

Parasites and Hosts – Humans and Technology
The Chaplain
9th October 2022

Welcome to Cambridge. Welcome to one of the finest institutions on this side of the multiverse. Welcome to Robinson! And welcome to Chapel.

Our Sunday evening talks tend to follow a different theme each term, and this term we are exploring the nature of technology. What is it? How does it affect our thinking, and acting and believing?

Several years ago I heard a report on Radio 4, lamenting the reliance of young people on their smartphones, and boldly declaring that for the vast majority, their smart phone had become an artificial limb. They could not function without it. The observation was used as evidence of just how dependent we have become on technology.

But, since at least as early as the 1950s, philosophers have noted that Technology refers not only to equipment that we try to use, but so much as a worldview. That is, an entire worldview that sees people as instruments to serve some other, unspoken, unacknowledged end. Technology, as a mindset, also refers to the way that technology uses us, how we ourselves become equipment, tools, to serve some other end.

If those European philosophers who fleshed all this out 60 years ago were to comment on smartphones today, they would not see them as prosthetic limbs for humans. They would more likely see human beings as the artificial limbs of smart phones. The level at which we discuss technology, tends often to revolve around the question of whether we can get technology intelligently in hand, but perhaps the more important question is the extent to which technology has us, in its artificially intelligent hand.

Far from thinking that technology is a tool we use, to what extent does it use us? To what extent does the tail wag the dog? We will explore this question throughout term, and from a variety of perspectives. So all I will focus on today is the question of **attention**.

I will not summarise here the wealth of research on what smart phones have done to our attention span, mostly because I haven't read any of that research. Instead, I want to ask what constitutes attention. To attend is to wait, to wait upon, to be a waiter – alert, ready to act on the basis of what you see unfolding before you. Not, how long can you stay awake during a boring lecture, nor how many pages can you read before your mind wanders into a Homer Simpson-esque thought bubble. Attention then, is perhaps best understood as the combination of alertness-to-the-world and readiness-to-act.

Alertness-to-the-world is, of course, a quality that I tend to assume I have, and those with whom I disagree do not have. But I if I say I have no sin, I deceive myself. So I will say a little about artificial intelligence, and ask to what extent my own intelligence is artificial. AI, after all, is likely to be a human trait long no less than a machine trait. Those working in AI often define intelligence as the capacity to *use action to achieve objectives*. Intelligence is action achieving objectives. My objective is to pass an exam. My action is to study and revise. My

objective is to publish in a journal. My action is to comply with the demands of that journal. My objective is to stay employed. My objective is to win grant applications. All of this is intelligence, and at Cambridge we have many highly intelligent folk. But these forms of intelligence can all be artificial. Artificial because the objectives that our actions achieve, are handed down to us, given to us. To what extent do I have the capacity to achieve objectives *of my own choosing*? The extent to which I can pay attention, the extent to which I am alert-to-the-world. Attention is, perhaps, a key means of ensuring that my intelligence is not artificial.

When my uncle lay on his deathbed with cancer thirty years ago, his last coherent words, were, 'I can't believe I'm going to die, and I've never won a single raffle ticket.' But his last conversation with me, was that he had spent his whole life as a tool. He was tool-maker, in fact. But this uneducated northerner, who never escaped the factory floor, saw himself as a tool. Not because he worked in a factory. But because his life and energy had been spent as a piece of equipment, being useful for other people. Not that he regretted his job, but in a moment of clarity, he had seen something else, something other, something greater than the world under his nose.

Technology as a worldview, is the belief that human beings are – above all – useful, to be used. And the question that begs is, for what? Used for what? It is the belief that human beings become batteries – as in the Matrix. Or resources. Human Resources! A few minutes' reflection on that phrase reveals a huge amount about the world in which that phrase is used without the batting of an eyelid.

The human being shaped by a technological worldview, will rarely lift their head from the immediate. Rarely lift their head from the world under their nose. Whether that is the relentless grind of the factory where you work, or the received orthodoxies of the humanities field where you work creatively, or the problem-solution mentality of the R and D department of the company where you work. What does it mean, to lift your eyes from the world under your nose – the daily grind.

It is tempting to encourage people to be Mindful. Mindfulness, after all, is attention training. Mindfulness helps to form habits of paying attention – but never of lifting your eyes from the immediate, never paying attention to anything other than the world under your nose. The advocates of Mindfulness boast how it helps us to pay attention to 'whatever life brings.' Or does it? As critics of the Mindfulness industry point out, the great problems that plague our world today – are themselves distractions. Economic, Ecological and societal breakdown are widely deemed the major/ultimate causes behind the mental health crisis – behind your mental health crisis. So, mindfulness focuses (or perhaps, blinkers) your attention to the sultana in your hand. To the world under your nose – never to lift your attention to the wider causes of your troubles. For one Buddhist practitioner of meditation, for all the benefits of Mindfulness, it is the religious dimension of faith in technology – belief in a world where a human's primary role is to be 'useful'.

For all the benefits of technology, it will not turn a stupid person into an intelligent person. Technology is designed to help you deal with the world under your own nose. And a human being is much more than the world under their own nose.

I wonder if there any virtue in revisiting the concept of the Luddite. In a technologized worldview, Luddite has become a term for the infidel, those opposed to progress, who long to remain in the comforts of the past. But I very much doubt that the Luddites of the 19th Century would be Luddite at all in the modern sense. In fact, when you consider some of their motives, their actions, and their beliefs, it would be perfectly plausible to cast the original Luddites as progressives, in the modern political sense.

When they smashed up factories and cotton mills and machines because of the threat to skilled workers and their livelihoods - Was it progress they opposed? Or was it dehumanisation? Was it a better, brighter future they opposed, or was it the radical intensification of the upward transfer of wealth? In the technological era, the Luddite might well be the true atheist, rejecting the gods of the age, and perhaps, attempting to rid humanity of a dangerous and destructive parasite.

The contemporary luddite would not go around smashing smart phones and power stations. But, like the Prophets of Hebrew Scripture, they would be drawing our attention to something beyond our aims and objectives and goals, something beyond the world under our nose.