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Technology

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Technology

Technology takes many shapes. Things such as water heaters, cell phones, intercontinental ballistic missiles, high-definition television, and hybrid cars belong to the large family called “technological artifacts.” In addition to artifacts, technology includes infrastructure (e.g., roadways, water and sewage lines, fiber-optic phone lines, Wi-Fi transponders)—systems of technologies that enable the artifacts to function while the system itself

remains, for the most part, out of sight and under the moral radar. Further, technology connotes a certain form of life, one not simply auxiliary to the existing social structure but also contributing to its very form (hence, the phrase “technological age”). Finally, technology also includes a particular mode of productive reasoning that vies for cultural dominance over both practical and theoretical reasoning.

The moral challenges surrounding technology are exacerbated by the fact that new technologies are appearing at an exponential rate, threatening to outstrip the pace at which Christians can evaluate them. Further, Christians find little explicit treatment of technology in the Bible. Consequently, Christian moral reflection on technology requires examining the moral qualities of particular technologies in detail, describing the most germane biblical resources, and learning to distinguish Christian moral reasoning itself from the kind of reasoning that technocentrism engenders.

Evaluating Technology's Moral Qualities

Many technological achievements, such as CAT scans and air conditioning, are good things, while some of their by-products, such as toxic waste and global warming, are not. Very frequently, a given technology turns out to be a mixed bag. Innovations in communication (e.g., telephone, internet) that enable frequent and instantaneous contact with a broad range of people may also have adverse effects. This same technology may increase the physical distance that people maintain from one another, which in turn may weaken the bonds of family and friendship. Further, technology often opens up new possibilities for daily life while rendering opaque other, equally legitimate behaviors. For example, in 2007 there were more televisions per home in the United States than there were people. The ubiquity of television tends to preempt leisure reading. Finally, one must consider how technology shapes what people come to expect as culturally “normal.” Not only are we coming to expect fast internet connection as a basic human right but also we increasingly champion the subtler technological values of rapid innovation, standardization, and quantification, as well as taking efficiency as the superior metric and novelty as the only recognizable form that progress takes. In light of the ambiguity of these so-called values, it is difficult, if not impossible, to say whether technology is uniformly positive or negative. It is clear, however, that technology is not inherently neutral; it plays a determinate role in shaping the lives of producers, users, and losers (e.g., those who do not own cars but still breathe the smog [see Staudenmaier]).

Technology and Scripture

The biblical canon was closed well before the first major technological revolution in the West (c. twelfth–thirteenth centuries). Despite the obvious presence in the Bible of useful artifacts such as axes and chariots, there is little evidence that technology shaped biblical culture on the same scale that it shapes culture today. So, it is unsurprising that the Bible does not directly discuss technology. Nevertheless, there are three distinct senses in which technology can be “good” or “bad” in light of Scripture.

First, some technological artifacts are tools that aid human flourishing. A hammer, for example, can extend human power to build without necessarily undermining human community (murder by a hammer blow notwithstanding). Similarly, the apostle Paul’s missionary journeys were facilitated by a simple yet pervasive form of technology: roads built by the Romans. Tools such as hammers and infrastructures such as roadways are genuinely good insofar as they facilitate human community. Some technologies are also good because they resonate with Christian evangelism and discipleship. And some technologies are good for both reasons. For example, novel methods of water extraction embody Christ’s mercy toward people in drought-stricken areas and prosper their communities.

Second, “technological” denotes a centuries-long revolution resulting in an entirely new form of life. Consider the mechanical clock (thirteenth century), which found its first home among Benedictine monks who sought greater precision in devotional life. By the fourteenth century, the mechanical clock had transformed Western life, opening up new possibilities for regularizing labor relations and standardizing production outside the monastery, thereby setting the stage for the rise of market economies. In this way, a technological artifact that was intended to function solely as a tool precipitated changes on such a vast scale that the entirety of Western culture is no longer a “tool” culture but a “technological” one.

Finally, technology can be evaluated in terms of what Scripture calls “powers and principalities” (e.g., Rom. 8:38; Eph. 3:10; 6:12; Col. 1:16; 2:15). Providing order to the chaos of fallen creation and structuring our shared postlapsarian human life, the powers play an important role in the story of salvation history. Indeed, they play a part in the story of God’s redemption of humanity and, in that way, are in service to God. At the same time, these powers are also part of fallen creation and thereby had to be conquered by Christ’s life, death, and resurrection, thereby relativizing their

importance to God's reign (Col. 2:15). The powers serve a limited purpose and thus are "good" to the extent that they are properly ordered toward God's kingdom. But when they become an end in themselves, the powers engender disorder and constitute a dangerous idolatry. The powers seem to be limitless in number: "They include all institutions, all ideologies, all images, all movements, all causes, all corporations, all bureaucracies, all traditions, all methods and routines, all conglomerates, all races, all nations, all idols" (Stringfellow 205).

