In the world of constant communication, few of us would say that we enjoy a free relationship to technology. But according to the language of political liberty, we do. Liberty frees us to use technology and accept its benefits, or to avoid it and suffer the consequences. Yet liberty and technology are more deeply implicated in one another, and it is impossible to speak of modern liberty without calling to mind technology. Though technology has sometimes advanced in the absence of liberty, the alliance of liberty and the natural sciences that animates the modern world has been the surest guarantee of rapid, enduring technological development. No one who takes pride in modernity fails to think of technology. But liberty predated modern technology, and those who praised liberty before technology always considered liberty in connection with virtue. How does technology recast the relationship between liberty and virtue?

Technology presents itself to us in the form of innovation. Its future is always one of radical promise and radical uncertainty. Liberty, too, shares something of technology’s indeterminacy, but not all of it. As the natural faculty of doing what one pleases, liberty is still limited by what is possible and by the uncertainty regarding what it will please a free man to do. To the classical and medieval philosophers, liberty was praiseworthy when it enabled a free choice for the good. Liberty’s limitation by the right or the lawful made liberty admirable. To praise the virtuous use of liberty is to praise definite virtues that will come together in an unforeseen or unique way. But technology’s promise is the promise of the unknown, the unlimited relief of man’s estate. Not every technology even satisfies a need of which we are aware. New technology awakens us to new needs. Occasionally, it makes us forget old ones—needs otherwise so close to us that we only notice them in retrospect.

In praising liberty we praise our free way of life, and in painting a mental picture of our way of life we think of technology. It was Tocqueville who suggested that Americans slide effortlessly from praising their freedom to imagining the material goods that freedom brings them. The production of material goods now depends heavily on technological processes, but we also enjoy technology for its own sake. Many gadgets simply show off technical wizardry, and we surf the Internet because we enjoy the pure buzz of connectivity. Political liberty, the liberty that Aristotle defined as being ruled and ruling in...
turn, can appear cumbersome and ineffective compared to technology's reliable accomplishment of its stated ends. When technology's abilities coincide with our desires, it heightens the attraction of the other liberty described critically by Aristotle—the liberty to live as one wants. When technology enables us to do things hitherto impossible, it becomes the very engine of liberation.

But what are technology's stated ends? It should be easy to point them out, since a tool or instrument accomplishes some goal, and technology first appears as a tool. Liberty's excellence depended on its making virtue possible. It was praiseworthy in light of an end. Even as an ungoverned faculty, liberty freed us for specific virtues and specific vices—the same human habits that prompted Solomon to find nothing new under the sun. Solomon had not seen modern technology.

We want technology to enact our liberty and only accidentally to threaten it, like the nuclear technology used first to defend and then to power the free world. Technology can be an expression of liberty that doesn't detract from liberty's goodness. But if technology is always involved in the expression of our liberty, then technological liberty acquires the uncertainty and indeterminacy of technology itself. With technology we cannot see what will come next, whereas vice, no matter how shocking, is never really unprecedented. Through technology our liberty is more open-ended than ever, and so we cannot praise or blame it simply, as we do when it is everywhere related to virtue and vice. Liberty gains all the promise of technology, but suffers now from a radical indeterminacy that it once did not possess.

Attempting to describe the proper use of technology brings us face to face with an extraordinary difficulty. In particular circumstances technology appears to facilitate certain goods, like health through pharmaceutical drugs. In others it can be used for wicked ends, as in the manufacture of biological weapons. But elsewhere and especially with information technology, it serves purposes willy-nilly and inspires ambivalence more than excitement or hatred. In every case, though, technology puts goods
into question that were not in question before, and forces us to ask how technology relates to the goods we thought we possessed. Social networking, for example, provokes a question about the good of friendship that had not been apparent before. Medicines to dull every pain raise the question of whether wisdom comes through suffering. Agricultural technology liberates us from the farm, and in so doing makes the virtues of farm life a superfluous matter.

To speak of the virtuous use of technology is thus never sufficient. Technology irrupts into a world of human goods that did not depend on technology, in which technology was not a requirement for human virtue. When liberty is absorbed into the image of technology, liberty seems to be praiseworthy only instrumentally. When we see liberty as the best instrument for our well-being, and when our well-being is identified with continual technological advance, then it seems that liberty is technology’s instrument for its own realization. Liberty becomes as equivocal as technology, and liberty like technology is praised as a “value” rather than a good.

