Thinking about Technology from a Catholic Moral Perspective

A Critical Consideration of Ten Models

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Abstract. This article explores ten models for thinking critically about technology’s place in our lives, which have been proposed in some form by various modern philosophers and theologians, including Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI. The author first provides a definition of technology and then analyzes the models. He concludes with a consideration of what he calls a moral “partnering” of man with technology and some thoughts on the role that technology plays in the mission of the Church and in her efforts to evangelize.


Technology comes in many different forms, in many different shapes, sizes, and levels of complexity. From the wheel and the printing press to the steam engine and the computer, human beings have been using technology in all areas of life—personal and social, work and play—since our beginnings. As technology has advanced, the questions about its production, use, and consequences have become more challenging.

People ask, Is technology changing the way we think, that is, the way our minds and brains work? Is technology a neutral instrument, a sinister slave-driver, or an entirely positive force? Is it affecting our relationship with God and others—friends and family, neighbors and coworkers? These and many other questions continue to spark debate about the benefits and burdens that technology brings to us and our environment.

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In this article, I explore various models for understanding modern technology. Avery Cardinal Dulles, SJ, was fond of using models to think about different aspects of the faith, such as the Church herself and divine Revelation.¹ Models can be effective heuristic devices. My aim is to see how we can apply models to help us to think critically about technology from a Catholic moral perspective, not merely a technical one.

Ten models of technology have been proposed in one form or another by relatively recent modern thinkers—even if they do not use the term “model”—ranging from Karl Marx and Noam Chomsky to George Gilder and Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI.² Some of the models are promising for helping us think philosophically and theologically about the perils and promises of technology; others are less so, although we can gain some insights from them.

Often when we think about technology, we think in terms of its dangers, such as addictions of one sort or another, exposure to bullies or predators, and threats of viruses or hacking, or we simply accept uncritically whatever is thrown at us. If everyone is using laptops and cell phones in the classroom, then it is laptops and cell phones in the classroom for learning, no questions asked. What we need is a critical consideration or discernment of technology as a human phenomenon, that is, as a product of our free and intelligent choices and actions.

Moral theologians and moral philosophers have an especially important role in this critical analysis for obvious reasons. While they often evaluate the ethics of biotechnology, they usually neglect to reflect on technology itself. Because of this, crucial questions do not get asked: How does this particular technology affect the moral character of the human person? What effects does it have on his or her freedom? How does it affect his or her family, friends, and religious faith? What consequences does it have for his or her work and leisure? These are just a few of the questions that need to be asked.

**Defining Technology**

Before turning to the models, let us briefly define what we mean by the admittedly difficult-to-define term “technology.” According to its etymology, the word is derived from two Greek words, *techne* (art, skill) and *logos* (word, discourse, rationality). “So, literally, technology means words or discourse about the way things are gained,” as the Oregon State University engineer Ken Funk has written.³ But it means

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something different than this today, Funk observes, as I think most of us would agree. We might find it hard to give an adequate definition, but echoing what US Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart said of pornography, we know it when we see it.

Different dictionaries give different definitions of technology, but I am partial to Leon Kass’s more philosophical definition because of his linkage of technology with the project of modern science. Kass was chairman of the President’s Council on Bioethics from 2001 to 2004. According to his definition, technology “refers to the disposition rationally to order and predict and control everything feasible in order to master fortune and spontaneity, violence and wildness, and leave nothing to chance, all for human benefit.” In brief, it is “the disposition to rational mastery.”

This disposition can be either for good or for bad, of course, but it is never indifferent.

As we turn now to the models, I will describe each one and then offer some critical comment, leaving to my conclusion the attempt at a further synthesis of sorts, including some brief thoughts on the Church and her use of technology for evangelization.

Ten Models for Understanding Technology

Model 1, Technology as a Neutral Tool

Our first model and probably the most common one today might be called “technology as a neutral tool.” I viewed technology this way until reading technology and culture writer Nicholas Carr’s fascinating book The Glass Cage.

It is a popular view that is captured in the National Rifle Association’s controversial slogan “Guns don’t kill people; people kill people.” The radical American linguist Noam Chomsky, who exemplifies this understanding of technology, has said, “As far as technology itself and education is concerned, technology is basically neutral. It’s like a hammer. The hammer doesn’t care whether you use it to build a house or . . . to crush somebody’s skull, the hammer can do either.”

So we can either use technology for good or for evil, but the technology itself is devoid of any intrinsic morality. It is all about the user’s intent, as the argument goes.

