ENDANGERED EXPERIENCES:
SKIPPING NEWFANGLED TECHNOLOGIES AND STICKING TO REAL LIFE

Dr. Marc Champagne
Department of Philosophy
Kwantlen Polytechnic University
12666, 72 Avenue, Surrey, B.C., Canada V3W 2M8
https://marcchampagnephilosopher.online/
contact@marcchampagnephilosopher.online

Manuscript draft, in progress.
(Last updated February 20, 2024)

To my future self,
in the hope that I will follow my own advice.

And to my children,
that they may one day say: "This is what dad thought"
(irrespective of whether they come to think this too.)

There is a generalized sense in our culture that […] something may have been lost. […] [P]eople react very differently to this; some endorse this idea of loss, and seek to define what it is. Others want to downplay it, and paint it as an optional reaction, something we are in for only as long as we allow ourselves to wallow in nostalgia. Still others again, while standing as firmly on the side of disenchantment as the critics of nostalgia, nevertheless accept that this sense of loss is inevitable; it is the price we pay for modernity and rationality, but we must courageously accept this bargain, and lucidly opt for what we have inevitably become. […] But wherever people stand on this issue, everyone understands, or feels they understand what is being talked about here.

Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (2007, p. 307)

The "technological imperative" is nowhere questioned […]. There are times when the [technological] drive needs moral encouragement, [but] [o]urs is not one of them. In the headlong rush, the perils of excess become uppermost. This necessitates an ethical emphasis which, we hope, is as temporary as the condition it has to counteract. But there is also a timeless precedence of "thou shall *not*" over "thou shalt" in ethics. This, in a time of one-sided pressures and mounting risks, is the side of moderation and circumspection, of "beware!" and "preserve!"

Hans Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age* (1984, pp. 203–204)

Contents

Foreword by So-and-So 5

Preface 6

Introduction 13

Chapter 1
Noticing things without notifications:
Training attention to let the ordinary compete with addictive technology 51

Chapter 2
Needle in a needle stack:
Understanding how AI's semiotic inflation causes experiential devaluation . . . . ??

Chapter 3
You are not in a vast simulation:
Finding features forever distinguishing real reality from virtual reality . . . . ??

Chapter 4
Meet me in meatspace:
Redressing share meals as a neglected link to reality and each other . . . . ??

Chapter 5
Meaningful inefficiency beats meaningless efficiency:
Using instruments without losing sight of their merely instrumental value . . . . ??

Chapter 6
When lacking an "undo" button, use a "don't do" button:
Listening to the message of caution conveyed in our most lasting stories . . . . ??

Chapter 7
Self-replicating machines and childless humans:
Realizing that robots don't have rights but we adults have plenty of responsibilities . . . ??

Conclusion . . . . ??

References . . . . ??

Appendix . . . . ??

Foreword by So-and-So

Forthcoming

Preface

I teach and write about philosophy of technology, but I can't quite pinpoint when I first began to think more critically about technology—and more charitably about real life. Maybe it goes back to 1998, when a freak event caused me to travel back in time. I wasn't alone: thousands of people were also involved.

At the time, I was living south of Montreal, in the epicenter of what would soon become known as The Great North American Ice Storm. Freezing rain poured so relentlessly for days that, by the time nature was coating everything with ice, each blade of grass had a baseball bat attached to it. You can imagine what that did to electrical wires. So, for weeks, a power outage left a large portion of the population in pitch black darkness. I was fortunate enough to have a close friend whose father was a hunter and handyman, so I spent the crisis in an oil-heated home eating game meat, canned goods, and sipping tea by candlelight. Everyone muddled through however they could. According to some estimates, the ice storm claimed 35 lives, injured 945, and resulted in the temporary displacement of 600,000 people. This is horrible. Still, I distinctly recall feeling disappointed when, after weeks of silence, power returned.

I liken this to time travel, because it was like sampling an era I knew once existed but had never experienced. This was before smartphones, mind you. Even so, the blackout showed us how little time we previously spent with each other. With nowhere to go and no distractions to grab our attention, conversations stretched and social bonds tightened.

When it all ended, many people resumed their lives, unaffected. I, however, could not shake the disturbing realization that my quality of life had been tangibly better.

Gestalt theory teaches us that, to see anything, we have to see it against the backdrop of something else. This contrast lets attention discern an object, but given that our cognitive resources would not handle a regress, we must let the backdrop's boundaries fade into the unknown. Thus, like our darting eyes, our minds are constantly focusing on surprises while letting invariants recede into inattention. This explains why new technologies feel exciting at first but quickly become a new normal that we don't even notice. The ice storm crushed this pattern of habituation, revealing valuable aspects of human life that we normally overlook.

I was an undergraduate student at the time. Now, two PhDs and five kids later, I want to use my philosophical training to explore—without any disaster—what else I might be missing out on.

To see the value of such a project, you must have had your private ice storm moment. Coming with this prior personal motivation matters, because I will not devote any space to establishing that technologies can sometimes, on balance, be more bad than good. What troubles me instead is that, even when we realize such harms, we often have a hard time skipping technologies. Conformity with social trends exerts a powerful influence, so something needs to tug equally hard or harder in the opposite direction. I cannot match the emotional power of a novelist. Still, I hope this book's justifications and explanations can nudge the complacent fence sitter within all of us.

Right now, there is a clear demand for books addressing the drawbacks of technology. Sociologists (Turkle 2015), psychologists (Twenge 2017), computer scientists (Newport 2019), and scholars from business schools (Zuboff 2019) have all written books addressing the drawbacks of technology. Yet, for some reason, we find comparatively few offerings by philosophers articulating such a critical message. This is odd. What sort of emptiness is technology generating, exactly? If it is an *existential* void, then we are solidly on philosophical turf. As for the question "what should I do?"—it is the core concern of philosophy's branch of ethics.

Decisions are all about trade-offs, so we should develop a reflex of asking, not just "What does this technology add to my life?", but also "What does this technology *remove* from my life?" I am less concerned with the outcome of such a reflection than with ensuring that both sides are considered. Such a reflection won't reach die hard technophiles convinced that every problem can be solved by cleverer algorithms and better policies. It may, however, help those who share my feeling that something is wrong but can't quite articulate this feeling of wrongness.

Sometimes, change can come simply from naming a pervasive phenomenon. So, if you want to glimpse the best-case scenario that motivates me as an author, my hope is that the expression "endangered experiences" will crystallize people's inchoate worries, go viral, and trigger a more critical conversation about technology.

Despite such aspirations, I do not think anything I say in this book is original. I might occasionally say certain things that haven't been said before, but originality is not my priority. Years in academia have convinced me that originality is overvalued, so expect

no breakthroughs. It isn't that originality is bad; it is a perfectly fine and often exciting (contextual) feature. I believe, however, that intellectual work like non-fiction writing can and should pursue goals *besides* originality. One value that books can provide is *edification*.

Many "self-help" books stoke readers into making more money, losing weight, or being more successful at seduction (the usual trivium). Edification, by contrast, is about finding the moral courage to pursue goals that one's better self considers worthwhile. Importantly, when one finds the courage to pursue such nobler goals, one does not acquire new knowledge. Richard Rorty remarked how, for some, "it is difficult to imagine that any activity would be entitled to bear the name 'philosophy' […] if it were not in some sense a theory of knowledge, or a method for getting knowledge, or at least a hint as to where some supremely important kind of knowledge might be found" (1979, p. 357). When it comes to technology, we all "know" that *newer* doesn't always mean *better*. But, the fact that our knowledge fails to significantly alter our choices shows how we need "more interesting, more fruitful ways of speaking" (Rorty 1979, p. 360).

Distancing this book from the standard concern with originality is crucial, since one of my strategies will be to draw on traditional ideas we are already acquainted with. I do not think the challenges we currently face differ fundamentally from the challenges our ancestors faced. Today's technologies may be unprecedented, but tempering human hubris and excess is an age-old struggle. Hence, the timeline I consider relevant is far longer than the norm.

This elongated outlook holds in both directions. Looking at the past, I will sometimes harvest insights about caution and prudence that may have pre-historic origins. Many people look to the past for guidance. Comparisons are sometimes made, for example, between the invention of the atom bomb and the invention of AI. However, I think we can find guidance in episodes like The Flood (yes, that flood). I also don't regard it as an automatic flaw when our hold on facts loosens and myths come into the picture. "Fact" is a word best applied to tiny truths. Some larger truths don't fit in that scheme and so are best expressed in the expansive medium of the imagination called fiction.

The same turn to myth shows up when we direct our gaze into the future. A prediction may be fact-based, but the more it ventures into distant centuries, the more speculative it becomes. Since I have no quarrel with this, my elongated timeline will take seriously technological issues—like total absorption in virtual reality and total replacement by artificial people—that most critics deem too distant to worry about. I am writing this book with my kids (and grandkids?) in mind, so ideally I would like to craft guidance that can be compelling and relevant beyond the present generation.

An added advantage of engaging with hypothetically sophisticated technology is that, if you can get clear about these extreme cases, the more moderate ones will have an easier time falling into place. If we can establish, for example, that for principled reasons even the most developed computer simulation could never duplicate an in-person meeting, then clearly the latest version of Zoom will fall short as well.

Most of the material presented here has never been published before. That said, parts of chapter one are scheduled to appear in *Phaneroscopy and Phenomenology: A*

Neglected Chapter in the History of Ideas, edited by Mohammad Shafiei and Ahti-Veikko Pietarinen (Springer, forthcoming). The ideas of chapter two were first articulated at Langara College in Vancouver on February 8, 2023 (the turnout and level of interest were so significant that, by 11pm, security had to remind those lingering of the building's closure). Parts of chapter seven have appeared as "The Mandatory Ontology of Robot Responsibility" in the *Cambridge Quarterly of Healthcare Ethics* (2021) and "A Comparative Defense of Self-Initiated Prospective Moral Answerability for Autonomous Robot Harm" in *Science and Engineering Ethics* (2023).

Although I am responsible for all the views and remaining mistakes in this book, I want to thank Rose Marie Borutski, Mehak Brar, Liam Dempsey, Nicola DiSvevia, Wayne Fenske, Brian Garrett, Mark Glouberman, Martin Hofmann, William Irwin, Henry Jackman, Nicolas Langlois-Demers, Karl Yang Li, Puqun Li, Joyce Liew, François Limoges-Champagne, Leslie Marsh, Wendy Qinruiwen Long, Jamin Pelkey, Karl Pfeifer, Ahti-Veikko Pietarinen, Kent Schmor, Mohammad Shafiei, Ryan Tonkens, Sandra Woien, and Christopher Yorke. Without them, I would have had fewer ideas to explore and more errors to apologize for. I am also grateful for the vibrant students of my film-based PHIL 1201 course, where many of this book's ideas originated.

Mainstream media makes it seem as if adopting the latest batch of technologies is inevitable: VR, AI, and bots are coming; it would be foolish to oppose such a trend; so just get with the program. The comments posted by readers at the bottom of my website show the costs of such a conformist attitude. I got a jolt of resolve from seeing how many readers shared my concerns. Since much of our inaction stems from underestimating how

many like-minded people there are, sharing personal stories is more powerful than it seems. Hence, as this book project progresses and anecdotes amass, I plan to include them as an appendix.

This draft is constantly improving, so anyone who spots typos and/or wants to offer constructive feedback can email me at contact@marcchampagnephilosopher.online

Enjoy!

Introduction

> Imagine a man who gets really good at karate: growing overconfident he picks a fight with a man with a gun and gets killed. He knew how to fight with armed men in the safest way possible; but he forgot that here 'safest possible' wasn't safe enough—he didn't know enough not to start the fight at all. In such cases, we can say, *'know-how' is incompetence without 'know-whether'* […].
>
> Dan Lyons
> "Are Luddites Confused?" (1979, p. 383; emphasis added)

Some people write books to save the world. I am writing this to save my reputation. You see, I have drawn a line in the sand and decided that there are some coming technologies I simply will not use. For instance, right now, I am deemed normal for holding my smartphone in my palm and not on the bridge of my nose. A few years from now, when virtual reality becomes a thing, I will be deemed abnormal for (not) doing the same thing. So, when that time comes and I am called crusty, old, and crazy, I want to have this book on hand—to prove that I am crusty, old, but not crazy.

There are *reasons* why I refuse some technologies. This is my best attempt to explain those reasons. I don't aim to convince anyone of anything—I have long ago stopped believing in that. Still, I suspect that others may appreciate having justifications on stand-by, the next time they are called names for skipping newfangled technologies.

Agree or disagree with where I draw the line, at least I have a line. Looking around, the dominant attitude seems to be to adopt whatever technologies come one's way, without any prior thought. Folks (in the West) seem to have gone from "God is dead therefore everything is permitted" to "Everything is permitted therefore anything we do will work out fine." This isn't the place to discuss the whole God thing. But, I doubt that an unconstrained free-for-all will turn out well. Lines in the sand, one eventually realizes, aren't necessarily a bad thing.

Such a realization usually comes only after bad consequences have happened, so it would be nice if, simply by reading a book, one could skip that phase. I doubt that I can spare anyone from the costs of their learning curve. Yet, as a philosopher and parent, I have to try. After all, my kids will probably be the first to regard me as crusty, old, and crazy.

A technological sea change is under way. Faced with this, I propose to adopt a radical stance and *do absolutely nothing*. The technologies I currently use serve me well, thank you very much. This stance is bound to get more radical with each passing year, but I don't intend it to be contrarian. I recognize, however, that standing against the current is essentially swimming against it. So, to weather the onslaught of virtuality and artificiality, we need to be grounded in reality as deeply as possible. Unpacking what that means is one of my goals.

Using a mix of argumentation, phenomenological description, and myth interpretation, this book will look at the loss of meaning that ensues when we rely so much on technology that we lose sight of our ordinary surroundings and activities. I will

gradually introduce the approaches I take in the chapters I take them, but for now let's unpack all the words in my title and subtitle.

Endangered experiences

Everyone is acquainted with endangered experiences. You have no doubt conversed with a friend roughly your own age and said: "Do you remember when we _____?"—filling that blank with some previously widespread experience now rendered rare or absent by technological change. In some cases, the bygone experience is mentioned out of nostalgia. In other cases, the joint reminiscence signals good riddance. Yet, what makes a philosophical study of endangered experiences so frustrating—and urgent—is the fact that we tend to notice their absence only once they have become extinct experiences. Chances are that, if we bring up a particular experience in conversation, it is because that experience is gone, in some cases forever.

Many readers have generously shared with me their stories. Ostensibly, privacy and tranquility are endangered experiences. As Sandra recounts: "When I work, I silence [my cell phone], but it is always there waiting, sometimes with bad news. I check at set times, and every so often I see a troubling news story or I am notified of an unwanted message with some untoward query or illegitimate complaint. I want to shut it off completely, but people, even people I like and love, know I have one and expect timely responses." Another reader, Tamsin, observes that this change began with Blackberry devices: "[B]efore these gadgets appeared, weekends and evenings were genuine time off. [The mobile elements of email] created the 'always on' culture, and the unspoken, officially-

denied pressure to always read and often respond at any time. The blinking red light, the notification symbols and the knowledge that even if you switched notifications off, the sender would know you'd been able to receive the message and therefore not responding was itself some form of choice, allowing unfavourable comparisons with those who did reply promptly."

