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A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

Review Article

Finding Life in a World Made Strange Christian ethics in a technological age Brian Brock

Grand Rapids, MI Eerdmans, 2010 x+408pp \$34.00pb ISBN: 978-0-8028-6517-5

Once I knew a man who saw the human world, slightly mischievously, in three layers. At the top is ‘science’—our knowledge of the earth that is yet to be applied. At the bottom is ‘stuff’, that myriad of artefacts that just work: brooms, shoehorns, buckets, pens, bicycles and the like. ‘Technology’ is somewhere in the middle. It consists of devices that promise mastery and control, but which don’t quite work. When we are on the brink of some powerful achievement, these are the gizmos that frustrate us. Your smartphone’s GPS, the boardroom’s audiovisual system, or a workplace’s latest copier-printer might fit the bill.

Most of us are now surrounded by ‘stuff’, objects of human making that effectively constitute the ‘natural’ for us. The wall next to us, the screen in front of us, the clothes on our back, the layers beneath our feet separating us from the earth—these are now our dwelling. A night without them (say, under the stars) is novel, frightening or strange. The stuff we’ve made now in a sense ‘makes’ us, because it has become so elementary to how we inhabit our lives. Indeed our stuff has become so primal that to think theologically about it usually defies us. We might celebrate our making, for we are in the image of a Creator. We might watch how it furthers or diminishes good ends, such as health or relationships. We might fret about whether a new technology is ‘too’ something: too ‘big’, too ‘powerful’, too ‘unnatural’. But these kinds of assessments inevitably dwindle to insignificance, because new technology eventually seems to blend into the matrix of current technology to which we must return from our cogitations if we are to live. After reading this article you might use a kettle, go home on a motorway and sleep in a bed, each of which was once unthinkable. How can we even begin to evaluate such a life? Indeed, who that is embedded in it would want to?

The quick tripartite schema of science, technology and stuff is an intuitively deployed taxonomy. We do like to imagine science as a pure kind of knowing.

We like to accept ‘stuff’ as a given. We try to bracket newish artefacts and procedures as ‘technology’, a class that requires a special kind of scrutiny that is no longer needed once it graduates to become stuff. (When was the last time you thought theologically about your telephone?)

In 2003 Honda commissioned what became an astonishing advertisement, ‘Cog’. I will borrow another observer’s neat summary:

The spot begins with a ball bearing that nudges forward, tapping another rolling part into a cog and setting off an incredibly elaborate, Rube Goldberg-like contraption—or interlocked series of contraptions—spread across a long room and built from various parts of a Honda Accord. At one point, for instance, just enough oil is spilled from a can to tilt a piece of glass and roll some ball bearings, whose weight lifts the battery, which sparks the fan, which spurts forth a few feet to bump the muffler forward a little, which—OK, you get the idea. In the end, the key is punched to close the windows on a fully assembled Accord, and an announcer says (somewhat smugly), ‘Isn’t it nice when things just *work*?’¹

‘Cog’ is beautiful and seductive, evoking the kind of awe that that a medieval person might have felt, say, at a holy relic or cathedral shine. It celebrates our technomancy (to borrow Terry Pratchett’s noun), where humans are absolute masters of tools made for our ease, and which we may pick up or put down as we please. So great is Honda’s mastery that it can graduate technology to become ‘stuff’ that ‘just works’.

But our intuitive taxonomy conceals more than it reveals. It so focusses upon the artefacts of our making that the social arrangements producing them remain a fuzzy, unacknowledged backdrop. No people are in the frame in ‘Cog’, for that would break the spell. But the advertisement required an invisible army of bodies and souls, and *six hundred and six takes*, before it ‘just worked’. Once the figure-ground relationship reverses to focus upon the makers, there is no going back: science, technology and ‘stuff’ are obviously projections of *a technological way of being human*. Made artefacts are not apart from us. If we respond to ‘Cog’ with awe and desire, and when we want new stuff, we participate in this technological way of being.

This ‘form of life’ results from a three hundred year upheaval in how we regard and arrange humanity existentially, socially and politically. Brian Brock’s *Christian Ethics in a Technological Age (CETA)* orients us to this upheaval. He unmasks our facile ways of regarding and evaluating technology. He shows that ‘technology’ is not a collection of artefacts accidental to our way of life—it has become intrinsic to how our age feels, thinks and lives. We now see the world according to a technological metaphysic that displaces theological knowledge. Brock also sketches a panorama of how Christians might function as worshippers of Christ in such an age, articulating a method in moral theology that is provisional yet expansive, and not given to easy pronouncements. What starts as a book about evaluating technology becomes a book about how to proceed morally in a technological age. Both aspects of *CETA* deserve extended attention.

The editors of *Churchman* have kindly hosted this extended review of and engagement with *CETA* because the book deserves more than the usual review space. More importantly, it touches on a constellation of themes that are not always well-handled in Christian theological reflection, which I hope to introduce here. *CETA* is not easy to read, but I hope to show that it is worth the reading investment it demands. Anyone who notices the technomancy of our age, and all who think theologically about ethics, should make an appointment with this important work. Contrary to custom, I will begin with its flaws (which may also reflect my flaws as a reader).

