

## **TECHNOLOGY, TELEOLOGY, AND POSTURE: MAKER'S KNOWLEDGE IN EDUCATION, RHETORIC, AND WORK-PLAY<sup>1</sup>**

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Could the bulk of our waking life come to consist of conscious experience in which our activities are directed toward self-chosen, significant ends, while engaging in rhetorical practices that reflect and reinforce the type of enjoyment characteristic of play, despite the fact that what we are doing is work? Yes, if we mean by this a possible world, clearly distinct from this one. But could this one day be true in our world? That large structural changes are occurring in our society is evident. Adapting to and managing the current changes, as well as playing a significant role in what will result from them, is in complex ways controlled not only by politicians and corporate forces, but also by the creative forces in a culture that include visual artists, musicians, and rhetoricians of every variety – including, but far from limited to, educators and advertisers.

The answers to two questions may help us see not only why the opening question can be answered in the affirmative, but also provide a framework for conceptually managing and practically utilizing our so-called technological advances. The first question is: How does our conception of value bear on the way in which we utilize technologies? The second is: What is the best posture to adopt toward communicative and other new technologies? An answer to the second question may more easily be approximated as we gain clarity about how to answer the first. The way we understand the question of the relationship between values and technology might be presupposed in the practical regard we accord the artifacts we use.

## **Part I: Values**

Are we a value-laden species? Clearly we make value attributions. We lend our allegiance to the idea that a plank of wood has value, if used to mend the hull; character traits have value, or dis-value, relative to a standard or set of standards. Institutions possess value: we invest in them in the hopes of seeing this value increase. We value scraps of paper that have been scribbled on by our children, declaring them to have special value. We speak of getting a good value and of sometimes of having been taken to the cleaners where, presumably, nothing or little of value was received. If, however, the question is taken to refer directly to us – are *we* value-laden – the immediate significance of the question may be harder to discern, and the temptation might be to shift attention to the vicissitudes of value; or to the different ways in which value can be spoken of, perhaps in hope that one or more of these designations will indeed apply to us. But could we simply not answer the question, out of respect for the richness that may be embodied in the notion of self-determination?

In contexts where our aspiration is to explore and foster human expressive capacities, widening our reflectivity might be enhanced by adopting an open-textured, receptive attitude toward others that does not trade upon claims about human nature. This is quite different from denying that substantive claims about human nature might be true. Rather, the imaginative space I am suggesting is one that can be cultivated intrapersonally or interpersonally, and that does not have propositional knowledge as its goal.

What, then, is the goal? We may begin trying to answer this by first making a distinction between what Jonathan Lear has in another context referred to as “knowingness,” and to a concept we may call posture.<sup>2</sup> As in Lear’s work, ‘knowingness’ refers here to something that has its roots in the thought of Socrates. The heart of it is not knowing that we do not know.

Some of the most interesting cases of this are embodied in more-or-less systematic bodies of “doctrine” or “outlook” or “theory,” which is typically knitted together by a lengthy skein of propositions. To illustrate: I – and the first-person stance is here important to the point I am making – am by disposition attracted to phenomenological descriptions, and although at times the poet may do it better, I derive pleasure and insight from reading books written from a phenomenological perspective. After a few pages, it hardly occurs to me to wonder if this is true, because I am instead enjoying – finding value in – looking at things from the perspective made available to me. Below is an example of this, but first consider a passage from a recent article by Albert Borgmann titled, “Moral Significance of the Material Culture.” This article contains genuine value, at least in part because by means of it Borgmann helps his readers discern some disturbing trends. Borgmann writes:

Consider the culture of the table. The practice of cooking has been greatly diminished through the availability of convenience foods and microwave ovens. The practice of dining has been curtailed through grazing, snacking, and grabbing a bite to eat – forms of mere food consumption. The food itself has been reduced from a contextually intelligible and illuminating thing to an opaque if glamorous commodity.<sup>3</sup>

Now in this article, and even within this brief passage, Borgmann says a great many things that make clear his disdain for much that goes on in contemporary life. But upon reading it, two things immediately struck me: first, I found myself immediately wanting to reflect upon the role of food in my own mental architecture and life. Does food, for me, consist of “opaque if glamorous commodities”? No. Then I reflected briefly on my eating habits, and could say that while convenience foods have indeed altered our landscape – including, horrifically, the installation of a Burger King and Denny’s on Highway 10 at Cabazon, California, thus removing from view the evocative dinosaurs that have filled that landscape and my imagination since

boyhood – at least as an adult, fast food has never had any great appeal. Insofar as propositional understanding is what is at issue, therefore, Borgmann’s statements are false.