Despite their variety, the powers share similar features: they are able both to enslave human beings (typically by distortion and manipulation of language) and to take on a life of their own. However, not all powers are alike. Some powers are "unredeemed," while others are "in the process of being redeemed." Consequently, Christians are admonished to communally discern the workings of the powers, cooperating where these support the reign of Christ and resisting when they overstep their bounds (1 Cor. 12:8-10; Col. 1:15-17) (Wink).

As a power, technology is seen to be a life-shaping set of forces within the contemporary world. For example, the telephone and its global infrastructure did not simply appear overnight as an answer to a specific human need. Despite advantages that are now visible from hindsight, potential users at that time had to be convinced of its utility and, consequently, to accept (however unconsciously) the remolding of their lives that use of the telephone would precipitate. On the one hand, the telephone promotes the idea that communication is mere information transfer, since it disables face-to-face conversation, whether the interlocutor is across the country or across the hall. Consequently, the nuances provided by non-verbal communication are lost, and miscommunication frequently results (an effect that surely is intensified by email). On the other hand, we enjoy rapid access to emergency services and can transact important business instantly over enormous distances. Once again, it is a mixed bag (Schultze). However, viewing technology as a power readies Christians to see it in relation to the preeminence of Christ's kingdom, judging its potential benefits in light of Christian discipleship and its drawbacks in terms of its demands for idolatrous allegiance.

Technology and Modes of Reasoning: Technē and Phronēsis

Closely linked with technology as a community-shaping power is the widespread acceptance of a technological mode of thinking. Technological advances have affected the ways people understand

cause and effect within the world. When cause and effect are as immediately and directly related as the push of a button or the flip of a switch, we are easily bewitched by the idea that the same pattern of easy cause and instant effect holds for social and spiritual worlds. We crave techniques for "managing" (i.e., manipulating) others. The search for techniques is a mark of "productive reasoning." By nailing together pieces of wood, the builder produces a picket fence. Cause and effect are immediately related. The builder hits the nail, the nail pierces and conjoins the wood, and, picket by picket, a fence is produced. The carpenter's pattern of reasoning, called *technē* by the Greeks, from which we get the word *technology*, emphasizes production and is suited for things that are externally (or mechanically) related to their causes. Productive reasoning (*technē*) approaches the world in terms of efficiency, mechanical causation, one-size-fits-all, speed, and numerical measurability. That is, certain actions are pursued as "good" precisely because they improve efficiency and increase output.

Most of human life, especially the moral or communal sphere, cannot be "nailed" together. We cannot fix a family the way we repair the fence, because the "pieces" of a family are not mechanically related. Rather, they are related contextually and reciprocally. In other words, the character of each family member (as for every human being) varies slightly with surroundings. Over time, small changes in character that arise in response to context and the actions of others begin to accumulate in the form of habits that become more and more permanent. In the case of the fence, a picket is and always will be just a picket. Although productive reasoning works for mechanical systems, it is not suited for dynamic systems such as the social world. An entirely different mode of reasoning, one marked by practical wisdom (*phronēsis*), is needed for knowing how to respond wisely and appropriately to human surroundings. In contrast to productive reasoning's quest for technique, practical reasoning takes deliberation over uncertainties and genuine contingencies as the primary way human beings navigate life together.

The church needs believers who are skilled in practical reasoning. The NT uses *phronēsis* and its cognates forty-eight times (thirty-four times in Pauline corpus [e.g., Rom. 8:5; 1 Cor. 13:11; 2 Cor. 13:11; Gal. 5:10; Phil. 1:7]). Practical reasoning involves making judgments about technology not on the basis of its productive value but in light of the purpose, or *telos*, of human existence as revealed by the gospel. This goal guides human

life by asking, what sort of people should we be? Certain technologies may be found to be beneficial at certain times and places (e.g., computers that aid in Bible translation), while at other times they might engender a corrupting influence (e.g., violent video games to attract adolescents to a youth group). Even the use of technology within Christian worship requires us to ask, what sort of people are we becoming by using this technology? Churches everywhere are employing a plethora of technologies in their sanctuaries, from computerized slideshows on large projection screens to the complete control over sound, light, and temperature. These innovations allow more people to see and hear, but some have asked whether these technologies also change the character of worship.

The question, what sort of people are we becoming? must be considered by the church because technology, from nanobots to wind turbines, structures community life. Christian moral discernment about technology depends on conversation across the church (and across the ages), a communal conversation in which participants “have the same mind [*phroneō*] . . . that was in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 2:5), thereby eclipsing mere *technē*.

See also Information Technology; Powers and Principalities; Prudence

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