The author uses long chapters to explore the thought of Heidegger, George Grant and Michel Foucault, later replying to these thinkers via Augustine, Karl Barth and Bernd Wannewetsch. Each thinker is crucial to the argument, but Brock does not always utilise the findings of his lengthy analyses. This leaves some sections oddly disconnected from the book. We learn a lot about each thinker, but are not always sure why, and Brock sometimes pulls punches that he is entitled to land. (Conversely, Wendell Berry’s important contribution later in the book needed more development of the kind Brock devotes to the other thinkers, if we are to learn from Berry’s delightful manner of perception.)

The book is encyclopaedic in scope, but not in style, and so is hard to summarise. Brock refuses to be drawn into simple principles and prescriptions because he seeks for the theological ‘renewal our senses’ (as opposed to giving us a ‘method’

for moral deliberation). In doing so he revisits a constellation of concepts and themes that are rarely restated in the same turn-of-phrase. Such fecund language makes it hard to notice when we're returning to ground previously worked. Brock is so doggedly anti-reductionist that quotations from other thinkers are long, and summary statements rare. Even an illustrative section (a thought-experiment about a hypothetical ovum testing machine) is laden with new material from yet more thinkers. The book so sluices layer after layer of analysis upon us that CETA requires several readings to make traction. On first reading, nearly every page contains a nugget worth marking. But the architectonics of the book cannot make sense until later. The book will be hard for newcomers to the genre of theological ethics.

At other points the content is so expansive that we are regularly asked to accept impressions that are hard to prove. For example, Brock quotes George Grant to assert that Western society is dominated by a 'monolithic' view 'that the pursuit of technological efficiency' has become 'the chief purpose for which the community exists' (82); or that technological progress is degenerate because its primary purpose is no longer to free people from work and disease, but is 'for the investigation and conquest of the infinite spaces around us', so becoming 'progress for its own sake' (86). Elsewhere Brock contends that technology expresses sinful pride 'when we become comfortable with the denuding of others perpetrated in the name of technological method, and uncomfortable with the idea that we might be asked to forego any proposed technological remaking' (208–209). Each claim may carry some force of recognition, but many would contest them—for as we shall see, most readers' first response to *CETA* is likely to be defensive.

Except for the early introduction of the biblical artisans Bezalel and Demetrius, Brock edges his way toward the Bible rather than starting with it. Technically, this method is anti-foundational. Culturally, it will seem to some a defect. But conservative evangelical readers need to reserve negative judgment until the final results are in, when it becomes apparent that Brock clears enough cultural space to allow biblical theology more of its explanatory power, not less. His method is necessitated by his subject matter, because unwittingly we filter the Bible through a deep affection for technology. (It is also forced upon him by the hegemony of biblical studies, which demands excessive overheads but rarely arrives at any interesting moral insights.)

I should finally add that the book is quite subverted by its cover. The author's intriguing photograph of a sick baby swathed in tubes is lost in a purplish-brown murk, which with a boring title font induces a compulsion to flee from *CETA*. The publisher should be ashamed at what seems like a passive-aggressive act of sabotage. I await a more respectful reprint.

All these flaws are excused by the leaps of new awareness Brock offers. We learn to appreciate creation as gift, rather than as a 'standing reserve' of raw material that exists to provision our visions. We discover how to inhabit the goodness of a broken creation with creaturely gratitude, without committing to the kinds of perfectionisms that we imagine can better it. We find how the life of the worshipping church, with all its idiosyncrasies and necessary reconciliations, unmakes the regimented polity of a disciplinary society that efficiently arranges bodies and souls to produce techniques and machines. Brock shows what makes complexity and diversity worth our respect, rather than the homogeneity and standardization we have learnt to value in a technological age. We discover how to attend to the particular rather than the general. We find that Christian piety, consisting in worship, prayer and the reading of Scripture, is no mere technique or talisman in a technological age, but our only means to discern the true nature of our dwelling.

Brock divides the book into two Parts, 'The Attempt to Claim Christ's Dominion' and 'Seeking Christ's Concrete Claim'. The first part explodes our views of technology. The second outlines how to go about ethics as recovering technological Christians.

'The Attempt to Claim Christ's Dominion' uses Heidegger and two of his interpreters, Grant and Foucault, to outline what's wrong with the thought and praxis of technological life. According to Heidegger, technology is 'not things we make but the way we live' (32). '[W]e do not simply make technology: it is the modern Western way of *life*' (23). It is 'the metaphysics of our age' (67). Using these thinkers, Brock does not view technology from the perspective of the dangers or benefits of our artefacts. He is not in the business of objecting to various machines or technologies, but wants to notice what the habitual promotion of them has done to us and to our anthropological awareness (4).

