

Technology and the Spirit of Ownership

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For the past few years, President George W. Bush has promoted the ideal of an “ownership society,” and advanced a number of specific policy proposals that aim to broaden and deepen personal wealth. While the catch-phrase is new, the ideal is not, and it has much deeper roots and purposes than simply “saving Social Security.” Property was central to the American founding, and it remains central to America’s economic, social, and moral way of life. An ownership society naturally resists the encroachment of despotism, clings to its liberty jealously, and guards against the particular distempers of the technological age. It is this last purpose of property that most interests me here: private property as a moral and social corrective to the potential excesses of modern technology.

Creativity and Nature

Technology, we must remember, is a form of human splendor; it is the produce of human ingenuity interacting with the natural world. But technology also presents us with its own novel challenges, including the obscuring of its own causes. In part by design, technology distances the *user* from the *maker* by a series of mechanical intermediaries. I use a computer virtually every day of my life, but my understanding of how the machine works is embarrassingly minimal. When there is a problem with it, the solution is usually the same: “Call Tech Support.” This experience is surely familiar to many Americans. It suggests both our impotence and our sense of entitlement: we cannot fix the machines that we come to take for granted; we forget the majesty of the first makers; we inherit tools we can use but rarely understand.

In the hyper-modern age, it is sometimes a challenge to remember the human hands behind every technological artifact, and to remember the distinctly human character of production itself. As G.K. Chesterton elegantly put it in his 1935 book *The Well and the Shallows*:

The man who makes an orchard where there has been a field, who owns the orchard and decides to whom it shall descend, does also enjoy the taste of apples; and let us hope, also, the taste of cider. But he is doing something very much grander, and ultimately more gratifying,

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than merely eating an apple. He is imposing his will upon the world in the manner of the charter given him by the will of God; he is asserting that his soul is his own, and does not belong to the Orchard Survey Department, or the chief Trust in the Apple Trade. But he is also doing something which was implicit in all the most ancient religions of the earth; in those great panoramas of pageantry and ritual that followed the order of the seasons in China or Babylonia; he is worshipping the fruitfulness of the world.

An orchard shares something very basic with a computer: it is a technological artifact. It is the produce of human creativity engaging the natural world. An animal will never make an orchard, even if it will make a nest. But men make things which fill no immediate need—save their own need to master and shape the materials of the earth. “And God said unto them, ‘Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.’” The biblical tradition calls men image-bearers, reflecting in some small but real way the singular power of Divine Creativity. It was the Creator who gave us the principle of property and charged us with the duty and privilege of interacting with the created world. This doctrine is what Chesterton refers to when he writes of a “charter” given by God. The original author of the ownership society was also the Author of the universe.

Private property allows each man to engage with the world as an earnest artist, to be a creator in his humble corner of Creation. Even small property is a complete studio for the human spirit: it needs not a whole orchard, but merely a whole garden. To labor over one’s property is to infuse things with humanness; it is to add our memories to the tangible world, like silent hanging trinkets of hopes and struggles shared, fears realized or relieved, lives lived and lives lost. Anyone could have mowed the lawn at the home where I grew up, but my father did—many hundreds of times, and then I did, and then my younger brothers; my mother’s work was in the gardens. Elsewhere a half-dozen friends and family lent their sweat and toil one weekend to the project of turning the driveway into a tolerable basketball court. These examples and innumerable others are what made our home *ours*; they represent the human character of human enterprise. Property, in this sense, is the opportunity and realization of the human spirit. It checks the swagger of the autocrat like countless small stinging darts. The great champions of liberty across history, as well as their antagonists, knew well the ineffable value of property.

Free enterprise and private property were both necessary prerequisites for modern technology. I do not say that technology is by any means the greatest achievement of these principles—it would be nearer to the truth to say that liberty is. But technology is central to the life of most free people and free nations, which is why we need to explore the ways that technology can imperil the spirit of liberty. It is possible to forget that technology is an instrument and allow it to become an idol. It is possible to enslave ourselves by technology, even as we imagine that we are setting ourselves free.

This danger becomes most vivid in the rhetoric of some biotechnology enthusiasts. We are told that we must make our decisions on a question like cloning human embryos on the basis of “good science,” leaving “theological” objections to the side. In this context, a critic of Leon Kass once scoffed: “Is [he] really citing the God of the Patriarchs as a guide for contemporary medical regulation?” But it is very important to recognize that, whatever one thinks of the God of the Patriarchs, *someone* (though he may go unnamed) must be cited as a guide for contemporary medical regulation. Perhaps it will be Jeremy Bentham and utilitarianism; perhaps Rousseau and perfectability; perhaps it will simply be the “bioethics” industry and the amoral authority of the stock analyst. The point is that it will emphatically be someone. To follow the compass of “good science” alone usually means doing what is good for the scientists. But what is good for the scientists is not always good for everyone. And a nation that stands idly by as its moral imagination is silently ushered out of the room is an emasculated nation; it is the very opposite of a free people.

