Living Well With Technology

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The Digital Futures Institute at King's College London has as its *raison d'être* the challenge of living well with technology. It is a simple, sunny and straightforward enough phrase. Four words, living well with technology, none of them very obscure or enigmatic. But do we in fact know what they mean, or all the things they mean? And what might it mean to take the project and prospect of living well with technology as a project, puzzle, or even predicament?

I would like here to answer this question by parsing out the phrase, word by word, 'parsing' meaning simply the portioning out of different parts of speech in a phrase, distinguishing what they individually mean and how they work together. It is an exercise that has been undertaken in different ways and at different times by different kinds and conditions of person, linguists, grammarians, code-breakers, geneticists, teachers and preachers. When I asked my son why he wanted to carry on with Latin at A-Level alongside Chemistry, he said 'Dad, Latin is just chemistry with words'.

'The meaning of a word is its use in the language', wrote the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein. By meaning, he meant, not what a word stands for, but what it does: not what it refers to, but what it 'means to say'. Curiously enough, reading a sentence in this way is not unlike investigating the workings of a kind of machinery, in that it does not make much sense to ask what a machine is without reference to what it does, and how it does it. By the time I have finished, I hope it might be clear that wondering what machines do, and we do with them, is a large part of what it what it means to live with them, well or ill.

So let me try to play through the senses of these four words, picking them out one by one, like the notes in a scale, though as with Eric Morecambe's version of the Greig piano concerto, not necessarily in the right order.

Technology

I will start, in fact, at the end of the phrase, with the word *technology*. We might say that technology just means machinery, except that we should notice that where machinery has a singular, in the word machine, technology does not, at least not in English. If we refer to 'a technology' or 'the technology', as in 'we

have the technology', we do not refer to a single instrument or contraption, but a whole technological class or system of such things, as in 'steam technology' or 'computing technology' or 'biotechnology'. The Greek word *logos* which provides the *-ology* ending of words like technology or climatology means simply word, but it also has the sense of the understanding, or, as we say, the organising *logic*, that words can give.

Our use of the word technology seems to retain the earliest meaning of the word, in both Greek and Latin usages, as the understanding, or *logic*, of a *techne*, a craft, artifice. In its early uses in English, the word 'technology' could be used specifically to mean the jargon, or technical language in which a particular art or craft was conducted or explicated. Indeed, the commonest area of application of the word technology, well into the eighteenth century, was the systematic study of grammar, making technology a word for the knowledge of the art of using words themselves.

These usages are both exotically antique, and yet, as so often seems to be the case in thinking about the history of the usage of words, uncannily familiar. Though users of words may forget about their origins, the words themselves never seem to entirely. For the most important thing about the contemporary word *technology* is that it never refers simply and neutrally to a set of machines, or technical devices. It includes the idea that there may be some idea behind, or working through technology. Technology does things for us, but technology also seems to mean something, to us. In working out how to live well with technology, we are trying to define the sort of promise that technology might seem to hold out for us, and the question that it might seem to put to us – what the philosopher Martin Heidegger called *die Frage nach Technik* – and the response that we are to make to both. The logic of technology is that of a promise, a promise of a transformation, a lifting of human being above and beyond its own existing capacities. In reflecting on what we are to make of technology, in other words, we must take account of what technology may make of us.

More even than this, *logos* points to a rather grand and metaphysical idea, of the formative or engendering power that speaking a word may give. This is why the Gospel of St John begins with the words Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ Λόγος, 'In the beginning was the Word': that is, at the beginning of all things there was the inaugural, open sesame, hey-presto force of the Word of God, for example in uttering the words, assuming that they might have been spoken in Hebrew as was assumed for centuries, *yehi or*, let there be light. So the *logos* part of technology is not just a word, but an idea, and not just an idea but the idea of an inceptive force, of bringing things about. This theological association of the

logos with the magical power of fiat is powerfully at work in the idea that technology does not merely consist of things to do things with, but itself is possessed of certain kinds of motive force, that we would do well to try to understand.

Living

The French architect Henri Le Corbusier wrote in 1924 that ‘A house is a machine for living in’, though his French ‘machine à habiter’, might equally well be translated as ‘living machine’, or ‘machine for living with’, just as Corbusier calls an armchair ‘une machine à s’asseoir’, a sitting-down machine, and a typewriter a ‘machine à écrire’, writing-machine (Le Corbusier 1995, 73). It used to be thought that technologies were primarily labour-saving, so things to work with, to make work easier. Nowadays, so much of our social life is mediated through technology, that we must feel constrained to say that technologies are not just what we work with, but what we work at living with.

