HUMANITAS TECHNICA

LYCEUM INSTITUTE
PROJECTS

We suffer most profoundly when we do not notice we are suffering. It is human to struggle against an ailment, but inhuman to accept it as normal—"A dead thing can go with the stream, but only a living thing can go against it", as G.K. Chesterton wrote.

While few today live wholly unaware that technology often has negative impacts upon our lives, the full depth to which we fall under its influence remains largely unnoticed. This ignorance follows from 1) vague definitions of technology; 2) the immediate comforts it provides us; 3) fundamental misconceptions about our own human nature.

As such, our relationship with technology needs not only to improve, but to change in its very foundations. It is our belief that contemporary misunderstandings of technology pose a critical threat to human well-being. These misunderstandings—categorize as conceptual errors—are exacerbated by pernicious habits of perceiving technology in our immediate experience: namely, of seeing it under strictly instrumental lights, as a set of tools by which we solve problems. Perceiving technology according to a framework of problems and solutions impedes conceptual corrections, and the conceptual errors propel the perceptual mistakes in a vicious spiral away from the core of what it means to be human.

Humanitas Technica is a multifaceted project that aims to re-cast the conversation concerning technology: not only for those in academic inquiry, but for everyone who uses technology, and especially those who create it. This project includes seminars, the publication of journals, books, and multimedia productions: audio lectures, podcasts, and videos. If we succeed in spreading this re-conceptualization, we may affect a proper **resolution of technology** to human existence.

This document outlines the major conceptual and perceptual necessities to affecting this resolution.

Humanitas Technica

A project of
the Lyceum Institute

Introduction

Commonly, the framing of technological questions presupposes one or another framework: social, economic, anthropological, progressive, conservative—etc. These presupposed frameworks pre-determine beliefs about technology according to principles themselves unexamined. This Procrustean approach, instead of incorporating essential truths about the nature of technology and discovering the principles by which it may cohere with a holistic philosophical doctrine, instead forces a conformity of technological conception into perverse paradigms. In consequence, technologies invariably become instrumentalized and weaponized in manners that both obscure their true nature and harm human beings in the process.

The evidence for this harm of human beings—though it is obscured itself by not only our persistent misunderstandings of technology but also the ubiquity of technological realizations—can be seen in nearly every dimension of contemporary life. We may place these harms in three broad and interrelated categories, which admit of many subdivisions.

First, there are what we may call **physical harms**, which may be subdivided into bodily and environmental. Environmental harms do not reduce strictly to the interfered functions of non-human nature (such as climate and ecology) but include also the ways in which the built environment constitutes unsuitable surroundings for individual human flourishing. Examples include immediately evident phenomena such as: pollution in urban areas, subsidence, contamination of water sources, and the trend towards autonomous vehicles (concerning not only for driver, passenger, cyclist, and pedestrian safety but also individual competence and job security), but also less obviously-technological problems, such as unsafe road-planning and lack of sufficient accommodation for pedestrian transport, poorly designed and built infrastructure that is costly and difficult to maintain, and the fragile interdependency of supply chains for essential goods such as food and medicine.

Bodily physical harms are closely tied to many of these environmental problems, which latter often cause the former, but include also a panoply of other issues: such as innumerable questions of medicine, the means for attaining fitness, nutrition, adequate rest, the effects of drugs (narcotic, recreational, and prescription alike), and many closely associated psychological issues which will

be addressed momentarily. In the area of physical health especially, a reductionistic and mechanistic view of the human person has resulted in an attitude that, even if the functioning of the body may be temporarily improved in one or another manner, the manner of solution fragments the whole good of the human and causes unquantifiable harm.

Second, there are what we will call psychological harms. Many of these occur correspondingly to diverse physical harms, both bodily and environmental. It would be mistaken, however, to reduce the complex reality of individual psychological constitutions to physical causes. Indeed, the root of technologically-realized physical harms, both bodily and environmental, can be located in certain habits of the human psyche—such as the moral anesthesia of increasing recreational narcotic usage. The psyche itself is harmed, however, in a more easily-identified set of ways: such as depression, suicidality, apathy, loneliness, increasing diagnoses of learning disabilities as well as behavioral and personality disorders, various bodily dysmorphias, and the overall disengagement from living in a meaningful way.