For technology has become a secular rationality that 'assumes the practical

irrelevance of God's past and present working. Here humanity shoulders the responsibility of finding a way forward amidst a chaotic context from which a future must be secured' (23). 'The hopefulness of faith in God's future, when secularized, becomes the enemy of any vestige of the God who now (in the guise of religious traditionalism) appears to limit the action of humanity in the historical project of alleviating evil within history' (71). In other words, the long history of human making has bequeathed to us a near-divinization of human techniques.

Brock introduces the important Heideggerian concept of earth as 'standing reserve' (unfortunately using an obscure quotation from Heidegger to do so, 58–59). This turn of phrase does recur usefully throughout CETA. In this way of seeing, the earth is not ordered in a way that can satisfy us. It exists simply as raw material for humans to reorder in a better way, as we see fit. Neither Brock nor Heidegger imagines that we can relate to the earth other than as humans: we can never be truly 'objective' about what we see there. But what is before us must needs elicit our proper responsiveness to its intrinsic goodness and order (62; Brock is committed to ontological realism). Although perhaps an odd commentator to use, Rudolph Steiner put it well in 1914:

Let us start by looking quite superficially at what happens in modern technology. In the first place this is just work carried out in two stages. The first consists of destroying the interrelationships of nature: we blast out quarries and take the stone away, maltreat the forests and take the wood away, and the list could go on—in short, we get our raw materials in the first instance by smashing and breaking down the interrelationships in nature. And the second stage consists of taking what we have extracted from nature and putting it together again as a machine, according to the laws we know as natural laws....Now when we construct a machine or complex of machines out of raw material, we put certain spiritual beings into the things we construct. The structure we make is by no means spiritless. We make a habitation for other spiritual beings...²

Modern technological life proceeds from some dissatisfaction about the world; and no machine pops up on its own. Everything we make and do is marinated in some human spirit. Our compulsions to build and use them reveal our dreamscapes.

If Heidegger highlights the technological gestalt we inhabit existentially, the

twentieth-century Canadian political philosopher George Grant shows it coalesced in shared social habits. Our view of time has changed: we do not mark time as participants in a natural order, but as makers of history. The good is benchmarked not according to what we receive and might defend, but according to the intentions of our will. Freedom is not the inhabitation of our creaturely purposes, but simply the project of further unfettering the will.³ Reason is mathematized, and no longer deals in values (and technology is our way of solving mathematical problems that arise from mathematical reductionism, 46). For Grant, modern liberal polity serves and advances the cause of technological humanity. Modern liberalism legitimized ‘the totally technological society by destroying anything from before the age of progress which might inhabit its victory...[criticizing] out of the popular mind the general idea of human excellence, and yet put[ting] no barrier in the way of that particular idea of excellence which in fact determines the actions of the most powerful in our society’ (83).

This politicization (which Brock examines through the thought of Michel Foucault) can only happen because we think technology is morally neutral. So, we invest energy into it without knowing either its future or present demands upon us. ‘In essence we commit ourselves to the evaluation of technology after we have already created it’ (93). (‘If you own a machine, you are in turn owned by it and spend your time serving it.’)⁴

I am reminded of Charles Perrow’s examination of what he calls ‘normal’ or ‘system’ accidents—incomprehensible trains of events where increasing complexity increases the likelihood of unanticipated interactions of multiple failures, which cannot possibly be anticipated or comprehended even by well-trained operators. The machinery is effectively beyond (‘owns’) its designers and operators. However a miasma of wilful blindness attends the evaluation of these accidents, thus maintaining the mystique of technomancy. Perrow recounts the judgments in the journal *Nuclear Safety* on a potentially dangerous 1970 failure at a nuclear generation facility at Humboldt Bay, California. Six separate and interrelated failures occurred, yet despite a perilously near-miss, the author can airily conclude that an ‘excellent safety record...has been maintained’. Another issue of the journal considers the malfunction in a French nuclear plant of 63 valves, representing some 35% of valves tested prior to start up. The conclusion to this epic failure is simple: ‘the frequency of valve testing

will be increased, and a better method of cleaning the air used for some valve operations will be studied.⁵ Such facile conclusions usually only result in the addition of defences-in-depth; but paradoxically, more defences also increase the likelihood of complex system accidents. It is a mode of evaluation that cannot get to the organisational and human problems that bedevil complex technologies. ‘Technology...*manifests as an idiom of forgetfulness,*’ says Brock (232), because it ‘seeks frantically to accrue as much control as possible over the material conditions of communion’ while denying concomitant effects and even harms upon others.