Although this view has some plausibility, it is hard to argue today, with our advanced capabilities, that technology is merely a neutral instrument. Rather, technology has an inherent “logic” (not consciousness!) that forms its user as much as its user forms or “humanizes” it. In other words, technology disposes the person using it to act (or refrain from acting) in certain ways. But, as David Schindler has

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7 As Pope Francis argues in Laudato si’ (May 24, 2015), “Science and technology are not neutral; from the beginning to the end of a process, various intentions and possibilities are in play and can take on distinct shapes” (n. 114).
argued, technology is never, to borrow a term from moral theology, “premoral.”

Our complex, shiny tools may be inanimate objects, but they also animate their users in fascinating ways, for weal or woe. This is the central thesis of Carr’s *The Glass Cage*. He sees technology changing the ways we think and make choices and the ways we live and act, and not always for the good. Carr wants us to use technology to enrich our humanity, not to diminish it or take it away as some transhumanists entice us to do. This involves scrutinizing the “values” with which software engineers and others endow their machines.

Take air-conditioning as an example. Few would argue that air-conditioning has been a net negative; most would say that it has been, in fact, a great blessing. But its use has had unintended consequences on both nature and human nature. There is the environmental impact that Pope Francis points out in *Laudato si’*,

but I will mention one that I think is overlooked: weight gain. Before the days of air-conditioning, appetites tended to wane in warm summer weather. With the invention of air-conditioning, however, hot weather no longer inhibits appetites, whether in homes, businesses, shops, or cars. One can now be cool at all times (as long as one has power!), no matter the season or where one lives. And food can, of course, stay fresher in air-conditioning.

**Model 2, Technology as Savior**

Our second model is also quite common and can be labeled “technology as savior or salvation.” Although accepted by most secular humanists—for example, the founder and ex-chairman of Microsoft, Bill Gates, and such advocates of transhumanism as Google’s Ray Kurzweil—but not limited to them, this view tends
to see in technology the cure for all the ills besetting mankind, whether medical, moral, social, or environmental. In this view, technology is (or becomes) a substitute for God and our cooperation with him.\textsuperscript{12} Although technology puts at our disposal amazing tools, drugs, and gadgets for alleviating human miseries and solving many problems (some of these technology-generated), it cannot solve every problem, especially those that pertain to ethical and non-technical matters. There is no app that can form or infuse virtue! As moral theologian Germain Grisez reminds us, “In a culture pervaded by technology, even Christians often overlook the fact that they can do nothing to achieve any good except by cooperating with God, in accord with the law [i.e., the natural law] which He has written on the human heart.”\textsuperscript{13}

\textit{Model 3, Technology as Intrinsically Evil}

At the opposite end from the secularist’s unbounded faith in technology is a third model that sees technology as a sinister invention. We can cite many examples throughout history of persons and movements that reacted, sometimes violently, against particular technologies that they saw as evil, destroying traditional rural ways of living and working or despoiling nature. We identify this model as “technology as intrinsically evil.”

Our term for someone who despises technology—Luddite—comes from the early nineteenth-century English machine-breaker Ned Ludlam.\textsuperscript{14} More recently, the Harvard- and University of Michigan–educated mathematician Ted Kaczynski, the “Unabomber,” was himself a brilliant but murderous anti-technology fanatic who, paradoxically, used technology to try to defeat technology. Kaczynski was dubbed a “neo-Luddite” by the FBI.\textsuperscript{15}

The French Christian anarchist philosopher-theologian, Jacques Ellul—whose work, interestingly, Kaczynski had read—would best be identified with this model, as he was a vehement critic of the dehumanizing aspects of technology, with its all-consuming concern for efficiency as the \textit{summum bonum}.\textsuperscript{16} But it is important to note that his view of technology was not in fact all negative: he wanted to rid humanity only of that technology that would enslave us, and he did not advocate using violence in service of that goal.