Living is something that living creatures cannot help but do, cannot help seeking to prolong and, to be candid, when it comes to it, can find it surprisingly hard to call a halt to. But living is also something that specifically human creatures cannot but contrive or strive to do in some way or other. To ‘get a life’, as we contemptuously say to someone who does not seem to have much of one, implies the obscure but pressing necessity of making something of your life, thereby avoiding what every culture of which we have knowledge seems to have regarded as the unthinkability or atrocity of unstyled existence. That we should be unable to be without meaning to be is a curious thing when you think about it. This is not to say that it is impossible to imagine, or to try to live out in practice such a wholly unmeant or unstyled existence, for literature and philosophy give us recognisable examples of it – in a figure like the Greek philosopher Diogenes for instance, who was so determined to live a wholly natural life that he lived naked in a barrel in the middle of Corinth, urinating and masturbating publically and, what Corinthians of the 4th century BC regarded as really disgraceful, taking his meals shamelessly in the open. The philosophy exemplified by Diogenes, Cynicism, from κύων, *kuon*, dog, means literally living a dog’s life. But, of course, Diogenes was not doing this on a whim, or as determined by the throw of a dice every morning, but rather pursuing a programme, and with annoying relentlessness, by all accounts. His styleless existence, like that of any dissipated avant-gardeist, was itself a style of existence, and one into which he had to put a great deal of work. One of the most difficult, indeed impossible injunctions that any human can be asked to

obey is to ‘act naturally’ – to act as though you are not consciously acting or putting on an act at all. Try it some time.

Typically, human beings have conceived their existence as a kind of task of styling, a mission rather than an accidental emission. Sometimes, as in Christian mythology, of redemption, this has been seen as a work of salvation, or penalty for some kind of inherited sin. Simply living, it seems, is never enough: we must, it seems, make a living, or make something of ourselves. So this implies that living is already a kind of art, something that you can’t just do, but have to mean to do, and so must work at doing – which may require precisely the kinds of thing signified in the word *techne*, – art, style, technique, manner.

One of the defining principles of human life is the fact that all humans pick up the rumour, and eventually almost come to believe it, that they are not going to live for ever. This finitude makes the way in which we live the time we have available an urgent and unignorable matter. And technologies are bound up with finite time, and the ways in which we bring it under tension, like the rigging of a ship. Technologies allow us to complicate and diversify our time experiences, even as the succession of different technologies provides historical scansion and scaling.

Just as technologies like clocks and other kinds of timepiece measure time, they also allow us to stretch, concentrate and reiterate time. Only writing makes it possible to declare truthfully ‘I am dead’. Not surprisingly, one of the ways in which humans have sought to shape their lives is in order to have it said of them as in *Macbeth* Malcom says of the Thane of Cawdor ‘Nothing in his life became him, like the leaving it’. This process was known for many years as the *ars moriendi*, or art of dying. Our styles of life, and styles of death, *become us*, as Shakespeare hints, not just in that they suit us or seem characteristic of us, but also in the sense that they turn into what we will have been, seeming to sum up the kind of life we have had, and allowing us to live not just in the moment, but before and after our own living. Hence the fascination with famous last words. I agree with W.H. Auden who thought the finest of final words were those of Lady Hester Stanhope: ‘It’s all been most interesting’. All living creatures have biology, but we are the only ones we know of who have biography, not to say autobiography. And since there is no autobiography without writing, and no writing with some form of technology, or material mediation, stylus, keyboard, screen, living must always involve kinds of artifice, technique, or technology. If, that is, we are to work out ways of not just living, but living well.

Well

Like many simple and familiar words, well is a wily word.

I remember a game of Adverbs played one Christmas in a Department of English reading retreat in Cumberland Lodge in Windsor Great Park. Adverbs is a version of charades, in which a player is given actions to perform in the manner of some adverb or other – abruptly, gaily, languorously, surreptitiously, and so on – which the audience then has to guess. When it came to her turn to perform, Barbara Hardy, the head of department, duly mimed as prompted, a large number of actions, ironing shirts, chopping carrots, writing a letter, drawing curtains, but all with no apparent qualities that would enable the particular fashion in which they were being done to be identified. We tried 'neutrally', 'plainly', 'ordinarily' 'economically', 'unreflectively', all without success. Eventually, we were forced to give up, and Barbara smirkingly revealed that she had merely been performing the specified actions ... *well*.