The terrain gained by phone use was terrain lost by private life. Here is Beth: "I feel as if I'm constantly having to decide whether to 'remember' something [by taking a picture] or enjoy it in the present moment. I used to sporadically keep a diary and write poetry to remember significant moments, or to distil and remember a daily but important feeling, like enjoying a sunset or feelings or feeling love while watching my partner gardening. Now it's much easier to have a visual record of little things, but I am less appreciative, both in the moment and retrospectively, than when it took a lot more effort to encode a memory and they were fewer and further between. The other negative effect of ease of recording that I'm most irritated by is the loss of private social experiences, like carefree drunken dancing with friends. I don't understand why it isn't a huge taboo to record what should be immersive, social, connected, disinhibited moments with people that you love and trust. Just the possibility that anything can be recorded and shared, and that this is not only technologically possible, but socially encouraged and rewarded, means that the experience of forgetting yourself in a group doesn't exist anymore."

The blogger Nicola DiSvevia shared with me the following story: "For quite a few years now I have lived in (outer) London; and London, being the place it is, naturally attracts a large number of tourists. Since tourists are not familiar with the city, they would

frequently have to find someone to ask for directions: and that person, it would seem with equal frequency, was me. Among a crowd of people to ask, more often than not they would zoom in on me, and I would do my best to help them out. […] Now, you will have noticed that I have been speaking in the past tense. About fifteen years ago, these interactions in the street with strangers started to become rarer. At first I hardly noticed. Perhaps, as I had got older, I had come to look less attractive—perhaps the difference could be attributed to this. But then, as time went on, the cause became clear: it was the invention and increasing adoption of the smartphone, which offered access to digital roadmaps. No longer did people have to ask others for the way—they could simply look it up for themselves. And they have done so ever since. A once common form of interpersonal exchange had become practically obsolete. […] I myself have occasionally contributed photos and reviews to Google Maps, not entirely without thinking of their benefit (I hope) to others. [...] By far the most viewed of my photos is one of Kenwood House on Hampstead Heath, in North West London. As of today, 29 June 2023, the figure stands at an extraordinary 741,193. [...] Speaking of Kenwood House, I have in the past had occasion to direct people to it in person. Now that I think about it, some of them come to mind: the attractive Italian girl for whom I spoke too fast; the American couple who were worried whether the Heath was safe after dusk; the old hippie who, after having had the route explained to him, soon veered off in a direction all of his own. Now that I think of it, I realise that each of these encounters, brief as they were, meant more to me than any disembodied fact of 741,193 photo views."

Valuable experiences are often rare, ephemeral, and unpredictable. Mark explains how a "favourite pastime of mine in younger days was listening to the radio. […] What a thrill it was when, in the course of listening, a favourite song was encountered. This feeling has pretty well vanished by now. One can listen to virtually any song at virtually any time, at virtually any place. There is no longer any uncertainty, and hence no delight when the thing occurs. […] Similarly, I was a great one in my graduate school days, and for some time after, for letter writing. […] Telephone calls were far too expensive to report commonplace things, and there was no E-mail. Instant communication was certainly an advance on many fronts. But not all. It fostered habits of carelessness. And, like the case of the music, it neutralized the delicious wait for responses in an exchange, and removed the excitement of spying a letter in the box."

Most of us care when a species or language vanishes, even when we have no connection whatsoever to the species or language in question. What usually threatens living species and languages is technological encroachment. Yet, despite this common cause, protection efforts by biologists and linguists are not conducted in the name of anti-technology, but rather in the name of diversity or intrinsic value. We don't build highways over wetlands or children's parks, because we regard the value of those sites as greater than whatever efficiency might be obtained by their obliteration. I see no reason why efforts to identify and protect worthwhile endangered experiences should be viewed any differently.

Skipping newfangled technologies

The stories just shared may not involve life and death changes, but they do track life and life changes, so we can legitimately wonder which life is best. Many emerging technologies are impressive and often useful. No one disputes this. Beyond this agreement, though, people are all over the place. Surveying academic papers, blog posts, and newspaper articles, we find arguments that the world is about to get worse, arguments that the world is about to get better, and arguments that the world is going to roughly stay the same. Everyone ostensibly gravitates towards whichever conclusion confirms their emotional estimate, so the label “argument” may be a bit generous. Even experts disagree.

This plethora of conflicting opinions is not caused by any lack of rigor, but rather by the subject matter. By definition, the future is not here yet. So, when trying to gauge the effects of an unprecedented technology, we can’t possibly access the evidence that would conclusively adjudicate our current disagreements. Despite this lack of evidence, thinking about the future is a vital prelude to action, so we each must generalize from what we know and gamble on our forecasts.

I am not exempt from this. If I thought the world was going to stay the same, I would not have bothered to write this book. Likewise, if I believed that things were on verge of getting much better, I would grab an iced tea, sit back, and enjoy the show. I thus implicitly predict that things may get worse. Predictions are nevertheless risky business, so let me try to keep conjectures to a minimum.

Imagine that I place a revolver on a table and ask you to load it. Next to the revolver, there is a box with three types of bullets, each with a different color and effect. If you fire a green bullet, the target you hit becomes better. Shoot a person with a green bullet and she flourishes more. Red bullets have the opposite effect, since whatever is hit by them instantly reaches becomes worse. The remaining type of bullet is grey. Like blanks, these don't do anything. Shoot a depressed person with a grey bullet and the person stays depressed. Shoot a happy person with it and the person stays happy. No change.

This set-up with a six-shooter oversimplifies things, but our confrontation with an uncertain future nevertheless resembles a modified game of Russian roulette, where we must each load all chambers of the revolver's cylinder. To honor the uncertainty at hand, no type of bullet can be left out (no one gets to load 6 green bullets to doctor a conclusion-assuming outcome). The remaining configuration, however, reflects your individual judgment. Upon studying the evidence and opinions available, one could characterize the anticipated effects of a technology with a bell curve distribution: 1 red bullet, 4 grey ones, and 1 green. An "AI doomer" could put 4 reds, 1 grey, and 1 green; whereas an "AI boomer" could put 4 greens, 1 grey, and 1 red. And so on. Once you have settled on the configuration you deem most plausible, you spin the cylinder, and press the trigger.

This metaphor captures how real life works: we predict the future to the best of our ability, act on that prediction, confront the risk involved, and await the verdict. Sometimes things don't change, sometimes things change for the best, and sometimes things change for the worse. Like a game of Russian roulette, we can never be 100% sure

how a technology will affect our lives. Despite this lack of certainty, we can and must rank predictions. It is clearly more reasonable to worry about AI than microwave ovens. Hence, for any given device, we can have meaningful conversations about which forecast is most sensible.

Those conversations are happening right now. There is, however, one vitally important option I don't see anyone discussing: whatever the correct mix of bullets, *you don't have to spin the cylinder*. Indeed, you are always free to *leave* the revolver on the table and *walk away*. Contrary to the Russian roulette, you can be sure what will happen when you opt for this: things will stay the same.

The only way not to risk it all is to not risk it at all. I want to call attention to this overlooked option. The revolver will always contain a green bullet, so there will always be a temptation to take a chance. Don't. The world around you invariably falls short of a utopia, but work within it to improve it. There is always a red bullet in the mix too. You don't have to gamble or even alter your life merely because everyone else is doing it or because some wealthy people want you to. So, if you presently find yourself pointing the gun to your temple and hoping that it clicks on a grey bullet, harnessing your know-whether and walking away lets you secure that safe outcome, albeit with 100% certainty.

Sticking to real life

As we shall see throughout this book, the best way to pull away from invasive technology is to *spend time with family and friends (in person), share (real) meals, and commit to effortful undertakings that, compared with machines, are inefficient but meaningful.*

None of this is original. But, it is precisely because these recommendations are not earth-shattering that they keep us grounded.

We easily stray from the best advice when we have heard it before, so the task is to say it anew, in a manner that makes us take notice. The two parts of this book's subtitle must therefore be kept in mind: it is critical of uncritical technological use, but it also celebrates ordinary life—the sort that has no fee or ads and gets disclosed by paying closer attention.

This ordinary setting is roughly that of our earliest ancestors, so we can expect those who lived before us to have transmitted what they learned about it in myths and stories. One of those lessons warns about not selling one's "soul" to some tempting force. The *chasse-galerie* legend (which I will recount and interpret in the sixth chapter) says that, if you take a shortcut to your goal—canoe paddling in a frictionless sky, in the legend—you risk loosing what makes you human. Effortful undertakings demand the most of us and the devil always lurks nearby, so this temptation to take a shortcut is always there. I could instruct an AI to write this, but trading my soul for a rapidly-completed manuscript is simply not worth it. You don't need any superstitious belief to heed this warning.

The word "integrity" captures well how adherence to principles is what holds us together. You "disintegrate" when you do what is wrong. Talk of losing one's soul can sound needlessly supernatural, but it can be rendered perfectly sensible. To live is to cope with an environment: like the function f(x)=y, the brain takes in sensory inputs (x), cognitively processes them (f), and outputs behavior (y). You can, bit by bit, replace "x" with VR, "f" with AI, and "y" with bots. Yet, once you have handed over control of your

perception, thinking, and action to machines, what do you expect to have left of your humanity? “Transhumanists” reassure us that human nature can be redesigned at will and that our current anxiety shall eventually give way to a utopia. Folks are certainly free to believe this. However, as with other “trans” movements, I will respectfully pass.

I am aware that, like those working in insurance, I have unwittingly devised a way to win no matter what. If the future turns out fine and technologies fail to match my negative forecasts, then I can claim partial credit for averting disaster. If the future turns out bleak, then I can claim the moral high ground and say I told you so. This is clearly disingenuous. I nevertheless hope that, amid the various things I say, some actually contain wisdom.

The extended mind actually atrophies it

Arguably the biggest harm posed by technology is “existential threat”—the possibility that super-intelligent AI might wipe out the entire human species (not because it is malevolent, but because it is indifferent to our interests). Click on that red bullet in the Russian roulette and it is game over. The harms caused by other technologies, however, are not as easy to detect.

By now, most of us have figured out that the algorithms used by big tech companies facilitate surveillance and increase polarization. These issues are relevant and interesting, but the problems that concern me in this book go deeper than economics or politics. As a philosopher, I am interested in the fact that technologies invariably bring with them a diminution of our moral, social, and cognitive habits. Physics defines a machine as

something that transmits or modifies force in order to do work. Machines, however, are artifacts, so they don't just do work; they do work *for us*. Since no biological organism needlessly doubles on work, any skill a machine performs is a skill we no longer have to cultivate. Often, letting go of a skill lets us move on to bigger and better things. Sometimes, though, we get deprived of a worthwhile experience. This is because, when we rely on a technology, we offload habits that evolution and cultural adaptation have spent centuries programming us with. Habits that go unused usually atrophy within a lifetime and often vanish across a few generations. Hence, in some cases, reliance on technology risks deleting hard-earned files that cannot be recovered. The "extended mind" (Clark and Chalmers 1998) actually atrophies it.

I surmise that people will notice this atrophy *en masse* when the first generation raised on self-driving cars loses the ability to drive. A similar thing happened when we (mostly) surrendered the ability to drive a stick shift. However, we did not surrender our agency (choice of destination, path, style of driving) to a computer. Technological encroachment's human atrophy is more prevalent than people realize. To continue with an automotive example, we build speed bumps to slow down cars, but bypassing the drivers' cultivation of good judgment is not so great for people who live on streets without bumps. More powerful technologies reshape our lives in more profound ways. Arguably, once we are able to warn of our lateness by text message, we are less liable of cultivating punctuality. Likewise, a person's ability to engage in deep work for sustained periods of time shrinks when that person continuously transitions from one attention

grabbing content to the next. Surrender your ability to shift the gears of your mind, and you are in big trouble.

In his book on the demise of our attention span, Johann Hari explains how he "had just turned forty, and wherever my generation gathered, we would lament our lost capacity for concentration, as if it was a friend who had vanished one day at sea and never been seen since" (2022, p. 2). Preventing such losses is exactly what I am concerned with. Philosophers have done excellent work on the "deskilling" (Vallor 2015) that results from technological reliance, but I want to focus on the fact that lost skills imply losses in what we can experience. For example, my working-class Quebecois grand-parents and their neighbors could gather to play the spoons, the fiddle, and recall a whole repertoire of sing along songs. These skills do not seem like much in isolation, so no one made a fuss as they quietly atrophied and eventually vanished. However, given that I cannot do any of these things, I can no longer experience the close-knit sense of community that my ancestors did. I am instead left watching archived videos of *Soirée Canadienne* on YouTube, somewhat envious of an experiential possibility that seems rewarding but that I can no longer recapture. Backgrounds and personal histories naturally vary, but I suspect that everyone has a similar story to tell. Nostalgia is of course an emotional response. However, as we learn more about the rationality of emotions (de Sousa 1987), it may prove to be a justifiable response.

Some worry that "the final unintentional result" of a stance like mine is "to pitch philosophy against natural science as its 'enemy'" (Barber 2010, p. 449). This seems to be the dominant view. *Follow the science*, crowds (with pitchforks) chant. A corollary of

this view is the imperative *Accept all technological change*. Hence, "[a]llergic to the sin of thinking negatively regarding technology—thank you Don Ihde—we remain aversive to critical thought" (Babich 2021, p. 133). Departing from both slogans in virtue of their unadorned dogmatism, I don't see why anyone should accept without argumentation that science and technology are not the enemies. In some instances, they very well could be (Bostrom 2019)—and scientists and engineers can sometimes be the first to admit this (see for example Edgerton 2011). It would therefore be misplaced to regard optimism about technoscience as an axiom.

As more and more traditional experiences become extinct, a growing number of people are sensing that passivity in the face of technological encroachment is not making our world or our lives any better. The success of science-fiction films and novels attests to this sentiment. Indeed, "[t]he revival of interest in Isaac Asimov's theories of robotics […], by which humankind attempts to formulate laws to prevent such a takeover, is only one symptom among many of this persistent cultural anxiety" (Jones 2006, p. 3). Novelists and filmmakers are often better at diagnosing the ills of their era than scholars and academics. The downside of fiction as a medium, however, is that it conveniently lets one disavow everything. Sci-fi thus acts as a kind of "moral outrage porn" that is "engaged with primarily for the sake of the resulting gratification, freed from the usual costs and consequences" (Nguyen and Williams 2020, p. 148) that real personal change(s) would entail.

