences and choices. Some fear that parents will assume tyrannical or technological control over their children by being able to design them according to their whims. But in our technological republic today we do not let parents—Christian scientists or snake handlers—choose against the health and safety of their children. Soon enough government will make available and require that everyone employ the latest biotechnological means to have children in a way that maximizes each child's health and safety. That would include the means of reproduction—maybe cloning but probably the implantation of genetically enhanced embryos—and submitting to therapeutic abortions if something genetic goes wrong. It may also include government's determination of how many children an individual can have or even whether it is any longer safe for him or her to have anything at all. If people stop dying for a very long time, then we will have little use for replacements.

Leon Kass, chair of President Bush's Council on Biotechnology, worries that Americans now are dominated enough by technological thinking not to be bothered much by the effects of our embryonic stem cell research on us. The debate has focused on life and health and not on the consequences for human dignity of "coming to look upon nascent human life as a natural resource to be mined, exploited, commodified."³⁰ Similarly, our main objection to human cloning is that it will be unsafe, not that it abolishes the distinction between procreating and manufacturing human beings. A world in which children are manufactured and sex and procreation are totally disconnected would surely be one without much love, one where one manufactured being would have little natural or real connection to other manufactured beings. The perfection of control is at the expense of love. Only through contemplating the extreme

possibilities biotechnology opens for us can we see with neon clarity how the excessive attention to perpetuating individual lives characteristic of the modern, technological project is destructive of the natural goods given to rational, social beings.

According to Heidegger, the world dominated by technological thinking somehow has its beginning with the philosopher Plato. Heidegger's defense of that view has never been clear to me, but Kass now suggests something similar. In his earlier work, Kass connected human dignity only with living well or thoughtfully with death. And Pascal also says that our dignity consists in thought. From this view, our bobos live most undignified lives, and the whole modern liberation of technology from higher human concerns can also be found wanting. Our pursuit of happiness, Kass has been complaining for a long time, has been undignified, and the principles of our technological republic do not give us the defense of dignity we need now.

Kass used to be more clear than he is now that Socrates is our model of dignity, and that Aristotle rightly taught that all of natural development culminated in his thoughtful dignity. But the problem is that if Socrates were offered another 70 years through regenerative medicine right before his famous defense speech before the Athenians, he might well have flattered and not angered his judges. If we identify our dignity simply with our minds, we might conclude that philosopher might can live undeluded about death and still welcome a much longer life without sufficient appreciation of what technology's assault on virtues connected with marital and parental love does to the dignity of most human beings. Living well with death cannot be a complete account of human dignity, although it is a fundamental part of that account. And even that virtue is more moral than intellectual: "What humanity needs most of all in the face of evils is courage, the ability to stand against fear and pain and thoughts of nothingness," and the

practice of the courage required of conscious but embodied beings requires the encouragement and usually love of others.³¹

So Kass now thinks that the philosophers, even the teleological Aristotle, do not understand that “respect for a being created in God’s image means respecting *everything* about him, not just his freedom or his reason but also his blood.” The philosophers do not see clearly enough “why it is not good for the man to be alone; why the remedy for man’s aloneness is a sexual counterpart, not a dialectic partner (Eve, not Socrates)” and “why in the shame-filled discovery of sexual nakedness is humanity’s first awe-filled awareness of the divine.”³² The philosophers do not give us a complete enough account of the relationship between the physical and psychic or social and spiritual dimensions of human, biological life, but the Bible presents human beings as whole persons made in the image of God and so as natural but more than natural beings.

There is no reason that philosophers cannot learn from the Bible at least what is clearly true psychologically; we are clearly more than minds or bodies or even some mixture of mind and body. Those “men from Missouri” who really use their eyes to see can find plenty of evidence of human dignity all around them, in “the valiant efforts ordinary people make to meet necessity, to combat adversity and disappointment, to provide for their children, to care for their parents, to help their children, to serve their country.”³³ They also should be able to see that “[t]o suffer, to endure, to trouble oneself for the sake of home, family, community and genuine friendship, is truly to live.”³⁴ The challenges posed by biotechnology—which are only extreme versions of the challenges posed by modern technology generally—may lead us to re-discover the relationships among birth, sex, marriage and the family, openness to the truth and God, and death that constitute human dignity.

We also must return to Pascal for a reminder that the biotechnological project cannot turn we human beings from mysterious into manufactured beings. We will not be able to manage our moods or our experiences as self-conscious beings through psychopharmacology very effectively. We do not even begin to know what consciousness (not to mention life) is. The more we push death back—or make it less necessary and seemingly more accidental—the more we will be haunted by it. The more technology overcomes very imperfectly our contingency and vulnerability the more we are reminded that “we cannot bring the mystery of death under the control of human will and self-assertion.”³⁵ Technological thinking only futilely denies the reality of the fundamental unpredictability of human life. The more perfect or risk-free we become, the more we will become paranoid about the inevitable result of our remaining imperfections. We will not even be able to manage our clones very well, who as separate, self-conscious beings will be just as mysterious and just as screwed up as we are. It is reasonable to believe, of course, that as to some extent botched experiments they will be even more screwed up. Technology will remain a problem for us, and it may finally make us unhappy enough that we will begin to criticize its effects effectively with the whole human good in mind.

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