Why should well-ness be so hard to recognise, or characterise? In many of its uses, the word *well* has a conditional sense, implying the existence in different circumstances of clear criteria for the determination of what it means to perform well – as an investment might be said to perform well, or an employee, or a team-member. On the one hand, it is a positive signal, of the good, the approvable, even the admirable or excellent. The word *commonwealth* contains the word *weal*, which meant the common good, the wealth of a community, wealth meaning literally *weal-th* wellness, as health means wholeness. The term well-being appears in written English as early as 1561, when it is used in a translation of Castiglione's *The Courtier*, which writes of women that 'it is well inoughe declared howe necessarye they be, not onlye to oure beeinge, but also to oure well beeinge' (Castiglione 1561, sig. Ggi^{v}). The fourteenth-century English mystic Dame Julian of Norwich reported the promise made to her in a vision by Jesus that 'all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well' (Julian 1994, 102)

But there is an oscillation in the long history of the word *well* in English. If doing things well implies admiration or approval, there is often something moot or muted in the approbation offered by the word. This may be because wellness is commonly defined not as a positive quality, but as the absence of woe or sickness. Historically the word well in English suggests not just what is good, but what is proportionately good, something that is done in an acceptable or satisfactory rather than a superlative manner, as though holding back from overdoing it. The whisper of precaution attaching to wellness is apparent in the somewhat archaic phrase 'mother and baby both doing well', as well as in the

all-things-considered watchfulness of a word like ‘welfare’, and even in ‘farewell’.

Somewhat oddly, the word *wellness*, implying some positive or persisting condition of being well, does not appear until the 1650s, when it was new enough to be regarded as a novelty or puzzle. We have the evidence of this from a letter of 1653 that Dorothy Osborne writes to her fiancé ‘I cannot excuse you that profess to be my friend and yet are content to let me live in such ignorance, write to me every week, and yet never send me any of the new phrases of the town. Pray what is meant by *wellness* and *unwellness*?’ (Osborne 1888, 140)

The OED notes the appearance only in the 1950s of wellness as a ‘positive rather than contrastive quality ... the state or condition of being in good physical, mental, and spiritual health, esp. as an actively pursued goal; well-being’, when Halbert L. Dunn wrote in 1959 of ‘the fight for high-level wellness’ (Dunn 1959, 791). Wellness of this kind seems like a survival, or energetic revival, of the classical notion of the ‘good life’, entertained especially in the work of Aristotle, who writes:

Now it is thought to be the mark of a man of practical wisdom to be able to deliberate well about what is good and expedient for himself, not in some particular respect, e.g. about what sorts of thing conduce to health or to strength, but about what sorts of thing conduce to the good life in general (*Nichomachean Ethics*, VI, 1140a–1140b)

Wellness may increasingly be understood not only as a personal ethic, but as a collective programme, the optimisation of social life conceived increasingly as though it were itself an intricate kind of machinery, in need of continuous monitoring and maintenance. If this is to be the case, then living well with technology might mean expanding our ideas of what a machine us in significant ways.

So living always implies trying to live well rather than poorly, even though it is not clear in advance how well is well enough, and as such is something that requires to be thought about and contrived, rather than trusting to luck or providence: a contriving that may well need to make use of the kinds of contrivance that we call technology.

With

To unpack the word *with*, we need to go back to the Gospel of St John. Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ Λόγος, in the beginning was the Word, he writes, John, καὶ ὁ Λόγος ἦν πρὸς τὸν Θεόν, καὶ Θεὸς ἦν ὁ Λόγος – 'and the word was with God, and the Word was God'. We pay a lot of attention to pronouns nowadays, but in truth prepositions are even trickier customers. What is the nature of this *with*, of this pairing and proximity of *logos* to *theos*, or the word to the God who deploys it, or the coupling of human and technology? The πρὸς *pros*- of πρὸς τὸν Θεόν is there in a word like *prosthesis*, meaning an artificial attachment or replacement. In Greek, *pros* means both with and towards. Plato's *Protagoras* tells the story of Epimetheus, who is responsible for distributing among all the animals their distinctive powers and qualities, but who discovers when he comes to humans that he has used up all the available qualities on other animals. Epimetheus has a more celebrated brother, Prometheus, whose name means foresight, as opposed to Epimetheus, which means hindsight, or afterthought. To compensate for the blunder of his brother, Prometheus steals the art of fire from Hephaestus and artistic wisdom from Athene. As Protagoras concludes his story, 'hence it is that man gets facility for his livelihood [εὐπορία μὲν ἀνθρώπῳ τοῦ βίου γίγνεται], but Prometheus, through Epimetheus' fault, later on (the story goes) stood his trial for theft' (Plato 1924, 132, 133).