This book is premised on the idea that our best deliberations should be taking place in the agora of nonfiction, not in the wild west of fiction. Why should we stay silent when

technologies make valuable experiences, skills, habits, and social patterns obsolete? We have private conversations about what we have lost. But, in a kind of grief denial, we continue our lives and our work unaltered by the realization. Certainly, in academic philosophy, few dare to sound the alarm bells, perhaps for fear of being labeled alarmist. I want to alter this conversation so that, when we worry that a new technology might erase an age-old practice, we don't feel as silly or radical.

What to do (or not do) before one-way doors

The conversation needs to be altered, because we are not having much of a conversation. Right now, creation of a technology essentially means adoption of that technology. Clearly, some who profit from clear-cutting established human habits have a vested interest in protecting this creation = adoption equation. I would like to wedge a moment of pause between the two events, so as to reflect on whether a given technology will indeed leave one better off. I have no beef with technology per se, but I do have a beef with dogmatism. Just as cars replaced horse-drawn carriages, DVDs replaced VHS cassettes, online streaming is now replacing DVDs, and so on. It is obvious that this happens. It is *not* obvious that such replacements always result in improvements. We took everything for granted at the time, but the internet prior to smartphones was a less toxic mix. Hence, before adopting a given technology, we should compare the options and weigh the trade-offs—especially when we risk a loss that can never be recovered.

Skipping on a technology comes at a cost, so there are no solutions, only trade-offs. One of the puzzles is how to preemptively compare pros and cons without being able to

predict the effects of a technology. We are thus dealing with decisions under uncertainty. Why, then, do we witness such bold confidence across the board? Maybe I am missing something, but when it comes to technology, I don't see much uncertainty. *Endangered Experiences*' goal is to reinstate some balance in the deliberations—if nothing else by making sure that we are actually deliberating.

If human behaviors were completely pliable, the possibility of experiential loss would not cause any concern. It would constitute a loss, but not an irretrievable loss. However, easy access to certain technologies can leave one unable to rebuild what has been extinguished—and thus less equipped to deal fruitfully with the world and flourish. To be sure, one can face this risk of loss with a carefree attitude and cross one-way doors in a cavalier manner. But, once the door behind slams shut and the valuable experience has been lost, there is no room to act on regret. Rational consideration thus needs to be frontloaded, since afterward there is no avenue for action. I recall visiting an archeological conservation center where part of a wooden shipwreck was kept in an aquarium, filled with the original lake water. The chief researcher explained that they were unsure how to remove the wood from its anaerobic environment without further damaging it. Drawing on their expertise, they did nothing. I find wisdom in this approach.

In most domains, we approach one-way doors with great caution. Finland, for example, expends great sums to safely bury its spent nuclear fuel into the bedrock, because it grasps that any exposure of the natural environment to those radioactive materials would cause irreversible damage. In the world of social relationships (dates, interviews, etc.), a popular saying warns that you'll never get a second chance to make a

first impression. The logic involved generalizes: we think more carefully about getting a tattoo than we do about getting a haircut. Likewise, most cultures value virginity in part because the loss which accompanies the gain is irreversible.

Such practices lie in the middle of our cultures like giant sequoia trees so ancient that we cannot date them. In fact, we are so used to admonitions of caution that we don't even take them seriously anymore. Hence, we take whatever Silicon Valley throws our way and massively incorporate it into our lives, often overnight. "Already, many people have learned to defer to algorithms in choosing which film to watch, which meal to cook, which news to follow, even which person to date. (Why think when you can click?)" (Carr 2018, p. xii). As a result of this technological encroachment, many worthwhile human experiences—some of them as old as humanity itself—are vanishing at an alarming rate. This book offers suggestions on what to do about this.

You do you

Taking the analogy between endangered experiences and endangered species too literally risks making it look as if we need some central authority or board of experts to measure which experiences are being lost and at what rate. But, unlike biologists tagging and tracking animals, the individual experiencer alone is in a position to tell whether their quality of life is getting better or worse. I would not want my discussion of endangered experiences to grease a slippery slope to more bureaucrats managing peoples' lives from afar. Wisdom (about technology or any other area) is responsive to reasons, not nudges, so "wisdom management" (Jakubik and Müürsepp 2022) is a contradiction in terms.

How can one distinguish garden-variety social change from alterations that corrode what is essential to one's being? Top-down governmental intervention is one path (for an impassioned and well-argued plea, see Hari 2022, pp. 149–163). Yet, at the risk of alienating those looking for policy recommendations, I regard technological consumption as a matter for each person to decide (policies that prevent interference with such personal decisions might be legitimate). I am also skeptical of one-size-fits-all prescriptions. Many authors have "solutions" to offer. If, by contrast, the net yield of my inquiry is a set of *maxims* that admit of slack and require judicious on-site application, I will be amply satisfied. The advantage of such a modest aspiration is that, if anything I say seems off or incorrect, there is an easy fix: just disregard it and move on.

Judicious technological choices do not require empirical methods like surveys, but rather the most exacting tool of all: honest self-appraisal. In such an inquiry, "right" and "wrong" answers map onto *honest* and *dishonest* ones. In the end, only you can tell whether your life is getting better or worse as a result of a given technology. Some might crave a more objective metric for wellbeing, but there is nothing wrong about subjectivity when it ranges over subjectively experienced episodes. Your feelings are not what determine, say, which foods cause gastrointestinal distress. This is a physical matter. But, your feelings are the only thing capable of certifying that such distress is unpleasant and to be avoided. This is an experiential matter. Similarly, pinpointing the exact *causes* of an unsatisfactory life can require input from others. However, when it comes to judging your overall quality of life, you are the final arbitrator (anyone telling you otherwise is trying to redirect your efforts towards their goals, not yours).

In *Technology and the Virtues* (2016), Shannon Vallor explores what she calls "technomoral choices," the most fundamental of which is arguably "Should I use technology x?" To answer that question, Vallor enlists the help of virtue ethics and engages in detailed comparative analyses of Aristotelian, Confucian, and Buddhist theories of moral self-cultivation. As far as I can tell, what unites these disparate Wester and Eastern schools is the idea that a good life is *shown*, not told. I take core lesson seriously and will forgo exegetical commentary, preferring instead implicit exemplification.

Honest self-appraisal is far harder than it seems. Going with the crowd is the perfect excuse for not listening to one's conscience. Even so, you didn't consult whether the majority approved of your choice of mate or sexual orientation, so you needn't consult the majority to decide whether an experience is more valuable than some gizmo. This call for case-by-case authenticity might be seen as a cop-out, but it is more demanding than emulating some pre-made life plan.

Authenticity cannot be reduced to a formula. This is where greater (inner and outer) attentiveness comes in: you must catch your thoughts in the act—especially the inconvenient thoughts you would rather not have. A life is comprised of innumerable experiences, so if you find yourself thinking that some x might disappear, then that x is already endangered. Paying honest attention, do you house a little voice pining for the time before, say, smartphones? We tend to disparage backward-looking perspectives—this is one of the dogmas I aim to combat. However, if we are honest and open, we may find that "the good old days" were in fact good days.

Some humans will always be tinkerers, devising new stuff. I am grateful for that, because I value options. However, one *homo sapiens*' invention places no moral demand on another *homo sapiens*' adoption. We are not required to verbally justify why we purchase a good or service, so we shouldn't have to justify why we don't purchase a good or service. Think, preferably well and beforehand. But, once you have reached a decision, a simple "no thank you" should suffice—with no frowns or weird stares.

The humanities are permeated by a certain political orientation that I do not share. Andrew Feenberg's *Technosystem* (2017), for example, continues the project of the Frankfurt School. I, on the other hand, would sooner call on a Thomas Sowell than a Herbert Marcuse. I employ critical thinking, not critical theory, so I move away from victim narratives and towards personal responsibility. We must avoid the mistake of assuming that social problems require social solutions. We rarely commit this fallacy in the reverse direction. Every scholar grasps that the behavior of, say, individual alcoholics results in a social problem when aggregated. Yet, having abandoned the individual as the proper unit of study (White 2016), political philosophers are forced to view alcoholism as a kind of animistic force that well-crafted policies can deflect or contain, much like water. Yet, apart from a cadre of intellectuals who make their living by typing, no one cares about "alcoholism" or "inflation" per se. Those are mere concepts. Actual social actors care about being disconnected from a loved one or having to switch from steak to pork. Similarly, the issues about technology that interest me are concrete, not abstract. Frischmann and Selinger (2018) essentially say "Put your phone down, otherwise you will lose your agency," but agency it is not something anyone can *see*. My message is

instead: “Put your phone down, otherwise you won’t see your thirties go by.” I don’t know how anyone can stop from being “alarmist” about *that*.

Simplifying quite a bit, one can scale back *supply* or scale back *demand* (doing both is possible, but I let me simplify for the sake of contrast). At the risk of alienating those who take joy in taxing or outlawing human activities, I do not feel comfortable curtailing the supply of any goods or services. This is because, at some point, such curtailment would require the use of force (like the law). Hence, as a fallible mortal who has opted for reason instead of coercion, I would much rather reduce the footprint of technology by reducing its demand. Loss of control and agency at the hands of big tech companies matters only because individuals risk losing valuable experiences. So, if changes at the level of society ever happen, it will be on account of first having moved ordinary people’s hearts, not legislators’ minds. By making a low-tech lifestyle look attractive, my hope is that individual actions and peer imitation can reduce demand, in the same way and by the same mechanisms that individual actions and peer imitation increase demand. Such a strategy may not be as splashy as state regulation, but it is better than inaction.

If one insists on labeling the stance just sketched, I would only ask that one choose the label carefully. “Capitalism” leaves people free to propose options and thus opportunities to flourish. I am fine with this. “Consumerism” urges people to adopt those options uncritically and amass stuff, just because. I am against this, with or without the aid of technology. So, adopting a stance closer to William Irwin’s *The Free Market Existentialist: Capitalism without Consumerism* (2015), I want to leave Silicon Valley companies free to propose new devices and invoke the same freedom to say “no”

whenever a device hinders one's flourishing. This, at any rate, is how I unpack the idea that we are each free to choose (Friedman and Friedman 1990).

You can have a *laissez faire* approach to the market without endorsing an anything-goes approach to your life. Likewise, you are not a "conservative" if you let traditional beliefs enter as premises to be entertained but not as conclusions to be reached. Because pro-flourishing choices are indexed to an individual's actual life, there is no reason to expect that everyone will agree on which technologies to adopt or reject. This is why I countenance lots of slack. The philosopher's goal should not be to make others march in step with their preferred vision. Instead, philosophers more concerned with wisdom than reputation should inspire/equip individuals to heed their conscience, especially when it recommends choices at odds with greater trends. Trying to persuade the whole world to change is out of the question. In that regard, I side with self-improvers like Henry David Thoreau and distance myself from central-planners like Plato. Plato wanted to lead. Thoreau wanted to *live* (and perhaps lead, though indirectly, only *by example*).

A timely topic

Far from being timeless, the topic I address is time-sensitive. Whereas philosophers used to ponder dilemmas in a merely speculative manner, programmers building self-guided cars need to be told what specific instructions to feed into a car in the event that it spins out of control and must hit, say, either a young or old person. The United States military is funding research to develop robot soldiers capable of making their own decisions, but robotics makes our usual reliance on blame and praise irrelevant, since we clearly cannot

punish or reward a machine for its actions. Technology also raises questions about what it means to be human. The familiar Bluetooth devices nested in our ears are only one surgical intervention away from being parts of our brains, thereby opening up unprecedented control over perception, the possibility of establishing a hive-mind, and so on. Meanwhile, leaked internal memos show Google's long-term ambition not just to record, but to eventually control, human behavior and thus world history.

Much of this utopianism is misplaced. While we may predict what an AI will do, we have no way to predict what an AI programmed by an AI will do. One could argue that we do not even fully know what our current tech does, so the situation may be even worse. When the AI software AlphaGo defeated world champion Go player Lee Sedol in 2016, the team of engineers at Google DeepMind had no way of knowing how AlphaGo reached its decisions and were thus unable to tell a blunder from a clever gambit. Robots will be in a position to design and 3D-print better versions of themselves, with or without our knowledge or consent. So, if there is any truth to the idea that "[o]ur species' pace of change now outstrips our ability to adapt" (Heying and Weinstein 2021, p. xv), uncontrollable and irreversible increases in technology may pose a threat to our very existence as a species.

If our lives are woven together by habits, then, as those habits wither, the fabric of our experiences unravels. The hippocampi of taxi drivers committing to memory the labyrinthine layout of London's 25,000 streets layout grew (Woollett and Maguire 2011). There is every reason to believe that this is like a muscle: it you don't use it, you lose it. I used to jokingly reassure my students that, while people increasingly depend on

uniwheels and hoverboards to get around, at least humans will never forget how to walk. Now I am not so sure.

No one thought that it would be common for people on a date to not talk to each other but to instead "text" people who are absent. When, for better or for worse, reliance on a technology extinguishes an unbroken strand of worthwhile habits, it can be hard and sometimes impossible to recapture what was lost. The ramifications of this are not always as drastic as forgetting how to walk. But, as a rule, the greater the technological encroachment(s), the more endangered the experience(s). For example, we learn mainly by imitating, so a workforce exposed only to online meetings would lack the etiquette and soft skills to properly conduct efficient in-person meetings. Recovery attempts can sometimes be undertaken. But, just as linguists would insist that re-learned Manchu will never compare to native-speaking Manchu, an influencer like Laci Fay who lives every day as if it was 1958 cannot alter the fact that no one else around her shares her lifestyle. In fact, like a renaissance fair that blurs the boundary between fact and fiction, trying to revive a departed way of life makes the absence more salient—I doubt moms of the 1950s did their weekly groceries looking like pin-ups. Life happens in a context woven with shared habits, so individuals do not have free reign on the experiences they undergo. Even if my partner and I wanted to host a Quebecois-style get-together of the sort that my grand-parents experienced, we wouldn't be able to. Following YouTube tutorials on podorythmie (seated foot tapping) cannot bring the experience back to life, since it really does take a village.

In my experience, when one publicly suggests that one wants to cut back on *one* technology *a bit*, what others hear is that one wants to cut back on *all* technology *altogether*. This hyperbolic characterization may be unfair, but it expresses a justified concern. What makes the Amish lifestyle a usual target of ridicule is not its particular content, but rather its aspiration to live apart from everything else that is happening. Such an aspiration is neither feasible nor wise. Importantly though, conformity with one's epoch offers no guarantee that one's society is heading toward a better future. We may not share Fay's or the Amish's preferred yardstick years, but we should all think more carefully before replacing a proven way of life with an unproven one. My book will thus argue that, when we suspect that a technology may have harmful yet irreversible effects, then the wisest course of action can often be to forgo or severely limit our use of that technology—until, at least, we achieve a clearer grasp of the trade-offs. I will often use the expression "technology" as shorthand in the book, but decisions can and should be device-specific. Similarly, it is not because one person comes to a particular conclusion that everyone else must as well. Seeking such uniformity is a recipe for strife.