Second, I wondered whether Borgmann actually hoped his pronouncements would produce within me a kind of indignation. It seems highly plausible that he did, and that he wishes for this among other passages to serve as a kind of wake-up call, that we might embrace what he calls “real ethics.”<sup>4</sup> But such indignation itself conflicts with my values. “The food itself has been reduced from a contextually intelligible and illuminating thing to an opaque if glamorous commodity.” This may be an instance of knowingness, expressed with rhetorical overtones intended to assist me in “making true” Borgmann’s assessment.

Stipulatively, regard this knowingness as a species of perspective, attained by adopting a particular posture. Posture here is a kind of freedom that we do as self-interpreting animals possess, and yet that often goes unused or unnoticed. It is a kind of awareness hinted at by Allen Ginsberg when he quipped, “Notice what you are thinking.” Knowingness, then, might be partially characterized as not knowing what you do not know, and this as a function of having got locked into a particular posture that prevents us from exploring other possibilities.

Another type of freedom is freedom of the imagination that paradigmatically instantiates what it apprehends. Daedalus and Michelangelo envisioned flying machines; Jules Verne, both these and submarines.<sup>5</sup> When we consider the postures of mind that we can adopt toward technology, however, we discover that alternatives are available, and exploiting these options may be regarded as less a matter of “failing to notice problems inherent in the philosophy of technology,” as it is freely deciding which problems to make salient in consciousness. There is, of course, the notion that technological experience is an ideology, and as such “hides, distorts, renders impossible to discuss [anything else] as an option.”<sup>6</sup> Some of the main characteristics of

this perspective have been summarized in a recent article by Robert Pippin.<sup>7</sup> But when we read these accounts, and read too from the rich literature on the phenomenology and pragmatics of technology, they do indeed constitute a critical inquiry into the effects of artifacts upon psychological and social reality, but in the very act of grasping their significance, we transform our relationship to the social and psychological world.<sup>8</sup> Awareness, for example, of the transformations that occurred when thanks to Galileo we began to look through telescopes, depicted in such engrossing detail by Don Ihde in his article, “Image Technologies and Traditional Culture,” enables us to look with more discernment upon the nature of our perceptions as these are mediated by telescopes. As Ihde also remarks, early improvements in telescopes revolved around “increasing the *clarity* of the ‘image’ (and thus the ‘transparency’ of the instrumental capacity)” which helps us glimpse the particular kinds of transformations in subject-object relations that its developers thought valuable.<sup>9</sup> Noticing that technological advances in telescope improvements revolved around improving clarity, then, enables us to see what was valued in subsequent technologies themselves. Our becoming conscious of our ability to do this now – recognizing the flexibility inherent in this self-interpreting animal’s ability to posture – can redirect our patterns of technological consumption and utilization. For educators, the potential effect of this awareness is enormous, because it enables us to create environments in which such self-awareness, such a recognition of divergent postures, is itself among the values that we manifest – in contexts ranging from the rhetorical element in our discourses, to the choices we make in the design of our web pages. Intrapersonal recognition of, and intrapersonal dialog regarding, the sense in which this type of freedom – or the flexibility of our potential postures – is itself capable of being reflected in conscious, lived experience.

Of course, the attempt to justify values is sometimes undertaken on the assumption that the products of human inquiry, if rational, will be accessible to, and appreciated by, any thinking person. Such attempts presumably assume that rationality – or reasonableness, as it is often described in normative contexts – offers the prospect of universal appeal, and thus may be of a piece with our Enlightenment heritage. Insofar as rational inquiry into value is undertaken out of an aspiration to achieve the end of universal rational consensus rather than local canons of reasonableness, what may underlie this is a wish to realize what will be referred to as positive peace. ‘Positive peace’ does not here mean a kind of inactivity or mere cessation from strife, but nor does it mean, *tout court*, the universal institutionalization of a particular set of social, political, or economic principles. Positive peace is, rather, that which gets expressed in environments where individually decided upon projects are brought to fruition through the use of technologies and communication-fostering systems that enable us to realize coordination and cooperation.