It is important to make clear here that technology *qua* technology poses little threat or challenge at all. Technology simply ceases to exist in any meaningful way absent its human operators. If men vanished, then machinery and technology would quickly fall to comprehensive ruin. If I criticize technology, what I am really criticizing is our interface with it, our implementation of it, and our bluster about it. My beef, though it may be adorned with arguments about technology, is emphatically with men, not with things.

The Cultural Contradictions of Technology

What is it about the technological age that threatens a subtle corrosion of its human foundation, and how do we arrest or moderate that threat? Our answer begins by seeking the element of truth in the old story about wealth and success breeding complacency and decadence. The Christian tradition formulates this story by frequent and pulverizing reference to

the spiritual perils of prosperity. “How hardly shall they that have riches enter into the kingdom of God!” Christ warned. I do not know how a Western Christian in the early twenty-first century can read such passages and not tremble. Why is it hard for the rich? Because their wealth so easily becomes an obstacle to the appreciation and pursuit of the things that really matter. It becomes, so easily, so subtly, their idol. In a similar way, wealth obscures its own causes. An ambitious but honorable businessman works his way to great affluence; but his son, despite all the father’s best efforts, falls into degeneracy and dishonor. The father, in his mind’s eye, set success as a distant goal, almost a vision or dream; for the son, however, success is all around him, so large that he can hardly see anything else, and he goes blind. Prosperity paradoxically enervates the human virtues that gave rise to it in the first place.

The most zealous critics of capitalism see only the spoiled son, not the hard-working father; and thus they come to believe that success must always derive not from virtue but from vice. We can, I think, dismiss this charge as irretrievably partisan: it sees only what it wants to see. It is true that the free enterprise system can be maneuvered to reward the unscrupulous, but this is not some singular feature of free enterprise. All those willing to act without moral constraint will likely find their profit. There is always gain to be had in plunder and treachery; the phenomenon is not unique to capitalist societies. The socialist societies of the past simply made plunder and confiscation the principles of their political economies, to the dreary ruin of so many.

But while this critique of capitalism is often made in the most one-sided way, it tells us something important about how prosperity comes to be perceived when it has become ubiquitous. We all come to be tainted by the vision of the spoiled son. In the technological age, this danger works itself out primarily in this way: the harvests of our labor, our technological artifacts, often weaken the human character that made technology’s rise so dramatic. We become spoiled. The danger is not in some marching tyranny of machinery; it is in a diminution or impoverishment of the human things behind technology. We risk becoming so enamored with our toys and gimmickry that we fail to cultivate the human virtues that sustain and dignify technological creativity.

Our danger is that modern men, armed with the most sophisticated techniques and technologies, will lack any real understanding of the dignity of human work. They will become perpetual middlemen. Part of this alienation lies in our remoteness from the causes of things, on the one

hand, and from their consequences on the other. A man aspires to be a doctor but instead finds himself an amateur attorney and document-shuffler: filling out forms, filing reports, ensuring at every stage that he is beyond liability. Technology has made his job “easier” but it often makes his patients more distant—both because he sees them less and because they come to trust the technologies of medicine more than the man who prescribes their use. Success rates may be higher, outcomes may be better, but a certain alienation lingers in both parties as the human touch diminishes. The doctor’s vocation is transformed from personal interaction and care to impersonal liaison between the enormous technological institutions of modern medicine and the patient. The doctor discovers one day that he is less a healer than a bureaucratic middleman.

To some extent, this condition is engendered by the moral limitations of the modern welfare state. We can hardly expect men to see clear, much less *noble* purpose in the mechanism by which Stranger A extracts income from men’s paychecks to distribute to Stranger B, who may or may not be poor. It is absurd to imagine that the personal moral duty called charity can be discharged by this impersonal process, whatever one might think of the necessity of the welfare state. But alienation is also engendered by the increasingly abstract or intangible nature of our free economy. The American worker is highly productive, but how often does he know well what he produces? He likely knows his own part, but does he comprehend the whole?

There is something august and human and indescribably sane to be said for completeness, even if it is simple. We hire out our gardening, our lawn-mowing, our child-rearing, our customer service, and our tech support. We buy our furniture from do-it-yourself catalogues, and experience the illusion of “making something” that is really mass-produced by others. Many modern employees, even when they labor in industries they admire, only infrequently perceive a satisfying completeness in their work. It is like a minute core sample from some larger enterprise; its final dignity is often obscure to them.

