



Rootedness in a Digital Age

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About the Author

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Introduction

The great temptation of the present age is to treat technology as a god. Even those of us who are reluctant to admit to the ritual worship of technology face tremendous pressure from our culture to think and act as if technology is—or soon might be—divine.

In recent years, I have tried to draw attention to the challenges raised by the simple fact that, until no more than a decade or so ago, the character and features of our digital devices, “hard” and “soft”, were universally understood across human civilisations as belonging exclusively to spiritual entities—specifically angels and demons.

To dramatize the point, I suggested that the tremendous sweep and power of the “Five Eyes” intelligence alliance—comprising of all five Anglosphere nations—pales in comparison to the might and dominance of what we could call the “Five Is”: our (1) innumerable, (2) invisible, (3) instantaneous, (4) interoperable, (5) information entities.¹ These are the five properties which have belonged since the beginning of time to the angels and demons in our imagination. Now they are qualities of disembodied inventions that fill the skies, course through pipes on the sea floor, and penetrate our workplaces, homes, bodies—perhaps even our souls. Now they are contained within gadgets we carry on our person at all times, from which we can hardly pry our hands or our eyes.

We are, in short, rooted to “tech”. In the digital age, the common human experience of rootedness is shifting from our tools being rooted in us, to us being rooted in our tools.

We are transforming from subjects to objects; and in the face of this unprecedented working-over, we strain with increasing desperation to preserve a role for some semblance of our humanity, by seeking to bring to our tech a part of ourselves. Some dub that vestige “creativity”—others, “consciousness”.² These faltering, unconvincing efforts attempt a spiritual or philosophical justification for our assimilation into the “cyborg whole” at the expense of our given human identity and form, which, until so recently, we solemnly remembered and protected as sacred.

The question that this reinvention of the human raises, as the central point of departure for this paper, is how do we resist? We must reassert our spiritual and philosophical authority over our own machines. But how do we do this?

Much of that process requires a fundamentally different approach from the intellectual one that has dominated present efforts to defend humanity from desecralisation by technology, and from the sacralisation of tech itself.

What is needed above all is a reestablishment of conditions in the human heart conducive to the deep rootedness in everything that makes us most fully human. The keys to this are not, first and foremost, intellectual devices, but rather the embodied practices and disciplines that have sustained millennia of holy men and women. These include, but are not limited to: ascetic labour, patient suffering, sabbath rest, sacrificial love, and silence.

The task at hand is one that requires the coordinated refreshment and renewal of the mind, the body, and the soul. We must understand the times we live in and tell a better story—one that does not fall for the seductive ideas of transhumanism. We must live human lives not robot lives—embracing the practices that for generations have physically encoded virtue, character, and an appreciation for the good, the true, and the beautiful. And we must recover spiritually what it means to be fully human, fully alive.

Understanding Our Present Identity Crisis

From mind, body, and soul to the cyborg consciousness.

To start, it is worth considering where we find ourselves today—the origins of our present predicament, how it has developed, and the resulting possibilities and responsibilities we face.

To answer these questions, we must come to grips with the basic questions of identity involved. What is the human and what defines its uniqueness? What is the digital and how is it unique? How has the digital and its uniqueness risen to such a dominant and definitive position in our inner and outer lives, such that our humanity and our human identity are increasingly contested, disbelieved, attacked, and eroded? What accounts for the pattern of failure in our spiritual and philosophical defences of the human against the digital? What are the prospects for the digital replacement of the spiritual and philosophical foundations of the modern human identity, with new cyborg foundations that overthrow and discredit the modern human identity?

The digital revolution occurred at a time when the modern vision of identity was uniquely fragile.

We have inherited a distinctive view of humanity in the Judeo-Christian tradition. The story goes that everyone carries intrinsic dignity, each person's identity is not subjectively invented but rather divinely bestowed, and each one of us is a created being situated in the wider cosmos.

But since the Enlightenment, and accelerating through the twentieth century, each one of these ideas was deconstructed with little of substance put in its place.

The modern era was defined by different poles claiming to provide the answer. Absolute libertarianism on the one hand said that life's meaning is found in the exercise of freedom and autonomy, and the absolute statism embodied by the fascist and communist states of the twentieth century provided an alternate pathway to situating the individual in the world.