Historically, one pattern of obstacle to achieving this goal has been a lack of efficient technology, and so this as an implicit goal may explain the rapid march of so-called progress in this domain. It is not necessary to identify the causes of these advances. One of the hindrances to our general recognition of our self-determining capacities, may be precisely a tendency to subject our aspirations to causal patterns of reasoning – reasoning which may short-circuit our attempts to instantiate those things we imaginatively envision. This claim is explored in Part II.

If we consider seriously the possibility that technological innovation might at least partially be explained in terms of this desire for coordination and cooperation, we can more easily accept its acceleration. Rather than viewing this potentially global phenomenon as mysterious, uncontrollable, or uncontrolled, we are free to view it as motivated by the impulse

for positive peace. On the other hand, if we suppose that an alternative explanation accounts more adequately for the proliferation of communicative technologies, it is still completely open to us to adopt the end of peace as the rationale for further development and implementation. So, for example, there are those who may wish to account causally for successful U.S. innovation in terms of predatory capitalism.

Some professors of education are busily engaged in constructing new discourses that they believe will facilitate alternative ways of thinking about the self and about society – ways that emancipate us from, to borrow a phrase from Peter McLaren, our status as “schizo-subjects in an artificially generated world.”<sup>10</sup> McLaren and Douglas Kellner, both professors of education, see rhetoric as highly malleable and, given its ubiquitousness, attempt to use it as a crucial and critical tool for individual emancipation. Without entering into a discussion of their work here, it is still worth noting that it is not far-fetched to assume that the work of such theorists may shape the foci of future generations unless alternatives are vigorously propounded.<sup>11</sup> As education theorists, their discourses are widely studied by graduate students who are in teacher-training programs. These individuals will subsequently educate, and are indeed now educating, at least some of our children.

Some, then, do think that one of the major U.S. exports is predatory capitalism, or a form of capitalism that has as its end, profit, and, some would add, enslavement. This story goes: Since profits can often be multiplied by manufacturing types of desire that are incapable of being satiated, this form of capitalism is in the business of creating an appetite-driven populace bent on nothing so much as consumption. Predatory capitalism, or something close to it, may well be a reality, but it is a socially constructed reality that thrives in proportion to the attention we pay to it.

Consider John Locke’s claim that the objective nature of morality could best be appreciated by comparing it to the kind of knowledge that a divine creator would have of the world. Such a creator would have maker’s knowledge, said Locke, who went on to say that, by analogy, we have maker’s knowledge of morality.<sup>12</sup> As Charles Larmore puts it:

Morality can enjoy this privilege because, for Locke, it is to a large extent our own construction. Nature, by contrast, is God’s work, done in accord with ‘archetypes’ lying in his mind, and so for us its inner structure must remain an object of conjecture.<sup>13</sup>

And so by analogy, the archetypes of our moral and other value-laden judgments, can be viewed as lying within us. Whether there is in fact more -- or less -- to the objectivity of value than this, Locke’s conception of maker’s knowledge is useful in viewing our relationship to our institutions and practices. It inserts us at the helm – a perspective that we can see if we adopt a particular posture, namely the one that Locke suggests. Locke’s example is compelling because despite the fact that he maintained belief in God, the prevalence of skepticism helped him to see the advantages of understanding morality from our point of view. Regarding value in this same light, may help us to recognize more acutely our prospective role in the future technological developments. Articulation – rhetorical, argumentative, gestural -- makes clear our teleological aspirations, understood as expressions of free beings, in the sense already described.

## **Part II: Posture**

The domination of scientific ways of knowing, together with the privileges such a designation affords, is reflected in what is consequently regarded as serious, and what is not, even though scientific models of knowledge do not typically allow for the teleological aims discussed above. The implication is that end-motivated activity is often subordinated to a causal understanding of phenomena, and is not taken as seriously as it might be in deliberating over

perspectives worth adopting toward experience. Imagine, for example, a non-rigid conception of work that is made possible by recent technological developments including the internet and ergonomically designed artifacts, like desk chairs. These developments both suggest, and make possible, a future in which an environment that contains the central elements of the freedom discussed in Part I, and traditional notions of work, may merge – and indeed in some quarters are merging – into a productive phenomenon known as work-play, in which the objective is to realize the ends that particular human beings self-consciously regard as valuable.