The phrase 'living well with technology' seems to assume the temporal dimension of technology, in its suggestion that there could be, because there once was, a way of living, whether well or ill, without it. Such a view can be maintained as long as the technology in question is taken to refer to particular forms of technology, all of which we might be able to imagine living without. As soon as one begins to wonder about technology in its broadest forms, as they have been and still might be, and therefore about technology as such and in general, the condition of natural or wholly unaccommodated man is much more difficult to conceive.

The paradox is that technology is something extra, part of the prosthetic way in which humans form prospects and projects, and yet at the same time profoundly cosubstantial with humans, to the point of seeming indissociable from them. So that it is unclear in what sense a life lived without recourse to any kind of art, technique or technology, most especially, perhaps, the technology of language, could qualify as human all. Hence, like the logos that St John tells us is πρὸς τὸν Θεόν, 'with' God, humans are paired with what they are for, in the sense of what they use to make good their Promethean foresight, their prospects or prognosis. Philosophers distinguish between things that are essential and things that are accessory. But we must say that humans are

essentially accessorised, their being, or what they are in themselves, being formed through what technology allows them to become in their future selves. What humans essentially are is to be for something, to be for what they are not yet, and so always come before themselves.

The technology of fire requires careful handling, and you may recall that, though it turned out well for us, the theft of fire did not turn out very well for Prometheus. Though technology is often designed to create ease and optimise pleasure, the relationship between humans and technology is also productive of risk, friction and what we call alienation. If technology can transform us, it also has the power to deform us, making us strangers to ourselves.

In any case, it seems that living well with technology will imply not just the simple use of technology for the kinds of protection and fulfilment that technologies so obviously seem to offer – windmills, refrigerators, cars, televisions, cookers, computers, Geiger-counters, burglar alarms – which might seem to imply that the more technology, and the more different kinds of technology we have at our disposal, the better, but also something like the willed, reflective adjustment to what technology might have in mind, or at least in store for us. This perspective might allow us a rhyme between 'living with technology' and a phrase like 'living with diabetes', or some other condition that makes demands upon us. Seen in this way, living well with technology would include the sense that technology can be somewhat difficult company. It seems as though the question of how we live with technology, though it can never be entirely separate from questions of technique, is equally not one that can simply be delegated to technical systems.

Technology is instrumental, in the sense that it is for particular purposes. But technologies are never exactly for the things they are supposed to be for, or what they are for turns out never to be fully definable in advance. As the word telephone, far-speaker, might suggest, the first telephones were conceived of principally as ways of conveying messages or orders: Queen Victoria installed one in 1876 in her residence on the Isle of Wight, and the earliest adopters also included mines and police stations. Everyone knew in principle that telephones allowed the person you called to answer back, but it seems that users had to discover for themselves what telephone conversations might be like. We can understand technological instruments by thinking of musical instruments, which are, of course, for making music. But exactly what is meant by the words 'making' and 'music' are just what instruments are designed to fill out. Technologies are invented in order to perform certain specified tasks, but they are also tools of invention, including the reinvention of themselves

and their own purposes. When Nokia added the capacity to send short text messages to their new phone in the 1980s, nobody really thought there would be much use for it. Technologies are in fact playthings, just as much as working tools, machines for trying out what can be done with them, and done with ourselves through our use of them.

I hope it has become clear that, whether or not we respond to it, technology always poses a kind of question, in that it always requires, and in fact always implicitly is, a way of thinking about itself. And thinking about technology must always involve thinking about a great many other things apart from technology, but are really a part of it – work, play, time, meaning, purpose. Just as the only route to an understanding of the present is via the past, so a purely technical understanding of technology is bound to overlook what is most important, and, even more important than importance, what is most interesting about it. Technology is a kind of language, or even a kind of theatre, in which we act out and communicate the kinds of being we aim to make of ourselves. How well we do that work of collective self-imagining is never a mere matter of fact: it is how we strive and contrive to do things that matter, better.

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