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Technology and Temperance

Kathleen A. Cahalan

College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University, kcahalan@csbsju.edu

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Today's technology transforms human life, presenting new challenges and prompting a fresh look at traditional virtues.

There are two spiritual dangers in not owning a farm. One is the danger of supposing that breakfast comes from the grocery, and the other that heat comes from the furnace. To avoid the first danger, one should plant a garden, preferably where there is no grocer to confuse the issue. To avoid the second, he should lay a split of good oak on the andirons, preferably where there is no furnace, and let it warm his shins while a February blizzard tosses the trees outside. If one has cut, split, hauled, and piled his own good oak, and let his mind work the while, he will remember much about where the heat comes from, and with a wealth of detail denied to those who spend the weekend in town astride a radiator.

Aldo Leopold, A Sand County Almanac (1949)

When we think of the relationship between technology and Christian faith, moral dilemmas such as nuclear power or nuclear arms and biomedical and reproductive technologies often come to mind. There is little doubt that these forms of technology define modernity in distinctive ways from the past, and they demand serious Christian moral reflection on their right and proper use. But if technology is viewed primarily as a reality that exists in the neonatal intensive care unit, the laboratory or the military base, we may miss the way that technology profoundly shapes and impacts everyday life. Consider for a moment the way technology is present as you read this article: A light illuminates the page; the room is cool or warm depending upon where you live; a hot cup of coffee is in reach and when it cools off it can be re-heated in a microwave oven; and, after reading the article, you send an e-mail to a friend to tell about it. This set of conditions is quite normal to us, one that we take very much for granted, unless of course the power goes out, the furnace breaks or our modem is too slow.

THE DEVICE PARADIGM

A current philosopher of technology, Albert Borgmann, understands technology not as the primary problem of modern life, but as its primary condition (Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life). What is distinctive about modern technology from earlier forms of tools and machines, according to Borgmann, is what he calls the device paradigm. His best-known account of the device paradigm is the shift, since the Industrial Revolution, from the hearth and wood-burning stove (focal things) to the central heating system (a device). The hearth or stove supplies warmth to a home and serves as a "focal point," a place of contact between people, who gather around a fire for conversation, meals and engagement. In addition to various kinds of human interaction, the hearth demands that human beings be in relationship to nature: hearths and stoves need to be tended each day, wood must be collected, chopped and stacked, and a fire kept burning. Certain skills and matters of knowledge are required to maintain a fire, which do not come "naturally" but must be learned and passed on from one generation to the next. The hearth, then, demands a certain kind of familial and social engagement between persons as well as a relationship between people and nature.

The crucial aspect of a device, according to Borgmann, is that it provides a commodity, in this case warmth, separate from a social and natural context and from a burden (chopping and stacking wood, and stoking a fire). Consumption is directly connected to technology because what is consumed are the commodities produced by technology—the pleasurable product disconnected from the burdensome labor. More and better technology allows for more and more commodities to be consumed with less and less effort. The opposite
of the device (the central heating system) is a focal thing and focal practice (the hearth and chopping wood) that are directly connected to nature, culture, social engagement and the body, whereas a device severs the commodity from its context. For example, the relationship to a device is quite different from a relationship to a focal thing, because devices are made in such a way that our only relationship to them is to use them. Try, for instance, fixing a furnace, dishwasher or automobile. Devices are constructed so that no skill or knowledge is required to maintain them. We are "disburdened" from the relationship, both from knowledge about as well as responsibility for the device; a focal thing, in contrast, is quite burdensome, as anyone who has chopped wood and tended a hearth knows.

Examples of the device paradigm abound: buying and listening to CDs, rather than playing music or attending a concert; communicating via cell phones or e-mail, rather than being present face-to-face; encountering artificial or virtual reality (the Wilderness Lodge at Disney World) rather than the real thing (the Rocky Mountains). Borgmann is particularly interested in how the device paradigm affects our relationship to food, meals and the table in American homes. Meals have become "fast food" that can be purchased and consumed at a drive-up facility; the table, for many, is no longer a central gathering each day for meals and conversation in the home. Not only does food production take place far away, the daily preparation of food and meals has been lost to the device paradigm (for example, McDonald's or the frozen dinner).