Calculating the trade-offs of new technologies requires, not just time, but also a genuine possibility of saying "no" to trends. Part of what happens when we give ourselves this right to say "no" is that we become free to say "yes" to the ordinary world. That world may not grab our attention like a pop-up. But, when we put aside our distractions and pay attention, we find that it is a source of meaning and value that no simulation could replace. The ordinary world is *irreplaceable*, in both the descriptive and normative senses of that word. Tragically, we fail to appreciate this, because "[n]othing is

more difficult than to have a sense for precisely *what we see*" (Merleau-Ponty 2002, p. 67). Owing to habituation, what is closest to us is hardest to notice. So, just as biologists and linguists are tasked with tracking categories on the verge of disappearing, phenomenologists should be tasked with evincing valuable human experiences on the verge of disappearing.

The problem—and our response—are not just a matter of logic

It is easy to understand why we fail to assert ourselves as experiences become endangered and eventually go extinct. Devices like Smartphones exceed our common comprehension by such a large margin that they seem "representatives of a higher class of being" (Anders 2016, p. 30). Walking into an Apple store, you would never guess that something so small required such high ceilings. Like farting in a quiet church, it just seems inappropriate to critique something so wondrous. Awe is the intended response—and we consumers respond according to script. No wonder the magnates who built today's devices often act with god-like hubris.

Of course, the adult in us knows that the blemish-free face which stares back at us on a Smartphone is the non-supernatural product of face recognition software, filters, and the like. Even so, the young adult in us cannot help but feel like this familiar-yet-alien face is a better version of ourselves that we somehow fall short of. Smartphone screens thus act like the Mirror of Erised from the *Harry Potter* series, showing "the most desperate desire of a person's heart, a vision that has been known to drive men mad." Tellingly, "Erised" is "desire" spelled backward. Empirical studies are slowly confirming the harm

that social media does to one's self-image. But, coming off a book on the ideas of Jordan Peterson (Champagne 2020), I am tempted to think that our best story-tellers understood such things sooner (and better?) than many academics.

Even if many of today's technologies are without precedent, humans have always known to be cautious. The ancient story of Prometheus reminds us that fire allows for much good, but it also allows us to forge weapons of war. When the Greeks looked at a technology, they saw pros and cons, not just pros. In fact, surveying world myths and religions, one would be hard pressed to find a single story advising people to engage in excess and push forward into the unknown, with no concern for what might await. Rapid progress may sound good, but "[s]peed is a defect in a blind horse" (Lyons 1979, p. 386). Yet, right now, this is essentially how we approach unprecedented technologies. I detect no wisdom in this recklessness.

One of my methodological assumptions is that the opinions of our present generation should be weighed against the combined opinions of past generations. It is not a head-count calculation, but warnings from the past should at least be given a hearing. The Yakut epic *Olonkho*, for example, tells of a "broad shouldered" but "fatuous and boasting" character who frees "a terrible devil." Once that devil was released, the *Olonkho* warns, it "was too late to catch him." Like many ancient stories, *Olonkho* was meant to be sung. Superficially, one might think that this is because this story pre-dates the advent of writing. It does. However, another explanation for the singing is that these were tales meant to be remembered—and presumably acted upon. This is not what we do.

Aptly enough, *Olonkho* was deemed by UNESCO to be part of the “Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.” This heritage may not be decisive, but it should carry some weight. Purely logical argumentation still has a place, so I have no wish to switch from philosophy to mysticism. But, if you look at a full timeline and squint, you will see which opinion prevails. It would be irrational for a fallible thinker to be unmoved by such historical facts.

Analytic philosophers are, as a rule, suspicious of drawing lessons from history. Yet, experts who discuss super-intelligent AI sometimes refer to “Moloch” to capture the idea of a malevolent influence that, through game-theoretic incentives, pits us against each other and our best interests (Alexander 2012). Haven’t we already heard warnings about Moloch before, perhaps under a different name? Although am not religious, I distinctly recall some story about freely exploring a large space but not eating from one particular tree of knowledge.

Those are just stories, one might reply. Yet, when Finnish engineers tried to convey the dangers of buried radioactive materials to humans 100,000 years from now, they concluded that myths and stories might be the most resilient communicative vehicle. Generalizing this conclusion, it might be wise for us to seriously consider the messages contained in lasting myths and legends. The wisest messages last by replicating anywhere, including popular culture. Some AI experts think machine learning will enable a total decoding of reality, but the hero Indiana Jones survived precisely by not looking at the godly secrets kept in the lost Ark. Humility, not hubris, is what saved him (in all the

movies). Suggestions on what to do—or not do—are thus all around us. We're just not listening.

A message of caution may be as old as humanity itself, but precisely for that reason, it needs to be refreshed by each generation. This is an especially urgent task today, given that technologies like VR, smartphones, and social media are designed to mask their addictive properties (see Eyal 2014 for a disturbingly candid behind-the-scenes look). The threats we face do not feel like threats. In the tech industry, getting you hooked is called "driving up costumer engagement." Yet, as anyone who has experienced a hangover will attest, activities which appear beneficial can often prove harmful. An inquiry into what actually serves one's interests must therefore be supplemented by reason. Such a rational inquiry, however, is not instantaneous, so it needs a minimum deliberative and temporal space in which to operate.

Yet, even if we reason perfectly, the problem that we confront—and our response—are not entirely rational, so rational appeals on their own are bound to fall short. As children, we responded to stories long before we learned to respond to arguments. I am reminded of this every day as I watch my children invent scenarios and role-play. This power of narratives never leaves us. So, if we can insert a moment of pause between the creation of a technology and the adoption of that technology, we can give reason, attention, and tradition a chance to render their verdict.

Spooky –isms: “Luddism” and “conservatism”

The stance that I have been outlining is not “Luddism.” Reading the original writings of the Luddites, one is struck by how clearly they knew what they were on the verge of losing. As befits this episode of the Industrial Revolution, the problem was in-your-face and the push-back was in-your-face too. By contrast, the technologies of today’s Information Revolution manipulate awareness and attention to control the range of worldviews that one is able to form. The Luddites hated the machines that they worked on, but we love ours and even bring them to our bedside. Tellingly, popular lore says that vampires cannot enter one’s home without being invited in. Comfortably numbed by the periodic doses of dopamine produced by our buzzing notifications (Lembke 2021), we fail to see what we are on the verge of losing. We thus sleepwalk toward a future that we may come to regret.

What should one do about this? Mark Coeckelbergh expresses a common view when he says that “[d]igital detox is no longer a viable option and advice based on ancient wisdom sounds like yet more self-help memes” (2022, book jacket). I think that this gets things all wrong. For starters, to give up on any kind of detox is to endorse a form of defeatism that is just as radical as anything a Luddite might advocate. Inaction does not even follow as a practical conclusion. In fact, “[i]t is the greatest of all mistakes, to do nothing because you can only do little” (Smith 1849, p. 290).

Secondly, although the unprecedented nature of today’s technological challenges seems to make tradition irrelevant, one could also argue that the unprecedented nature of today’s technological challenges stems precisely from the fact that our generation has

rejected tradition as irrelevant. Yet, memes work wonders—especially those that have a millennia-old pedigree. Now, to say that the past is preferable to the present or that the present is preferable to the future is automatically to make a conservative claim. An anti-conservative bias will render one unable to effectively defend such a stance, so I see this as a golden opportunity to say something that few in academia dare say.

Political labels cloud even the best minds, but the starting assumptions that will inform *Endangered Experiences* come from epistemology, not politics:

- First, *with every technology come losses and gains*. It is hard to see how anyone acquainted with the history of technology could deny this.

- Second, *we tend to appreciate what we had only once we have lost/destroyed it*. This is a tragic aspect of the human condition that we can mitigate but never escape, since it stems from the fallibility of our forecasts.

- Third, given that some losses are irretrievable, *it is better to assess those losses and gains rationally than to adopt technologies uncritically*. Rationality is our most reliable guide for determining how to act, but rationality needs time (since it is a "system 2" task, in the sense used by Kahneman 2013).

I submit that, if one accepts these three assumptions, caution follows as a matter of course. Right now, however, few champion such a stance. Instead, as we zoom down humanity's timeline, every technology viewed in the windshield is deemed desirable, while every technology viewed in the rear-view mirror is deemed undesirable. This is a fallacy in the strictest technical sense called "argument from novelty" (*argumentum ad novitatem*). The probability that the future is always better than the present is nearly zero.

What should we label the decision to skip Russian roulette and stick to an imperfect but perfectible status quo? According to Michael Oakeshott, one of the traits of a "conservative" temperament is the belief that "a known good is not lightly to be surrendered for an unknown better" (1962, p. 172). Note that "not lightly" is not "never." Unfortunately, in today's orthodox climate, tagging the label "conservative" on an idea or stance suffices to ignore nuances and the persons espousing them.

At the risk of being tarred and feathered by those who have no interest in genuine thought, I unapologetically want to conserve whatever is best in our lives. The ideologues who have taken over our institutions bully everyone into being conservationist about nature—don't dare to cut down an old tree. Yet, when it comes to culture, they seek to clear-cut all age-old practices now, to make way for their preferred utopia (unless the practice happens to be non-Western, in which case it must be met with quasi-religious reverence). This way of viewing the human condition is both foolish and foolhardy, so when it comes to endangered experiences, conservation efforts are philosophically warranted.

Progress? Really?

When I was a child, my parents once took my brother and I to a place called a "magnetic hill." It is an ordinary-looking stretch of road—only, when you put your car in neutral, your car goes uphill, not downhill. The same reversal is experienced while riding a bike or walking: effort is needed to descend, while ascending is effortless. Scientists who have

studied such sites assure us that what is involved is merely an illusion. Still, the experience is disorienting, since it pits what one *feels* against what one is *told*.

Current times often feel like a magnetic hill. Everyone in the mainstream media is assuring us that we are moving forward. The world around us is supposed to be getting better. But, from all appearances, it is in decline. Technology is supposed to create new jobs, but most of what I see are layoffs. Social media is supposed to bring us together, but most of what I see are people feeling lonely and isolated. So, what do you do when your gut tells you something diametrically different from what you are told to believe? Some facts are not under dispute. The latest iPhone is demonstrably faster than the previous version and Elon Musk is preparing to colonize Mars. Doesn't that betoken progress?

In a way, yes. We can even define "progress" to ensure such an affirmative answer. But, what spoils the enjoyment is the lack of enjoyment. My working-class parents, for example, were able to work hard, save, and purchase a house. I, on the other hand, cannot hope to own a home and struggle to even rent one. True, unlike my parents, I have nifty scrolling images on my phone to pacify me. Still, I would gladly give up such cheap thrills to go back to a time when home ownership was a genuine possibility.

So, are things *really* getting better? Maybe my feeling that we are moving backward is merely an illusion. Then again, maybe claims about progress are illusory. Other writers are no doubt articulating a similar message, so let me clarify a few points to ensure that I am not misunderstood. For starters, I am not telling anyone which technologies to avoid. Instead, I am non-intrusively sharing what *I* do—and leave it up to individuals whether they want to do that too.

Second, I do not claim to be able to detect what, in a given technological experience, makes it unhealthy. The cat video that makes you smile *is* innocuous, so I can no more spot a harmful technological experience than I can spot a counterfeit bill. Still, my central claim has been that, when such artificial experiences are consumed in large quantities, they can lead to meaninglessness. Like markets flooded with counterfeit bills that cause inflation, we detect a surfeit of artificiality mostly by its large scale effects. Things *as a whole* just don't feel right. The task is then to pinpoint what parts of that whole need adjustment. So, while I discuss specific technologies in each chapter (smartphones in the first chapter, chatbots in the second, virtual reality in the third, etc.), I am more concerned with understanding and combating a total harm to our spirit than with picking on any single cause of it. I can be wrong about a particular case while still being correct on the whole (this is common in philosophical thinking).

Third, I have no idea whether you or anybody else feels a sense of creeping meaninglessness. For all I know, when you visit the magnetic hill, you feel no tension. I only aver that I notice a disconnect between official narratives of progress and anecdotal observations of regress. Our limbic systems are satiated, but our souls are malnourished. Now, I am a philosopher trained to consider weird questions and attend to unobvious phenomena, so I may be overstating the problem. I surmise, however, that these allusions to technology-induced malnourishment will make sense to others who also want to lead better lives.

A fresh look

Ostensibly, no one wants to be called an alarmist, so we should demystify what that means. Is the expectation that alarm bells should *never* be rung, or that they should be rung *only on justifiable occasions*? If one endorses the former view, then one is arguably endorsing a stance just as radical as Luddism. If one endorses the latter view, then the burden is on one to specify what would count as justified alarmism. The current debates usually focus on the "existential threat," but this invites caricatures, attracts crackpots, and desensitizes regular people. *Endangered Experiences* argues that the extinction of worthwhile human experiences, while admittedly less grandiose than species-level extinction, suffices to justify pausing and reflecting critically about one's technological adoption. Invoking the precautionary principle only in extreme situations renders that principle powerless.

Are all past experiences worth preserving? Probably not. But, the moral of *Endangered Experiences* is that figuring this out is a matter to be determined, not assumed.

There is an opportunity cost associated with adopting any technology. By letting something like smartphones into our lives, we are not only gaining something, but also losing something. We might be losing something that is more valuable than whatever we gain. The overall trade-off is not apparent, so we should be (more) careful about which technologies we let into our lives.

There is no pre-set blueprint for how to live, so the standard for measuring what is more or less valuable is my individual flourishing (Champagne 2023). Such an account get quite detailed (Champagne 2011), but the sum of one's evaluative judgments is experienced as an emotion. Hence, one can tell, without much reflection, whether on the whole one's life is going as it could/should. What is required to gauge this is attentive honesty, not increased analysis. People from different disciplines and backgrounds will no doubt raise questions and express concerns that reflect their training, but there is no need to make things more complicated than they need to be.

Simple ideas must not be confused with simplistic ones. Hence, we must guard against naively transliterating from the concept of endangered species to the concept of endangered experiences. A case can be made that all living species deserve to be kept alive (I am not sure about the wisdom of brining back extinct ones), but the mere fact that a human experience is endangered is not a sufficient reason for preserving it. I remember rolling down a car window instead of pushing a button, but honest investigation will reveal such an experience is not worth preserving. Similarly, even if a skill was lost, I am not overly aggrieved that we went from driving a stick shift to driving an automatic. "Trade-off" doesn't mean "loss." It just means *trade*-off.

I must confess, however, that I assess this particular trade-off from a completely biased and uninformed vantage. How can I be justified in saying that stick shift is "better" than automatic, when I cannot even drive in the discarded manner? My father was adamant about not letting go of that method, as are many professional racers, so there may be something to it. Likewise, we may pontificate about the "progress" that took place when we stopped

riding horses, but we are warranted in drawing a line only because we have experienced both sides of it (Wittgenstein 1922, p. 23). In the absence of that first-hand acquaintance, all that is left is a conjecture (that may or may not prove correct). As we shall see throughout the book, this need for contrast explains why we act so stupidly/tragically. We notice the value of what we have lost only once we have lost it.

