

Session 2.1: Redeeming Technology in Principle

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Title: Searching for Christian Values that could Redeem Technological Systems:
Complications, Challenges, Confirmations

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Having obtained Master's degrees in both theology and philosophy, Lauren Pfister gained his PhD in Comparative Philosophy from the University of Hawai'i at Manoa. He has lived in Hong Kong with his family for thirty years, where he was Head of the Department of Religion and Philosophy (2010-2011) and Director of the Centre for Sino-Christian Studies (2012-2017), both at Hong Kong Baptist University.

He has written widely on Chinese philosophy in the context of Christian, Buddhist, Confucianist (Ruist) and Daoist thought, with particular emphasis on what he has coined "missionary scholars" such as the Scottish Congregationalist James Legge (理雅各 1815-1897) and the German Lutheran Richard Wilhelm (衛禮賢 1873-1930). His research is published in English, Chinese, and German, and he has translated significant texts on science and religion from Chinese to English, and from English to Chinese. Among other organisations, he is a member of the Society of Christian Philosophers, the International Jacques Ellul Society, and the Society for Philosophy and Technology.

Abstract:

In order to offer Christian ways toward engaging various dimensions of our technologically-infused modern environment in A.D. 2017, we must first face some specific conceptual and theoretical complications in the literature related to the philosophy of technology. Following precedents set by Hans Jonas, Lewis Mumford and Jacques Ellul, I will argue that we must reject any reductionistic account of "technology" or technologies that considers them only to be about machinery and our innovative ways of advancing their efficiency. Instead, we must recognize the fundamental transformation of our 21st century forms of life by means of a new kind of technological environment that has created a dynamic system of values shaping, guiding, and changing a vast interconnecting network of technological systems that embraces and restructures us as humans within the various dimensions of our familial, communal, social, national and international experiences.

In order to address these conceptual and theoretical complications, I will develop the Ellulian concept of “environment” as it is applied specifically to “the technological environment” and “the [modern] technological phenomenon”. By this means we can begin to explore the practical challenges that await our self-conscious efforts at setting forth some Christian responses to our current embeddedness within the “Megamachine” (Mumford) and the pervasiveness of the “iGod” illusion (Nicolas Carr) that has been intensified through the so-called “World-Wide Web”. By these means we will seek to comprehend more about the “double-edged sword” of technological environments that have simultaneously included new and massive “advanced levels of human progress” and (especially within the contexts of environmental degradation and new military complexes) unprecedented forms of inhumane and more-or-less autonomous tendencies toward massive destructiveness.

We will approach some initial Christian responses by comparing the three inherent values driving technological research and innovation – seeking for “the fastest, the cheapest, and the means that produces the greatest impact” – with those found in the Beatitudes (Matthew 5: 3-12), the Greatest and Second Commandment, and the Pauline vision of an engaged cross-cultural transformative Christian form of life (Philippians 4: 8-9). Within these processes we will explore more of the practical and spiritual challenges in coming-to-awareness as Christian persons, families, and communities within our modern technological environment, and pinpoint various areas where we should develop forms of resistance to “technicization”, creative alternatives that reintroduce Christian humaneness into “artificially ignorant” and “artificially insensitive” technical systems, as well as consider specific means for living out Christian ways as adults, teachers, family members, church members and professionals to transcend what would otherwise become forms of life completely compliant to dominant values inherently at work within our expansive technological environment.

Reading:

- “Toward a Philosophy of Technology” Hans Jonas.
Article #20 in Scharff and Dusek.
- “Tool-Users vs. Homo-Sapiens and the Megamachine” Lewis Mumford.
Article #32 in Scharff and Dusek.*
- *What I Believe* (1989) Jacques Ellul, William B Eerdmans Pub. Co. Specifically, what he says about “Environment” (pp. 99-103) and what he says about “The Technological Environment” (pp. 133-140).

Further Reading:

- “Ellul’s Corpus: A Brief Overview of His Writing” in Andrew Goddard (2002) *Living the Word, Resisting the World: The Life and Thought of Jacques Ellul*, Paternoster Press (pp. 51-57).
- “La Technique and Beyond” in Andrew Goddard (2002) *Living the Word, Resisting the World: The Life and Thought of Jacques Ellul*, Paternoster Press (pp. 134-151).

* This was also one of the set readings for Session 1. If you have read it already, you are all set. If you missed it for Session 1, now is your chance to engage with it.