FOCAL THINGS AND FOCAL PRACTICES

Borgmann's answer to the device paradigm is twofold. First is the need to be more conscious of the device paradigm; it does not have to deplete us of vital and dynamic relationships with each other and with nature. He does not advocate tossing away microwaves, computers and televisions or never again purchasing fast food or frozen dinners—there is nothing inherently wrong or evil about this technology and the use of it. The microwave dinner may enable us to get to the Little League ballgame on time and engage in the focal practice of gathering with neighbors and friends at a local park to watch the game together. What we fail to realize, however, is that the most dangerous feature of the device is the fact that it is hidden, removed and concealed from daily life. The commodities are all around us: light, warmth, music from the radio, even food, but both the device and the labor connected to it have vanished from sight. Devices create a false kind of freedom: Human persons live under the illusion that all of life's burdens can be solved by better and more efficient technology. Some people contend that technology has enslaved rather than freed human persons, and obviously more and more time is spent acquiring and managing all these devices—a new kind of burden. Borgmann agrees that technology has altered human freedom in significant ways, but the freedom it allows is freedom from that which is most essential to human life: its burdens, frictions and struggles for creating a good life together. We may, for example, continue to seek more and better medicines to cure disease, but this will never free us from caring for the sick and dying.

Borgmann's second response to the device paradigm is to create and engage in focal practices and things. Focal practices and things have (at least) three characteristics. First, they have a "commanding presence," which means focal practices and things make demands on us. To engage a focal practice (for example, making a meal) requires patience, skill, endurance and discipline. In contrast, devices are usually disposable, requiring little skill or enduring practice (for example, heating a frozen dinner in the microwave). Second, a focal thing or practice has a "telling continuity" between the self and the environment; devices are usually discontinuous from their context. Take, for example, Borgmann's example of the runner who takes the path along the Rattlesnake Creek—she is engaged with the sights, sounds, smells of the outdoors, the rigors of the path, the possibility of poor weather and the chance encounter with wild animals. In contrast, a runner who uses a machine at the health center and watches a video of the Rattlesnake Creek is still exercising her muscles, but her experience of the environment is diminished from its true context. The runner may achieve the same amount of exercise (the commodity) whether she is on the path or in the health club; the danger lies in never encountering the wilderness as wilderness, but only as a manufactured reality of video images.

Focal things and practices also have "centering or unifying powers." They embrace a web of relations to self, others and nature,
and maintain a unity between means and ends. What is lost, for example, if a family never engages in growing some kind of food, even if it is as simple as a potted tomato vine growing on the balcony or a small garden of herbs? Some children may believe that food comes from McDonald’s or the supermarket—they may never know or encounter its source in nature or learn the skills of growing and harvesting food. Most importantly, for Borgmann, they never encounter the demands, responsibilities, the sheer burden and joy of producing food and making meals.

TECHNOLOGY AND THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

A central theological question in relationship to Borgmann’s description and prescription regarding the device paradigm is anthropological: What kind of human beings are we becoming by living in the device paradigm? Is our everyday use of technology altering or warping fundamental human capacities in ways that erode the basis for Christian spirituality and morality? One theologian who has taken up Borgmann’s analysis of the device paradigm is Richard Gaillardetz in his book, Transforming Our Days: Spirituality, Community, and Liturgy in a Technological Culture. Gaillardetz argues for two new forms of asceticism. The new mystagogy fosters “a more profound recognition of the presence of God as Holy Mystery emerging from within the warp and woof of our daily lives.” Engaging in the most basic and fundamental of human practices opens up the possibility of encountering the divine presence in the most ordinary and mundane aspects of life. Gaillardetz describes how buying lunch at McDonald’s can be a mystagogical encounter if through a certain level of moral and spiritual awareness people are connected to those who make and serve the food as fellow human beings, and not as extensions of the device paradigm.

Along with a growing awareness of divine grace in the ordinary, Gaillardetz calls for a new asceticism: a disciplined way of living the paschal mystery that embraces the limits that are part of all human experience. Technology seduces us into believing that we can remove the burdensome, ugly, difficult and painful, which is certainly a contradiction for those who strive to live the life of Christ. For Gaillardetz, “an authentic Christian asceticism affirms that in the plan of God human fulfillment can only come from the free embrace of that which technology and modern consumerism tempt us to circumvent: constraint, loss, and the necessary ‘friction’ of human existence.” A new asceticism demands that we consciously enter into practices that are burdensome and that require self-giving and self-sacrifice.