Understanding Technology

What is technology? Tocqueville rather than Heidegger makes a good introduction to this question for Americans, for Tocqueville made the technological view of nature a key element of the democratic desire for “present material enjoyments.” For us, he wrote, “every new method that leads to wealth by a shorter path, every machine that shortens work, every instrument that diminishes the costs of production, every discovery that facilitates pleasures and augments them seems to be the most magnificent effort of human intelligence.” Commenting on the sources of poetic imagination in Democracy in America, Tocqueville observed that the European image of America is that of the untouched wilderness. But Americans themselves hardly see the forests before they have felled them to make lumber. The technological view does not see the forest as a forest before it resolves it into its constituent parts to be unlocked and put to productive use. Where Heidegger would prophesy catastrophe, Americans saw the image of human conquest, and so of human liberation. In the vision of putting nature to our use we see the image of modern liberty.

Liberty opens the door to what it pleases us to do. Since we are not free to do the impossible, the technological view makes nature reveal its possibilities. What nature could be is what we can get out of it. Even we ourselves—human beings—are simply a possibility: a grand possibility, but not natures with a corresponding natural end. Technology has no use for ends, which are the domain of the virtues and the discrete arts. Strictly speaking, there can be no virtue in a world with no ends. Technology corrals the world so that science can, as Bacon hoped, effect all things possible.

The classical way of seeing the world may not even allow us to see technology for what it is. Considering technology as just another sort of means, for example, overlooks technology’s view that the world is empty of goods. Only in the world of human goods does liberty look toward virtue. Everywhere that nature is in act, technology seeks to unlock its latent potential and harness it with our will. The activity of nature splits apart into prior possibilities. What appears to us is not a natural being or an artifact but a resource for consumption, part of a world in which the arbitrary rule of nature is reduced—if not controlled, then at least anticipated as perfectly as possible.

Most discussion of technology avoids the question of the difference between the arts and technology. Classically, the human
arts were for the service of human ends. Art involves either the perfection of a human deed or the extension of human activity for the sake of virtue and thus over a limited domain. Technology uses human acts for a mastery of nature in which man may have no special part. Technology thus includes the science of cybernetics, which hopes to arrange human beings for the sake of peace and production, but sees only manpower and not human beings. Technology replaces the need for human deeds, and so it often supplants the opportunity for virtue. The arts asserted a ranking of the beings that implied, at some risk, the subordination of lower beings to higher. Although, according to the arts, the perfection of human beings required diverting other beings from their separate perfections, natural hierarchy assumes a hierarchy of natural perfections. A river is not only a composite resolvable into tappable energy. To build a bridge over it—a work of the human arts—is not the same as reducing it to a potential source of power. The art of cultivation seeks to produce healthy fruits, requiring a heavy burden of human work. But pesticides cover a multitude of sins.

Though the Rhine’s hydroelectric plant was Heidegger’s powerful image of technology, today it strikes us as a little anachronistic. We don’t want to go back to the manufacturing economy, yet we take electricity for granted: the irony of material enjoyments, acquired laboriously and now possessed thoughtlessly. Our new ecological sensitivity is fully compatible with our love of information technology, computers, and wireless devices of every sort. It is there that we feel both freest and most unfree with respect to technology.

The relationship of liberty and technology may be stated as follows. Modern liberty culminates in technology, it reduces to technology, and so, finally, it is technology. The view of nature as something threatening to be conquered, a view inaugurated by Machiavelli, leads to the view that all nature is an external impediment. Liberty according to Hobbes is the absence of external impediments, and the discovery of the laws of nature through science gives away the secrets of nature as an impediment. Every discovery in nature becomes the discovery of what in nature hinders our liberty. The discovery of nature’s laws thus includes the discovery of the potential for using them. All of nature is impediment. Understanding what makes nature an impediment, we understand how all of nature is potency. Liberty becomes liberation.