Since our ‘artefacts embody collective judgments about what is meaningful to do or make’ (11), technological development and evaluation is inherently political. Technology names ‘not a static object, but a mode of human action into which we are born, an idiom of relation to creation and the neighbour’ (193). Hence Brock turns to Foucault who ‘tempt[s] readers to reconsider features of their own societies’, ‘throw[ing] into relief contemporary habits that are invisible because they are so close to us’ (125). Foucault makes explicit the ‘unacknowledged grammars embedded in [the] movements’ of ‘bodies in real space’: ‘what we do can speak so much louder, and differently, than what we think or say’ (102). Foucault’s analysis of technological change in prisons and punishment—beginning with the ‘Panopticon’, the dream of so arranging a prison as to see prisoners at all times (112–113)—seems oddly remote at first. But the Panopticon exemplifies ‘a secularized parody of the Christian insight that God sees all things’ (113), so that (for example) it becomes thinkable for Napoleon to arrange around himself a mechanism of state power that enables him to see more. In this emerging milieu, panoptical sight plus discipline gives a more efficient order. Foucault contends that such norms then followed in education, medicine and the military, using various kinds of examinations and drills to create ‘[t]he overwhelming homogeneity of modern society [which] is masked by its attendant tendency to emphasize specific minor distinctions between rank, prestige and pay as of ultimate significance’ (114). So an entire ‘disciplinary society’ emerges—Foucault’s term for patterns of social arrangement that we now take for granted and barely notice. In factories and offices we enclose space, analytically distribute bodies according to functional categories, and rank hierarchical relations. We keep time, and synchronize and choreograph bodies for productive efficiency (119). The emergence of the concept of privacy (125) is only needed because of this regimentation of bodies

and souls. Liberal society loves to imagine itself as free; but in it, our actions are actually ‘thoroughly scripted’ (174).

Readers might be tempted to discount all this as so much continental leftist nonsense. I have been so tempted myself. However *Mr Daisey Goes to the Apple Factory*, a monologue recently aired on U.S. radio, shockingly illustrates Foucault’s contention. Mike Daisey is a self-confessed Apple ‘fanboy’ who field-strips his MacBook as a form relaxation. But it occurs to him to go back up the line to Shenzhen, the gigantic Chinese factory city that makes these objects of his love and desire.

[W]e head down to the factory floor, industrial spaces with...30,000 workers in a single enormous space....As a creature of the First World, I expect a factory making complex electronics will have the sound of machinery, but in a place where the cost of labour is effectively zero, anything that can be made by hand is made by hand. No matter how complex your electronics are, they are assembled by thousands and thousands of tiny little fingers working in concert. And in those vast spaces, the only sound is the sound of bodies in constant, unending motion.

And it is constant. They work a Chinese hour, and a Chinese hour has 60 Chinese minutes, and a Chinese minute has 60 Chinese seconds. It’s not like our hour....This looks like nothing we’ve seen in a century. They work on the line, and the lines only move as fast as its slowest member, so each person learns how to move perfectly as quickly as possible. If they can’t do it, there are people behind them watching them. And there are cameras watching both sets of people, and people watching the cameras.

...You know, when we dream of a future where the regulations are washed away and the corporations are finally free to sail above us, you don’t have to dream about some sci-fi dystopian *Blade Runner/1984* bullsh*t. You can go to Shenzhen tomorrow. They’re making your crap that way today.

When I leave the factory, as I can feel myself being rewritten from the inside out, the way I see everything is starting to change. I keep thinking, how often do we wish more things were handmade? Oh, we talk about that all the time, don’t we? ‘I wish it was like the old days. I wish things had that human touch.’

But that's not true. There are more handmade things now than there have ever been in the history of the world. Everything is handmade. I know. I have been there. I have seen the workers laying in parts thinner than human hair. One after another after another. Everything is handmade...⁶

The aluminium case of an iPad is hand-sanded. A major *New York Times* report⁷ investigates conditions in Chengdu's and Shanghai's iPad factories, where two aluminium dust explosions have killed four workers and severely burned dozens of others. Even in normal conditions, these workers are 'recognizable by the slight aluminum sparkle in their hair and at the corners of their eyes', no matter how often they shower.

As with the response to nuclear risk, Apple has instituted a kind of industrial relations defence-in-depth. To be fair, these initiatives may be having some effect on the welfare of Chinese factory workers. But these measures elide the basic issue: that Apple is not leaving China, because '[c]ustomers want amazing new electronics delivered every year.' Despite profits last quarter of over \$13 billion, 'a radical overhaul would slow innovation'. Apple executives deploy 'a lot of rationalization', says an industry observer.

As I read this report on my iPad, I can feel myself being rewritten from the inside. The polity I inhabit has furnished me with several useful rationalizations. But if I choose defensively to deploy one (say, by magnifying the excesses of totalitarian China over Anglo-american liberalism; or by shrugging that every advanced nation goes through a sweatshop phase), I fail to notice just how much our technological polity trades in 'bodies and souls' (Rev. 18:13, NIV). We can continue to dream, as Daisey once did, that our gizmos are 'made by robots...an image in my mind that I now realize I just stole from a *Sixty Minutes* story about Japanese automotive plants.'⁸ But somewhere in my city's vast Chinese hinterland, flecks from what I hold in my hand may be lodged in someone's else's body.

Similarly, we can ignore the social impact of our own work. '[T]he deracination of the modern context makes it much easier for workers to become absorbed in the technical abstractions that sever technical tasks, and so existential pleasure, from their social and political context' (133). Napalm can be made stickier with no attention to the barbarity of its killing (134–135). Foucault shows how the

skilled manipulation of the division of labour maximises this disconnection from the social impact of work, whether ours or others, to minimize all psychological and moral scruples. ‘The real social explosive of our time [is] forgetfulness of the social character of work’ (233). Threaded throughout *CETA* is an outstanding re-envisioning of work, which unfortunately I cannot recount here.

