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I AM DEEPLY HONORED TO BE WITH YOU today in Florida. Thank you so much for coming, for your membership, for your friendship. Thank you to everyone who put this meeting together—our local host Ryan Musgrave, and all at Rollins College who made us feel so welcome here. Thanks, also, to our Program Committee, Barbara Lowe and Anthony Neal; our communications director, Dan Brunson; our secretary, Dwayne Tunstall; our treasurer, Bill Myers; to our Board; and to President-Elect Steve Fesmire. A lot went into making this meeting happen.

It's good to be back together. One thing the pandemic has done by separating us is cause us to reflect on what being together means—for friendship, for communication, for community—for imbibing, *todos juntos*. The pandemic forced us out of our comfort zones, and made us find new ways to connect. But these innovations, in my estimation, do not substitute for face to face. We need to continue to investigate why this is, especially as we try to find ways to mix old and new ways of carrying on as intellectuals.

During the pandemic, I lost steam; maybe it was being in a state of near-constant worry. Maybe it was the political climate. But something happened to me that had never happened before. An existential "befuddlement" (is that the word?), the loss of a horizon, a sense of now and later, here and there. I felt lost at sea. Unlike some who snuggled into their libraries and reread the collected works of Hegel or Royce or the Upanishads . . . I couldn't work on philosophy. I had nothing to say—no desire to even read. I felt bereft. Ideas that sustained me, which I proselytized to others—rang hollow. *What have I been doing?* What *will* I do?

But teaching keeps the nose to the grindstone, the shoulder to the wheel. *Act like you believe*, Pascal said, and you may yet, someday. *Yeah, right, Pascal.*

(And you, too, William James.) But I have to admit, they were right. Teaching classes—the meaning of life, philosophy of technology, aesthetics—kept my compass needle in motion. And it kept swinging back to what we (sometimes, with some disgruntlement) call *Pragmatism*.

This approach has what I need. *Pragmatism as looking forward*: proleptically, instrumentally, with ideas and theories as tools, looking forward to consider the *meanings* of future goals—and then organizing backwards. Moving in time, from present to future and back again. Moving in reality, from concrete to abstract and back again. *Pragmatism as looking from side to side*: democratically, pluralistically, looking at those who have been around us all the time but not fully appreciated, not fully visible, or all too visible—because overexposed. *Pragmatism as looking more closely*: phenomenologically, radically empirically, slowing down, moving closer, then backing away. Inspecting experience, its structures, its flow, its journey, its history.

Still, I wondered, *pragmatism . . . for what*? I recognized that pragmatism lent itself as an aid for making sense of the pandemic, helping me to develop themes that I'd already been thinking about. Themes about technology, experience, inquiry, and democracy.

What I would like to do, then, for the rest of this talk, is relate what caught and held my attention, philosophically, pragmatically. Especially on the theme of what is happening *for* us and, even more, *to* us—the impact of recent technologies on our experience, our ways of inquiring, with both education and democracy hanging in the balance. I'm offering no final thoughts about anything. Just what's been keeping me up at night.

The Technological Situation

Where do we find ourselves, in 2022? As we all know, we are increasingly enmeshed in a growing network of information-oriented tools, systems, and techniques. Smartphones, transportation apps, learning thermostats, location trackers, on and on. The benefits of these devices is usually foremost in our minds; after all, it is the job of marketers to be sure we know why we need something more. The downsides are also familiar to most of us—we fight interruption, distraction, information overload, and the fear of missing a notification or update. What seems increasingly clear is that these ostensible "externalities" have become significantly more troublesome; disinformation and propaganda spread like wildfire, and the usual touchstones of common sense seem lost in the noise. The trends that make up the problem have long roots, and a long

list of prominent thinkers have weighed in. I will cite just a few who have been most helpful for me in sizing up this rather complex problem.