Technology can also obscure the humanity of the human beings we interact with. For example, the Internet is wonderfully efficient at distributing information and at democratizing the Fourth Estate, but it can also isolate and dehumanize. Anyone familiar with Internet debate understands this reality all too well. There is a sort of raucous and wooly community among the multitude of bloggers. It is always fascinating, frequently rewarding, and at times magnificent: a genuine innovation in

free speech and republican discourse. But it is also conducive to meanness and slander. The ordinary inhibitions of human interaction, the natural respect and civility that should be extended between even those who disagree, is attenuated and at times almost nonexistent. The result is often a kind of disembodied aggression, a drab uncharity. People troll the Internet hunting for targets of animus on whom to unleash their polemical weapons. It is very easy on the Web to forget that you are actually in a distant way engaging real people. And in forgetting that, ferocity ensues. Blogging is spirited, but it often lends itself to rancor. At its best, it brings distant people with shared interests together in ways once unimaginable. At its worst, it reflects the radical isolation of technologically-inebriated creatures. In its glories and entangled perils it illustrates the truth that we must be mindful of all that is human behind our contrivances, lest they devour us.

In a rush toward efficiency and convenience, men have grown efficient at overlooking things. We do not see the wonder of the window, so busy are we looking through it. The elevator does not astound us, because we never contemplate elevation. A perennial artifice in fiction, film, and television is the man from the past brought forward to the present, who must spend a good deal of time struggling through astonishment, fear, and bewilderment as he adjusts to his new world. Whatever we may think of this conceit, it rests on a sound insight about the tendency in man to forget where he came from. A few years ago in these pages, Yuval Levin wrote that “repugnance fades with habit” and quoted Dostoevsky’s claim that “man, the beast, gets used to everything.” Man surely gets used to horrors, but he also gets used to wonders—perhaps to such an extent that he may eventually forget that there is wonder and mystery left in the world. He loses the small boy’s amazement at the miracle of the fountain or the magical grotesquerie of the anthill. In losing sight of this mysticism and awe, his spirit is enfeebled—the very spirit that helped give birth to our technological civilization. It was man’s wonder at the fountain that stirred his visions of elaborate irrigation in the driest desert and majestic human settlements in what once was wasteland. “All human pioneers,” writes George Gilder, “from poets and composers in their many epiphanies to scientists on the mystical frontiers of matter where life again begins, are essentially engaged in forms of devotion.” They are worshiping fruitfulness. Forsake the imaginative sense and devotion fades.

Of course, there is another side to this picture: habituation to our technological marvels can also be a catalyst to further innovation. Unsatisfied

with what exists already, the inventor seeks to create something new. But the true inventor is unlikely to allow his restlessness with the present to turn into disdain for the past. The dreamer who aspires to colonize Mars is unlikely to hold the Apollo astronauts in contempt. He is much more likely to revere and honor them by continuing their creative work.

The Meaning of Ownership

This brings us to our second question: How can we avoid the cultural contradictions of technology? How can we avoid the danger that our technological achievements will erode the human spirit that makes human creativity both possible and meaningful? The answer depends significantly on the promotion of private property. Men are manifestly more likely to regard with reverence, to cherish for itself, a thing which they own. A man can hardly feel alienated from his own house, or from the simple pleasures of labor in his own garden. I would even prefer private property when it conflicts with the free market principle—as it does on occasion. In the preponderance of instances, these two principles cohere nicely. But it is not mere semantics that divides them, and our laws should favor property over the market in any given conflict—especially *personal* property, where the ownership of assets is more truly connected to the life of an owner.

One must surely grant the importance of largeness in the free enterprise system—for diffusion of risk, accumulation of venture capital, and economies of scale. But I cannot see how liberty is best preserved in the implacable swallowing up of small, autonomous firms into vast bureaucratic corporations. I cannot see the sanity in preferring the huge and cumbersome to the small, local, and independent. I cannot see much to admire in that consolidation which allows a single corporation to own 40 newspapers or 200 banks. It is often remarked, both anecdotally and more systematically, that the corporate psychology vitiates innovation and vigor; that it bureaucratizes and thereby weakens considerably the creative human impulses. Like any bureaucracy, the corporation can regularly mean the promotion of agreeable fecklessness, the rewarding of failure, and the punishment of independent enterprise. We are foolish, as defenders of liberty, if we reflexively defend the corporate economy, or if we willfully ignore the tension that sometimes exists between the corporatist ethic and the spirit of ownership.