Gaillardetz joins several moral philosophers (Albert Borgmann, Alasdair MacIntyre) and Christian theologians (Dorothy C. Bass, Larry Rasmussen) who have taken up the concept of practices. For example, the authors of the book, Practicing our Faith (ed. Dorothy C. Bass) identify twelve practices that are “shared activities that address fundamental human needs and that, woven together, form a way of life.” The practices—honoring the body, hospitality, household economics, saying yes and saying no, keeping Sabbath, testimony, discernment, shaping communities, forgiveness, healing, dying well, singing our lives—are basic anthropological and social activities, and when they are known, taught and passed on within the Christian community, a way of life emerges that is consistent with the life of Jesus Christ.

Practices point to a communal, historical and narrative anthropology. They help to overcome the divorce between means and ends that devices promote; they keep in focus the true ends of the good or the Christian life as well as the means proper to those ends. In terms of practices, means include the critical forms of human agency that require skills, disciplines and know-how. Practices such as hospitality, meals around a family table or a congregation’s care for the elderly are grounded in a tradition that is both historical and narrative: People come to know who they are in and through the community’s basic practices. Community, then, is more than shared values or principles—it is shared practices. The central practice for Christians that grounds all other practices, according to Gaillardetz, is the liturgy. Liturgical celebrations draw Christians into a sacramental encounter with grace as well as the paschal mystery—both are essential for discovering grace in the ordinary world and responding to the rhythms of suffering and redemption.

In his 1981 book, After Virtue, MacIntyre connects the concept of practices to the traditional category of virtue, a topic that Borgmann and Gaillardetz do not take up. Virtue, for MacIntyre, is an “acquired
human quality” that develops through the engagement of practices over time. Virtues help to realize the goods that are “internal” to practices and that cannot be acquired in any other way but through practice. For example, the kind of courage, patience and knowledge that come from hiking or running in the Rocky Mountains cannot be acquired in the health club while watching a video of the Rocky Mountains; this is not to say that a person cannot acquire courage, patience and knowledge of the wilderness through other experiences, but that something is lost if the video is the only encounter with the wilderness. Virtue, for MacIntyre, is not an abstract or metaphysical reality, but is conditioned by a tradition of practice that is deemed valuable and important by a particular community. Certain communities will place a high premium on particular virtues because they value particular practices. Baseball offers a good example. Baseball, in order to be played well, requires learning what the game is and how it is played, skill in handling a bat and ball, and discipline and perseverance in honing skills and acquiring greater agility and facility in the game. By engaging in the game of baseball over time, a person comes to acquire certain virtues such as honesty, fair play, patience and being a “good loser.” As the great American pastime, the importance of baseball is not “whether you win or lose, but how you play the game.” The external goods (for example, winning a trophy, wearing a uniform) are distinct from the “goods” that are internal to the practice (for example, the kind of person that develops through playing baseball). Moral character cannot arise, develop and flourish, in other words, if a person is not engaged in the community’s central “focal practices” of everyday life.

Virtues are the inner qualities that emerge from practice but are also essential to good practice. Practices and virtues, then, exist in a dialectical relationship. Focal practices shape, develop and nurture certain human traits, dispositions, and virtues. For example, engaging in the practice of gardening fosters gratitude for things of the earth, skills at helping living things to grow, an awareness that all living things are interconnected and dependent, patience in the face of bad weather and hope in returning to the garden when a season of failure has devastated the plants and ground. It is only through engaging the practice of gardening over the course of time that one can acquire greater skill in gardening as well as the virtues necessary to be a good gardener. The virtues that are acquired are essential for long-term engagement in the practice, as well as for engaging other kinds of practices. Virtues, then, transcend particular practices by creating the inner qualities necessary for other practices. For instance, the practice of gardening engenders virtues that are essential for raising children, coping with loss or working toward more just environmental conditions. The focus on practices has helped to enlarge the concept of virtue beyond a more traditional individualistic and privatized notion of the self and the moral life. Practices make virtue communal as well as personal. If focal practices are essential to living fully and faithfully in the device paradigm, as Borgmann and Gaillardetz contend, what are the virtues that are critical to these practices? What virtues are necessary for the proper use of technology that does not succumb to the device paradigm?