McKibben, Postman, Turkle, Twenge, Carr

Writer-educators such as Bill McKibben and Neil Postman have warned that television (and the wider culture's adoption of the *frame* of entertainment as pertinent for nearly everything *outside* entertainment) works against our ability to reason and discuss and solve common problems, such as environmental sustainability.[1]

More recently, psychologists Sherry Turkle and Jean Twenge focus upon the deleterious effects that intensely habitual use of social media and texting has had on children's and teens' capacity for intimacy, conversation, and self-reflection—all crucial to self-formation. They also document some of the challenges technology has posed for relationships between romantic partners, among family members, and for friendships. They report startling psychological data about unprecedented levels of depression, anxiety, and loneliness.[2]

Others, such as writer Nicholas Carr, connect ramped-up levels of distraction and fragmented attention to recent brain research. In *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains*, Carr traces our new normal—constant interruption—to neuroscientific discoveries showing that information technologies can physically reroute neural pathways. His main concerns echo earlier figures (Postman and others) who warn that we are losing our ability to concentrate, contemplate, and reflect.[3]

Zuboff

Perhaps the most magisterial and comprehensive examination of present technological and economic forces has come from Shoshana Zuboff; her *Age of Surveillance Capitalism* goes into painstaking detail about the development of what she calls "instrumentarian" technologies—carefully designed systems developed by internet designers and software engineers to not only to observe and record online conduct, but to aggregate and monetize them as "big data." Bear with me while I tell you a bit more.

EXTRACTION ARCHITECTURE   What began as website-use tracking evolved into what Zuboff calls an "extraction architecture." Extraction seeks to render behavior predictable; moreover, it has grown to seek "surplus behavioral data," that is, information about what you are doing above and beyond your

activity online. To get this, extraction moves beyond the virtual world to the real world, that is, "your bloodstream and your bed, your breakfast conversation, your commute, your run, your refrigerator, your parking space, your living room" (Zuboff 199).

DEPTH: MOODS, PERSONALITY, ATTITUDES   In addition to seeking data about things like sleep, eating, movement, and recreation, extraction operations want "depth," or as Zuboff puts it, the "highly lucrative behavioral surplus [that] would be plumbed from the intimate patterns of the self. The supply operations are aimed at your personality, moods, and emotions, your lies and vulnerabilities" (199).

TUNING, HERDING, MANIPULATING: ECONOMIES OF ACTION   The last point I'll relay from Zuboff—and I don't want to freak you out more than is necessary—relates to what is called the "tuning" or "herding" by technologies. They have learned, she writes, that

> the surest way to predict behavior is to intervene at its source and shape. The processes invented to achieve this goal are what I call *economies of action*. In order to achieve these economies, machine processes are configured to intervene in the state of play in the real world among real people and things. . . . They nudge, tune, herd, manipulate, and modify behavior in specific directions by executing actions as subtle as inserting a specific phrase into your Facebook newsfeed, timing the appearance of a BUY button on your phone, or shutting down your car engine when an insurance payment is late. (Zuboff 200)

Running through all of these operations is, she adds, the same

> consistent vision: the everywhere, always-on instrumentation, datafication, connection, communication, and computation of all things, animate and inanimate, and all processes—natural, human, physiological, chemical, machine, administrator, vehicle, financial. . . . The aim of this undertaking is not to impose behavioral norms, such as conformity or obedience, but rather to produce behavior that reliably, definitively, and certainly leads to desired commercial results. (Zuboff 200–01)

The implications of Zuboff's work are no less than staggering.

This is, at best, a thumbnail sketch of our present situation. However variegated the causes and effects mentioned, all authors sound a common note of *crisis*, and their books propose themselves as "*interventions*" to stop what they fear may be irremediable damage to mental health, democratic habits, and to the general viability of education and public life.

Where Does Philosophy Fit In?

You may be wondering whether this is just a political or sociological or psychological problem. What is the role for philosophers?

While much can be gleaned from the foregoing accounts, something is lacking; with the possible exception of Postman, the authors offer no philosophical analyses. Indeed, they very rarely reference philosophers (or philosophers of technology). Such a lacuna invites philosophers to step in—to *inquire* into technology. And, of course, they need not do this in esoteric ways. Indeed, there is an urgency, I think, to intervene in pragmatic ways and to point out the significant implications and human stakes. Below are three good justifications for pragmatists to get involved.