Of course, hatred of technology is contrary to the experience of many that technology is not in truth a kind of conscious, evil genius out to harm human persons


\textsuperscript{13} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{14} See Carr, \textit{Glass Cage}, 22–23.


and their communities. It is contrary to reason and, I would argue, the Catholic faith, to think that all technology is inherently bad and can never be used to further truly human and humane purposes and that therefore we must rid ourselves of it. The creative energy of the human intellect can give birth to wonderful inventions that are fully in accord with our true, integral good. The natural moral law, I would argue, is that moral methodology that can best assist us in knowing how to use our technology virtuously and thus achieve more than simply technical training.\(^{17}\)

**Model 4, Technology as Ambiguous Instrument**

One corrective to thinking of technology in such a negative light, or even rejecting it *in toto*, is the thought of Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI.\(^{18}\) His balanced reflections bring us to a fourth model, “technology as ambiguous instrument.” As Benedict XVI puts it in his 2009 social encyclical, *Caritas in veritate*, “Technological development can give rise to the idea that technology is self-sufficient when too much attention is given to the ‘how’ questions, and not enough to the many ‘why’ questions underlying human activity. For this reason technology can appear ambivalent.” He continues, “Produced through human creativity as a tool of personal freedom, technology can be understood as a manifestation of absolute freedom, the freedom that seeks to prescind from the limits inherent in things.”\(^{19}\)

While rightly warning us against a Promethean attitude, however, Benedict XVI affirms the good that technology has brought about; he in no way rejects it. “Technology—it is worth emphasizing—is a profoundly human reality, linked to the autonomy and freedom of man. In technology we express and confirm the hegemony of the spirit over matter.”\(^{20}\) Using an arresting phrase, Benedict XVI says, “Technology is never merely technology. It reveals man and his aspirations towards development, it expresses the inner tension that impels him gradually to overcome material limitations. Technology, in this sense, is a response to God’s command to till and to keep the land.”\(^{21}\) When used rightly, technology can thus be seen as an extension of our intellect and body, which we *humanize* to work in harmony with our true goods and true ends—such as life and health, knowledge, friendship, and work.

But Benedict XVI is also aware of the great abuses that occur in our use of technology, as when biotechnology is used as an expression of hubris and the will to power.\(^{22}\) Hence, we must steer ourselves in the direction of a virtuous use of our freedom. “But human freedom is authentic only when it responds to the fascination of technology with decisions that are the fruit of moral responsibility. Hence our


\(^{18}\) See, for example, his encyclical *Caritas in veritate* (June 29, 2009), nn. 14, 68–77.

\(^{19}\) Ibid., n. 70. See also John Paul II, *Evangelium vitae* (March 25, 1995), n. 22.

\(^{20}\) Benedict XVI, *Caritas in veritate*, n. 69.

\(^{21}\) Ibid., original emphasis.

\(^{22}\) See ibid., nn. 74–75. As John Paul II insists in *Evangelium vitae*, “Respect for life requires that science and technology should always be at the service of man and his integral development” (n. 81).
pressing need for formation in an ethically responsible use of technology. Moving beyond the fascination that technology exerts, we must reappropriate the true meaning of freedom, which is not an intoxication with total autonomy, but a response to the call of being, beginning with our own personal being.”\textsuperscript{23} Ontology before technology and morals before machines, we might say!

\section*{Model 5, Technology Subordinated to Ethics}

Close to the perspective of Benedict XVI is that of his predecessor, Pope St. John Paul II. John Paul II argued for a model of technology that can best be described as “technology subordinated to ethics.” In his programmatic first encyclical, \textit{Redemptor hominis}, John Paul II said, “The essential meaning of [the] ‘kingship’ and ‘dominion’ of man [i.e., the \textit{munus regale} of Christ himself found in Vatican Council II’s teaching] over the visible world, which the Creator himself gave man for his task, consists in the priority of ethics over technology, in the primacy of the person over things, and in the superiority of spirit over matter.”\textsuperscript{24}

This formula is not so much an ethical norm as it is a moral principle for directing and orienting the human person to think rightly about technology and both its products and effects—in the area of work, for example, where we apply technology to our environment in order to exercise our divinely appointed vocation of stewardship.\textsuperscript{25} Technology, for John Paul II, is alienating only when it trumps ethics.\textsuperscript{26} When that happens, we lose the dignity of the person and his or her moral conscience—or, as John Paul II would say, the dignity of the person is eclipsed. We also end up fearing technology as an enemy. The person then comes to look much like the factory worker played by Charlie Chaplin’s character in his 1936 film \textit{Modern Times}, who literally becomes a cog in the machine.\textsuperscript{27}