What ultimately captures our imagination is technological spectacle, where we experience sublimity and awe. ‘Every age inherits a visual modality that deeply shapes political behaviours. Ours is technological’ (144). Our awe at technology legitimizes our liberal political economy and our resignation about its Chinese hinterland. ‘This is why it is so tempting to bypass the articulation of the aims of a new project in favour of the inarticulate persuasion of the spectacle....[T]he “inevitability of the future” will be secured in a manner that makes political discussion appear positively obscurantist’ (141).

In *CETA* Part 1, everything we take for granted threatens to give way. To glimpse technology’s false lordship feels bleakly confronting. Early responses to *CETA* have stumbled precisely here, animatedly pulling Brock back to technology’s glorious benefits. Such defensiveness confirms Brock’s thesis while simultaneously missing its point: we cannot investigate technology dispassionately, because we are all so invested in the dreams it promises to fulfil. Brock is no Luddite. He knows technology’s benefits—it saved his son Adam’s life (p. x). ‘[T]he theological task is not to renounce all modes and forms of technological rationality but to desacralize it’ (225). It will not do to laud human creativity and merely question some poor uses and bad ends of it, for *it deals in bodies and souls*. ‘These very same human skills are [arrayed] against those, like Adam, considered imperfect or nonstandard’ (p. x). That much become apparent in the shimmering dreams behind the ovum-testing machine Brock considers at the end of both Parts, which presumes some lives cannot be worth living, according to the technical canons of testing to be embedded in this machine (367).

It is one thing to mount such a penetrating critique. Brock is well aware that it is quite another matter to mount a constructive proposal from within the technological consciousness we all share. That is the task Brock sets himself in Part 2, ‘Seeking Christ’s Concrete Claim’, which sets out to propose ‘how humans caught up in the unconscious desires that sustain technological

determinism can have its hold broken and their true freedom as responsible actors restored' (169). This 'active probing of ways new life' to gain 'a foothold in a world against Christ' is both more modest, and more sweeping, than (say) planning an alternative society or legitimizing the existing one. Nor will it do simply to look for 'limits' to technology—'some imagined outer boundary beyond which our transgression threatens to upset a fragile creation.' That kind of approach 'recognizes God only as the provisioner of our self-construction, a gesture that acknowledges God while longing to escape him' (205). Rather, Brock 'aims to increase our sense of gratitude for God's care in the context of a range of technological practices' (186). His 'solutions' are not prescriptive, and rely on a different conception of moral theology than we are often used to.

Brock doesn't think that moral truths are simple 'derivations from ideas or doctrines' (5). 'I prefer not to use the language of "principles" as it encourages the mind-set that ethics is about "applying" them' (343). Brock opposes this kind of idealism because it offers a technical short-cut to moral truth. Part 1 has schooled us to see that 'technology' consists more in techniques than in artefacts. 'The problem of technology lies in its addiction to methods of thinking and perceiving; method offers itself as the only proper heuristic for perceiving all that is valuable for human life' (168). A technological society believes that everything can be solved by recourse to technique; so it follows that Brock will not offer us some kind of program or method or checklist to help us 'think theologically' about technology and then act accordingly. 'What must at all costs be avoided is trying to meet the problems raised by technological thinking using yet another technological or formalist decision-making method' (168).

Such a theological technique would too easily obscure 'hints about ways of life the gospel indicates as full of promise' (5). It would also elide an actual relationship with God in Christ, where the life of faith is 'given shape in life shared with God' (5). This 'shared with God' is not contrasted to doctrinal awareness, for the most profoundly theological sections of the book (e.g. 211–235) make it clear that doctrinal awareness, arising from God's revelation of the creation and of himself in the reconciling Christ, is integral to 'life shared with God'. His point is anti-foundational: doctrinal coherence alone cannot deliver the shape of the Christian life. This shape also arises from worship, embodied individually in practises of prayer and the exploration of Scripture, and collectively in well-constituted churches.

Part 2 of the book, then, is mainly a long and necessary excursus on how moral theology works. This pedagogy is apparent in the title of the fourth chapter, ‘Advent and the Renewal of the Senses’. After the appearance of Jesus Christ, we are eventually given by the Spirit new ways of perceiving our habitation. ‘Because God’s working is not on the surface of things, God must create in us the ability to *perceive more*....[P]erception and moral evaluation are not separate activities, but two aspects of all human interactions with the world’ (177). We can know ‘dogmatic theology’—the person of God, and God’s acts upon the creation—with clarity. The unfolding of Christian life and action is known within that context, but is ‘necessarily less comprehensive and more explorative’ because it must closely attend to the particular (174–175). On this view, ‘the problem of Christian moral theology is less that of making correct general statements about Christian behaviour, and more the process of developing the sensitivities to perceive when and how intervention is appropriate at all’ (176). Ethics is much more than ‘the discourse of “making right choices”’, for:

the gospel renders questionable beliefs or activities we never saw as products of any choice. But the gospel does not ‘answer’ our moral questions: it generates new ones. When it does, it does not necessarily direct us to the action that would constitute a proper response. Ethics as faith’s struggle with such complexities is a much more open and explorative notion, which of course includes conscious choices, but differs in scope and tenor from the activism forced on us by an ethics reduced to the act of choosing. Seeing and moral evaluation are wholly intertwined, and are separated only with great difficulty (p. 5).