If we let go of an experience so uniformly across a population that no one can verify whether a change lived up to its billing, then we are in the same position as someone who has only heard arguments for one side of an issue. Ostensibly, few people care these days about considering heterodox views, so it may be that few people will care to preserve and perhaps sample lifestyles that go against the grain. Even so, confidence in my current choices might be a by-product of my ignorance, so I want to make provisions for the possibility of being mistaken. We don't all have to ride horses. But, if knowledge of horse riding completely vanishes, we will have lost the means of keeping alive a potentially valuable experience.

This threat of loss looms over any number of experiences, such as our dwindling reading ability. Viewed atop a long timeline, the pace of this decline is astounding. "We touch our phones 2,617 times every twenty-four hours" (Hari 2022, p. 18). As an educator, I witness the resulting attentional atrophy almost daily. People outside of educational milieus should take notice, because "[t]he reading brain is the canary in our minds. We would be the worst of fools to ignore what it has to teach us" (Wolf 2018). What is needed, then, is a more cautious approach to technological consumption, an enhanced ability to attend to the mundane riches that surround us, and a renewed respect for the wisdom of tradition. I

will thus employ a mix of argumentation, phenomenological description, and myth interpretation

These approaches are meant to cover tensed time: in addition to abstract justifications that hold in *any time*, I will explore ways to better focus on what is happening in the *present* and *past* lessons that different peoples have conveyed in narratives. If clicking with one or more of these approaches can make technological refusal more sensible and combat weakness of will, then this might reshape the *future*. This is of course a compressed statement, so my goal in the chapters that follow will be to unzip it.

Chapter 1

Noticing things without notifications:
Training attention to let the ordinary compete with addictive technology

> One afternoon, I sat in the Blue Lagoon in Iceland, a vast and infinitely calm lake of geothermal water that bubbles up at the temperature of a hot bathtub even as snow falls all around you. As I watched the falling snowflakes gently dissolve into the rising steam, I realised I was surrounded by people wielding selfie sticks. They had put their phones into waterproof casings, and they were frantically posing and posting. Several of them were live-streaming to Instagram. I wondered if the motto for our era should be: I tried to live, but I got distracted.
>
> Johann Hari
> *Stolen Focus* (2022, p. 6)

We all know that texting while driving can distract (Yannis et al. 2016), but even commercial pilots absorbed in reading gauges can fail to notice an airplane obstructing their runway. Apparently, you don't need a fancy magician to make an entire airplane vanish; a bunch of buttons will do. Indeed, "when he was shown the videotape of this run, Pilot D said, 'If I didn't see it (the tape), I wouldn't believe it. I honestly didn't see anything on that runway'" (in Haines 1991, p. 174). The plane was, as it were, hidden in plain sight (Zerubavel 2015). If trained professionals paid to maximize safety can miss such "startlingly large" objects, who knows what we can miss when absorbed in our gizmos?

Like most people, I take pictures on my smartphone that get automatically uploaded on a cloud. We have a big family, so this has essentially become our family album. One day, as I scrolled down our timeline, I was struck by some archived pictures of my second child, Louis-Cyr. It wasn't that those files were missing or corrupted. It was that I had no recollection of my child's second year. Like the airplane pilot, I missed something startlingly large.

I do not suffer from amnesia, so how could this have happened? I recall working a lot at my computer that year. Yet, since my work station was located in the room where our children played, the thought of having missed significant portions of my child's life is especially troubling. You may not have children and may not pilot a plane, but you surely have things you value, so these concerns concern everyone. Life is short and some experiences are precious, so it would be nice to take in one's environment with as little loss as possible.

It is easy to see why we get so absorbed in technological use that the world around us vanishes. Smartphone feeds in particular are designed to match your interests, so you have no doubt browsed search engines or social media platforms with the intent of finding a specific item or information—only to emerge with vast amounts of time wasted on other contents. As if these addictive properties weren't bad enough, those wanting to wean themselves off invasive technologies are often reproached by their peers. No one likes the implication of being wrong, so (jealous?) people at work and at home may accuse you of exaggerating for not answering messages or putting away your device.

Texting while driving is clearly reckless, but what is so wrong about, say, looking at cat videos in one's sofa?

The harms caused by current technologies are not apparent, so it is easy to internalize this accusation of exaggeration. Like cartoons of a devil and angel sitting atop one's shoulders, deliberations about what to do are an internal dialogue. That dialogue may be guided by basic emotions and drives, but I am struck by the fact that the conflicting voices give reasons for what they advocate. We may be animals, but if we weren't *rational* animals, we wouldn't bother with reasons and go straight to satisfying our impulses. The fact that we feel compelled to feign rationality thus provides a sliver of hope.

I doubt the voices of self-doubt and social disapproval will ever go away. The good news is that, since habits acquire momentum, it is possible to muffle the naysaying and gradually steer one's attention in a more meaningful direction. Some strategies are no-brainers. For instance, I put board games and logical puzzles near our family's kitchen table, so that my kids and I can divert ourselves together without any screens. I also don't let pop-ups alert me whenever I get an email, since inboxes are invariably toxic and must be handled with care. We are, for the most part, unthinking. So, if you engineer the incentives of your surroundings correctly, your subsequent decisions will stand a much greater chance of falling into place, in the same manner that water runs down slopes to accumulate into pools.

Smartphones and computers already have adjustable settings, so the problem isn't that we lack an "off" switch. The problem is that, even when the solution is only a fingertip

away, we often don’t resort to it. The conflict, then, is not between you and machines, but between you and you.

It is unlikely that, on my deathbed, I will curse myself for not browsing the internet more. So, if the choice is between looking at trivial contents or spending quality time with my loved ones, it is clear what I ought to do. Yet, to escape the gravitational pull of addictive buzzes and disapproving frowns, you first need to reach escape velocity. I don’t think you can will yourself to dislike your phone. You can try, but it won’t work. I have found, however, that is possible to prefer all that is non-phone over your phone. Let me therefore propose some tools that can make the splendour of the real world come alive.

Two ways of experiencing the world

It is always preferable to start with assumptions anyone can relate to, so let me begin where we find ourselves. Right now, I am in my office, typing. As I look around, I can inventory what I see and classify it in various ways. I can, for instance, divide everything into the living and non-living. The trees outside my window are alive, while the computer under my fingers isn’t. This is a sensible division, but are there more practical ways of carving the world? One unusual but helpful way of making sense of your surroundings comes from asking a simple but revealing question: *did I come to this experience* or *did it come to me?*

When we look around and take stock of where we find ourselves, not everything gets inventoried. In the thumbnail sketch of my office, I forgot to mention the stack of boxes to my left, the outdated Easter decoration still hanging on the wall, and the ergonomic

cushion under my feet (which I barely notice). I could eventually make this list more complete, but it would take time. Noticing things often requires a great deal of concentration.

Sometimes, though, we notice things without any effort. Were a bird to suddenly crash into my window as I gaze peacefully at my computer screen, I would instantly notice it. This standing readiness to focus on whatever forcibly enters our senses essentially defines consciousness. Yet, while awake, we can take control of this attentive process and direct it at a target of our choosing. This is the case, for example, when I carefully attend to the cushion under my feet. As soon as I absorb myself in another task, my awareness of this cushion vanishes. However, with effort, I can make the cushion the center of my attention. This is what I meant when I said that we can divide our surroundings into things that we come to and things that come to us: the bird crashing into my window comes to me, whereas I must come to the cushion under my feet.

Attention-grabbing events like crashing birds are, thankfully, rare. Dwelling on uninteresting objects like foot cushions is also rare (perhaps more so). The bulk of our waking life thus vacillates, according to the circumstances, between the rare extremes of being surprised and being absorbed in a task. Even so, everything can be sorted into these two moments.

Once we get better at distinguishing this direction of fit, we can ask: how does technology reshape the usual distribution? Like kids bursting into my office unannounced, my phone can start buzzing at any time. Clearly, pop-ups alter the ratio of experiences-that-come-to-us and experiences-we-come-to. Yet, like my office door,

which I can close, my computer and phone have settings which I can adjust. I can take control of my awareness. Alternatively, I can decide to no longer decide what will enter my awareness. Is giving up control a good thing? It may be. If an email message is urgent, I may be quite thankful to have handed over my stream of consciousness to the computer. Yet, what if a normal ratio of experiences-that-come-to-me and experiences-I-come-to proves healthier, overall?

Everything hinges on the “overall” here. Certainly, on a case by case basis, one can argue that it is better to be aware of more than less. If a major election result just took place in some crucial geopolitical region of the world, don’t you want to know about it right away? Maybe. The problem, however, is that usefulness can only be assessed in hindsight. The pop-up you receive may prove decisive, but it may also be a superfluous nuisance. Importantly, by the time you find out, it is too late, since the useless and annoying content has already made it into your mind. If I say, for example, *asparagus*, you can’t unthink it. Like it or not, asparagus is what you must now think. Asparagus.

An author may be in charge of one’s thoughts when one reads, but I cannot track your responses in real time and adjust what I say to maintain your attention. Now, if we were eternal beings with infinite cognitive resources and infinite wisdom, intrusive technologies that do this would not bother us. We would simply take note of their attempted manipulation and move on, unaffected. The problem, of course, is that we don’t fit that description at all. On the contrary, we live short lives filled with cognitive biases and vices. It is by no means obvious, then, that letting go of what little control we have is a good thing. The exact ratio of experiences-that-come-to-us and experiences-we-

come-to is carefully calibrated to get us by. If, like an ecosystem of preys and predators, we dramatically alter this balance, things can degenerate. You might still get by, but the overall sum—which we experience as moods and emotions—might not be in your best interest.

Some surprising news throughout your day is fine, but too many pop-ups can lead to anxiety. It is not hard to see why. If a bird smacked against my window every couple of minutes or so, I doubt I would get any quality work done. It is vital, then, to think carefully before surrendering one's attention to devices like computers and smartphones.

As a rule, life's most meaningful experiences do not jump out at you. Love at first sight can hit you like a freight train, but this is a rare experience. Witnessing the birth of a child is definitely a once in a lifetime experience, but the tensions, obligations, and distractions involved make it hard to fully grasp the event's significance on site. Despite what companies and common beliefs might wish, a detailed record of pictures and videos will *not* give you a second chance. Given how easy it is to miss out, it is probably wise to put away gizmos and attend more carefully to such precious and ephemeral events.

Whenever you decrease what-comes-to-you and increase what-you-come-to, you (re)gain control of your life, one experience at a time. How exactly does one "come to" an experience? It requires practice, but I want to borrow techniques from phenomenology to show how to extract more from the present moment.

Pay attention

Here is how I introduce the issue of attention in my courses. For starters, I ask students to place a sheet of paper before them and draw a circle on it. Next, they are told to shade half of that circle's surface. We then pause in order to watch a brief video. In preparation for that video, each student is given a card, distributed randomly. Everyone is told to stay absolutely quiet. Half the class gets a card saying "If you get the number right, you get an extra 2%" while the other half gets a card that reads "Don't bother counting. Just pay careful attention." I then play a 20-second video showing two basketball teams, one dressed in white and the other dressed in black. That video begins by asking viewers to count the number of passes thrown between teammates in white. Given the cards distributed beforehand, half of the students have a tangible incentive to follow the video's instruction; whereas the remaining half are told to disregard that so as to instead focus on what(ever) transpires. The basketball drill is then shown (watch it here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UfA3ivLK_tE).

Once the video is over, students are asked two questions. First, *how many passes did the team in white make?* Second, *did you see the dancing gorilla?*

Rare exceptions notwithstanding, students who had an incentive to count the passes tend to answer the first question correctly, but they are dumbfounded by the second question. Conversely, students who were told to put aside the concern with counting are usually unable to pinpoint the number of passes, but the trade-off is that most notice the gorilla (in fact, keeping their chuckles in check when the person in a bear costume first appears is my biggest worry). To prove that there was no trickery, we watch the video

again. Although this second viewing generates amusement, many are agitated to find that they counted incorrectly or weren't offered extra marks. So, to soothe such apprehensions, all students are immediately given 2%. Once everyone in the room exhales, our goal is to unpack what philosophical moral we can learn from the event.

On the one hand, we could say that a person's goals filter what that person notices or fails to notice. This influence is not merely mnemonic; it colours our very awareness. Intent on earning extra marks, students became blind to the dancing gorilla. This is usually what interests psychologists (see for example Mack 2003). Yet, what interests me as a philosopher is that the students who let go of their normal concerns *were* able to see the unusual intruder. This revelation of what would have otherwise been occluded shows that the blindness caused by our absorption in tasks and distractions can in principle be remedied. There is thus hope that our ignorance can remedied, though perhaps only partially and with training.

The practical benefits of the non-practical

We are all busy doing something, especially these days. Yet, our concern with what we *want* risks occluding what we *have*, right before us. Hence, it is worth wondering what would happen if we put our phones and other devices away and "gave ourselves the right to […] adopt what might be called the contemplative stance" (Champagne 2016a, p. 48). We naturally feel at home in our inventions. So, like a wine-taster who learns to discern nuances that not readily apparent at first, the ordinary world is an acquired taste that must be cultivated. If we can extract more value out of ordinary experiences, these ordinary

experiences might be able to compete with the personalized contents streaming in our feeds.

Open attention to one's surroundings is a skill worth investing in. In real life, we never get to press the rewind button to go over what we have missed. The most we can achieve is live more carefully, as if in slow-motion. This relaxed pace goes against our impulse to stay busy, so we need a discipline "which, in consequence of its most radical essential peculiarity, is remote from natural thinking" (Husserl [1913] 1982, p. xvii).

The approach I am gesturing at is inspired by phenomenology, which "may be characterised […] as the unprejudiced, descriptive study of whatever appears to consciousness, precisely in the manner in which it so appears" (Moran 2002, p. 1). I cannot stress enough the link between improved attention and improved quality of life. Indeed, "[d]ifferent aspects of the world come into being through the interaction of our brains with whatever it is that exists apart from ourselves, and precisely which aspects come into being depends on the nature of our attention" (McGilchrist 2019, p. 38). There are dancing gorillas all around us—and some of them might benefit us in untold ways.

Most of the time, we don't "just see." Rather, we "look for" something. Indeed, "for some purposes […] we need, in fact, to be quite selective about what we see. […] This processing eventually becomes so automatic that we do not so much experience the world as experience our representation of the world" (McGilchrist 2019, p. 38). If, in a hurry, we have to name a colour, to name a tool, and to picture a fish, we (Westerners) tend to gravitate uncritically toward "red," "hammer," and an almond-shaped animal roughly as long as the width of one's shoulders. For a host of contingent reasons, "sandpaper,"

“maroon,” and a lengthy eel don’t pop up in our minds as easily—especially when we are busy. Of course, there are exceptions to this. A carpenter who routinely handles tools will perceptually discriminate between different kinds of hammers (Tanaka and Taylor 1991). Yet, once we have transitioned from an apprentice to a master, we identify *what* a thing is—“Oh, I know this (type)”—without attending to *how* a (token) thing is. This neglect afflicts laypeople and experts alike. The medical researcher who uses an fMRI machine might, for instance, completely forget how intimidating it can seem to a patient. We inhabit our habits—and rarely leave the comforts of home.

