Technology: The Modern Messiah

By Chris Dunn

In our modern era, technology is the driving force behind the bulk of our actions. In fact, it would be unheard of if we went for even the shortest of time without something new. We regard this state of perpetual invention as a constant progression towards the "better." But, what exactly is this “better” and what makes it better than the state we are in now? A principle difference between our ancient ancestors and us is the quantity and quality of comforts/pleasures which we possess. Thus, it can be concluded that the “better” is regarded as better because comfort and pleasure will increase.

Do we ever stop to question whether or not technology is necessarily bringing us toward some vague vision of utopia? A principle shortcoming of technology is its inescapableness. A good example is the gun. It is nearly impossible for the whole of humanity to live without the gun. If a country used some other means of defense, such as the sword, they would be overrun. What if the entire world decided to do without the gun and we collectively destroyed all guns. This would not stop the use of it either, because the knowledge to create guns still exists. Inevitably, someone would build an army of gun bearing soldiers who could easily overrun the world because the rest of humanity would have no effective means to defend itself. Thus, not only would guns have to be destroyed, but also the knowledge to create them. However, the steps necessary to destroy this knowledge are manically impossible. First, every document about most any weapon, the whole of chemistry, physics, metalworking, engineering, most of history, etc. would have to be destroyed. Then, every human being with the faintest knowledge of how guns work would have to be destroyed. The point being that, as with the gun, once knowledge is obtained and utilized for technology, it cannot be undone.

In the case of the gun, competition for power is what binds us to technology. We are bound to some technologies by our desire and dependence on comfort. I and all of my fellow kin would be hard pressed to return to the days of no refrigeration. For temperature control and food preservation are extremely comfortable in contrast to the lack thereof. Thus, humankind is, mentally, and more than likely, physically, incapable of living without comfortable, yet oftentimes completely unnecessary technology. We are also ingrained with the mindset that our overall situation should improve as time goes on. In other words, we expect our comforts to increase. As they do, we become less and less capable of living without our technology. Like the gun and refrigeration, most all technology, once created or discovered is impossible to eliminate. Thus, humanity is irreversibly dependent on technology. Our dependence is now moving into disturbing areas, such as nuclear weapons and bio-medicine. However, we undauntedly press on in our development of technology. Why? Because we believe that technology can solve all problems. Opening a door is hard, so we invented automatic doors. Life is painful, so we
invented valium. But, can technology solve the problem of itself?

Even the humanities have bought into the technological mindset. For technology has so encompassed every aspect of our lives that it is no longer necessarily focused on creating new material gadgets, but rather has evolved into a mindset where all of our pursuits are focused on the absolution of problems. It is up to the artist, philosopher, historian, etc. to come up with new ideas and ways to understand our existence. The products of the humanities are simply technologies of the mind rather than purely utilitarian devices. We believe that somewhere in our humanitarian pursuits, an idea will emerge that helps the project of self-created salvation. For, in the end, that is what modern society has reduced our lives to.

Perhaps we believe that a painless, perfect existence can be created. If we were able to cure death and make all of life pleasurable, then we could have heaven on earth. This must be the great project we are incessantly working towards. Why are the richest people in America those who are on the forefront of the technology which makes our lives easier and more pleasurable? Why else would we invest practically all of our time and resources into coming up with new things? We toil all day producing new technologies, or providing some service to those who do. We come home and watch our TV’s allowing us to “relax” so we can most efficiently create technology the next day.

Television’s main purpose is to advertise the newest technology we are supposed to buy. We have coated our whole world with advertisements and massive billboards celebrating our progression towards redemption. Our holidays, particularly Christmas, are for the primary purpose of buying and selling technology. Why are we supposed to buy the newest technologies? First, they appear to make our lives easier, and secondly they fuel the pockets of the technology makers, thus ensuring new technologies will continue to be developed. Technology has completely consumed our lives. And for what? The world has replaced the role of God in Judeo-Christianity with technology--the messiah. The messiah is what saves mankind from its impending destruction and is the absolute object of dedication from its followers. In the eyes of modern society, technology is the Messianic fulfillment.

Currently, our self-imposed enslavement to the unending creation of new technology is rotting our souls. We care not for who or what we are, but only for the newest gizmo or idea. Much as the technology we value so highly at one moment will be outdated garbage in the next, do we treat our lives and each other -- as tools to be utilized in the progression toward the unknown “better”. It is not necessarily the material technology itself which is detrimental; rather it is our attitude towards it and to ourselves. If we placed more value in self knowledge and truth than in technology and a purely pragmatic existence, we may find there is some hope yet.

If you have any questions, criticisms, or comments, please contact either Chris Dunn or Dr. Nordenhaug. Anyone interested in writing a brief article for The Philosopher’s Stone, please contact either of us (it doesn’t have to be good, however it does have to be thoughtful).

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“As long as technology was represented exclusively by the machine, it was possible to speak of “man and the machine.” The machine remained an external object, and man (though significantly influenced by it in his professional, private, and psychic life) remained none the less independent. He was in a position to assert himself apart from the machine; he was able to adopt a position with respect to it.

But when technique enters into every area of life, including the human, it ceases to be external to man and becomes his very substance. It is no longer face to face with man but is integrated with him, and it progressively absorbs him. In this respect, technique is radically different from the machine.” – Jacques Ellul, The Technological Society (1964)