‘We cannot simply think ourselves out of the contorted positions into which our technologies force us’ (22). Such statements will profoundly irritate whoever thinks that biblical imperatives direct our thinking, that acting is the upshot of thinking, and that complete freedom of choice is open to us in the absence of a biblical imperative. This view masquerades as evangelical freedom, but hides Pelagian self-justification as we are unwittingly captured by whatever surrounds us. In contrast, Brock’s approach to moral deliberation reminds me of the nuances of Old Testament ‘wisdom’, and New Testament ‘discernment’,⁹ all conducted within the saving grace of the reconciling God who never holds our complicit blindness against us.

After his treatments of Heidegger, Grant and Foucault, Brock shows how they

can assist theological enquiry. Without restating each argument here, Brock believes that several pivotal assumptions in each stance derive from the fount of Christian theology (cf. 23–24). He is able to sustain this contention because he is epistemologically anti-foundationalist: there being no view from nowhere, and after generations of Christian thought, these thinkers sometimes worked with grain of divine revelation. Therefore Brock believes that each unmasks some key aspect of technological humanity, albeit that each also needs a theological corrective. Part 2 uses Augustine to reply to Heidegger, Barth to reply to George Grant, and Bernd Wannewetsch to reply to Foucault.

Augustine unveils how humanity is invested not only with thoughts, but loves, that skew our perception of the proper order of things. The problem of technology is ‘the discernment of the proper human place within an ordered love of earthly goods and the flourishing of all creation’—from which, say, restraint may follow. ‘Augustine does not repudiate the expansion of technological skill but limits its selfish acquisition by tying it to the selflessness of service, the confession of sin, and gratitude to God. This is...an account that fundamentally reshapes the loves out of which our making grows’ (209).

But Karl Barth explicates this proper order christologically, for otherwise Augustine’s neo-Platonic conceptions of order (211–212) are too easily lent to naïve and optimistic natural laws (such as that God is a maker; so is humanity; therefore making is good). ‘To know Jesus Christ as God, Barth says, “means that the being of man *acquires a direction*, because it acquires a *destiny* and a *perspective*.” The great hope revealed in Christ’s work is thus the font of the little mundane hopes for redemption of daily life that fund ethical transformation’ (216). When Christ is raised, God establishes and declares the reconciliation of humanity to him as of cosmic significance. ‘The transformations of human beings through the processes of reconciliation are now revealed as descriptions of the particular enfleshments of the fundamental structure of reality’ (218). In this difficult sentence, Brock shows that the proper conception of order, to which our senses must become attuned, cannot come to us without participation in Christ’s work of reconciliation. In Christ we are given a glimpse of ‘how the world actually holds together...God breaks in on what we take to be common sense to reveal how our own common sense and highest aspirations hide the basic reality of the cosmos’ (218). A simple outcome follows. ‘To come to know the meaning of Christ’s birth, death, and resurrection begins with the confession

that his life is known definitively in biblical revelation. Such a confession commits the believer to an unending investigating and probing of Scripture in our concrete lives' (224).

And so the Spirit 'break[s] in and reveals to us our blindness' and the 'irreducibly particular' neighbour, who is 'obscured by our schemes, plans and mechanical manipulations' (221). Believers pray to, hope in and wait upon God in the manner of an actual relationship where the other cannot be predicted, contained or second-guessed (222). This kind of piety is no technique to control the universe or get a result. '[F]or the believer seeking to act in faith, moral deliberation is fundamentally grounded in an asking that seeks transformation of the supplicant into something not yet graspable. Prayer in faith can issue in transformation only if prayer is genuinely open to God's will being done.' Such dependent action asks 'how God can, in repeatedly breaking and remaking individuals, slowly and methodically redirect them, opening their senses to those they do not see amidst a world that has deeply shaped them to use others for their own ends' (223). God's self-humbling in Christ becomes the measure of human calling upon God, and in asking 'Lord, what shall I do?' in the Spirit, the one who prays seeks to become conformed to the addressee.