But both views have failed to provide the keys to flourishing in social life and a healthy identity. As Tocqueville poignantly predicted, the free individual under equal conditions faced daunting personal and social obstacles to flourishing in democratic life. People tended to feel isolated, interchangeable, and insignificant, confronted with invisible barriers to advancement that arose from the envy-inducing small differences in distinction amid broad competition to conform to uniform standards.³ Tocqueville rightly feared that without the reciprocal action of one heart upon the other, Americans and others would paint themselves into a spiritual corner of self-enclosed egotism—even amongst family members sharing an abode. The result would be a regime like none other, soft but inexorable, intimate and smothering in its despotism.⁴ Tocqueville emphasised that Christianity strengthened souls worn down by democratic life right where they were weakest, drawing them out of their egotism and narcissism into the modest but pressing practicalities of shared life.⁵ But he felt that the imperatives of democratic life—especially the demand for ever greater speed in beating others at acquiring the goods of this world, lest one vanish into penury and obscurity, watching the winners from afar—would pressure people to look with increasing bitterness and scorn at the patience, long-suffering, and sacrificial love of Christianity and Christ. Christianity was widespread because it was popular, Tocqueville sensed, and if that changed, it would face a dire risk of freefall.

Tocqueville's visions came true. However noble, inspiring, and plausible in the age of the printing press, the abstract principles of freedom, equality, and individuality—whether theorised by the rationalist or romanticised from experience—failed to stand on their own *in the heart*, where our spiritual and temporal fates are truly decided.

The technological revolution took place at that moment of spiritual rootlessness and identity crisis. The inability of libertarianism and statism to be stable sources of identity has left us uniquely vulnerable to the possibility that digital technology might totally change the game—and the very meaning of human identity. At a time when we were unsure about who we are, we have seen the “virtualisation” of life; in other words, the invitation for humans—mind, body, and soul—to enter an existence in a digital world

where intellect is king, the spiritual pursuits of the soul are a distraction, and the body is nothing but a social construct.

It could be said that we are living through the merger of the human and the machine into a cyborg form of existence that destroys the original design, form, and purpose of both the human and the machine.

The Roots of Transhumanism

From the eradication of suffering to the Übermensch.

How did this happen? Why is it happening? What are the consequences?

Today two main philosophies or heresies compete for control over the development and use of interoperable technologies that can reach deep inside the human person to radically transform individual, community, society, and environment alike.

The first worldview aims at the full escape from misfortune. It is associated with the political “left”, which increasingly sees even the slightest suffering as never desirable and always a transgression: injustice anywhere (in any amount) is injustice everywhere. The best analyst of this worldview is the French sociologist and philosopher Jean Baudrillard, whose later work underscores that the rise of the virtualisation of the world and the transition into digital spaces is the result of an ever more totalitarian desire to expel all misfortune from life. According to Baudrillard, proponents of this view intend to crowd out suffering and even its possibility with other stuff—the stuff of activism, of “doing good”, of distractions and delights, of medications, anaesthetics, even suicide machines.⁶ Better nothing than pain!

The second worldview aims at our full escape from our humanity—better tremendous pain than imprisonment unto death in our failing human being! Largely because of Friedrich Nietzsche, it is often accused of being a politically “right” position. Yet, as the Communist projects of Cosmism in religion,⁷ and the New Soviet Man in philosophy revealed,⁸ the celebration of suffering in the pursuit of liberation from the limits of the human has no right/left valence—unless posthuman entities can inherit human political categories or those categories transcend the given natural world entirely. Nietzsche’s will to power unto the overman was not simply a political program, and the abolition of the human in favour of something more godlike strongly implies the annihilation of politics as it has always been understood and imagined.⁹

The foolishness of tying these two worldviews so closely to politics is revealed by the simple fact that both share the same political philosophy that technology should be developed as rapidly as possible, in ways that fundamentally and radically alter our given human form and experience, to the point of effacement and replacement with

something fundamentally new, global, and inescapable. Though starting with different assumptions, the end point of both is transhumanism.

Of course, there are more measured or gentle versions of both these worldviews, but it is extremely difficult to avoid gravitating toward the extremes of either position, due to the position of quasi-spiritual authority that digital technology has claimed in both cases.