Many of these psychological harms have been greatly accelerated by the prevalence of social media and the devices that enable their ubiquitous presence. But, though an essential instrument to this acceleration, the media themselves do not alone cause the damage. As this project aims to show, the fundamental cause of technologically-realized psychological harm consists in the structures responsible for psychological habituation themselves. These are **extended but not constituted** by technology. Absent a right understanding of these structures, the worsening of harms—psychological and physical alike—is inevitable.

Third, there are what we will call relational harms. This category exists in dependence upon both the physical and the psychological but reduces to neither. Put otherwise, it is necessary that we recognize mind-independent relations, as mediated and influenced by technology, in order that we understand technology's true effects. These are harms that occur within institutional structures of society, both personal (such as marriage) and societal (such as academia or government). Here we might consider the technological effects such as cellphone location data and how it impacts trust and transparency, or how LLM technology might alter the course of dissertation research and writing.

By careful examination of these three distinct kind of harms, we will be able better to understand the nature and constitution of technology itself: for each serves as a heuristic to discovering the proper relation between the human person

and the instruments of his technologically-oriented thinking. However, the aim of the project is not to focus upon harms as such, but, rather, to use inquiry into these harms so as to affect a **better-ordered** integration of the technological into a properly-human way of living.

We will call this "better-ordered integration" by the name of "technological resolution". A resolution, in this sense, is the affection of a unity without the dissolution of difference. Our present experience of technology—given its rapid development and expansion into every area of life over the past several centuries, and especially in the 21st—has resulted in a fragmented situation. We lack technological resolution in many—and likely most—areas where it has become prevalent. To affect technological resolution, it is necessary that we first discover precisely what technology is. We can answer the question of technology's essence by making various distinctions about how we use the word. Second, as will be discovered through this inquiry, technology does indeed exist as an extension of the human psyche. Presenting a robust and well-developed faculty psychology will enable us to gain deeper insights into not only technology's essence, but its essential properties as well, and especially to identify the intelligibility of specifically-technological causality.

On the basis of this essential task, we will be able subsequently to examine the influence of technology on both biology and the constitution of the built environment. This will help exemplify in concrete particular technological causality and make more evident the full scope of its effects to a broad audience. Attention to the sensible world's suffering of the technological will make more evident not only its physical but also its psychological harms. More importantly, these evident harms—many of which are widely realized already—will be intelligible as *why* they exist. A more apt diagnosis will allow us a better prescription for correcting the maladaptation of these technologies.

Having grasped both the psychological and the biological constituents of the technological experience, we will then be capable of turning our attention to how technological causality affects cultural institutions, from those that are most particular and personal to those that are most universal and far-reaching: from relationships between spouses and local communities to questions of international government and war.

Finally, we will inquire into the technological mediation of and effects upon communication and weave together the ethical concerns motivating all the prior

areas of focus: psychology, biology and the built environment, and cultural institutions. Across all four major areas (including communication), we will observe certain consistent themes: such as the confrontation of material problems, necessities, and innovations; economic incentives, disincentives, and the converse relation of technology to questions of material wealth; artificial intelligence, future-orientations, and the preservation of humanity; and, perhaps often in the background but nevertheless persistently, the relationship between technology and religion.

The Difficulties of Technology

2024 SEMINAR

The first major initiative of the Humanitas Technica project is a collaborative online seminar to be conducted in the Fall of 2024. As with all Lyceum seminars, this will be conducted using Microsoft Teams and combine both asynchronous and synchronous participation. Participants will be engaged in continual communal inquiry through selected readings and discussions, listening to brief lectures, and contributing their own thoughts through a variety of media. This seminar will attempt elucidation of the key difficulties of technology across the four major areas outlined above: **psychology**, **biology and the built environment**, **cultural institutions**, and **communication.**

In conducting this seminar, we will be immersed within and making use of the digital environment. Through this immersion we will have a unique opportunity for conscious reflection upon how technology shapes our communication, our thinking, and our behavior.

This seminar will consist of three phases:

1. An introductory asynchronous reading and conversation period (from 19 July–September 21), in which key texts and issues are raised and subjected to a preliminary investigation. Key texts which we will examine in the seminar include but are not limited to:
    I. Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology*
    II. Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society*
    III. Norbert Wiener, *The Human Use of Human Beings*
    IV. Edward Engelmann, *Nature and the Artificial*
    V. Marshall McLuhan
        i. *Understanding Media*
        ii. *The Gutenberg Galaxy*
        iii. *Laws of Media* (with Eric McLuhan)
    VI. Anton Barba-Kay, *A Web of Our Own Making*
    VII. Leo Marx, "Postmodern Pessimism" in *Does Technology Drive History? The Dilemma of Technological Determinism*.