From within this christological context Brock considers human making from Noah to the Prophets (227–232; I was surprised that the first couple's pathetic technology, Genesis 3:7, did not figure here.) This story arc 'reveals the oscillation of our perception between faith and unfaith. Technology appears to offer power over social and material reality, as idols of gold and wood once did' (230). We may resist this conclusion if we focus on its disanalogies. Whereas the Baal worshipper depends upon an illusion (1 Cor. 8:4), technology relies upon the scientific observation of God-given reality. Hence it delivers techniques that do make meaningful differences, and a medical scanner seems entirely less problematic than a fertility ritual. But Brock never denies that technology is partly grounded in helpful descriptions of reality, and repeatedly accepts that its techniques can be helpful on a humanist measure. His attention is on the key analogy: that people in every age, whether the Baal worshipper or white-coated lab expert, carry the same aspirations to control the world and often the neighbour, projected by means of various practices. Defences of technology that are fixated on its artefacts are blind to the existential, social and political habits that we have all internalised. Brock's favourite trope is the contrast between

Bezalel (Exod. 35:30–33; cf. 1 Chron. 28:11–12) and Demetrius (Acts 19:24–26): ‘All building serves some lord and is assessed solely in relation to the faith it expresses’; but ‘we moderns, with our focus on ethical choices, have lost the ability to see...that our making has an intrinsic relationship to our worship’ (7). ‘The task of Christian ethics’, then, ‘is to draw attention to outcroppings of the grammar of our age in order to inquire there into the new grammar of God’s reconciling work. Such asking is undertaken as a form of active hope that God remains faithful to confront human idolatries, not least in the forums of collective worship and the boardroom’ (224).

Technology resigns us to technology’s trade in bodies and souls, whereas the gospel compels to attend to our new Lord and to particular neighbours. Inexorably then, we are returned to the political. Howard Rheingold visited Amish communities to understand their adoption of some technologies as opposed to others. He was intrigued to find a limited use of telephones, often situated in a shanty in a meadow and shared by several families. He asked, why not simply place phones in houses? The answer resided in an Amish conception of virtue, which in turn is shaped by their distinctive communal polity. ‘We don’t want to be the kind of people who will interrupt a conversation at home to answer a telephone. It’s not just how you use the technology that concerns us. We’re also concerned about what kind of person you become when you use it.’¹⁰

To discover more about this kind of political sensibility, Brock turns to the thought of (now) fellow-Aberdeen theologian Bernd Wannewetsch. The life of the church might offer some antidote to the scripted techno-polity that surrounds us. But we find no smug ecclesial ethic here: although the church ought to stand out, it consists of people within the world ‘who have in many areas not yet overcome the schemata of this world, despite their confessions of the Christ’ (241). Hence the ‘Christian response to technological life should not begin from an ideal picture of what worship and thus political life should be, but from participation in the work of reconciliation that defines the church’s life’ (254). Practices of reconciliation, communication, and discernment (255) show forth what Augustine articulated: that ‘if society is not constituted in humble union under Christ’s sacrifice, it can only become vicious because an association of love is always an association of sacrifice’ (226). This conception of political life is a far cry from the ‘freedom’ of liberal polity, a form of indifference that only enforces against oddly shifting conceptions of ‘harm to others’. ‘Obedience

that is called out of these errors is best characterized as a set of experiments in service' (235).

Brock repeatedly points to how the polity of Christian marriage teaches reconciliation in ongoing partnership with the Spirit. Marriage provides 'a fleeting but sharply focussed glimpse of the vast scope of the problem of human reconciliation', and 'in Christian marriage a couple promises fidelity before the community that represents and carries the reconciliation marriage depends upon for its endurance, and which neither spouse can manufacture out of his or her natural endowments' (181). Marriage:

trains Christians to recognize how the bodily nature of other creatures can confront us as a *verbum externum*—a divine claim that comes from beyond us, demanding the amendment of our behaviour...The attentiveness due to the spouse may demand a more lifelong commitment than is due to every neighbour we meet, but every neighbour is due the very concrete and material attentiveness and solicitude made visible by the institution of marriage. Failures of our understanding of marriage are thus especially revealing of deficient doctrines of creation, deficiencies that undermine a wide range of material relations with concrete neighbours (326).

Brock knows that recourse to marriage will be misinterpreted as mere pietism. 'Some have objected that to orient Christian ethics by way of an exemplar from interpersonal ethics renders such an ethic of no value for the negotiation of broader issues in political ethics. But the polarization...is misguided. A steady emphasis on the occasional, attentive, and spontaneous nature of Christian responsiveness between individuals is not opposed to more hard-headed institutional thinking..., but demands it' (182). At first I thought this statement to be a misprint: surely the best institutional thinking emerges to protect the needs of our intimate relationships? That is a habit of thought we have received from Reinhold Niebuhr, and Brock disagrees. The Good Samaritan uses an inn:

An inn as a meeting of economic, political and interpersonal cultures may be a better or worse place for the Good Samaritan to leave his ward. It is here that Christian ethics finds its critical force, being at every point a social ethics. A church that has developed attentiveness to its concrete neighbours becomes the conduit of the divine renewal of all society in being a divine 'pilot project'

in which the redeemed form of given societies may take shape. But it cannot do this if it splits off institutional ethics from the forums of neighbourly responsiveness between people that it must foster and against which institutions can be judged [*pace* R. Niebuhr]. A church that has learned this lesson is freed into the service of unleashing into society any insights into living in its age that may be granted it. This creative attentiveness not only takes place outside and prior to the formation of the institutions of society and so suggests the form future institutions might take, but is also at work within the institutions that already exist by seeing and hearing beyond them, and so judging and remaking their ossifications (pp. 182–183).