However, it is not only the activities of those consciously adopting these ideologies that have contributed to the ascendancy of tech-augmented identities. A further contributing factor to our current situation is the emergence of the economic and political systems that dominate modern life. In particular, two fundamental processes have emerged: (1) the rise of institutionalised excess (in production and consumption) as a socioeconomic system; and (2) the rise of rule by scientists as an ideology and form of government. These two processes combined over time into one: an increasingly globalised regime in which ruling experts ensured the ruled produced and consumed ever more material things. From the left, this was described as controlling the means of production; from the right, liberating the free market.

“Progressives” under the banner of science insisted we could not “go backwards” as a moral and an ontological criterion—manufacturing was a spur to compliant action, the “retrogressive” enemy other, anyone or anything that would “return us to the dark ages” or even pump the brakes or ask critical questions.¹⁰ Under the progressive neoliberal model, it was a foregone conclusion that technology would be harnessed to the model and indeed become the engine of the model. But few took the logical next step toward understanding that the model would become subsidiary to the engine. This switchover marked the end of modernity and the beginning of postmodernity—where modern inventions and patterns of life were, when possible, repurposed for post or transhuman ends.

The moment of the switchover is hard to pinpoint. But the result of the switchover we can now clearly recognise as the “virtualisation” of the world, the creation of a cyberspace which could mirror the world in greater detail than perceptible by any human or humans, and so become bigger than the world any person could experience unaided.

The Body is a Social Construct

The social and spiritual consequences of the transhumanist moment.

The virtualisation of the world has changed everything. To understand the consequences of these developments, it is worth considering the contortions that the

present identity revolution has led to in the two basic elements of the given human form: the body and the soul.

The advent of digital technology triggered an explosion of increasingly narrow or abstruse categories and subcategories of identity affiliation. In that sense, growth in myriad self-identifications across the range of possibilities is a key hallmark of the digital revolution. The most significant new self-identifications, however, fall into the category of the bodily—with a dramatic emphasis on the sexual or erotic—and the category of the spiritual—emphasising particular religious affinities or the lack thereof.

Of course, these categories are not separated by an abyss. As in the human person, where the body and the soul are united here in this life, so too are the new digital-age self-identifications rarely a matter entirely of body or of soul. Each holds implications for the other. But it is impossible to understand the stunning rise of queer identity as a product of anything other than the impact of digital technology on the experience and conceptualisation of the human body.

Current Pew research suggests some 5% of young adults in the United States alone now identify as “transgender” or “nonbinary”, while more than one in five adult members of Generation Z identify as part of the “LGBTQ+” community or spectrum.¹¹ Over the past decade, according to Gallup polling, queer identities have more than doubled, sitting close to 8% as of last year.¹² Whilst there are many reasons for this increase, it is undeniable that sexual “reassignment” with hormonal and surgical “interventions” is either impossible or not viable in the absence of digital technology. And identities across the broader “queer” categories have been propagated far more widely by the rise to prominence of virtual social life.

It is unmistakable that the rise of queer identity is also trending toward an explicit spiritual justification. Due to the power of interoperability in the rise of digital technology, sexual identities are beginning to mirror the nature of digital technology and have gained spiritual authority. The belief that queer identity is itself sacred is palpably expanding—apace with the addition of ever more stripes, logos, and sigils onto the “Pride Flag”. Over the past several years, Microsoft has facilitated a “Radical Joy” campaign open sourcing a flag featuring and representing 74 different queer identities—up from 40 in 2022.¹³ Queerness is taking shape as a spiritual entity— a virtue without stain or blemish—in keeping with predictions by late-twentieth century theorists like Donna Haraway that the advent of the “cyberorganism” is inherently queer and queering.¹⁴ Because of the radical character of its transformations of the human body in form, purpose, and function, queerness takes the turning of our tools inwards as a saviour and liberator upon which it is increasingly dependent for its spiritual authority.

So, it is no surprise that the triumph of digital technology over so much of public and private life has broadly and deeply altered religious identity over the same time frame as the rise of queer identity. While pollsters and researchers have yet to fully capture

the rise of cyborg identities of the sort that proliferate on today's social media—with young users identifying as “poly”, as “ethically non-monogamous”, as asexual, as members of a swarm, as posthuman, or as members of cults of AIs—these trends are instantly recognisable to anyone in regular contact with Silicon Valley scenes and subcultures, where in many cases they have together formed a majority identity.

