

“You Were Asking, Part 10: Technology and Humanity”, Part Two:
A Sermon for Trinity United Church (Nanaimo, B.C.)
for August 25th 2019 (Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost)
by Foster Freed

Isaiah 44: 9-20

This is the second sermon in what is a very brief—a far too brief—look at some of the implications of modern technology for human life. I hasten to emphasize that at the outset: noting, first that two sermons is far too brief for a subject this complex, but noting, as well that this is part two of a two-part series, a reminder offered with special concern for folks who were not here last Sunday. I emphasize that because the sermon you are about to hear is rather bleak, since it will be naming some of my very real concerns, not only about technologies projected for the future, but about technologies we already possess. I therefore need to remind those who were here last Sunday—and point out to those who were not—that my focus a week ago was on the many blessings that we have all received as a result of technological advances. I hope and pray that nothing I say this morning, will cause us to forget that we are debtors to those who have created in a wide range of technological fields. To put that succinctly! Any discussion of technology and humanity must surely strike a note of “gratitude”. From where I stand, that is an indispensable starting point. Nevertheless! There is another side!

Let’s start with the prophet Isaiah—Second Isaiah if we are going to be technical!—and ponder his powerful warning against idolatry. And you know: the danger here—especially in an era when researchers in the field of robotics are designing robots that are increasingly human-like in their design...

...the danger is that we can take Isaiah’s warning against idol-worship in a far too narrow way. What I am getting at, here, is my sense that it is a mistake to restrict the fear of idolatry to the narrow band of technology that involves the creation and utilization of robots or androids. Quite frankly, I think that trivializes the challenge we face, namely the challenge of “discerning” the idols we so readily worship. I believe the real challenge here, is the extent to which we can fall into the trap of worshipping technology considered as a whole, a tendency which reveals itself most tellingly when we begin with the presumption that each and every challenge facing the human race is bound to have a technological fix. And you know: it’s hard to resist falling into that trap, given the very real progress that has been made in the resolution of seemingly impossible challenges we human beings have made: resolution attained through technological wizardry. Given how much we owe to technology...given how much we owe to that marvellous marriage of science and craft...is it any wonder that we are always tempted to place it on a pedestal? Which is why...which is why it can be helpful...

...depressing but helpful...

...to pull back from our admiration every so often, in order to ponder the at-times unsettling underbelly of technological change: the “unintended consequences” so to speak, of the marvels that surround us...as well as the marvels that are “promised” for the human future. And yes: let’s begin with a handful of the marvels that are already here.

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The first such marvel is the facial recognition technology I made reference to last Sunday. At the end of the service, when I was shaking hands, I mentioned to a handful of people that the challenge for this week would be choosing which examples of disturbing technology I would name. One person snapped back: “Well, Foster: you don’t need to go any further than that example from China you used this morning!” That was a reference, for those who weren’t here or have forgotten, to an experiment conducted by a writer for Reason Magazine—a libertarian publication—who was touring China and visiting one of their larger cities: a city of nearly 5 million people. The experiment involved the police uploading his face to facial recognition software and then feeding that data to the many surveillance cameras throughout the city. Using that sophisticated technology, he was found and arrested in roughly 7 minutes. I am reminded of Lord Acton’s famous dictum: “power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” Given the propensity of even the most benign government to seek to establish control of its populace....and given how easily even the most seemingly stable of societies can find itself turning to authoritarian leaders during times of crisis, it may well be the case that it is only a matter of time before there will be tools at the disposal of most governments, that will be used to enact the sort of deadening conformity George Orwell envisioned in his masterpiece, *1984*. Not that overbearing government is likely to be the only source of conformity we face over the coming years. Indeed!

In addition to enhancing the power of government, modern technologies increasingly appear to be enhancing the power of the mob. Don’t take my use of the word “mob” in this context to represent an allusion to the “mafia”. No. What I refer to here are the “online mobs” that are an increasingly ugly side of human life in the technological age. A particularly horrific instance of the way in which technology can bring out the very worst in humanity, can be found in the awful events that unfolded earlier this month, right here in British Columbia—in Langley—in which Carson Crimini, a 14 year old boy (apparently awkward and hungry for acceptance) was lured by a group of older boys into taking a dangerous amount of drugs. As he became increasingly incoherent he was mocked by those older boys and filmed so that those films could be shared online. At the end of the episode, he was simply left there to die.