Usually, we spend the bulk of our waking day in a “look for” mode. This was the mode that students entered into when they were told “If you get the number [of basketball passes] right, you get an extra 2%.” There is nothing inherently wrong with this. In fact, to accomplish what we must, it is vital that we narrow our focus. The downside, however, is that any information discarded so early in the cognitive processing cannot be retrieved. We don’t take note of everything, classify some things as irrelevant, then put this irrelevant data on a shelf for safe keeping. Rather, we simply take note of some things, with no memory space devoted to whatever fails to serve our given purpose. What we overlook thus becomes an unknown unknown. You can’t retrieve this.

Were it not for pictures and videos stored on my phone’s cloud, I would have been convinced that I had a firm handle on my child’s second year—when in fact it escaped me almost entirely. The technology may have acted as a memory I did not have, but I don’t want to recall my kids (in 2D). I want to experience them for real, here, now, in

their plenitude. This full reality, which no device can capture, is what slipped through my grasp. The present has to slip away. Still, I want to hold on as long and as firmly as I can.

Opening oneself to the world involves doing less, not more. We know that compounding two or more simple tasks reduces our perceptual, cognitive, and motor resources (Simons and Chabris 1999). If you recite the alphabet backwards while driving, you increase your chances of having an accident. Rational exercises are even more engrossing (Kahneman 2013). You cannot attend to everything, so tough choices are needed. Yet, since many of the best things in life are more like unnoticed cushions than crashing birds or pop-ups, we need an antidote to the endless distractions of technologies like smartphones. Look at bus passengers and you will see that we now tilt our heads down far too often. Alas, we have no eyes atop our scalps. And if you absorption in technological use is already bad enough, VR googles will give our necks a break while completely taking over our visual fields.

Every company and influencer out there wants you to attend to whatever they peddle. Luckily, narrow goal-directed attention is not the only type of attention possible. For evolutionary reasons, we have also developed an ability to remain maximally open and responsive to our surroundings. An animal needs to focus on the meal before it, but it also needs to avoid becoming a meal for the animal behind it. "The right hemisphere, as birds and animals show, is 'on the look out'. It has to be open to whatever it is that exists apart from ourselves, as much as possible without preconceptions, not just focussing on what it already knows, or is interested in" (McGilchrist 2019, p. 38). This was the mode that

students switched to when they were instructed to "Just pay careful attention." We can tap into this neglected mode of attention to combat smartphone use.

The Buddhist thinker Alan Watts distinguished between "spotlight" consciousness and "floodlight" consciousness. Like a biceps and triceps of the arm or the right and left hemispheres of the brain, both have value and are needed. Yet, he believed that, comparatively speaking, we Westerners tend to have an underdeveloped "floodlight" consciousness. I agree. Spotlight consciousness, which is largely governed by the brain's left hemisphere, "is designed to aid you in grabbing stuff. Its purpose is utility and its evolutionary adaptation lies in the service of grasping and amassing 'things'. As such it is seductive" (McGilchrist 2019, p. xxii). Watts, however, warned that "the conscious intellect is frantically trying to clutch the world in its net of abstractions, and to insist that life be bound and fitted to its rigid categories" ([1957] 1999, p. 19).

The main advantage of habits is that they are mindless: we needn't consciously attend to them (see West and Anderson 2016). However, the main disadvantage of habits is that they are mindless: if we don't suspend them once in a while, we will never detect what we are missing. Hence, when left unchecked, the emphasis on practical value can make us live in a crayon world of our own collective making, where the grass is always green, the tree bark is always brown, the sky is always blue, and flying birds are reduced to a pair of black arcs. If you see the world that way, you have no idea what you are missing.

The co-founder of phenomenology Edmund Husserl called this family of habitual expectations the "natural attitude" ([1913] 1982, pp. 51–53; see Luft 2002). In a way, "[w]e are all familiar with the natural attitude, even if we don't know it. Being in the

natural attitude means simply taking for granted everything that we do take for granted" (Gallagher 2012, p. 41). The concepts we inherit presumably survived some kind of evolutionary selection, so they could be seen as "largely accurate summaries of the world" (Murphy 2010, p. 13). However, the natural attitude replicates falsehoods as easily as truths—all while atrophying our ability to tell the difference. We must each combat this atrophy by actually looking at the world and reminding ourselves how impoverished most of our ready-made assumptions are.

The abstention of belief

Habits have a strong hold on our perception, thinking, and imagination, so we need an equally strong way to dislodge them. Doubt can help us do this. The other co-founder of phenomenology Charles S. Peirce is famous for insisting (against sceptical philosophers like René Descartes) that "[w]e cannot begin with complete doubt" (1931–58, vol. 5, para. 265). The goal of phenomenology is not to doubt everything, but rather to use doubt as an instrument for reconnecting with anything. Hence,

> If I am perceiving or judging, for example, then whether these activities are veridical or not, whether they have objects that exist or not, it is nonetheless clear that I am perceiving this or that, or judging this or that. […] In this manner we are able to find a way to focus on what appears to us, just as it appears. (Tieszen 2010, p. 9)

The goal, Peirce says, is to describe "whatever is before the mind in any way" (2020, p. 436). To attain this outlook, we need to abandon our ordinary concerns. We normally think that we know what exists, but we need to bracket this comfortable hubris. Husserl thus called such bracketing the *epoché*, the Greek word for abstention.

What happens when one performs the *epoché* is telling. Even if you suspend belief in the existence of, say, the flower pot before you, “it remains right there in front of you and you can describe how it appears in your experience” (Gallagher 2012, p. 44). Since this involves doubt and doubt is usually associated with skepticism, care must be taken to properly characterize the technique (see Overgaard 2008). Phenomenology “advocates a detachment from the world precisely in the service of a greater devotion to the world” (McCarthy 1994, p. 148).

Consider the question “I wonder if ________ is really the case?” Whatever one plugs in the vacant slot, surely it is undeniable that *that* shows up. This is what Husserl meant when he called for a focus on the “things themselves” (Husserl [1900] 2001, p. 168). Such contents are the raw matter out of which all theories are (fallibly) built. Science may check the merit of theories, but phenomenology endeavours to ensure that those scientific edifices are not built on crayon-like assumptions. As Husserl explains, “[n]atural cognition, even positive science, can begin by [...] devising methods in naively enacted self-evidence. […] The philosopher, however, […] for reasons of principle, cannot come into being in naive cognitive activity […]” ([1920–5] 2019, pp. 209–211). Irrespective of our backgrounds, we all contend with distractions and the distorting expectations of the natural attitude. Hence, can all benefit from practicing a stance of open attention.

Nothing in this method results in scepticism about the “external world.” On the contrary, whoever diligently carries out phenomenological observations and descriptions will come to appreciate how our immediate environment is not a fictional spectacle. As Peirce puts it:

> The chair I appear to see makes no professions of any kind, essentially embodies no intentions of any kind, does not stand for anything. It obtrudes itself upon my gaze; but not as a deputy for anything else, not "as" anything. It simply knocks at the portal of my soul and stands there in the doorway. It is very insistent, for all its silence. It would be useless for me to attempt to pooh-pooh it, and say, "Oh come, I don't believe in the chair." I am forced to confess that it appears. Not only does it appear, but it disturbs me, more or less. I cannot think the appearance is not there, nor dismiss it as I would a fancy. I can only get rid of it by an exertion of physical force. It is a forceful thing. Yet it offers no reason, defence, nor excuse for its presence. It does not pretend to any right to be there. It silently forces itself upon me. (Peirce 1931–58, vol. 7, para. 619–621)

This obstinacy explains why, suitably adapted/interpreted, this method of observation "might spawn a radical version of externalism" (Rowlands 2003, p. 56), insofar as "to be conscious *of* something is to be confronted with a concrete and full presence which is not consciousness" (Sartre [1943] 1978, p. lx). As we shall see in later chapters, you are *not* trapped in some elaborate VR simulation.

Some skeptical philosophers regard the external world as a conclusion and not a premise, but phenomenological honesty reveals how silly this is. By redirecting our attention to the here and now, this method seeks to reinstate a child-like ability to see the world for the first time—if by "child" we mean a person who has not yet been schooled or learned a language. It is a ladder back to the concrete. What presents itself at this concrete level is often not what we expect. Peirce gives this nice example:

> When the ground is covered by snow on which the sun shines brightly except where shadows fall, if you ask any ordinary man what its color appears to be, he will tell you white, pure white, whiter in the sunlight, a little greyish in the

> shadow. But that is not what is before his eyes that he is describing; it is his theory of what *ought* to be seen. The artist will tell him that the shadows are not grey but a dull blue and that the snow in the sunshine is of a rich yellow. That artist's observational power is what is most wanted in the study of phenomenology. (Peirce 1931–58, vol. 5, para. 42)

To see the snow as it truly presents itself in an actual experience, one must forget what one learned about it, since almost everything we are taught pertains to snow-in-general. Such abstract knowledge is valuable, but our bodily transactions are only with particular snow.

Because the influence of habitual conceptions is persistent, phenomenology discloses a hard-to-reach experiential layer. It is a bit like trying to see a figure in a stereogram. Normally, our eye lenses focus on what they are pointing at, but stereograms appear only when we interrupt this habit. Stare directly at the picture's surface and all you see is gibberish. Unfocus your eyes and all you see is a blur. But, when you aim your focal point beyond the image's surface, forms are revealed that are really there (https://www.aolej.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/strunatrain.jpg). If the best things in life are like a pattern revealed only after your eyes have adjusted, then a lifetime spend looking only at the surface doodles is essentially wasted.

Like viewing stereograms, the change of perspective that I am describing is difficult to achieve. It requires discipline. Peirce, one of the founders of the method, acknowledged that phenomenology requires "very peculiar powers of thought, the ability to seize clouds, vast and intangible" and confessed that "[t]he mere reading of this sort of philosophy, the mere understanding of it, is not easy" (1931–58, vol. 1, para. 280). We

can thus say that "phenomenology, like mathematics, requires […] certain 'strenuous studies,' without which a philosopher should not even be allowed to comment on phenomenological matters" (Livingston 2002, p. 243). Escaping our habitual ways of seeing demands a significant investment of time and effort, but what one finds when one succeeds even more significant.

A truly radical inquiry

Gizmos are addictive and addictions are hard to combat. Still, this chapter is premised o the idea that, with effort and practice, we can each take control of our attention and thereby our lives. "Unlike people who actually lose their peripheral vision (or horses with blinders), it is in fact we ourselves who essentially construct the narrow figurative tunnels to which we habitually confine our mental vision. Rather than resign ourselves to such a predicament, we can therefore 'widen; our mental vision, thus allowing ourselves access to what is ordinarily 'hidden' from us, albeit in plain sight" (Zerubavel 2015, p. 93).

The switch from spotlight consciousness to floodlight consciousness called for by phenomenology changes everything. Unlike the scientist, the phenomenologist or "artist who sees [...] the apparent colors of nature as they appear" (Peirce 1931–58, vol. 5, para. 42) can never gather any forward momentum, since performing a situated observation faithfully on one occasion does not spare one from having to do so all over again the next time (see for example Monet's painting series *Les meules à Giverny*). Absorbing yourself in an event or site is a bit like writing a biography about a specific person: nothing you

accomplish can ever be transferred to another case. Despite this lack of practical utility, the exercise has enormous value.

This phenomenological openness to the concrete is radical for two reasons, one widely acknowledged, the other less so. First, it involves what William James called “radical empiricism,” an acceptance that the “directly apprehended universe needs […] no extraneous trans-empirical connective support, but possesses in its own right a concatenated or continuous structure” ([1909] 1975, p. 7). You can see why many believe in a Creator, since a beautiful world is already *there*, awaiting to be experienced by whoever has the humility to actually pay attention.

Paying attention in this way is radical, because the reasons/motives that lead a person to bracket their natural attitude might not survive phenomenological inquiry. You could turn to the method to justify some scientific claim—only to find out in the course of one’s attentive descriptions that this epistemological preoccupation no longer grips you and should in fact be relinquished. In regular inquiry—the kind that has a truth-seeking purpose—one might lead an expedition to the South Pole (say) with the hope of empirically justifying some computer-assisted model. That model might or might not be satisfied by the world, so the goal is to obtain an observational verdict. Phenomenology can help such observations be unbiased. However, phenomenology is unlike regular scientific observation since it requires bracketing one’s aims and habits—including the aims and habits that prompted one to do phenomenology in the first place. So, one could drill ice cores only to find out that one should be playing the cello instead. The verdicts rendered by conscious experience are thus more sweeping than those rendered by the

natural world, since they can show that our questions are not worth asking and our projects are not worth pursuing.

The mundane

When I put away my phone and suspend my usual preoccupations, I see my home, currently strewn with books, toys, clothes, and playing children. Despite being the center of my daily life, this setting does not show up (or show up centrally) in the official worldview that I learn from books. In the view from nowhere (Nagel 1986), I have no address. Yet, what do I *care*, literally, about the orbits of the planets, say (Champagne 2021b)? Such knowledge may benefit me in remote ways. However, the most vital contribution of phenomenological description, in my estimate, is not that it grounds the sciences (Ströker 1997) or paves the way for some insight into the mind's structure (Dreyfus and Hall 1982), but rather that it lets us be at peace with the humdrum grind of daily life.

It is becoming more comfortable (and fashionable?) to champion the unthinking (see Dreyfus 2007; Legg 2003; or the vast literature on enactivism in cognitive science). However, few dare to champion the aimless. Yet, what if an unbiased description of what(ever) appears reveals a large swath of the experiential spectrum devoid of any purpose? What if, moreover, phenomenology establishes that these pointless experiences are in some sense the most important one could undergo? Peirce enjoins his readers to "actually repeat my observations and experiments for himself, or else I shall more utterly fail to convey my meaning than if I were to discourse of effects of chromatic decoration to a man congenitally blind" (1931–58, vol. 1, para. 286). What I am suggesting is that

first-hand experience has intrinsic value—quite apart from its ability to ground knowledge.

Bracketing, Merleau-Ponty said, represents an attempt to recapture "'wonder' in the face of the world" (2002, p. xv). He was quoting approvingly Eugen Fink, whose phenomenological investigations sought to resist "a strange secularism that deprives us of imagination, and enframes and industrializes our minds without transcendental wonder" (Alvis 2019, p. 104). Meaning—the sort that makes live worth living—is often inconspicuous. By hugging the concrete, we can grasp how the little things no one writes about—folding laundry, sipping coffee, carrying the groceries home—matter more than we normally suspect.