\begin{itemize}
\item[\textsuperscript{23}] Benedict XVI, \textit{Caritas in veritate}, n. 70, original emphasis.
\item[\textsuperscript{24}] John Paul II, \textit{Redemptor Hominis} (March 4, 1979), n. 16. Fourteen years later, John Paul II reminded us of technology’s important but subordinate role in the very first paragraph of his encyclical \textit{Veritatis splendor} (August 6, 1993): “The development of science and technology, this splendid testimony of the human capacity for understanding and for perseverance, does not free humanity from the obligation to ask the ultimate religious questions. Rather, it spurs us on to face the most painful and decisive of struggles, those of the heart and of the moral conscience” (n. 1).
\item[\textsuperscript{25}] See Lorenzo Albacete, “Human Dominion over Creation: A Priestly Act According to the Vision of John Paul II” (STD diss., Pontifical University of St. Thomas Aquinas, Rome, 1983), 32–35. The late Msgr. Albacete was both a theologian and a physicist who was an expert on the thought of John Paul II.
\item[\textsuperscript{26}] Ibid., 34.
\item[\textsuperscript{27}] For seven summers, from 1980 through 1986, I worked in the paint factory in Cleveland, Ohio, where my father was the chief chemist. Doing everything from monotonous line work to making paint on a loud, hot, and dusty platform, I learned how alienating factory work can be. But I also learned the value of hard work, perseverance, punctuality, and manual labor.
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Model 6, Technology as a Liberating Force

“Technology as a product of human creativity and a liberating force” is another model, our sixth, which is still prevalent despite our fears about the ominous role that technology has come to play in our lives—from weapons of mass destruction to cyberattacks—on a scale never actualized or fully imagined before. George Gilder, the economist and technology futurist, whose writings celebrate technological innovation, exemplifies this enthusiastic view of technology, although he is not blind to technology’s darker side.28 We can also call his view of technology the “information theory” model. Gilder is not so much a techno-utopian (as he is frequently described) as he is a thinker who emphasizes the role of the human spirit in technological discovery, that is, “mind over matter.”29 Gilder can celebrate technology because he celebrates the creative power of the human mind.

For instance, Gilder has written of information theory as a science that “establishes the supremacy of the entrepreneur because it appreciates the powerful connection between destruction and what [the late economist and political scientist Joseph] Shumpeter described as ‘creative destruction,’ between chaos and creativity.”30 Gilder speaks of how the axioms of information theory “come from the minds of creators endowed with freedom of choice.”31 In Knowledge and Power, Gilder uses the word “mind” seventy-six times, “freedom” thirty-six times, “choice” twenty-nine times, and “virtue” (not always in a moral sense) nine times. Gilder uses these terms in a way that is, I believe, harmonious or at least compatible with a Christian anthropology.

Model 7, Technology as a Gift of the Holy Spirit

The seventh model provides an explicitly Christian way of thinking critically about technology. One prominent proponent of the “technology as a gift of the Holy Spirit” model is the late Dominican Thomist Benedict Ashley. Ashley’s Theologies of the Body32 argued for an understanding of science and technology that would see them as God’s gift to humanity as well as products of human creativity. But they are a gift that we have, alas, often squandered and used for sinful pursuits instead of for service to God and neighbor.

Ashley can, of course, point to Vatican Council II’s Gaudium et spes for this positive view of technology as an instrument of humanity’s authentic development: “When man develops the earth by the work of his hands or with the aid of technology, in order that it might bear fruit and become a dwelling worthy of the whole human family, and when he consciously takes part in the life of social groups, he

30 Ibid., 30.
31 Ibid., 28.
carries out the design of God manifested at the beginning of time, that he should subdue the earth, perfect creation and develop himself. At the same time he obeys the commandment of Christ that he place himself at the service of his brethren.”

According to Ashley, we have the technology to overcome many problems but lack the moral and spiritual will to do it. Instead, many innovate in such areas as pornography, choosing to pursue, and help others pursue, sexual pleasure apart from its true ends and morally good means. Ashley developed his views on technology in subsequent articles such as “Dominion or Stewardship?” (1992) and “Truth and Technology” (1993), the latter engaging the thought of the philosopher Martin Heidegger. In the former, he argued that our use of technology “must be moderated by the principle that human dominion is a stewardship of God’s gifts.”

Model 8, Technology as a Substitute for Virtue

Yves Simon, the Catholic French philosopher of the mid-twentieth century, who also had a scientific background, was, like his student, Father Ashley, not opposed to technology, but he saw how prevalent the notion was of “technology as a substitute for virtue.” As Simon argued in his classic 1951 book, The Philosophy of Democratic Government, a “rationalism born of technological pride hates human liberty both on account of its excellence and its wretchedness.”

Explaining Simon’s understanding of technology, the philosopher John Hittinger adds, “The experts focus on new techniques and knowledge to control behavior, but must come to grief against human freedom and the contingency of human affairs.” The technical expert says, “Just pop this pill to control your appetite or undergo bariatric surgery rather than develop the virtue of temperance.”