A recent article in the *National Post* poses the pertinent question. *Crimini’s death has exposed a problem. It reveals a huge gap in what we know about how kids exist in the world today. The teens involved in Crimini’s death did something cruel and they filmed it. What we don’t know is whether they did it so they could film it or whether they simply filmed something they always would have done. It’s a chicken-and-egg problem, and it gets to the core of how teenage, and even adult, lives are being lived in*

an era where everyday moments are being processed and shared and turned into content on a massive scale. Does social media make young people more likely to do cruel things, things that are more extreme than they otherwise would have done? Or are we simply seeing things now, by virtue of social media, that have been happening all along?

And yes. Similar questions must be raised concerning the online activities of those far older than the teenagers who egged Carson Cremini onto his death. I refer to what have become known as “twitter mobs”, rightly so, since—of all the social media to have emerged over the past 20 years—“Twitter” is in many ways in a class by itself. In the case of a so-called “twitter-mob”, here is what typically happens. Somebody posts something regrettable online: something foolish or offensive or both. Someone else takes note. Using “twitter” and other forms of social-media, an online mob forms to denounce the offender, for whom the consequences can be devastating: not only losing their present employment, but in some cases becoming virtually unemployable, with some online mobs going so far as to threaten to have the offender’s spouses fired from their jobs. Here again, we can take a wee bit of comfort in the thought that the only thing new technologies have accomplished is amplifying an unfortunate aspect of human life that has always been there, with or without technology. But I wonder. As one insightful New York Times article suggests: *social media is perfectly designed to manipulate our desire for approval...and I would add...our delight in expressing disapproval.*ⁱⁱ In other words: it’s not just that social media amplifies human nastiness; it’s that social-media may very well cause us to be nastier than we otherwise would be. Scary!

And no less scary—to cite a final example—is the way in which the internet in general—and twitter in particular—have diminished the place of the thoughtful exchange of ideas, especially between those in different ideological camps. Dialogue is the hallmark of a civilized political environment. But dialogue is simply not possible in the 140-character universe of twitter, in which it is far easier to trade insults than to trade ideas. In general—even if we ignore the particularly pernicious implications of Twitter—the internet (as a whole) has tended to diminish the powers of human concentration.ⁱⁱⁱ Speaking personally, I know that far more of my reading these days involves article-length rather than book-length endeavours. In part, that is certainly a function of diminished concentration as a result of being 68 years old. But in part it is most certainly a function of life-online, which has unquestionably impacted our powers of concentration. The medium may not be the message in quite the way Marshall McLuhan anticipated, but the medium has certainly diminished our capacity to hear whatever message is being transmitted. That too is a consequence of the technological revolution that has already taken place in our midst: most of it during our life-time, much of it over the past two decades!

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Far harder...far harder to characterize are the dangers posed by technologies that have been promised for the human future. Here we enter terrain that is deeply

contested between those visionaries who are fully convinced about the coming dawn of a technological revolution, one that will far exceed any humanity has yet to experience, over against those who remain somewhat skeptical. In many ways the key concept is that of the “technological singularity”...

...please note that the word “singularity” can be used in a variety of ways; if you want to learn more about the “singularity” of which I am speaking here, it is important to refer to it as the “technological singularity” so as not to confuse it with other concepts...

...the “technological singularity” basically refers to some future time...

...some futurologists argue that time will be within the life-time of some of the younger people here today....

...the “technological singularity” refers to a time when technological progress becomes unstoppable: largely because it will then be under the control not of human actors, but of technologies powered by “artificial intelligence”. In short: the singularity refers to the possibility of the arrival of a time when our technologies will have so surpassed even the “best and the brightest” of human beings, that they will no longer require our assistance in order to create the future, including the human future.^{iv}

And no: it doesn't take an especially high-IQ to imagine the most obvious danger that possibility will pose: namely that the robots we design to serve us, will turn against us. Many of you will remember the computer Hal from 2001: A Space Odyssey. Hal, in case you don't recall, decided to disobey the commands being issued by the human beings on board his space-craft, going so far as to murder members of the crew. Whether or not it would be possible to build into artificial intelligence, programmes that would prevent such devices from turning against their human creators, is one of the most hotly contested questions in the whole realm of research into artificial intelligence. My hunch is that we will never have an entirely satisfactory answer to that question, as our technologies grow increasingly sophisticated.

A more subtle problem, I believe, than the question of whether our technologies would turn against us, involves the very real challenge vis a vis our treatment of them! Many years ago I read a compelling piece, whose author argued that what we are presently witnessing the creation of a new life-form: that we were, in effect, witnessing the emergence of silicon-based life that would eventually live side-by-side with carbon-based life. Given the immensity of the leap that will need to be made in order for that to come to fruition...