The value of these mundane events can be hard to discern, especially when we spend most of our day staring at lit displays. "Indeed, considering the number of hours that many people spend engaging with media in contemporary life, the body-screen relation in particular may be one of our most significant human-technology relations" (Richardson 2012, p. 135). Handheld devices provide only a tiny window on the world (Wellner 2016, pp. 91–95). As if this wasn't enough, by constantly catering to need gratification (Nazri and Latiff 2019), the social networking technologies conveyed on those screens put the natural attitude on steroids. Humans have shown a "canny and subtle" ability to adapt to such technologies (Richardson and Wilken 2009, p. 31). Still, I share the worry that "the approaching tide of technological revolution […] could so captivate, bewitch, dazzle, and beguile man that calculative thinking may someday come to be accepted and practiced as the only way of thinking" (Heidegger [1959] 1966, p. 56).

Technology is an important part of the human condition. Yet, at the risk of stating a truism, every moment looking at a computer screen is a moment not paying attention to one's "actual" environment. So, for reasons that we are only beginning to appreciate (Dreyfus 2009, pp. 67–68), there is no substitute for the real thing. In spite of this, many prefer posting their meals to tasting their meals. Unmooring from real life to attain a global reach may give us more "friends" than ever (Cocking and Matthews 2000), but feelings of isolation, depression, anxiety, and meaninglessness are on the rise (e.g., Lin et al. 2016; Twenge et al. 2018). The experiences we undergo—or don't undergo—thus affect our wellbeing (Elhai et al. 2016, pp. 509–510).

Fortunately, there are ways to intimate (some of) what we may be overlooking. My classroom activity, you will recall, began by asking students to draw a circle and then shade half of it. After watching the basketball video a second time to confirm the missed gorilla, students are asked to hold up their initial drawing, so that everybody can see. Mostly, what we find are circles cut down the middle by a straight line, with one side shaded. Yet, by design, I never instructed students on how to distribute the shaded area. Despite this freedom, almost everyone follows the path of least resistance and sunders the circle with a (usually vertical) straight line intersecting its center. Caught in our usual attitude to the world, a mindless habit takes over our actions.

The habit in question has merit, since it is quite economical. Still, I ask my students, what are some other ways that one might shade half the surface of a circle? In a pedagogical exercise that combines Husserl's "eidetic variation" (Michels 2020) and Peirce's "diagrammatic reasoning" (Paavola 2011), students experiment with the blank

circle to discover its nested affordances. It takes a while for imaginations to get into gear, but eventually we sketch a variety of legitimate possibilities. My favourites are cow skin patches and the yin and yang symbol. Like the gorilla that our eyes overlooked, these are shapes our minds overlooked.

Receptivity to non-obvious possibilities must be voluntary, because one cannot confirm what one will glean in advance of gleaning it. It is therefore impossible to rid the situation of risk and discomfort. The natural attitude—which can be understood as doing what everyone else is doing—will always represent the path of least resistance. The natural attitude lets contingent cultural shifts masquerade as eternal constants, so my students "assume, like everyone else, that technology is a fact of life—the air they breathe, the water in which they swim, like it or not" (Jones 2006, p. 2). Critique is impossible under those conditions. We thus need a technique to wake us from our complacency.

Phenomenology as a secular source of existential solace

According to Peirce, "[t]he first and foremost" faculty that a phenomenologist must develop is "the faculty of seeing what stares one in the face, just as it presents itself, unreplaced by any interpretation, unsophisticated by any allowance for this or for that supposed modifying circumstance" (Peirce 1931–58, vol. 5, para. 42). I don't know whether it is appropriate to burden this method with supplying comfort and peace in the face of mortal worries. All I know is that, if phenomenology is not called upon to satisfy our basic human craving for meaning, religion (Champagne 2020) or ideology (Aron 1962) gladly will. Phenomenology, by contrast, has no agenda to peddle. At any rate, it

should be designed in such a way that, if one ever front-loaded a dogma, the alarms of improper bracketing would automatically go off. Appeals to authority should also be pre-empted by the call to experience things for oneself. Phenomenology is thus poised to accomplish something no other discipline can.

Interestingly, Husserl eventually arrived at similar conclusions, insisting that "the total phenomenological attitude and the *epoché* belonging to it are destined in essence to effect, at first, a complete personal transformation, comparable in the beginning to a religious conversion, which then, however, over and above this, bears within itself the significance of the greatest existential transformation which is assigned as a task to mankind as such" ([1936] 1970, p. 137). Husserl realized this near the end of his life, but much is gained by realizing it earlier.

The world certainly looks different when seen with phenomenological eyes. A dice, to pick a handy example, always hides a backside (Husserl [1931] 1960, pp. 39–45; Sokolowski 2000, pp. 17–21). Of course, as we toy with the object, we quickly form a habitual expectation of what we shall see next. In the natural attitude, we reify this habit and call it a cube. There is nothing inherently wrong with such a shortcut, so in ordinary circumstances the goal is "is not to abstain from hypostatization, but to do it intelligently" (Peirce 1931–58, vol. 1, para. 383). Yet, even if reification or thing-making is sometimes warranted, no amount of spinning the dice between my fingers or asking "other Egos who see better and further" (Husserl [1913] 1982, p. 119) will let me experience all six sides at once. So, while an ordinary thing "can in principle become the intentional object or correlate of a *fulfilled* conscious experience," it remains the case that "our perceptual

awareness of things is, in principle, suffused with presumptions that at this moment do not (and never will) enjoy such fulfillment” (Jabobs 2013, pp. 364–365).

A more faithful (and philosophically interesting) description of the situation would instead be that “an actual experience refers back to another experience which is not given in actuality and will not be actualized” (Schutz 1962, p. 125). This is philosophically interesting, because it shows that one’s hold on even the simplest things always remains incomplete. We remain free to contemplate ideals and idealizations, but we can and must also gauge the ineliminable distance that separates those projections from our present situation.

Over time, gauging that distance instils a sense of epistemic humility. The world is intelligible, but it always hides surprises, so total confidence in one’s judgements is rarely if ever warranted. Of course, this partial grasp and concomitant humility apply not just to dice, but to social situations as well. No conversation or Google search will ever let one have another person all figured out. The phenomenological call to “pay attention” is thus also a call to *listen* (Champagne 2020, p. 69). We saw how we normally identify what a thing is—“Oh, I know this (type)”—without attending to *how* a (token) thing actually is. This tendency to favour abstractions, which is fine when handling things, becomes ethically deplorable when dealing with people. If I see you merely as a token of a type of person, I am not really seeing you.

Tellingly, participants in a summer camp that bans all electronic devices reported that, even after five days, “they were more interested in their summer friends than in their friends at school. They thought the difference was that at home they talk with their

friends about what's on their phones; at camp, they talk to each other about what's on their minds" (Turkle 2015, pp. 317–318). Experiencing others in their plenitude doesn't come easily (for us educated adults, at least). Still, if we are too absorbed in our tasks and dvices, we will turn the people around us into vanishing gorillas. This is what happened to my son's second year.

Johann Hari imposed on himself a ban on electronic devices similar to the children's summer camp, leaving all his gizmos with friends and renting a house by the ocean. The observations from his experimental change of lifestyle are telling:

> For so long I had been fixing my gaze on things that were very fast and very temporary, like a Twitter feed. When you fix your gaze on the speedy, you feel pensive, amped up, liable to be washed away if you don't move, wave, shout. Now I found myself staring at something very old and very permanent. This ocean was here long before you, I thought, and it will be there long after your small concerns are forgotten. Twitter makes you feel that the whole world is obsessed with you and your little ego—it loves you, it hates you, it's talking about you *right now*. The ocean makes you feel like the world is greeting you with a soft, wet, welcoming indifference. It's never going to argue back, no matter how loud you yell. (Hari 2022, p. 23)

To the extent that this experience is valuable, it makes sense to try and sponge up the ocean view as much as possible. This typically compels people to pull out their smartphones and immortalize the moment with a snapshot. However, the technological reflex backfires, since it denatures the experience. The rare is no longer rare once it can be duplicated without limit and experienced by proxy by everyone. You don't "immortalize" a precious moment with a smartphone. You kill it.

Naturally, maximal openness to one's present environment is an achievement that can be sustained for only so long. Sooner or later, one must interpret one's experiences and thereby foreground some aspects while neglecting others. Habits have their place in our semiotic economy, so they cannot be put in abeyance for long. Phenomenology nevertheless curbs this inborn tendency to march forward, as efficiently as possible, just because. Consciousness has been described as a stream, but there is much value to be gained from spending some time in consciousness' still pools (see "The Stream and Still Pools of Consciousness," in Champagne 2018, pp. 46–47).

Many books teach readers how to wean themselves from addictive devices like smartphones (e.g., Eyal 2019; Newport 2019; Odell 2019). Ironically, many of these books promise that such lifestyles can be more lucrative. This misses the point. Spending time away from technological distractions may give you a competitive edge (see Carr 2004), but reducing technological use in the hope of improving efficiency is a bit like saying that, if you stop chasing your tail, you will finally grab it. I make no such promise. You will definitely benefit from skipping newfangled technologies and sticking to real life. This gain, however, is *not* monetary. I thus champion *inefficiency*, "in the double sense of a respite from technological progress and an escape from efficient causation" (Champagne 2016, p. 48).

When you stop chasing your tail, what you get is stillness. This is not a thing, but a feeling. Now, even if feelings "form the warp and woof of cognition" (Peirce 1931–58, vol. 1, para. 381), we do not have endless fabric to work with. Our cultural focus on productivity makes it seems as if we can work way out of mortality. We cannot. Humans

earn their cognitive living by anticipating (Clark 2013) and anticipate best when they gloss over the nitty-gritty details of the actual world. Unchecked, though, this focus on practical matters risks leaving us with a livelihood but a life not worth living.

How, then, can one reconcile the practical demands of daily life with a life of contemplation? The combination can seem hard to achieve. Indeed,

> Whoever is familiar with the history of philosophy will tend […] to separate phenomenological and pragmatic thought and place them at opposite poles. These poles could be designated approximately as follows: on the one hand there is an appeal to intuitive evidence [...] and the radical absence of presuppositions; on the other hand there is an appeal to the ability to make or do something, an operational theory of meaning. [...] How is a mediation between Pragmatism and Phenomenology possible under these conditions? (Apel 1981, pp. 110–111)

This is a genuine tension. One must invest oneself in one's projects in order to make/find meaning (Beauvoir 2004, pp. 89–149; Champagne and Gladstein 2015). But, if one *only* invests oneself in those projects, meaninglessness ensues. Ostensibly, one can train oneself to accept either consequence. Even so, the mindless pragmatism of go-getters and sappy mindfulness of mystics both remain dead ends.

Faced with this conundrum, my solution—unsophisticated as it is—is to diversify my experiential portfolio by making time for both. The deepest solace lies in a situated understanding that cannot be commodified or verbally expressed (Champagne 2019a). It may not be clear what I gain from watching my children play. Still, I submit that whatever existential salvation we can muster in the face of a finite life and indifferent universe resides in such ephemeral episodes.

Stop. Look. Listen. *Live*.

As I said at the outset, life's most meaningful experiences do not jump out at you. Being too busy, I missed a year of my child's life. Luckily, his life (and mine) are not over, so I can make a renewed commitment to paying closer attention. As I suspend standard reflexes and take stock of who I am in an honest way, I find myself to be a creature who can tell *now* what I will regret *later*. I also gather that life does not afford me the luxury of a rewind button. Flourishing is not immediate pleasure, so only on my deathbed will I confirm whether it was wise to devote time for moments of heightened attention devoid of any practical relevance.

While this postponed verdict makes it seem like the decision to skip technology is arbitrary, I think some evidence in its favour can be adduced. If, as some have suggested, "signs work as an influence of the future upon the present" (Deely 2009, p. 207), then perhaps an unprejudiced inventory of what(ever) appears includes a voice from my future self enjoining me to sweep aside technological distractions so as to observe what really matters in slow-motion.

What you see in real life is more valuable than anything that could be shown on a lit screen. Substantiating this claim of greater value is not something I can do, since all I can do is "tell the reader which way to look and to see what he shall see" (Peirce 1931–58, vol. 2, para. 197).

Join the Endangered Experiences Community

Are you worried about the many valuable experiences already rendered obsolete by Smartphones and social media -- and now look with concern at GPT4's AI, Meta's VR, and Tesla's bots?

A technological sea change is coming. So, to weather this onslaught of virtuality and artificiality, we must be grounded in reality as deeply as possible.

Join the many subscribers who, each month, receive philosophical confidence to skip such bandwagons and stick to what really brings meaning.

Cheers, Marc Champagne, PhD

Sign up!

References

Alexander, Scott. 2014. "Meditations on Moloch." *Slate Star Codex*, July 30. https://slatestarcodex.com/2014/07/30/meditations-on-moloch/

Alvis, Jason W. 2019. "God's Playthings: Eugen Fink's Phenomenology of Religion in Play as Symbol of the World." *Research in Phenomenology*, vol. 49, no. 1, pp. 88–117. https://doi.org/10.1163/15691640-12341412

Anders, Günther. 2016. *Prometheanism: Technology, Digital Culture and Human Obsolescence*. Edited by Christopher John Müller. London: Rowman and Littlefield.

Apel, Karl-Otto. 1981. *Charles S. Peirce: From Pragmatism to Pragmaticism*. Translated by John Michael Krois. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.

Aron, Raymond. 1962. *The Opium of the Intellectuals*. Translated by Terence Kilmartin. New York: W. W. Norton.

Babich, Babette. 2021. *Günther Anders' Philosophy of Technology: From Phenomenology to Critical Theory*. London: Bloomsbury.

Barber, Michael David. 2010. "Phenomenological *Wissenschaftslehre* and John McDowell's Quietism." In *Advancing Phenomenology: Essays in Honor of Lester Embree*, edited by Thomas Nenon and Philip Blosser, pp. 433–454. Dordrecht: Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-90-481-9286-1_26

Beauvoir, Simone de. 2004. *Philosophical Writings*. Edited by Margaret A. Simons, Marybeth Timmermann, and Mary Beth Mader. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press.

Bostrom, Nick. 2019. "The Vulnerable World Hypothesis." *Global Policy*, vol. 10, no. 4, pp. 455–476. https://doi.org/10.1111/1758-5899.12718

Carr, Nicholas G. 2004. *Does IT Matter? Information Technology and the Corrosion of Competitive Advantage*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business School Press.

Carr, Nicholas. 2018. *The Shallows: How the Internet Is Changing the Way We Think, Read and Remember*. New York: W. W. Norton.

Champagne, Marc. 2011. “Axiomatizing Umwelt Normativity.” *Sign Systems Studies*, vol. 39, no. 1, pp. 9–59. https://doi.org/10.12697/sss.2011.39.1.01

Champagne, Marc. 2016. “Can Pragmatists Believe in Qualia? The Founder of Pragmatism Certainly Did…” *Cybernetics and Human Knowing*, vol. 23, no. 2, pp. 39–49. http://www.ingentaconnect.com/contentone/imp/chk/2016/00000023/00000002/art00004

Champagne, Marc. 2018. *Consciousness and the Philosophy of Signs: How Peircean Semiotics Combines Phenomenal Qualia and Practical Effects*. Cham: Springer.