Technology coincides with the eclipse of liberty’s connection to virtue. Since the modern view of liberty leads to technology, it enjoys the simple power that technology exerts over our imaginations and our hopes. The liberty to do as one pleases is open to technology without apparently being technological. The liberty of speech, of association, of the press, of religion, of one’s person and property—none is necessarily associated with technology in its origin, but each is tied up with technology today. Although virtue seems like a compelling alternative to the liberty to choose vice, virtue is not a compelling alternative to technology. Since technology operates beyond virtue and vice, very few say that virtue requires the rejection of technology.

Modern politics itself manages us in a way that displays certain overtones with the technological point of view. It does not presume to tell us what to do directly, as in a regime ordered toward virtue in which the practice of virtue is the law. Modern politics proceeds indirectly with regard to our souls by proceeding directly on the basis of our passions. Even the liberties acknowledged by the modern state, from the freedom of expression to the freedom of religion, take on the character of the technological project of which they are a part.
The philosophers who advocated the spirit of liberty for all religions hoped that by dissociating religion and the good from political life, men’s energies might be drawn, indirectly but powerfully, toward the worldly concerns that remained a part of politics, promoted and encouraged by the sponsors of the new natural science. Tocqueville spotted what he called a confusion of freedom and religion in the minds of Americans, with religion beneficially limiting the human horizon and with freedom seen not in opposition to religion. That healthy confusion now seems reversed. Technology limits what we expect from religion. Religion in turn cannot anticipate technology with any of the confidence of Solomon.

**Social Networking and the Soul**

The soul is the last part of nature requiring explanation by science, technology’s final conquest, the old domain of poetry and philosophy. The soul or the self now hands itself over to technology in the activity of social networking. The human world long ago reduced its overlap with the political world, but now technology has given the human world a second and even less political layer: the network of avatars that interact in cyberspace. Social networking gathers together and puts at men’s disposal all the elements that have been important in the technological expansion of the modern media. It joins the media world described by Marshall McLuhan to the virtual reality of Jean Baudrillard. Unlike mechanical technology, virtual reality does not offer nature to us as standing reserve. What we receive are the various apparitions of human souls, presented as a collection of parts: lists of friends, likes, interests, groups, articles, locations, moods, reactions, pictures, updates. To fashion our network double we have to resolve ourselves into our constituent parts, advance some and suppress others, make ourselves the medium without making our souls the message.

To appear within the social network you must effect a partial disappearance from...
real life. But if the essence of technology is to empty the world of its real significance, it is rather the absence of reality that spurs you to create it. The business of everyday life is nothing while you text. You disappear to the world around you, your body a moon to reflect the handheld’s glow. Not you but your storyline appears to others. You merge with the recent activity of your account. An account once signified property, debts, obligations, and credits. Now you have e-mail accounts and social networking accounts, which mix account in the sense of narrative statement and account in the sense of credit-based commerce. You have to log in to who you are, and the debit you find is the debt of social interaction. The nag of communication pulls with all the force of the old conscience, but with the ironic cruelty of an obligation whose satisfaction doesn’t satisfy.

The watchword of social networking is transparency, just as openness and accessibility have taken off as the characteristic virtues of democrats. To hide, though, is an aspect of our political liberty, and so the Fourth Amendment asserted a right to be secure against unreasonable searches and seizures. In hiding we resist human association, but since human association is necessary to do what we want, hiding can seem to have all the sting of partisanship itself. Though nature yields up her secrets, provided we build the right tools to look past her pretenses, human beings must be coaxed, seduced, and trapped. The trick is to get us to give up our secrets honestly, without, like Schrödinger’s cat or the analysand on a Viennese couch, emitting an answer only because we have been asked. Science keeps trying to look into our souls from behind a two-way mirror, whether through knowledge of the id, the linguistic structures we parrot, the material conditions from which we are deducible, or much else besides. Each approach denies the human soul, even though it could never begin but in fascination at the human soul.

Social networking presents us with a different technology of human interaction, a technology of what were once human souls—souls that have gone into hiding but whose speeches still echo, bodies whose feet still leave footprints. Social networking encourages the view that ordinary life is a front, fake, inauthentic, merely customary, and even involves something other than the real you. Most human beings, no matter how sanguine, want to hide themselves in some respect or resist the attempt to open them up. This resistance is compatible with creating an online persona that also isn’t really you, but which fulfills the desires of others to know what and who you really are. Quiet artists and quiet intellectuals speak through their works, but now even the loud-mouthed have to use the same medium. Or rather, even the introvert has an easy outlet that fosters his hangups rather than requiring their conquest.