But virtue—especially prudence (practical wisdom) and temperance (moderation)—is absolutely essential, despite the fact that we are unaccustomed to speaking of virtue and technology in the same sentence. As Hittinger notes,

Right use is a matter for prudence, not science. Knowledge and art may be ignored at the time of action. But there is a form of knowledge that would prove most beneficial to the human use of technology. Technical energy should be devoted toward genuine human good: hence, there is a need for a “sound knowledge of human finalities.” This knowledge is difficult to obtain, but with it men would be willing to serve nobler ways of life. This is the key to an ethics of technology. The older view of techne, as articulated by Aristotle, is that art imitates and cooperates with nature; it is enfolded within the finalities of

33 Vatican Council II, Gaudium et spes (December 7, 1965), n. 57.
35 Yves R. Simon, Philosophy of Democratic Government (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 278. Simon discusses the “effects of technology which seem to be of particular relevance for the theory of democratic government . . . under six headings: time, nature, life, reason, labor, leadership” (274).
nature. Simon is very much aware of the character of modern science as non-teleological and its subsequent technology as oblivious to finality.37

Model 9, Technology as Slave Master and Emancipator

Karl Marx gives us our ninth model of technology, “technology as both slave master and emancipator.” According to the economist and social philosopher Thomas Sowell, Marx sees ongoing technological advances pushed by the capitalists as a way for them to increase profits in the short term, even though these extra profits would be used up as other companies were compelled to copy them and lower prices in order to stay in business.38

But Marx is also conflicted about technology, seeing it not only as leading to a form of slavery for workers but also as providing a liberating force in their lives.39 In the end, for Marx, what really matters is who is in control of the technology: if the proletariat, that is good; if the capitalists, that is bad. The brilliant electrical engineer and socialist Charles Proteus Steinmetz shared a similar view, although without the apprehension: “He believed that through automation in factories and in our personal lives (appliances) that we could eliminate the need for ‘serfs’ doing manual labor and that governments or companies could share the profits gained from automation to support the freed ‘slaves’ of feudal systems.”40 Quite an optimistic view of technology and human nature!

Model 10, Technology as Evolutionary Artifact

“Technology as evolutionary artifact” is our final model. Gilder, who argues against this view, nevertheless outlines its central theses well in his book Knowledge and Power, and he summarizes it succinctly: according to this view, “technology is an independent actor that emerges from the process of biological evolution.”41 Gilder’s criticism of this view, and it is one that I share, reflects his “mind over matter” approach to economics and technology: “Separating machines from material evolution is the human mind and consciousness—the capacity to surprise. The attempt to reduce human creativity and technology to Darwinian determinism yields virtually no insights.”42

So, once again, we see that technology is not some autonomous force, even if it is not simply neutral. It is not the artificial intelligence of HAL 9000, the fictional computer with a mind of its own in Stanley Kubrick’s 1968 film, 2001: A Space

37 Ibid. 39–40, emphasis added.
39 See Carr, Glass Cage, 23–24.
42 Ibid.
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However powerful and “intelligent” and “moral” our computers, in the end they are only as powerful and intelligent and moral as their programmers.43

A Moral “Partnering” with Technology

As we think about the large role that technology plays in our lives on so many different levels, I suggest we draw from and develop further Pope St. John Paul II’s theology of the body to help us think about man and his relationship to technology in all its facets. This “theology of technology” would help us think critically about the relationship, including its moral implications, between human beings and our machines and how our bodies relate to those machines in ever more intimate and intricate ways.44 For many of us today, our gadgets—our smartphones especially—are virtually extensions of our own bodies, our own personalities. Experimental products like Google Glass suggest that we will become even more closely connected to our machines over time.45

But as John Paul II observed more than thirty years ago, we are the sons and daughters of an age in which the “integral vision” of the human person as a body–soul composite is “rejected and replaced” by partial or reductionist accounts. As a result, each of us becomes “more an object of certain technologies than the responsible subject of his own action.”46 John Paul II’s personalistic norm can be of great service in helping us hold to the proper order of the human person as subject and technology as object.47 To adapt this master ethical norm for our reflections on technology, we can formulate it this way: We should always treat persons as ends and treat technology as means. This is another way of affirming the priority of ethics over technology, of persons over things.

