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Gay's "Modern technology and the human future" (book review)

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Book Review



Gay, C. M. (2018). *Modern technology and the human future*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic. 254 pp. ISBN 9780830852208

In this scholarly work, Craig Gay examines modern automatic machine technology through theology, philosophy, history, sociology, and economics, drawing on his expertise as a professor of interdisciplinary studies at Regent College in Vancouver, Canada. He contends that the worldview behind our machine technologies lures us unwittingly into a disembodied way of being in the world, a way that devalues embodied humanity and created nature. Implicating the church for failing to sound the alarm, Gay calls Christians to return to the Christian story, to remember the created world we live in and the embodied people that we are in it, that we might rein in technology's trajectory to make way for richer embodied life.

Gay begins by arguing that machine technology does not enhance human embodiment but detracts from it. Our technologies shape us, and as we have designed automatic machine technology to efficiently overcome human weaknesses, we now view those weaknesses as technical problems that must be overcome by our technologies. Our technological worldview causes us to see everything as a problem to break down into parts small enough to solve, which in turn leads to fragmented cognitive styles and de-skilled labor. Eventually, our technologies outstrip human capabilities and lead to technological unemployment to save time and money. In addition to fragmenting our public lives, technology enters our private lives, affecting us psychologically and neurologically by the ways we order our lives around it.

Chapter 2 describes the ways in which technology is developing towards automatism at such a rapid pace that it cannot slow without external pressure. Gay provides a historical analysis of the forces behind modern technological development: modern scientific thinking that quantified everything into objects and deconstructed complexities into the simplest of components, and capitalism, which provided incentives and capital for quickly bringing technological improvements to market. These forces disenchant the world by replacing unique qualities of natural creation with uniform, abstract quantitative values.

Gay then turns his attention in Chapter 3 to the technological worldview that prevents us from seeing and stopping the problems caused by technological momentum and inertia. Beginning his historical overview with Descartes, the author discusses how Cartesian epistemology encouraged humans to think of themselves as rational

beings who stand outside of nature to study it objectively as God might, viewing the world as a machine without a divinely appointed *telos*. This instrumentalist view carried over into English Puritanism, which viewed technological improvements as a way to efficiently accomplish tasks in order to make time for the real business of Christian piety and service. Backtracking into the medieval period, Gay then demonstrates how concepts of natural order and *telos* that were inherent in the *via antiqua* gave way to the more inductive view of the *via moderna*, giving experience primacy over theology. Moving forward into the modern period, Gay describes Martin Heidegger's idea of enframing, in which we do not relate to the world in Martin Buber's I/Thou relationship but rather in an I/It position that sees natural creation as something to be used, for our technological worldview has blinded us to any other way of being-in-the-world.

To remedy this blindness, Gay points to the Christian story of creation, fall, redemption, and consummation in Chapter 4. He laments the amnesia of the church, which has forgotten its theological heritage of viewing human embodiment as central to faith. In creation, redemption, and consummation, he finds goodness in physical existence, while in the fall he sees a view of sin that tempers modern society's blind belief in human progress through technology.

In Chapter 5, Gay suggests three ways for Christians to engage with technology. First, we should be suspicious of the homogeneity of technological development and ask if our technologies promote embodied interaction with reality. Second, we should question rationalization and look critically at the strengths and weaknesses of rationalized procedures while prioritizing embodied human interactions over rationalization. Finally, we should oppose the worldview that sees the universe as impersonal matter and promote both the personal qualities of humans and "the deeply personal quality of reality itself" (p. 202).

After a brief conclusion urging the church to practice resurrection by appreciating created nature as other, Gay adds an epilogue encouraging frequent celebration of the Eucharist as the best way to celebrate human embodiment. As the celebration of incarnation that unites our bodies with that of Christ, the Eucharist can remind us of the place of embodiment in creation through consummation.

A strength of this book is the way which Gay connects the critique of technology's trajectory to the theological amnesia of the church and links the corrective to the Christian story. Many other books cover technology's history and lament the ways in which it has taken over our lives, but Gay adds to the story by describing how the church has failed to intervene in the disembodiment trajectory of technology because it has forgotten its roots in a Christian tradition that celebrates physical embodiment. By connecting technological trajectory to the church, he demonstrates why the topic should matter to us and shows us a possible way forward.

Additionally, while he relegated it to the epilogue, Gay's discussion of the Eucharist and its connection to technology provided a theologically meaningful close to his book. His brief theological overview connects Eucharist to embodiment in its description of our union with Christ but additionally ties in technology by pointing out that the technologies of bread and wine remind us that human-created things can be life-sustaining. However, while Gay rightly argues that frequent celebration of the Eucharist can act as a corrective to our disembodied way of being in the world, he might have taken this further by saying the celebration should be done with explicit reflection on its nature as an embodied practice. Some Christians grow up celebrating the Eucharist regularly without ever thinking to connect it to physical embodiment. If the theological concepts connected to practice are not spelled out in the church, some people might miss them.

Gay's argument does have some weaknesses. His narrative of technological development focuses on capitalistic, for-profit situations, but he fails to account for non-profit work in the information sector. He writes that technological accomplishments "are not typically conceived in terms of the love of God and/or neighbor. And neither are they deployed to strengthen communities" (p. 189). My experience in the non-profit information sector has shown me many examples to the contrary, such as the development of websites aimed at helping college students to more easily access research materials without commercial profit in mind. Gay also proposes prioritizing human interactions over maximizing profits but does not consider how this would work for information sector non-profits such as libraries and archives that are often operating on a shoestring budget. Sometimes these non-profits must use rationalization strategies simply to keep the doors open. While Gay's narrative is not necessarily incorrect, it oversimplifies the situation.

Additionally, while he acknowledges that machine technologies have had some positive effects, he mostly glosses over the positive to emphasize the negative. He could have acknowledged accomplishments such as the development of database technologies that replaced older research tools such as library card catalogs and print indexes for academic journals. While the embodied experience of using those tools may be remembered with some nostalgia, I doubt many would find them worth returning to, and I cannot find a theological reason to see their replacement as problematic. Perhaps his narrative is intended as a corrective to an overly positive view of machine technology, but he again oversimplifies the situation to make his point.

Finally, while Gay could only cover so much ground in his argument, he might have strengthened it by discussing the ways in which machine technologies weaken collective human memory. As our information objects require more machine mediation to access their content, likewise the rapid rate of technological obsolescence makes it difficult to maintain that access. A book is easier to access and preserve over

time than is a VHS tape or a digital file stored on a floppy disk. Digital files require transfer to newer formats as the older ones become obsolete, and they require ongoing maintenance to avoid corruption. As more of human history and memory is reliant on machine technology for its preservation, it is in greater danger of being lost.

Overall, Gay offers the Western church a way of seeing the potential for our technologies to erode the embodied ways God has called us to live in the world, so that we might learn again to remember the ways in which the Christian tradition has celebrated physical embodiment and to see our human finitude as a gift that leads us to God rather than a problem to be overcome by our technologies. Well-documented with extensive footnotes and including author, subject, and Scripture indexes, this book is suitable for Christian academic library collections in general, but it is also highly recommended for Christian librarians desiring to think theologically about how the technologies that permeate modern librarianship affect our embodied human existence.

Reviewer

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