

Introduction

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“We can hold in our minds the enormous benefits of technological society, but we cannot so easily hold the way it may have deprived us, because technique is ourselves.”

—George Grant, “A Platitude”

What is globalization? What is technology? We cannot fully understand these phenomena by accounting for their many manifestations, by listing the impacts of globalization or different technologies. Globalization is not simply world-wide markets and technology is not simply a set of neutral tools. They are expressions of our will to master our planet. To understand these related phenomena we must accept that something essential is at stake in them, something that changes the way we understand community and that touches us directly as human beings.

The authors in this collection make an effort to understand globalization and technology through the lens of philosophy. Conventional wisdom would have us believe that others are better suited to explain globalization and technology: economists, heads of state, bureaucrats, engineers, computer programmers, biochemists, or other technical experts. Philosophy, it might be argued, offers very little in the way of practical responses to the multiple challenges of the future. For those who would say this, philosophy is an interesting, albeit useless, academic subject.

Philosophers have long recognized this criticism. Consider the amusing story about the philosopher Thales that Aristotle recounts in Book I of the *Politics* [1258b15–1259a36]. As the story goes, Thales is reproached for living in poverty because he spent his whole life engaged in ‘useless’ philosophy. To prove his critics wrong, he used his observations of the stars to predict a bumper crop of olives, bought up all the olive presses at a low price, and later rented them out at a profit. This proves, Aristotle writes, “that it is easy for philosophers to become rich if they so desire, though it is not the business which they are really about.” Philosophy is not to be judged based upon its usefulness—its ability to solve particular problems, or in this case to make money—but based upon its capacity to understand and explain the whole, hard as this may be. For us, this means understanding globalization and technology. Fortunately, the authors of the following essays have taken the time to do just this.



In the opening essay of the collection, W. R. Newell argues that technology and a new global postmodernist paradigm are “slowly corroding” the character of political community and disintegrating civic virtue and obligation, so much so that democratic civilization as we know it is threatened with extinction. He argues we are now experiencing a renewal of the tension between our yearnings for a sense of community and individual rights, and suggests that, far from being a place of stability and boredom, a globalized world will be unsteady and incendiary. Newell’s concern extends to a description of a planetary technological transformation that does not simply include the rise of new global political and economic regimes but also a new, potentially illiberal conception of human being.

Darin Barney’s essay takes a specific look at the affect of the Internet and digital technology on community. He argues that on-line virtual community is deprived of the central tenet of liberal politics: moral obligation. The relationship between virtual and real community may even be antagonistic, since the growth of digital communication contributes to the decay of real community and civil life. As in Newell’s piece, this discussion leads to a central dilemma for contemporary peoples and nations: the acceleration of individual autonomy versus a basic human need for association with others. All of the good things about overcoming divisions of geography and social standing within the virtual sphere also allow an anonymous entrance and exit from relationships. Dissatisfactions are no longer met with calls for political, legislative or social reform but with a simple click of the mouse, that severs all ties and

obligations. The problem, Barney argues, is that we have mistaken communication for community.

Bernardo Attias remarks that “left-leaning rhetorics seem to be turning up in the strangest places.” He shows how the information revolution has co-opted the language of revolutionary politics, such that we may no longer be able to speak about pathways to alternative communities. This is an important theme of the book: our attempts at dissent are inculcated by technology and globalization.

In the same vein, Tom Darby argues that the old categories and metaphors that we used to understand our world—like Left and Right—no longer work. The disorientation that results is not an uncommon occurrence in the history of civilizations, but our crisis of understanding is unique in that our world—the sphere of our knowing and making—has no limits. Our world, which is the world of technology, is self-referential, relatively autonomous, progressively sovereign, and tends toward the systemization of nature both human and non-human. Thus defined, there is nothing outside of technology against which it could be judged. Rather, technology puts forward its own standard: efficiency. For Darby, this is the basis of the new planetary justice.

Don Ihde challenges many of the views put forward in these first essays. He asks “Which kind of globalization do we want and how do we go about getting it?” He argues that as technology shapes our planet we must become aware of its unpredictable consequences. For this reason, Ihde critiques both utopian and dystopian visions of globalization as unlikely if not ridiculous. Rather than either demons that must be exorcised or the saviours for our social ills, technology and globalization are processes that need to be managed through a new kind of civil involvement.