Some of our technological developments should be gladly welcomed as beneficial as well as morally good. We could give numerous examples. One is the research that helps wounded war veterans use robotic arms and legs, including recent advances that allow them to move the limbs simply by “willing,” or thinking about, the movement. In this case, technology works to restore nature in some fashion. The


44 See Carr, Glass Cage, chap. 9, “The Love That Lays the Swale in Rows” (211–224). I should add that it is refreshing to see that a technology writer like Carr is not, as many are, an anthropological dualist. See, for example, his discussion of what is called “embodied cognition” (147–152). Unfortunately, Carr seems to accept contemporary neuroscience’s false idea that we think with our brains.


goal is not to enhance, supplement, or even really correct it, but to return a person to something like normal functioning. Here technology, the fruit of human intellect (as Gilder likes to remind us), functions as a man’s *partner* or *helper*—serving, not enslaving, him.  

Still, apart from concerns over immoral use, one of our major fears, of course, involves the possible hacking of these devices, like that seen recently with the hacking of Fiat Chrysler automobiles and other machines.  

Even medical devices are ripe for hacking. These dangers may or may not increase in the future with the rise of what has been called the Internet of Things.  

What we do not want to do is fall into the trap of what Carr calls the “degeneration effect,” that is, the erosion of skills and knowledge as a result of (over)reliance on automation. But the dependency on technology, coupled with its misuse, can lead also to a *moral* degeneration. We do not want to be “degenerates” in the moral sense of that term either.

When faced with the digital equivalent of an avalanche—an avalanche of *information*—we need not only true knowledge and reliable information, but the ability to “make true moral judgments and good moral choices,” as the late moral theologian William E. May liked to say. For this, we need the natural law and the cardinal virtues to enable us to navigate the information, as well as to use all forms of technology. We also need ascetical practices. Sometimes, for instance, we need to abstain from our gadgets and social media for a while. But we should also try bringing these ascetical practices to the various media themselves, for example, by trying to bring a form of silence *to* the Internet, *to* Facebook and Twitter, and so on. What might that look like? An organization might announce during Holy Week, for example, that it will cease posting to its Twitter account.

Finally, while I want to affirm with Ashley that technology is a gift from the Creator God, we can indeed learn much about its nature from its many secular creators, just as they could profit from a dialogue over ethics and anthropology with Christian

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48 For this to happen, software programmers and other technology experts will have to design our machines in such a way that they function in terms of what Carr calls “human-centered automation” rather than “technology-centered automation,” or “human-first automation” rather than “technology-first automation.” See Carr, *Glass Cage*, chap. 7, “Automation for the People” (153–176). It is an understatement to say that there is no guarantee that this will happen!


and Jewish thinkers. While both Apple’s Steve Jobs and Catholic television’s Mother Angelica got their starts in garages(!), they used their gifts for different purposes: one to spread a gospel of technological innovation, the other to spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We must ask ourselves, then, How will we use technology? To do God’s will and further the aims of his kingdom or to do our own will and simply further the aims of our secular world?

At the same time, when we speak of the New Evangelization, we are not speaking simply of the Catholic Church and her members using the latest technology or having a presence online. The Church and the faithful must always approach technology with a critical eye, judging which technology best suits their evangelical mission and then asking how best to make use of it. For the Church, the telos of technology must be the encounter with Christ and the other.54

As the Council Fathers of Vatican II cautioned in n. 57 of Gaudium et spes, in the very same paragraph that they extol the blessings of technology,

Indeed today’s progress in science and technology can foster a certain exclusive emphasis on observable data, and an agnosticism about everything else. For the methods of investigation which these sciences use can be wrongly considered as the supreme rule of seeking the whole truth. By virtue of their methods these sciences cannot penetrate to the intimate notion of things. Indeed the danger is present that man, confiding too much in the discoveries of today, may think that he is sufficient unto himself and no longer seek the higher things.55

So Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI is right: technology is ambiguous and therefore we are ambivalent about it. What is not in doubt is the fact that we will continue to be of two minds about technology and its role in our lives, even as we continue to rely on it more and more, whether we want to or not. After all, the technologists will make sure that there is plenty of technology, both simple and sophisticated, for us to rely on.

54 In this regard, see Pope Francis’s provocative reflections on technology in Laudato si’, especially parts I and II of chap. 3; see in particular n. 112.
55 Today, the attitude that sees science as the supreme rule for truth seeking is often called scientism. Although the Council expresses some of the same ambivalence about technology that Benedict XVI evinces, its view of technology is positive overall, in keeping with its generally optimistic stance toward the modern world.