Work-play? Ralph Netzky, in a paper titled “Playful Freedom,” criticizes what he takes to be a defining statement of Sartre’s view of play, found in a section of *Being and Nothingness* titled, “Existential Psychoanalysis.” While unpacking Sartre, Netzky remarks favorably that “in play freedom is the ground of necessity.”<sup>14</sup> Rules there may or may not be, and abide by such rules as there are we may, but at any instant we can also choose to abandon our play altogether. Rule-governed play, he tentatively concludes, possesses a feature that might be termed the “*non-necessity of the necessary*.”<sup>15</sup> Later he reneges on the very possibility of play without rules, insisting that Sartre does as well, and then asks if there is a necessary feature that distinguishes play from work, since both for him involve rules.<sup>16</sup> He concludes that, “We work because it is necessary; play is by definition unnecessary.”<sup>17</sup> Netzky has concluded that play is necessarily non-necessary, and that work is necessarily necessary. If correct, this would show work-play to be an impossibility – or that its advocates are conceptually confused – by resorting to a vestige of Platonism. By asserting that something is necessarily true of a concept – in this case work – we eliminate further discussion not only about how the relevant concept is to be understood, but also what may not be envisioned. It is not conceptually required for us to regard work as necessary. We may regard work as valuable, and certainly a part of any kind of existence we would wish to

have, but any of us, as individuals, could choose not to work. Heavy penalties may follow in the trail of our decision, but, from the perspective of activities which we may or may not engage in, work is not necessary any more than is play.

If it is thought that this is a trivial point, consider the potential effects of having our thought and imagination informed by a conception of work that has come to us through philosophy, and that insists that if we properly understand the concept of work, we will understand it to be something that we do of necessity. This is a perhaps subtle, perhaps not so subtle, conservative posture to adopt toward what is permitted of us. ‘Permitted’ here means not, permitted by social norms, but rather permitted simpliciter. Since not working is permitted, reflecting this fact in our conceptual framework could have a transforming effect on the attitude we bring to the job: Even from the little said here, hopefully it is clear that what looked like an analysis of a necessary condition for anything to count as work, namely its being necessary, turns out to be informed by social-normative attitudes that make it difficult even to imagine work as non-necessary, and hence as sharing an element we normally attribute to play.

The aims of communicative technologies are not determined, but such as to be regarded as determinable, by us. It is possible to reflect upon the uses to which we wish to put them, and we are free to use them in a manner that explicitly recognizes their role in realizing, or failing in the struggle to realize, positive peace.

Consider a vehicle that is rapidly accelerating down a highway. We could adopt a posture toward its progress, in which it is assumed important to know exactly how the vehicle began moving. This valuable and in this case life-preserving information can be secured by developing and using instruments, formulas, and units of measurement that help predict the trajectory of this vehicle over time. Finally, if all variables are accounted for, if the instruments

are adequate, and if the measurements are precise and accurate, then – given the uniformity of nature – they can predict what will happen next.

This is the posture of the social scientist, and the posture adopted in the popular media whenever a serious portrayal of the future is presented for our consideration. This and most other so-called developed nations rely upon this model of knowledge in planning their social policies which they in turn believe will shape their institutions. It is a model of knowledge that prizes control. Pronouncements, if authoritative, are not voiced as conjectures, but rather as virtual matters of fact. This rhetorical posture is deterministic in spirit if not in intent, and perhaps the frequent sense that people have that they are unable to determine their own futures, is partially a function of this knowingness. Note that if the claim was that it is in fact due to this rhetorical posture, this writer would be engaging in the same sort of rhetoric that is now being asserted to be optional.

Just as we are wise to view a work of art from a variety of angles, including some which may require us to bend our knees and crane our neck, so likewise it is prudent to view social phenomena, including techno-communicative developments, from the uncomfortable position of the social scientist. To assume, however, that this posture is the normal or most important one, is to risk paralysis.

Our imaginary vehicle it is the product of human design. And while it may appear to be heading uncontrollably in a certain direction, it is nevertheless subject to control. It is, after all, a vehicle. Third, it is a vehicle that is extraordinarily useful for the realization of a variety of freely chosen ends.

We have maker’s knowledge of our vehicles, and as such, they are potential locations of value. Values that are shaped by ends or aims that we set for ourselves are what determine the

course our vehicles take. Because the vehicle in question is a communicative vehicle, it can be steered in the direction of giving expression to our imaginations. We sometimes give expression to our imagination not only for the sheer exhilaration that comes with being able to do so, but also because of the typically greater exhilaration we experience upon discovering that there are other like-minded individuals who wish to cooperate with us in the projects we are, or wish we were, pursuing.