In other words, there are good reasons to test our institutions against what the gospel reveals about reconciliation in marriages, and in churches. ‘Our social and political system is no organism, rationality structure nor rationally functioning autonomous system. “Organism” and “system”: these are lying images. Where there is no service, there is robbery’ (192, citing Oswald Bayer).

Brock’s theological explorations of reproduction, eating, work and even blogging are beyond my scope. These sections of the book come closest to what some readers will crave as ‘practical’. (They can be found using an index that is not long, but is accurate and uncannily useful.) Even then, Brock sometimes refers us elsewhere for practical tips. Yet we are rewritten. For example: ‘the “responsible consumer” falls out of the category of consumer altogether, because consumers are by definition estranged from production....[I]nsights about and practices of responsible consuming will [include] local tactical judgments about how best to respond to the alternatives on offer. The first aim of such responses will be to develop an appreciation of food and its sources’ (358).

‘Today, what it means to confess Christ must be learned by a humanity weighed down by its divination of technique’ (379). What frustrates us, as this work closes, is that Brock is a journeyman, only a little further down the road than ourselves and beckoning us to start out. The renewal of our senses may take decades.

What does the reconciled polity I learn from Wannewetsch mean for my participation in political arrangements with our neighbours in the Chinese hinterland? I can have no idea, yet. I can only breathe a forlorn prayer of thanks

for the hand that so beautifully finished the iPad I caress. What does the hope and reconciliation Barth learns from Christ mean when I read that ‘a radical overhaul would slow innovation’? So far, only to keep listening to and learning about the queasy feeling I have when I read about it on my iPad. What does Augustine teach me about my technological awe? At least to interrogate what I am loving, next time I want the new thing. Only then can I begin to discern better responses to the previous two questions.

CETA has a prophetic task, an adjective I rarely use. Brock gestures to a technological monolith, hidden in plain sight, that enslaves even while it helps. He may still be finding his voice in addressing it, but we need to work with him. For ‘in the house of worship humanity is told that proper housing can only be continually discovered and received amidst a bountiful and sufficient creation....[A]ll human making, technological or otherwise, is a process of discovering what God gives to sustain creaturely lives’—‘a truth Christians must learn to confess from within a broken world’ (377).

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ENDNOTES

1. Rob Walker, ‘Honda’s Incredible Driving Contraption,’ Slate April 21 2003. Online: <http://www.slate.com/articles/business/ad_report_card/2003/04/hondas_incredible_driving_contraption.html>. See also Quentin Letts, ‘Lights! Camera! Retake!’ *Telegraph* (UK) April 13 2003. Online: <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/france/1427400/Lights-Camera-Retake.html>> (both accessed January 24 2012).
2. Rudolph Steiner, ‘The Nature of Technology’, lecture delivered in Dornach, Switzerland, December 28 1914. Online: <<http://images7.rsarchive.org/Lectures/19141228p02.html>> (accessed January 26, 2012). Reproduced in *Art As Seen in the Light of Mystery Wisdom* (Rudolf Steiner Press, London, 1996).
3. Elsewhere Oliver O’Donovan names these postures ‘historicism’ and ‘voluntarism’. Oliver M.T. O’Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order: An Outline for Evangelical Ethics* (Leicester: Apollos, 1994), 16, 58–75 and passim.
4. Marion Zimmer Bradley, *The Forbidden Tower* (New York: Daw Books, 1977), 48. The book is a work of science fiction. The quotation is a judgment made by the character Damon Ridenow, a spokesman for an alien feudal society as he reflects

upon the human culture coming to his planet.

5. Charles Perrow, *Normal Accidents: Living with High-Risk Technologies* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 46-47.
6. Mike Daisey, 'Mr. Daisey and the Apple Factory,' aired on "This American Life", WBEZ Chicago 6 January 2012, 26:19–31:40. Online: <http://www.thisamericanlife.org/play_full.php?play=454&act=1> (accessed January 26 2012).
7. Charles Duhigg, David Barboza and Gu Huini, 'In China, Human Costs Are Built Into an iPad,' *New York Times*, January 25, 2012. Online: <<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/26/business/economy-apples-ipad-and-the-human-costs-for-workers-in-china.html>> (accessed January 26 2012).
8. Daisey, 7:34.
9. For more on Brock's general approach, see Brian Brock, *Singing the Ethos of God: On the Place of Christian Ethics in Scripture* (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 2007). For my own attempt to comprehend NT 'discernment', see Andrew J. B. Cameron, *Joined-up life: a Christian account of how ethics works* (Nottingham: IVP, 2011), 312–317.
10. Howard Rheingold, 'Look Who's Talking,' *Wired Magazine* Issue 7.01, 1999, Online: <http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/7.01/amish_pr.html> (accessed January 13, 2012).