Justification One: Criticism of Customs Sustaining New Technologies

The first thing to realize is that all technologies emerge from what Dewey called nascent "traditions and customs, rules of business and of law" (Dewey, *Unmodern Philosophy* 244). With this in mind, we might remember founder Mark Zuckerberg's early charge to Facebook: "Move fast and break things." We can ask, then, have these changes been worth it? What was gained and what was lost? And who decided that these changes were appropriate? This is the kind of interrogation that philosophers are best at.

Justification Two: Implications of New Technology for Experience, Education, and Democracy

As philosophers, we can also raise questions about the implications for democracy and education. We might consider that the effects of technology can have either direct or indirect ways of altering our conduct and our worlds. One example of *direct alteration* is the integration of technologies with existing ways of doing things in schools. Take, for example, the statement of University of Colorado Denver's chancellor, who said: "The future of education is hybrid."[4] There are so many variants of these kinds of statements that the question becomes: Is there a coherent philosophy of education buried under all the public relations verbiage? If not, philosophers can ask: What is the nature of the diluting agent? What other motives have snuck into our educational practice? Such are puzzles that philosophers could untangle.

Indirect alteration of our institutions and practices is perhaps even more worthy of philosophical investigation. I am especially interested in how emotional and cognitive comportments are being changed. These are situations in which technological entanglements change our habits *outside* of work, school,

the town hall, or wherever. Once we are changed, though, those institutions cannot *but* alter as a consequence.

It's worth remembering that these analyses of experience in modern life have a long tradition in pragmatism. Dewey, in his 1910 work *How We Think*, writes: "More of our waking life than most of us would care to admit is whiled away in this inconsequential trifling with mental pictures, random recollections, pleasant but unfounded hopes, flitting, half-developed impressions" (Dewey, LW 8:114). Twenty-four years later, in *Art as Experience*, Dewey was still focused on this, warning that a "zeal for doing, lust for action leaves many a person . . . with experience of an almost incredible paucity, all on the surface . . . dispersed and miscellaneous." He worried that what is becoming prized is "the mere undergoing of this and that, irrespective of perception of any meaning . . . [a] crowding together of as many impressions as possible [which then] is thought to be 'life'" (Dewey, LW 10:51).

The consequences Dewey detailed were characteristic of wide-scale changes in experience, ones that could affect the ability to reflect, attend, judge and—crucially—remember. Dewey wrote: "Remembering is . . . joining things together again; that is, taking facts of our experience and putting them together to make a living organized whole. . . . Genuine remembering *involves control over our past experiences* (Dewey, LW 17:325; emphasis added).

Dewey has put his finger on exactly what is being challenged by *our* new technologies. Earlier, I offered a couple of contemporary examples; you can see the stakes. For, as Zuboff explains, the very model for the financial success of instrumentarian technologies is to (a) tailor stimuli to (b) capture our attention so they can (c) cultivate users' moods, choices, and (d) manage relations to information and other people. As philosophical critics, we can bring attention to the normative dimensions of such phenomena. We can, as Dewey put it, foment "a heightened consciousness of deficiencies and corruptions in the scheme and distribution of values that obtains at any period" (Dewey, LW 1:308).[5]

Justification Three: Technology's Challenges to Living Meaningfully, Aesthetically

The third justification for philosophical inquiry is due to the fact that what is being affected are the kinds of experiences most critical for meaning-making, that is, experience at the had, felt, and somatic levels.

It is easy to think we are in control. But while we think *we* have the tools, it is increasingly clear that *the tools have us* (or will have us). The imperative

of these technologies is to create behavior in us that is predictable, that, as Zuboff puts it, "transforms the things that we have into things that have us . . . [so they can] render the range and richness of our world, our homes, and our bodies as behaving objects for . . . calculations and fabrications on the path to profit" (253). As one software engineer quoted by Zuboff puts it, "[y]ou can make people *do* things with this technology" (Zuboff 294). This agenda—in our eyes, ears, under our fingers, and increasingly on our wrists, our fridges, thermostats, cars, and soon our clothing—pervades experience in more than cognitive ways. It reaches to sub-linguistic, somatic levels of experience.