Jonathan Lear writes of what he calls an “idiopolis,” or idiosyncratic internal polis, where neurotic behavior is explicable as the attempt to “keep . . . the barbarians outside the gates.”<sup>18</sup> Creative behavior, on the other hand, is the attempt to make these private polai accessible, where they are potentially taken up into public consciousness and thereby grafted into social reality. Modeling our interest in fostering a social reality in which associations are voluntary, and respect for the open-ended uses of the imagination is demonstrated linguistically and otherwise, might be a way to help us recognize what we do not know, and thus be more inclined to let the barbarians inside the gates. It may not be necessary, but it certainly is work.

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Diane Anderson, Stephanie Molnar, and David Seiple for comments on an earlier version of this paper. None of them agrees with everything I say, and any logical or conceptual inconsistencies should be attributed to me alone.

<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Lear, *Open Minded: Working Out the Logic of the Soul* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1998), ch. 3.

<sup>3</sup> Albert Borgmann, “Moral Significance of the Material Culture” in *Technology and the Politics of Knowledge* edited by Andrew Feenberg and Alastair Hannay (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press), p. 90.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, p. 92.

<sup>5</sup> Arthur B. Evans remarks upon Verne’s fictional hero in *Robur-le-conquérant*, that “. . . once aboard his powerful airship, this technological génie braves the worst of storms and soars far above the bullets fired at him, exulting in his supremacy over his earthbound rivals. Baudelaire’s poetic allegory is thus clothed in new scientific regalia; it is now the scientist who becomes the poet, and it is now the machine (as well as the knowledge that created it) which becomes the symbol of earthly transcendence.” (Arthur B. Evans, *Science Fiction Studies*, XIII:2, Number 69 (July 1996), page 174.)

<sup>6</sup> *op. cit.*, p. 46.

<sup>7</sup> Robert B. Pippin, “On the Notion of Technology as Ideology” in *Technology and the Politics of Knowledge* edited by Andrew Feenberg and Alastair Hannay (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995), pages 43-61.

<sup>8</sup> An excellent anthology of such literature is to be found in Larry Hickman, editor, *Technology and Human Affairs* (St Louis: C. V. Mosby, 1981). See also Larry Hickman, editor, *Philosophy, Technology and Human Affairs* (College Station, Texas: Ibis Press, 1985), and Larry A. Hickman, *John Dewey’s Pragmatic Technology* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992).

<sup>9</sup> Don Ihde, “Image Technologies and Traditional Cultures” in *Technology & The Politics of Knowledge*, *op. cit.*, pp. 149-150.

<sup>10</sup> Peter McLaren, *Critical Pedagogy and Predatory Culture: Oppositional Politics in a Postmodern Era* (New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 117.

<sup>11</sup> Representative of Douglas Kellner’s work is *Media Culture: Cultural Studies, Identity and Politics Between the Modern and the Postmodern* (Great Britain: Routledge, 1995). Kellner also maintains an extensive website with online articles located at <<http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/faculty/kellner/kellner.html>>. Peter McLaren has told me that his

most representative pieces are: *Life in Schools*, 3rd edition (New York: Longman, Inc., 1997); *Critical Pedagogy and Predatory Culture* (New York and London: Routledge, 1995); *Revolutionary Multiculturalism* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1997); *Schooling as a Ritual Performance*. (Boulder, Colorado: Rowman and Littlefield; 1999); *Che Guevara and Paulo Freire: An Introduction to the Pedagogy of Revolution* (Boulder, Colorado: Rowman and Littlefield, in press).

<sup>12</sup> See John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), II.xxiii; III.xi.15-16; IV.xii.8, where the first number refers to book number, the second to chapter number, and the third to paragraph number.

<sup>13</sup> Cited from pp. 30-31 of an undated manuscript that was to appear in Garber and Ayers, editors, *Cambridge History of 17<sup>th</sup> Century Philosophy*.

<sup>14</sup> Ralph Netzky, "Playful Freedom," *Philosophy Today*, summer 1974, 126.

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*, p. 127.

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.*, p. 128.

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*, p. 129.

<sup>18</sup> Lear, *op. Cit.*, p. 70.