Someone will surely reply that I am mistaken in my economics. But they have missed the point. Economics answers to its master: mankind. It

is precisely backwards to let economics dictate our principles—for economics is a tool, just like any other applied discipline. Economics cannot tell us our vision of the good life any more than biology can tell us why human life is sacred, or chemistry why a glass of beer after a hard day's work is such a great pleasure, or physics why men look to the heavens with such awe. Economics can surely aid us in our efforts to achieve the good life, but it cannot, of its own devices, articulate the good life. The reign of economics as a kind of totem is the sign of a servile people.

Both philosophically and practically, the broad ownership of property is the greatest tool we have to embrace and secure the immense benefits of technological civilization, and to check the encroachment of spiritual enervation on the sanctity of human initiative. All private property secures liberty, as every cunning despot who subverted the former to obliterate the latter knew well. The Bolsheviks concluded, shrewdly and correctly, that when the state is the only employer, disobedience means starvation. That was their innovation in political economy, and it took men like Trotsky and Lenin—not good men mistakenly doing evil, but evil men rarely mistaken in any of their calculations—to implement so fearsome and cruel a regime. If demons like these hated private property, we have reason enough to cherish it.

The ownership of property, something purchased on the credit of honest labor, is a near-constant reminder of the ultimate humanness of all our achievements—even, perhaps especially, our technological achievements. In a technological civilization, property often appears as little more than a bundle of documents representing stock options and retirement plans and personal savings accounts. There is more “property” in my filing cabinet than there is in the rest of my home. The property is in the record of transactions and contracts. But when a man looks on his house—the wallpaper that so stubbornly resisted removal, the innumerable minor but trying repairs, the paint applied and stains removed—he sees his labor as real and material; he cannot be alienated from it. Looking next on that bundle of papers in the filing cabinet, he more solidly comprehends what they mean. When he knows real property, he more clearly understands and cherishes its mere representation in paper statements. Ownership has become live and vivid to him.

Modern technology often comes to us as if an inheritance. We are (most of us, anyway) remote from its causes and its inner principles. How many newcomers to the American South (like myself) know anything about the development of small, cheap air conditioning units, even though

that development was absolutely crucial to the late economic boom in cities like Atlanta? This whole story of invention and engineering and refinement is obscure; air conditioning is our lovely little inheritance. But the inheritance feels a bit more personal when I own it myself and find myself responsible for its upkeep, even—perhaps especially—in the middle of oppressive summer heat when the unit breaks down. The principle of property has drawn technology nearer to me, and made it more human, even in this small and merely illustrative way. But technology might come to appear like mere sorcery if the regime of proprietorship were imperiled. And here it must be emphatically acknowledged that property, despite the many accretions against it, still thrives in the United States. Stock ownership—a strange manifestation of private property, but a manifestation nonetheless—is wide and ever-widening. Home ownership soars; similarly automobiles and DVD players and, yes, air conditioners are owned by an ever-increasing number of people. Every major town has a Home Depot store. These are not insignificant things.

Life, Liberty, and Property

But they could come to naught if the very principle of private property is subverted or allowed to decay with neglect. The technological age challenges the idea of property by making it more abstract, more immaterial, and more distant—though in the end no less real. Intangible manifestations like intellectual property assume a new predominance, with concomitant legal, social, and political difficulties. The popular music industry is a good example: It faces new questions about how to protect the makers of music in an age where every recording can be easily copied for free. This puzzle—music belongs to the maker even as it becomes the possession of the masses—is just one example of how technology transforms the meaning of property, but never eradicates its importance. Where property is immaterial or wholly unseen, there is the danger that the *idea* of property will be attenuated and thus made more vulnerable. Everyone will claim other people's creations as their own, and thus lose sight of the honor owed to creativity itself.

Life, liberty, and property—of these declared rights we cannot forget the indispensable last, for it is through private property that we engage with the ineradicable humanness of our technological civilization. To weaken property rights is to render creative exertion defenseless and unintelligible; it is to drive a wedge between material products and the human activity of production. But this sad development is by no means

inevitable. We need only remember that technology, for all its marvels, remains a great human problem. A technological society is not the same as a free society, much less a good and decent society. Technology can produce a peculiar kind of deadening in the human spirit, a deadening of precisely the human character that gave rise to our technological age. But the ownership society, rightly understood, can provide a partial antidote to this dreary trend in the life of toil and hardship freely endured for the sake of something owned and cherished. The distance between things and man can be narrowed; the final humanness of technology can be established; and the problem of technology making slaves of its makers can perhaps be averted.