Everyone knows that social networking thwarts its own desire to gain access to your soul, that it simply calls forth a new type of performance. But you’re not off the hook so quickly. Social networking is like the mad lover who either wants you for himself or wants you dead. How else could you reach hundreds of followers? The only alternative is withdrawal to a world that already disregards the soul. Technology involves the reduction of nature and matter to a set of manipulable powers. Are you matter to be manipulated by yourself, your own agent for your own media, an apparition of yourself more constant than your physical presence could ever be? Or are you a data set that Facebook counts on to offer to its advertisers—with the opt-outs subsidized by the fools who don’t change their privacy settings? The possibility of self-creation is that of leaving behind what you are and making
all things new. But nature has the last word in all these attempts—something Nietzsche, the prophet of self-creation, knew much better than the prophets of the 1960s. The Internet promises the possibility of this self-creation and its display. It encourages an impossibility.

The Internet and digital imaging technology allow you to imagine yourself anywhere in the world at any time, doing anything or just about anything. But should you actually travel there, the sights quickly shrink in size to the display screen on your camera. The moments of life become a database, ready for facial recognition software to find you in every digitized picture. The world, emptied of meaning, presents an unbearable situation in which meaning must be imposed—any meaning you can find, any time—an unlimited constant announcement of meaning, available for anyone and inescapable. To see a flow of constant interpretation is to witness the death of events, their memory, their study. If an action did not happen before it was interpreted, if our knowledge of far-away events is greater than our knowledge of events nearby, if events nearby seem dull in comparison, significant only if they are tweeted, then in what sense do events happen anywhere in our life? That was Baudrillard’s question, a question that grows more pressing as virtual reality extends itself.

Although the Internet appeals to the desire for privacy and for liberation from place, it also involves networking around particular, shared goods, and the creation of something like a protopolitical community. Social networking apes the old politics of common goods, but it leads to a manic intrusion of the virtual upon the real. In the phenomenon of flash-mobs the virtual passes over into reality on the condition that the real is momentarily treated as the virtual, a pure resource, full of possibility and consequence-free. As any survivor of a flash-mob knows, the damage is not merely virtual. The low entrance fee of a virtual community, whether formed for a virtuous or a vicious end, has the same effect that any other price does. A place in reality has too high a start-up cost by comparison. The currency of good deeds is driven out by the rigor of Gresham’s law. The ease of virtual community is offset by the ease of virtual hooliganism.

The community of the Internet is now as spiritual as the communion of saints once was, so it is fitting that McLuhan thought Thomas Aquinas’s angelology was important in understanding the media. Through social networking we receive not prayers and graces but links and likes. The church triumphant appears in virtual reality, where all things are possible and everything is realized virtually in the mystical body of the web. As in the resurrection of the body, logging off from your account gives you your body back, this time not glorified but fraught with anxiety, the church suffering after triumph rather than the reverse. Signed off from your account, you are now unaccounted-for. Reality itself becomes the afterlife, the postmodern No Exit where hell is virtual people. The advent of virtual reality, not to say the beginning of modern politics itself, detaches human beings from the consolations of church, city, and family that wayfarers in this life once thought they had. A late-modern Augustine could not see technology as just another dimension of alienation from our heavenly home. We are now aliens twice removed.

Virtual reality starts from the observation that the real world has lost its meaning. Baudrillard likened virtual reality to the “substitution of a technical, artificial universe for the ‘natural’ world.” The virtual world has no end or purpose in itself. But since we remember that the world once had a purpose, we race to fill with meaning the virtual
copy of the real world, which accepts our impositions with less resistance. Now nothing happens to you which is not potentially a Facebook moment, and the more pedestrian the better. Ordinary events appear to lose their meaning in becoming fodder for the interpretation they never would have had on their own. You upload the picture, in the most extreme case, because the event has been deprived of all other meaning.