Champagne, Marc. 2019. “Consciousness and the Philosophy of Signs: A New Précis.” *The American Journal of Semiotics*, vol. 35, nos. 3–4, pp. 443–462. https://doi.org/10.5840/ajs2019353/458

Champagne, Marc. 2020. *Myth, Meaning, and Antifragile Individualism: On the Ideas of Jordan Peterson*. Exeter: Imprint Academic.

Champagne, Marc. 2021. “Other Stars, Other Planets, and Other Life: A Primer that goes Two-thirds of the Way.” *Metascience*, vol. 30, no. 1, pp. 153–156. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11016-020-00593-1

Champagne, Marc. 2023. “My Life Gives the Moral Landscape its Relief.” In *Sam Harris: Critical Responses*, edited by Sandra L. Woien, pp. 17–38. Foreword by Stephen Hicks. Chicago: Carus Books.

Champagne, Marc, and Mimi Reisel Gladstein. 2015. “Beauvoir and Rand: Asphyxiating People, Having Sex, and Pursuing a Career.” *The Journal of Ayn Rand Studies*, vol. 15, no. 1, pp. 23–41. https://doi.org/10.5325/jaynrandstud.15.1.0023

Clark, Andy. 2013. “Whatever Next? Predictive Brains, Situated agents, and the Future of Cognitive Science.” *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, vol. 36, no. 3, pp. 181–204. https://doi.org/10.1017/s0140525x12000477

Clark, Andy, and David J. Chalmers. 1998. “The Extended Mind.” *Analysis*, vol. 58, no. 1, pp. 7–19. https://doi.org/10.1093/analys/58.1.7

Cocking, Dean, and Steve Matthews. 2000. “Unreal Friends.” *Ethics and Information Technology*, vol. 2, no. 4, pp. 223–231. https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1011414704851

Coeckelbergh, Mark. 2022. *Self-Improvement: Technologies of the Soul in the Age of Artificial Intelligence*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Deely, John N. 2009. “The Full Vista of the Action of Signs: From Semiosis to Semioethics.” *Chinese Semiotic Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 171–222. https://doi.org/10.1515/css-2009-0020

de Sousa, Ronald. 1987. *The Rationality of Emotions*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Dreyfus, Hubert L. 2007. “Detachment, Involvement, and Rationality: Are we Essentially Rational Animals?” *Human Affairs*, vol. 17, no. 2, pp. 101–109. https://doi.org/10.2478/v10023-007-0010-0

Dreyfus, Hubert L. 2009. *On the Internet*. London: Routledge.

Dreyfus, Hubert L, and Harrison Hall (eds.). 1982. *Husserl, Intentionality, and Cognitive Science*. Cambridge, MA, and London: MIT Press.

Edgerton, David. 2011. “In Praise of Luddism.” *Nature, vol. 471*, no. 7336, pp. 27–29. https://doi.org/10.1038/471027a

Elhai, Jon D., Jason C. Levine, Robert D. Dvorak, and Brian J. Hall. 2016. “Fear of Missing Out, Need for Touch, Anxiety and Depression are Related to Problematic Smartphone Use.” *Computers in Human Behavior*, vol. 63, pp. 509–516. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2016.05.079

Eyal, Nir. 2014. *Hooked: How to Build Habit-Forming Products*. New York: Penguin.

Eyal, Nir. 2019. *Indistractable: How to Control Your Attention and Choose Your Life*. Dallas: BenBella Books.

Feenberg, Andrew. 2017. *Technosystem: The Social Life of Reason*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Friedman, Milton, and Rose D. Friedman. 1990. *Free to Choose: A Personal Statement*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

Frischmann, Brett, and Evan Selinger. 2018. *Re-Engineering Humanity*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Gallagher, Shaun. 2012. *Phenomenology*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Haines, Richard F. 1991. "A Breakdown in Simultaneous Information Processing." In *Presbyopia Research: From Molecular Biology to Visual Adaptation*, edited by Gérard Obrecht and Lawrence W. Stark, pp. 171–175. New York: Plenum. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4757-2131-7_17

Hari, Johann. 2022. *Stolen Focus: Why You Can't Pay Attention—and How to Think Deeply Again*. London: Bloomsbury.

Heidegger, Martin. [1959] 1966. *Discourse on Thinking*. Translated by John M. Anderson and E. Hans Freund. New York: Harper and Row.

Heying, Heather, and Bret Weinstein. 2021. *A Hunter-Gatherer's Guide to the 21st Century: Evolution and the Challenges of Modern Life*. New York: Portfolio.

Husserl, Edmund. [1900] 2001. *Logical investigations, vol. 1*. Translated by John Niemeyer Findlay. Edited by Dermot Moran. London: Routledge.

Husserl, Edmund. [1913] 1982. *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy, First Book: General Introduction to a Pure Phenomenology*. Translated by Fred Kersten. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.

Husserl, Edmund. [1920–5] 2019. *First Philosophy*. Translated by Sebastian Luft and Thane M. Naberhaus. Dordrecht: Springer.

Husserl, Edmund. [1931] 1960. *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology*. Translated by David Cairns. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.

Husserl, Edmund. [1936] 1970. *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*. Translated by David Carr. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.

Irwin, William. 2015. *The Free Market Existentialist: Capitalism without Consumerism*. Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell.

Jakubik, Maria, and Peeter Müürsepp. 2022. "From Knowledge to Wisdom: Will Wisdom Management Replace Knowledge Management?" *European Journal of Management and Business Economics*, vol. 31, no. 3, pp. 367–389. https://doi.org/10.1108/EJMBE-07-2021-0219

James, William. [1909] 1975. *The Meaning of Truth: A Sequel to "Pragmatism."* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Jones, Stephen E. 2006. *Against Technology: From the Luddites to Neo-Luddism*. New York: Routledge.

Kahneman, Daniel. 2013. *Thinking, Fast and Slow*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.

Legg, Catherine. 2003. "This is Simply What I Do." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, vol. 66, no. 1, pp. 58–80. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1933-1592.2003.tb00243.x

Lembke, Anna. 2021. *Dopamine Nation: Finding Balance in the Age of Indulgence*. New York: Dutton.

Lin, Liu Yi, Jaime E. Sidani, Ariel Shensa, Ana Radovic, Elizabeth Miller, Jason B. Colditz, Beth L. Hoffman, Leila M. Giles, and Brian A. Primack. 2016. "Association between Social Media Use and Depression among U.S. Young Adults." *Depression and Anxiety*, vol. 33, no. 4, pp. 323–331. https://doi.org/10.1002/da.22466

Livingston, Paul. 2002. "Husserl and Schlick on the Logical Form of Experience." *Synthese*, vol. 132, no. 3, pp. 239–272. https://doi.org/10.1023/a:1020378731241

Lyons, Dan. 1979. "Are Luddites Confused?" *Inquiry*, vol. 22, nos. 1–4, pp. 381–403. https://doi.org/10.1080/00201747908601879

Luft, Sebastian. 2002. "Husserl's Notion of the Natural Attitude and the Shift to Transcendental Phenomenology." In *Phenomenology World-wide: Foundations, Expanding Dynamics, Life Engagements*, edited by Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka, pp. 114–119. Dordrecht: Springer.

Mack, Arien. 2003. "Inattentional Blindness: Looking without Seeing." *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, vol. 12, no. 5, pp. 180–184. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8721.01256

McCarthy, John C. 1994. "Some Preliminary Remarks on 'Cognitive Interest' in Husserlian Phenomenology." *Husserl Studies*, vol. 11, no. 3, pp. 135–152. https://doi.org/10.1007/bf01387289

McGilchrist, Iain. 2019. *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. 2002. *Phenomenology of Perception*. London: Routledge.

Michels, Robert. 2020. "Husserlian Eidetic Variation and Objectual Understanding as a Basis for an Epistemology of Essence." *Logos and Episteme*, vol. 3, no. 11, pp. 333–353. https://doi.org/10.5840/logos-episteme202011325

Moran, Dermot. 2002. "Editor's Introduction. In *The Phenomenology Reader*, edited by Dermot Moran and Timothy Moody, pp. 1–26. London: Routledge.

Murphy, Gregory L. 2010. "What are Categories and Concepts? In *The Making of Human Concepts*, edited by Denis Mareschal, Paul C. Quinn, and Stephen E. G. Lea, pp. 11–18. Oxford: Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199549221.003.01

Nagel, Thomas. 1986. *The View from Nowhere*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Nazri, Syahida Mohd, and Zulkifli A. Latiff. 2019. "Exploring Desires and Maneuvering on Instagram Life: A Phenomenology Study." *Proceeding of the 5th Conference on Communication, Culture and Media Studies*, pp. 301–305.

Newport, Cal. 2019. *Digital Minimalism: On Living Better with Less Technology*. New York: Penguin.

Nguyen, C. Thi, and Bekka Williams. 2020. "Moral Outrage Porn." *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy*, vol. 18, no. 2, pp. 147–172. https://doi.org/10.26556/jesp.v18i2.990

Oakeshott, Michael. 1962. *Rationalism and Politics*. London: Methuen.

Odell, Jenny. 2019. *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy*. Brooklyn: Melville House.

Overgaard, Søren. 2008. "How to Analyze Immediate Experience: Hintikka, Husserl, and the Idea of Phenomenology." *Metaphilosophy*, vol. 39, no. 3, pp. 282–304. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9973.2008.00543.x

Paavola, Sami. 2011. "Diagrams, Iconicity, and Abductive Discovery." *Semiotica*, vol. 186, pp. 297–314. https://doi.org/10.1515/semi.2011.057

Peirce, Charles Sanders. 1931–58. *The Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*. Edited by Charles Hartshorne, Paul Weiss, and Arthur W. Burks. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Peirce, Charles Sanders. 2020. *Logic of the Future: Writings on Existential Graphs*. Vol. 2. Edited by Ahti-Veikko Pietarinen. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter.

Richardson, Ingrid. 2012. "Touching the Screen: A Phenomenology of Mobile Gaming and the iPhone." In *Studying Mobile Media: Cultural Technologies, Mobile Communication, and the iPhone*, edited by Larissa Hjorth, Jean Burgess, and Ingrid Richardson, pp. 133–151. New York: Routledge.

Richardson, Ingrid, and Rowan Wilken. 2009. "Haptic Vision, Footwork, Place-making: A Peripatetic Phenomenology of the Mobile Phone Pedestrian." *Second Nature: International Journal of Creative Media*, vol. 1, no. 2, pp. 22–41.

Rorty, Richard M. 1979. *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Rowlands, Mark. 2003. *Externalism: Putting Mind and World Back Together Again*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press.

Sartre, Jean-Paul. [1943] 1978. *Being and Nothingness*. Translated by Hazel Estella Barnes. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Schutz, A. 1972. *Collected Papers 1: The Problem of Social Reality*. Edited by Maurice Nathanson. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.

Simons, Daniel J., and Christopher F. Chabris. 1999. "Gorillas in our Midst: Sustained Inattentional Blindness for Dynamic Events." *Perception*, vol. 28, no. 9, pp. 1059–1074. https://doi.org/10.1068/p281059

Simons, Daniel J. 2010. "Monkeying Around with the Gorillas in our Midst: Familiarity with an Inattentional-Blindness Task does not Improve the Detection of Unexpected Events." *i-Perception, vol. 1*, no. 1, pp. 3–6. https://doi.org/10.1068/i0386

Sokolowski, Robert. 2000. *Introduction to Phenomenology*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Smith, Sydney. 1849. *Elementary Sketches of Moral Philosophy*. London: Spottiswoodes and Shaw.

Ströker, Elisabeth. 1997. *The Husserlian Foundations of Science*. Dordrecht: Springer

Tanaka, James W., and Marjorie Taylor. 1991. "Object Categories and Expertise: Is the Basic Level in the Eye of the Beholder?" *Cognitive Psychology, vol. 23*, no. 3, pp. 457–482. https://doi.org/10.1016/0010-0285(91)90016-H

Tieszen, Richard. 2010. "Mathematical Realism and Transcendental Phenomenological Idealism." In *Phenomenology and Mathematics*, edited by Mirja Hartimo, pp. 1–22. Dordrecht: Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-90-481-3729-9_1

Turkle, Sherry. 2015. *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age*. New York: Penguin.

Twenge, Jean M. 2017. *iGen: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy—and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood—and What That Means for the Rest of Us*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Twenge, Jean M., Thomas E. Joiner, Megan L. Rogers, and Gabrielle N. Martin. 2018. "Increases in Depressive Symptoms, Suicide-related Outcomes, and Suicide Rates among U.S. Adolescents after 2010 and Links to Increased New Media Screen Time." *Clinical Psychological Science*, vol. 6, no. 1, pp. 3–17. https://doi.org/10.1177/2167702617723376

Vallor, Shannon. 2015. "Moral Deskilling and Upskilling in a New Machine Age: Reflections on the Ambiguous Future of Character." *Philosophy and Technology*, vol. 28, no. 1, pp. 107–124. https://doi.org/10.1007/s13347-014-0156-9

Vallor, Shannon. 2016. *Technology and the Virtues: A Philosophical Guide to a Future Worth Wanting*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Watts, Alan. [1957] 1999. *The Way of Zen*. New York: Vintage.

Wellner, Galit P. 2016. *A Postphenomenological Inquiry of Cell Phones: Genealogies, Meanings, and Becoming*. Lanham: Lexington.

West, Donna E., and Myrdene Anderson (Eds.) 2016. *Consensus on Peirce's Concept of Habit: Before and Beyond Consciousness*. Cham: Springer.

White, Mark D. 2017. *The Decline of the Individual: Reconciling Autonomy with Community*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 1922. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Translated by Charles K. Ogden and Frank P. Ramsey, with an introduction by Bertrand Russell. New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company.

Wolf, Maryanne. 2018. *Reader, Come Home: The Reading Brain in a Digital World*. New York: Harper Collins.

Woollett, Katherine, and Eleanor A. Maguire. 2011. "Acquiring 'the Knowledge' of London's Layout Drives Structural Brain Changes." *Current Biology*, vol. 21, no. 24, pp. 2109–2114. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cub.2011.11.018

Yannis, George, Alexandra Laiou, Panagiotis Papantoniou, Christos Gkartzonikas. 2016. "Simulation of Texting Impact on Young Drivers' Behavior and Safety on

Motorways." *Transportation Research Part F: Traffic Psychology and Behaviour*, vol. 41, pp. 10–18. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.trf.2016.06.003

Zerubavel, Eviatar. 2015. *Hidden in Plain Sight: The Social Structure of Irrelevance*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Zuboff, Shoshana. 2019. *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*. New York: Public Affairs.