...after all, while computers have become quite adept at intellectual puzzles such as chess or the Japanese game Go, it has been far trickier to programme

them with human-like emotions or human-like instincts that would guide social interaction...

...if eventually those challenges were met, and there emerged a “race” of androids who in every particular were like human beings, how would that change and challenge human self-understanding? Even if these new creatures were truly “on our side”...how intimidating would it be for us to interact on a daily basis with beings who were like us in every regard, other than the inconvenient fact that they were infinitely stronger than the most physically well-developed human and infinitely more intellectually capable than even the brightest human.

Optimists—those who believe in our technological future—argue that we will change in order to meet the challenge of living side by side with “silicon based” others. Pessimists argue that even the ongoing threat to employment prospects posed by these technologies, guarantees that we humans will find ways to sabotage technological progress once those threats get beyond a critical mass. Hard to say...although there is no reason to think that our generation of Luddites will be any more successful in stopping technological progress than previous generations of Luddites. What cannot be denied is the inevitably disruptive nature of all technological change. Embrace it or run from it: there can be no getting away from the opportunities and the dangers posed by the changing world of wonders we are privileged to call our home.

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This has been a far from adequate survey of some of the challenges we face. I realize that I have failed even to allude to some of the changes on the horizon as a result of genetic engineering. Putting the science-fiction possibility of “silicon-based life” to the side: what will the implications be for the future of human society, if the already growing class-divide in advanced societies is heightened by the divide between those who have the means to “conceive” designer-babies and those who do not possess those means. Would we see the advent of a time when Nietzsche’s prophecy of the coming of the “Übermensch”—“The Supermen”—becomes a reality? And what would be the relationship between these genetically-modified/genetically-engineered super-humans be...and mere mortals such as you and I? In some ways that’s a possibility no less chilling than that of malevolent androids treating us as second-class citizens.

And boy is it tempting to dream up all of the laws that someone/somewhere ought to be legislating to protect us from these dangers...just as it is tempting to jump on board with the more optimistic of the futurologists to presume that none of these problematic scenarios will ever play out. Call me a skeptic...but my gut tells me (more to the point: the fallenness of our world tells me) that there is good reason to presume that (a) there will be some unhappy consequences to go with our new technologies and (b) that there may not be a legislative quick-fix to the challenges we will face. Indeed: if we imagine that passing laws will do anything other than drive scientists and technicians “under-ground”, then we are likely kidding ourselves! All of which...

All of which puts me in mind of a conversation I had with a technician...a fellow who came into my house many months ago to repair a misfiring piece of technology in my kitchen. We got chatting as he worked, and it became obvious that he was not only a skilled technician, but something of an armchair philosopher. Widely read in the area of technology—as well as social/political thought—he made the point (once he found out that I was a United Church Minister) that the churches may very well be called to play a decisive role as one of the places where true community will be found over the coming decades. And you know: even if the more glowing predictions about the technological future never take root...

...the very fact that we already live in an age in which it is easier to trade insults over the internet than it is to form meaningful bonds over the internet...

...all of that suggests that my friend was not far off the mark in terms of there being a pressing need for places where human beings will still have the opportunity to come face to face outside of a work setting. What that might entail for the church...

...what that might entail for **this** church going forward....

...is, of course, a very big topic...a topic for another day...but a topic that ought not to be swept under the rug. That there is still a hunger for purpose and meaning...and that much of our human hunger for purpose and meaning can be found in community, is something that technology is not likely to change. And so yes: here is my prayer!

May we...who have tasted the very special community that is ours through Christ and the Spirit...never be tempted to hide our light under a bushel. May we have the strength of conviction to know that we most certainly do have something priceless to offer...and may we have the courage and humility to offer it wisely and well.

Amen!

ⁱ “On the Viral Death of a B.C. Teen: What Came First, Cruel Intentions or an Addiction to Creating Content?” by Richard Warnica, *National Post* (August 23, 2019)

ⁱⁱ “How One Stupid Tweet Blew Up Justine Sacco’s Life”, *New York Times Magazine*, February 12, 2015

ⁱⁱⁱ A recent book by Kevin D. Williamson examines these issues in great detail. *The Smallest Minority: Independent Thinking in the Age of Mob Politics* (Regnery Gateway, 2019)

^{iv} I am grateful to congregation member David German for recommending a recent six-part documentary series produced by National Geographic, called “The Year Million,” which concentrates on the more “elaborate” (and optimistic) possibilities. The Wikipedia article “Technological Singularity” includes the perspective of scientists and engineers express greater skepticism vis a vis the coming “ingularity”.