More broadly, people identifying as “nones” or as having “no religion” now outrank adherents to major monotheistic religions in some cases. In the United States, between a quarter and a third of respondents fit that ostensibly secular category.¹⁵ Toward the upper bound, in New Zealand, the number is more than half.¹⁶ Notably, however, the fast rise of “nones” year over year has very recently been slowing down¹⁷—reflecting that an identity defined by what one is *not* is less powerful and prestigious today, especially on the internet, than an identity defined by what one *is*. Being, of course, is not merely a physical matter, and these phenomena show that the spiritual and spiritualised identities that have grown to prominence under digital conditions will remain great attractors now and as long as digital primacy continues.

All these developments in digital-age reidentification come at the expense of the Christian understanding that our given bodies and souls are sacred, and that with this sacredness comes responsibilities toward our bodies and souls, and their Creator. Perhaps that would not seem too frightening if the old secular, modern identity of the free and equal individual was stable or strengthening. But under digital conditions, it is not—quite the contrary.

The urgency of the matter—combined with the weakness of our legacy institutions and methods of reasoning to overcome the challenge to human identity—underscores the need to view things in a fresh light, in order to comprehend our own role and responsibility in what has happened to us, at the level of the human person, at that of societies or peoples, and at the level of the globe and the human race.

A new articulation of the way forward will issue forth from a lived-out re-rooting of our vision toward the human and the digital in a spiritually secure architecture of mind, heart, body, and soul. To rebuild, we must understand the multiple dimensions to human flourishing that underpin a stable identity—from the spiritual through to the intellectual to the physical—and seek not only to tell a better story, but to practically live out a different lifestyle.

Technology is Forcing Us to Answer the Ultimate Question

Why spirituality, not philosophy, is the key to resistance.

Preparing ourselves to forge ahead at this fateful moment in our troubled existence requires a return to the ultimate questions, those which historically have led us to the ultimate answers. Make no mistake: the leading voices of digital tech are now brazenly offering up comprehensive visions of a rapidly advancing future, in which AI confers on its users godlike powers of control over every element of the human being—whether consensually or, one must surmise, otherwise. They openly declare the impending onset of a golden New Age, where all human problems are technicalities to be solved by the application of ever more computation.

They are not waiting for those with traditional values or religious observances to draft persuasive arguments making “the case for humanity”. Consciously or otherwise, they grasp that the path to the technological replacement of the human person with the cyborg collective runs through the replacement of God with their digital neo-god or gods.

Some may argue to the contrary that, rather than our bearing the image of God, it is our advanced state of reflexivity—manifesting in our complex relationships with ourselves and others—that makes us unique. In other words, philosophy, not religion. The particular quality that, in turn, makes digital unique among technologies is that it demonstrates in unexpected fashion how the argument for philosophy as the key to human identity and uniqueness fails. For today, digital technologists are ever more overtly both philosophers when it suits their ambition to destroy received religion and the given human form, and priests when seeking to replace those things with their theocracy of the digital god. For its own part, philosophy has simply proven unable to stop or even slow the progress of the mission to efface and replace our given human form and identity. There is zero indication that philosophy—or indeed unaided reason alone—will be able to transcend this limitation before it is too late.

To be sure, religion is also struggling to counter the grand effort to remake it in the image of the digital god and its cyborg collective. There are many reasons for this, but the primary one is that “religion” in the abstract can do little— and sometimes worse than nothing. In the West, it has become plain that, given its role at the foundation of our civilisational story, the prospects for a successful religious counter to the digital New Age hinge entirely on whether the Judeo-Christian tradition is able to mount a defence that reestablishes its spiritual authority, and belief in the human as bearer of the divine’s sacred Image. Our human identity is under such strain from the digital environment into which we have been so swiftly “onboarded” because the digital—alone among technologies to date—promises to replace this central divine story and

the sanctity of the human form in every area of life, in a way that captivates and fatigues the mind like nothing ever before created.