TEMPERANCE AND THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

No single virtue is the key to living with modern technology. Obviously, a full range of virtues as well as practices must be cultivated by communities of faith. Traditional virtues such as faith, hope and charity as well as virtues identified by modern theologians are necessary: truthfulness, asceticism, reverence, gratitude (Romano Guardini); humility, vigilance, serenity, readiness (Bernard Häring); and happiness, friendship, obedience and patience (Stanley Hauerwas). In examining the list of ancient and contemporary virtues, one virtue stands out as particularly helpful for living amidst modern technology and the device paradigm—the virtue of temperance. Temperance has traditionally been understood as a cardinal virtue, “one of the four hinges on which swings the gate of life.” It is often misunderstood to mean complete abstinence, as in the temperance movement of the 1930s; its more traditional meaning refers to moderation in the use and consumption of material goods. In addition to moderation, however, temperance has an additional, perhaps more fundamental definition. Temperance also refers to interior order and unity. For example, temperance is related to the Greek
word, sophrosyne, which means “directing reason” in a broad sense, and in Latin, temperantia, meaning to dispose various parts into a unified and ordered whole.

Augustine, perhaps more than any other saint or theologian, understood the way in which the self lacks unity and order when it seeks to fill itself with pleasures and desires apart from God. True order and unity come only from God, he discovered, and temperance keeps the self centered in God. For Augustine, temperance “controls and quells the desires which draw us to the things which withdraw us from the laws of God and from the fruit of His goodness.” Because human persons are inclined toward a kind of inordinate desire for food, sex, money or possessions, they acquire and attach themselves to objects that eventually come to replace God as the center of the self. The self is ultimately lost when it turns from God to follow its own desire, and so temperance guards a person’s integrity and preserves true freedom “from corruption for God’s sake.”

For Aquinas, temperance is distinct from the other cardinal virtues because it “aims at each man himself,” whereas justice, courage and fortitude are directed toward relations between persons. Aquinas also takes up the theme of inner order and unity by stressing the distinction between selfless and selfish self-preservation. Desire for food, sex and material things is a natural good because it aims toward preserving the self (body and soul) in order to love and serve God and neighbor. Temperance is selfless self-preservation that maintains proper desire for goods and pleasures; selfish self-preservation can only end in self-destruction.

The understanding of temperance as an ordered and unified sense of self in relationship to God is also connected to the moderate use of material goods. According to Aquinas, temperance is directed to the passions that become attached to “bodily and sensible goods” that bring pleasure to the five senses. These goods are not opposed to reason, but in fact are necessary to human life; the problem lies in seeking pleasure through external goods disproportionate to the self. The passionate desire for bodily and sensible goods, absent reason, leads to a long list of vices: gluttony, drunkenness, lust, incontinence, anger, cruelty, pride and curiosity. Self-indulgent and intemperate behavior also leads to the misuse and abuse of material goods.

Temperance is not the same for every person. Moderation and in some cases abstinence are crucial for a unified and ordered sense of self in relationship to God and the material world. What each person requires in terms of moderation and abstinence will differ because the passions and attachments that lead to self-destruction differ for each person. But the acquisition of and disposition toward temperance are not an individual or solo quest, for temperance can only be discovered, acquired and nurtured through communal practices. More specifically, communities, such as families, congregations and neighborhoods, must consciously strive to nurture an ordered and unified sense of the self and the community in relationship to God, as well as moderate use of material goods.

Temperance seems particularly important for fostering a proper relationship to technology and the dangers of the device paradigm. Is it easy to understand the power and attraction of devices, for the commodities they provide and the pleasures they offer are often good and valuable. But absent a true sense of the self, human lives can be consumed by acquiring more and better devices. Temperance reminds us that true pleasure and freedom are found not in acquiring and consuming more, but in right relationship with God and neighbor. Secondly, devices create an illusion that technology solves the problems facing humanity. But unity and order for Christians are found in the paschal mystery, which does not deny pain and death, but actively seeks companionship with those who suffer. Finally, devices further threaten humanity’s relationship to nature. Temperance helps us to see all creation as a gift from God to be used wisely, justly and with moderation. This very brief examination of temperance reveals an ancient insight about virtue: Acquiring one virtue means acquiring all virtues. Temperance, finally, is only one of many virtues needed to live faithfully in relationship to modern technology and the device paradigm. Practices that foster temperance will also nurture the virtues of stewardship, gratitude and generosity.