2. A discussion period, spanning 8 weeks (from 22 September–November 23, with a break at the midpoint), with focused weekly conversations

structured around a key question including a synchronous video chat session every Saturday. Provisional questions include:

I. What is technology? Does it need conceptual disambiguation? Can we define it?

II. What is the relationship between human psychology and technology? Which model of the human psyche best explains technology's effects upon us? How can we understand self-control in relation to technology's capabilities?

III. What is the relationship between nature and the artificial? How do we by our technological efforts alter the environments in which we live?

IV. In what ways do we alter, extend, distort, improve, or risk our own biological well-being with technological interventions? How should medicine be understood and practiced in the light of advancing technological capabilities?

V. What are the effects—beneficial and negative alike—of technology upon the organization and conduct of human communities? What are the responsibilities of cultural institutions towards the use and development of technology?

VI. How are governments specifically responsible for technology? Can government *itself* be regarded as a form of technology? How is it responsible for the technological environments of individuals and communities?

VII. Are all technologies communication technologies? What are the effects of technology on communication? How does technology exert this causality?

VIII. How can we reconcile technological development with the right and fitting constitution of environments, physical and psychological alike? What is the "mean" of technological incorporation into the life of the whole human person?

3. A resolution period, in which participants work together to coalesce their thoughts into writing or other media production. This voluntary period will officially last an additional two months but will continue to unfold into the rest of the Humanitas Technica project.

Digital Technology and Identity

2024 ACPA Satellite Session Panel

An open invitation to all members of the Humanitas Technica project: we will host a panel at the American Catholic Philosophical Association's Annual Meeting (14–17 November 2024) on the topic of "Digital Technology and Identity". The description is as follows:

> *Does digital technology alter our identities*? Why (not)? How? And what can we do about it? Though a now-constant background to our existence, the nature and consequences of digital technology remains veiled, and lights are only beginning to shine through—giving us as yet an obscured and dim insight. Recent books—such as Antón Barba-Kay's *Web of Our Own Making*, James Madden's *Thinking about Thinking*, Anthony Wachs' *New Science of Communication*, and Edward Engelmann's *Nature and the Artificial*—have all provided some fruitful illumination. This panel aims to extend these explorations by asking specifically about the effects of digital technology on the development—or disintegration—of personal identity. In particular, we will focus on the questions of anonymity and pseudonymity, the (distortive) mirror of the digital environment and curated self-presentations, and the correspondent increase of divergent sexual attractions and gender identities.

This panel will include a 45-minute discussion of the panelists, centered around a selection of brief texts to be distributed in August, and a 45-minute open floor conversation.

Project Participation

Though we expect it may perhaps remain indefinitely open to continued development and expansion, the immediate aim of this project, as presently conceived, will span two-years, beginning in August of 2024 and ending in September of 2026. During this time, we plan to hold multiple seminars, workshops, participate in various conferences, and produce a wide range of media all in line with the goal of changing the conversation around technology. We envision participation in the project to take place through two primary modalities:

Continuous Conversation: Among the unique opportunities afforded us by the age of digital technology is that we can build habits of conversation with one another despite being geographically far-flung and even despite (to some extent) the busyness of our lives. By maintaining an active forum in the digital environment, we will have the possibility to maintain an on-going collaborative inquiry into the nature, use, adaptation, and development of technology. Through this forum, participants can shape the direction of our specific initiatives, the second modality.

Specific Initiatives: Giving structure to these conversations will be a diverse series of initiatives: time-specific planned activities, ranging from seminars to workshops and conferences, publications and media production (and perhaps more), these initiatives will both sharpen our own inquiries and result in the development of public facing media of the project. These initiatives will be announced several months in advance and will include synchronous, asynchronous, online, and in-person events. We intend to include not only academic events but also outreach and conversation with those within industry.

Those invited to participate in Humanitas Technica will be free to participate as much or as little in both modalities—understanding the hectic nature of many schedules today, we want to provide opportunity rather than imposition—though we will encourage consistent engagement and may ask for specific input or contribution to specific initiatives where we believe it appropriate.