Andrew Feenberg’s essay is a bridge between Parts one and two: community and humanity. Like Ihde, he argues that a new politics directed towards democratization can arise from within a technological order, but again, this requires that we set aside both dystopian and utopian visions of technology. Both are visions of technology from the outside, either as destructive to our humanity or as a guarantor of our happiness and freedom. We do not stand outside of technology, but this does not mean that we are committed to a rationalized social order directed only by efficiency. Resistances “inevitably arise” out of the limitations of technological systems, and motivated by a search for meaning, these resistances can affect the “future design and configuration” of our world. These resistances form the basis for a new technological politics and a new technological human being.

Whereas Part I examines the changes that technology and globalization affect upon our communities, the essays in Part II ask, “By what

standard do we judge or even notice these changes? Does something of our humanity stand outside of technology and globalization?” These essays all give differing accounts of the status of the self within technology and globalization, and of the role of philosophy in the project of self-knowledge.

As a general introduction to the philosophy of technology, Arthur Melzer’s essay is excellent. When his overview is coupled with his critique of the common approaches to technology, the urgency of the subject becomes apparent. He argues that the more we rail against technology, the more firmly we are held in its grip. Using examples from the Right, Left, and Center, he explains that critiques of technology are themselves technological. Realizing this, we must go behind these critiques and back to classical philosophy.

Trish Glazebrook’s essay is an attempt to amend the silence of philosophers of technology on the topic of globalization. She calls upon Heidegger’s teachings and extends them to ethical, political, and cross-cultural practices, showing how the logic of domination and control does not stop with the “things” of non-human nature, but includes human beings themselves.

Gilbert Germain puts forward that in threatening our given worldliness—our particular, spatial limits and our relation to objects not of our own making—technology and globalization threaten our humanity. Not only does this tendency remove the external limits that define our being, but as the outside world is brought within our immediate grasp, we cease to see technology as a mediating term: we disappear into our technology, our technology disappears into us, and both collapse into a world that we no longer see as external to ourselves.

Criticizing and reforming technology is no easy matter of recalling a humanist standard against which it can be judged. Ian Angus argues that this is so because the separation between the technical and the ethical upon which humanist evaluation rests is undercut by technology. The modern self sees the good as that which is within its power to procure, and according to this definition, the technical and the ethical are interwoven. To assert a truly humanist creed one must first understand human beings as limited beings within a given context. For us, this means understanding technology, since technology supplies the context for modern existence.

Horst Hutter calls upon Nietzsche as the thinker who most fully thought through the ambiguities and contradictions that define our technological age. Perhaps owing to this inheritance, the essay is jarring. Hutter writes that to master technology, we must first master ourselves; this means going behind the unity of the self to see what it masks—a

multiplicity of warring powers—and going forward toward the creation of a new human being.

According to Charlotte Thomas, philosophy is necessary for an adequate understanding of technology, but technology undercuts the basis for philosophical thought. In a world measured by efficiency and usefulness, philosophy seems to have no place. While she voices some hope, she sees the public currency of philosophy being devalued as we are ever more directed by the necessary and impressed by the specialist.

The book ends with a short essay by Donald Phillip Verene. For all of the talk of the self and the value of the individual, Verene argues that as functional members of technological society we are cut off from the possibility of self-knowledge. For us, the self is essentially undetermined and has a hollow core: there is nothing to know of the self, only an empty drive to mastery, and an empty standard of truth as certainty.

One of the cautions raised by many of our authors is that philosophical questions about globalization and technology are not only rare but also threatened. Philosophical thinking about the whole is crowded out to make way for specialized, instrumental rationality. Our thinking has become a tool directed toward solving the problems of the world. As a consequence, most studies of globalization and technology deal with specific problems concerning global society, economics, the environment, etc. This book aims to do something different: to understand what globalization and technology are in terms of how they affect our communities and our humanity. Though this may not directly solve the “problems” of technology or globalization, the openness to the whole that inspires these kinds of questions—the same wonder that caused Thales to contemplate the patterned changes in the heavens—may serve as a moderating influence on our mastery of the planet and ourselves, a program that would otherwise have only technological limits.