Again, philosophers' resources for responding to these phenomena are deep and varied. Consider, for example, Richard Shusterman. He writes, in *Practicing Philosophy*, that Dewey's "prime purpose" was "the aesthetic and practical aim of improving experience by making it the focus of our inquiry: to enrich and harmonize our experience, for example, by affirming and enhancing the continuity between soma and psyche, between nondiscursive experience and conscious thought" (Shusterman 170).

Alternatively, we might look to Robert Innis's work:

> Inquiry, for Dewey . . . is first and foremost itself situated in labile fields of felt perplexities, each with its own distinct quality. We are embedded, as well as embodied, in these fields. . . . [These technological] artifacts also use us by subjecting us to their logic. . . . But it is not just power over artifacts that is at issue. It is the power of artifacts themselves to enforce forms of valuing, choosing, and acting that neither enhance nor enrich the streams of experiencing nor plow rational furrows in nature. (Innis, "Meanings")

The most interesting element raised for me is aesthetic, and Innis dwells on this. *Aesthetic* experience, he argues, is *most* directly expressive of meaningful living. Thus, he puts his finger directly on *why* technologies pose a challenge to aesthetic experience. It has to do with "rhythm." "Dewey argues," Innis writes, "that art organizes energies through rhythm, and much of his aesthetic theory—and its application to an aesthetic critique of technology—relies on his theory of rhythm" (Innis, *Pragmatism* 176). "Rhythm," he continues "is found everywhere in human life and consciousness. Every sense, as well as its embodiment in various media, has its own intrinsic—normative—rhythms, which can or cannot be respected in any technological extension" (Innis, *Pragmatism* 177). The consequence, then, of technologies' abject disregard of the norms of *our* rhythms, Innis concludes, is to destroy "one of the

conditions for [aesthetic and artistic] experiencing as such on all its levels" (Innis, *Pragmatism* 177).

This gives us a *metric* with which to judge technology: *the encouragement or discouragement of* experience capable of becoming aesthetic and/or consummatory: "It is the creation of consummatory experiences to which material objectification in all its forms is intimately to lead and by which it is to be measured. The human quality of life is to be judged in light of how much it fosters this process" (Innis, *Pragmatism* 179–80). Thus, Innis situates the goals and parameters of technology in the widest possible arena of human culture—one that includes aesthetics and ethics. In this way, we have a strategy for interrogating technology and also for pushing back against narrow conceptions of technology. Here, Innis and others such as Shusterman, Hickman, and John J. McDermott provide us with ways to push back against narrow and opportunistic technologists.

Conclusion

This is where I'll leave things. I've offered just a sketch, a back-of-the-napkin *exhortation*. I hope to hear what *you* think about these phenomena because we are all saturated with these technologies; we are all affected in how we think and experience the world around us. We need to map this terrain together.

Thank you for coming; thank you for your membership, your support, your creative and experimental thinking, and your friendship. It has been one of the most profound honors of my life to serve this organization.

NOTES

1. See, especially, McKibben; and Postman, *Amusing Ourselves*; and Postman, *Technopoly*.
2. See Turkle, *Alone Together*; Turkle, *Reclaiming Conversation*; see also Twenge.
3. See Carr, especially Chapter 4, "The Deepening Page."
4. Marks, "A Message."
5. In his book *Philosophical Tools*, Larry A. Hickman traced such technological stakes back to a key point in Dewey's 1896 "Reflex Arc" paper: "[I]t is the interests and attitudes of the knower that lead to the selection of data from an indefinitely large field of possible experience, and it is also interests and attitudes that contribute to the reworking and reconfiguration of that data into objects of knowledge" (Hickman 48). Hickman understood back then that the internet might place such an overweening emphasis on individualism that it could lead to the "splintering" of people and factions from wider public or community life. He wrote: "Will the point-to-point communication features of the information superhighway contribute to a splintering of comprehensive commu-

nity life into smaller and smaller communities that reinforce their own eccentricities and insulate themselves from the methods and forces that serve to promote the coherence of the wider community?" (Hickman 60).

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