The unlimited liberty to choose between all forms of virtue and vice has been combined in information technology with an immediate confrontation of all possible views on what is virtue or what is vice. Networking makes life a tabbed browsing session in which every sector of our life crashes in on every other. And so the question of virtue and vice takes a back seat to the answers of search results. Even questioning takes a back seat to Google’s anticipation of your query. The filters which prevent web searches from going astray give you no hint about what course of action is virtue and what is vice. Not the intimation of varied views but the continuous interaction with them makes the choice for virtue extremely difficult. Liberty is no longer for the sake of virtue but for the self-awareness of liberty. Our liberty becomes wholly reflexive. When freedom equals unlimited choice, and when technology abolishes limits and with them purpose, everyone winds up having to make or discover the rules himself. Plato and Xenophon asked whether the virtues could be practiced non-ironically, without awareness of their defectiveness. Today the answer is no, not only for philosophers but for all of us who live in the self-absorbed playfulness of the Internet. We can hardly do anything without irony, since the Internet haunts us with the vision of every possible alternative. The web of choice undoes the ground of choice.

Using Technology Ironically

To respond to technology by flight leaves us with a sense of futility, but to respond with blithe acceptance leaves us feeling shallow. Heidegger’s machine technology was always very serious, never the object of ironic distance, for the irony was all in our vain presumption that we could master technology. But virtual reality now enables a newly free relationship to technology for the very reason that it is impossible to take seriously. We can therefore extend our irony to the treatment of the virtual itself. The danger is that since many events are announced to us only virtually, we might not take reality seriously either. Horrible news from around the world is held at a distance no matter how badly you feel about it. It is never as real as sorrow or anger nearby. The soul once made us able to keep a distance from ourselves. We now stand against our virtual selves as our souls stood against us in the capacity to judge. The deeper risk is that virtual reality will precede our experience of reality too much for us to stand apart from it. Will babies swaddled in social media still grow up to desire the rational milk without guile? Or will the real world become a bric-a-brac, an inferior knockoff of virtual reality?

Freedom with respect to technology is not so much in its virtuous use but in the ironic distance from technology which always attends our use of freedom. Today the virtual protests its reality by inspiring in us the ironic remark: seriously. The virtual presents reality to us as a show, and we always stand slightly aloof. For this very reason, a reason that haunts all virtual programming, every aspect of Facebook, and all the media from Twitter to print, we can maintain a distance. Simply to criticize technology implies falsely that it can be reoriented to the good. But technology will proceed ever apace. We can-
not be merely annoyed with technology, and we cannot flatter it with the possibility of its conversion.

Technology does not allow us to escape it till we pay the price of ironic self-awareness. The flight away from modern technology would always be plagued by the need to write about it, and the world would demand an excuse that only a monk could produce. The ordinary obligations of human life assume technology as part of their accomplishment. Houses uninhabitable without air conditioning, suburbs not designed to be places your children will want to stay. In a sweltering home and far away from your children, technology has made itself necessary to even the most elementary aspects of human life.

But we know too well how often the Internet seems to descend into farce and parody, and so virtual reality confronts us with irony directly. Irony helps us see the problem of networks in all its starkness, regretfully but without futile resistance. It enables us to see the way that technology presents a different view of being and even limits the exercise of our virtue—without accepting Heidegger’s assertion that the old ways of being are not only buried but forgotten.

Not to recognize virtue is a sort of vice. Technology, which momentarily abstracts from the very question of virtue and vice, leaves us stuck not with virtue but with vice. Since we are stuck with technology, we should use it when it has made itself necessary to the practice of virtue, but we should use it ironically, with a wink at the fact that it has made itself necessary where virtue once had flourished without it. A little dab of mirth helps the technology go down. Where we have the option to practice virtue without the use of technology, we should do so.

In the world seen through technology and governed by rational control, to speak of virtue is like speaking of Sion in the land of Babylon. Technology is the Babylonian exile of virtue. But if like modern exiles we make Jerusalem the beginning of our joy, we shall be equipped to use technology with the spirit of ironic distance, as we wait in joyful hope for the coming of the revenge of natural limits.

Notes


2 Heidegger, 16.

3 Tocqueville, 280–81.


5 Baudrillard, *The Intelligence of Evil*, 122–25.

6 Ibid., 32.

7 For a different but related perspective on irony and virtuality, see ibid., 84–85.