Now it must be said that, while philosophy has run aground as a strategy for beating back the replacement of the tangible with a new digital paradise, one reason we know this is that its very best and bravest exponents made tremendous headway in unveiling and explaining what was coming decades before it arrived. In the West, the most notable figures have often been French—Rene Girard, Paul Virilio, and especially Jean Baudrillard—although as outlined above, centuries ago Alexis de Tocqueville perhaps came the closest to imagining the intimate kind of “soft despotism” not difficult for us today to perceive.¹⁸ In the new world, the towering figure is Marshall McLuhan, particularly in his unheralded later, computer-age work with his son Eric.¹⁹ Taking McLuhan and Baudrillard as the exemplars, while both philosophers published numerous books that reached audiences well beyond the academy, inspiring some of the most significant science fiction films (*Videodrome* and *The Matrix*) dealing squarely with the matter at hand, nothing they said, wrote, or did has amounted to more than a pebble in the road raced down by our dehumanising technologists.²⁰

At the same time, it also must be emphasised that philosophy, for all its failures and limitations, is not the enemy of those who hope to restore a saving spiritual authority to our development and use of technology. McLuhan, a devout Catholic, wrote for the sake of understanding, but not, as so many philosophers have done, by first banishing Christ.²¹ An older, even better example is St. Gregory Palamas. He was a master of philosophical learning and argumentation yet recognised the supremacy in human endeavour of prayer striving toward union with God—therefore defending the extreme spiritual discipline of the monastery over the extreme philosophical discipline of the academy.²²

Philosophical competence is of great help in making sense of the present war waged by technological means against our human form and identity, and in articulating the conflict of ideas that led us to this point. It is of much less help in grasping how to win that war—within our hearts and souls, and within our peoples and our nations. For that, reasonably enough, what is needed is first and above all a restoration of our living spiritual link with our God, which demands far greater humility, patience, labour, and silence than perhaps any mere philosopher of note has shown willing to muster.

Strengthening the Human: Body and Soul

Our history is replete with the births, renaissances, and re-establishments of our religious, economic, and political life. Nearly all understand that ours is a time of old orders ending and new orders beginning. The generations living through this moment await the appearance of spiritual authorities they can trust with the responsibility of preserving our humanity in these technological times.

There is work to be done in combatting the founding myths of the technological age. A restorative new tale should strike at the weak point of the artificial heart. Perhaps the favourite story of the tech-idolisers is the myth of Prometheus, who heroically stole from the gods their quintessential and definitive property: fire. The greatness of the new covenant delivered the Christian story destroys the Prometheus myth by revealing beyond dispute that the ultimate, defining property of God is not fire but love. We have witnessed in our lifetimes the consequences of our present-day Prometheuses attempting to destroy the “Jesus myth” by stealing *love* from God—defining it our way, as whatever we say, and using that power to infuse the virtual clone of Creation with animating artificial life. We already know that love shorn from God can only be a false idol.

The beginning of our restoration of the human identity in real life is the recovery of love’s divine power and authority in our life, by *returning* it to its divine source, as is our urgent responsibility. When we look to the God of our foundational, Judeo-Christian story to understand what love is, we remember that it is the opposite of all that bedevils us in our frantic filling up of the real and virtual worlds with simulations of identity and simulations of love. Love is not pride. Love is not leverage. Love is not speed. Love is not gratification. Love, the divine tells us, is all of the things that virtualisation is not: it is patience, mercy, labour, humility, obedience, and sacrifice: yes, even unto death.²³ Our perfection is to be found in the perfection of our love, reflecting this ultimate image of love. It is a process that demands beginning again with meekness of heart no matter how far or how often we fall.

But the story of resistance is not only one rooted in choosing a higher founding myth. It is found in living a different life. Here the holistic, embodied nature of the practices that created spiritual rootedness through the centuries may be the most effective means of resistance.

These practices, by their very nature, pull us away from the digital universe—the seductive temptation of engaging with the cyborg consciousness—and back to nature, back to quietness, away from distraction and the conveyor belt of modern life, and upwards to the true meaning of life. In other words, the renewal of the body and the soul.

What are some of the practices that can pull us away from the hedonistic world of clickbait, and back to the stabilising, embodied identity that creates the conditions for flourishing? These ideas are rooted in the Christian tradition, but are common to many spiritual traditions, and could be the crib sheet for a kind of digital minimalism.

