

BOOK REVIEW

Modern Technology and the Human Future: A Christian Appraisal

Gay, Craig M. (2018). *Modern Technology and the Human Future: A Christian Appraisal*. IVP Academic. 254 pages.

In this well-researched volume, Dr. Craig Gay of Regent College admonishes Christians to remember and proclaim our embodied faith in the use of modern technology. Gay's book is structured around five meaty chapters, supporting of a simple if counter-cultural thesis: The technology that empowers us to become more of ourselves can also make us become *less*. We are readily diminished as persons by that which purports to deliver "more" and "better," "faster" and "easier."

Gay first seeks to convince the reader that modern technology threatens to reduce the ordinary embodied human being. His point is that we have become so tech-dependent that it's hard for us to see the human cost of our supposed progress. While pre-modern advances (e.g., phonetic literacy), positively impacted human consciousness, modern technology has a dehumanizing impact whereby things get easier at the cost of becoming less real. Gay points to the decline in human relationships and lower levels of civic engagement. As we've known since *Bowling Alone* (Robert Putnam, 2001), we have become, as a society, increasingly disconnected from one another. Volunteerism and community involvement have all dropped significantly. Today, the widespread use of tablets, iPhones, and online everything is correlated with an increasing percentage of Americans reporting having fewer real-life friendships. Modern technology, Gay argues, is designed to perform flawlessly with minimal need for skilled human input, thereby dehumanizing us. Gay quotes other writers who have noticed that online relationships' ease and low commitment level weaken adults from the inevitable friction that accompanies actual embodied interactions.

Gay then argues that shifting modern technology in a more human direction will require great effort because of the powerful economic forces that drive innovation in a people-replacing direction. The pace of such innovation has greatly increased since the 18th century. Gay argues that a change in mindset around that time made possible a string of technical advances that radically changed the lives of everyday people. This change of mindset was towards a "mechanical world-picture." Science "came to conceive of nature as an elaborate mechanism, a kind of intricate machine." (Gay, p. 62)

Around this time, it also became morally acceptable to profit from innovation. Gay attributes this shift to the influence of the Protestant Reformation, which affirmed the goodness of work and a sense that "secular" callings were just as legitimate as "sacred" ones. "Believers were all but mandated to improve the material conditions of life by inventing new devices." If large profits were thereby required, this was seen as God's blessing. Maximizing one's commercial success was regarded as faithful stewardship. Today, a close connection between technology and capitalism helps explain the restless pace of development. It dovetails with what Charles Taylor called "exclusive humanism," an ethos that "entertains no final human purposes beyond those of material flourishing."

From this foundation, Gay considers how "we arrived at the point where we can imagine no way of being-in-the-world beyond that of relentless engineering." We got here by viewing nature mechanistically, as a system that "differs from automatic machine technology in scale and intricacy but not in kind." From this perspective, ordinary embodied human existence is thought of not as something to be nurtured but "as a series of limitations...to be overcome with more and better technology." With the decline of traditional religion, Christianity in particular, modernists chafe at the notion that created nature "ought to shape and delimit human aspirations." Gay traces the history of this mechanical world picture in the writing of Descartes (1596-1650), who saw natural processes as predictable and thereby controllable. This *via moderna* replaced the *via antiqua* which had stressed that the order of Nature was divine, good, and fixed. The role of humans was to live a good life, one that fit within the counters of this divinely instituted order.

Is there any remedy? Gay urges Christians to "discover a new way of seeing the world...of attending to it that doesn't simply 'enframe' the world as stuff to be put to use...We need to reimagine our place and task in the world...such that we might grow into that truly human vocation of caring for each other, for ourselves, and for created nature." In a lengthy chapter, Gay unpacks how the incarnation and resurrection of Jesus Christ show an "astonishingly high view of human embodiment." Our bodies both bear and reveal divine glory. Leaning on Irenaeus, Gay writes that "we are not our own to fashion and refashion...but rather belong to the one who has created us, and unless we therefore embrace our created limitations, we can never be drawn

close to the glory of the uncreated God for whom all things are possible” (see also Psalms 8 and 100). We are created, physical beings, fashioned in God’s image “to glorify God by participating in his love.” Technology products have value when used in the service of this love.

Our fallen nature muddies the waters. The Tower of Babel incident was a divine protection: God confused the languages of these early innovators *for their sakes*. Human ingenuity, while not itself immoral, could never reverse the curses of Genesis 3. No, redemption would come the God-man, from the Word made flesh, who would live a perfect life, and die a perfect death, in the place of sinners.

Modern Technology and the Human Future is an affirmation of ordinary embodied human life in a fallen world. The book’s strength is the depth of its theological reflection. Chapter 4 is saturated with beautiful language and abundant Scriptural references. Gay is less helpful on how specific modes of technology are changing us and what we should do about it. For example, there’s data that youth raised after the iPhone’s release have significant differences (for the worse) in attention span and social interaction.¹ But Gay doesn’t engage in nitty gritty specifics. He provides more of a 30,000-foot view.

That said, *Modern Technology and the Human Future* is a helpful book for Christian educators. Ours is a world made by God and for God. It’s a world with creaturely limitations. It’s also a world into which God’s kingdom has entered and is now ever-expanding in the lives of God’s people, a growing, global, multi-ethnic tribe of Christ-followers. To us belongs the high calling to image our Triune Creator through lives of love and service to other divine image-bearers. Our use and development of technology as Christian faculty is to serve *that* calling.

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¹ See, for example, Jean Twenge, *iGen: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy--and Completely Unprepared for*

Adulthood--and What That Means for the Rest of Us, Atria Books, 2017.