Ascetic Labour

Asceticism—derived from the Greek *áskēsis*, meaning “training” or “exercise”—is the practice of subordinating our earthly desires for pleasure and satisfaction to the cultivation of virtue and spiritual formation. In the Christian tradition, this posture can be surmised as Paul’s instruction to the Galatians to “live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.”²⁴ To labour ascetically is to orient one’s lifestyle towards the pursuit of this higher, spiritual calling, and keep one’s lower desires in subordination to it. To live in such a way is heretical to today’s digital spirituality, which places immediate gratification as the highest of human endeavours, aided and accelerated by the dopamine hits at our fingertips. However, our humanity is not most fulfilled or liberated by surrendering ourselves to our basest impulses. Rather, the cultivation of virtue comes from keeping these distractions at a minimum, and instead lifting our gaze higher.

What does it mean to undertake a lifestyle of ascetic labour in the digital age? It is to recognise how the virtual world tries to amplify, animate, and enlarge our lower order of desires, and therefore to limit the reach of the digital into the rhythm of our daily lives. Quieting the influx of “perfect” homes, relationships, holidays, and careers on our social media feeds helps us to wrestle down the urge to covet and complain. Stepping away from the Twitter threads vilifying and dehumanising those outside our echo chambers frees us to once again love our enemies. We can replace these habits with the rhythms of ascetic labour practiced by generations past: giving of one’s possessions, building shelter for those in need, preparing food for the hungry, and clothing the poor. It does not take much to recognise that preparing a meal for a loved one in need, or repairing a neighbour’s dilapidated home goes far further towards cultivating a flourishing society than liking a post supposedly highlighting an injustice thousands of miles from home.

On the most fundamental level, what we can learn from the ascetic tradition today is that we need not accept the transhumanist anthropology which says to become greater and transcend our weaknesses is to give ourselves the ability to meet our every hedonistic desire. Instead, our growth as people is found in limiting these desires, so we are free to cultivate the inner virtues of love, joy, peace, patience, and so forth. This far harder, but far more beautiful task, is the narrow path we are called to walk.

Sabbath and Rest

Our civilisation has, since its inception, adopted the idea that work is to be balanced with regular patterns of rest. This belief finds its roots in the Judeo-Christian principle of Sabbath. Sabbath rest does not just mean to stop, but to “delight”—making space for our deepest relationships and contemplations. However, as is characteristic of our present age, the “digital twin” of rest or sabbath we have created is a shallow echo of its original design. Having both simultaneously become obsessed with “busyness” and

“productivity”, but also the longing for an escape from the pressures of life into “fun” and “entertainment”, many would now describe their rest time as dominated by the lure of our digital screens. Sabbath was never intended to be a binge-watch, doom-scroll, or any other form of digital distraction keeping us from that which gives our souls true rest.

For those of us who wish to resist this pull to ever-growing restlessness, creating sabbath spaces away from our digital devices to connect with one another, contemplate, pray, and truly rest from the constant inflow of messages and images flooding our minds will aid us in keeping them truly human. These steps need not feel like a burdensome denial of all joy, or a Luddite fantasy—rather, they should allow us the freedom to pull away from the digital substitute and rediscover the sources of true “delight” and rest we crave. Rather than allowing the digital blurring of work, life, and entertainment into a single, online existence, we can create boundaries in order to dedicate ourselves to our work, and then disconnect to rest with families, friends, community, and in contemplation. Silencing the news alerts which pull us from concentrating in the workplace, and silencing the emails which keep us from our relationships in the home are small steps towards stemming the constant buzz preventing us from finding true rest.

Silence and Solitude

One could easily describe the digital revolution as a mission to eradicate silence. How often do we turn to our omnipresent smartphones in our tiny moments of quiet and waiting, to protect us from the “danger” of boredom? As our world becomes full of ever-increasing stimuli, so our tolerance for quiet reduces. But more profoundly, our avoidance of outer silence slowly erodes our ability to find inner silence. That inability to quiet our minds, to find moments of peace, fills us with stress and anxiety, pulling us back for another digital fix of distraction. And so, we engineer ourselves to avoid what we need most to navigate the digital age: true silence and solitude.

Solitude too is an unappealing notion to a world constantly urging us to make new connections across time and space. Yet solitude and loneliness are not synonymous. Loneliness and isolation stem from a lack of meaningful relationships—and technology is not an antidote. Rather, its consumption of interpersonal connection and replacement with a digital impersonation increase our loneliness. Friendships, dating, “communities”, and workplaces move online and keep us in our atomised physical worlds, oblivious to the people around us. Ironically, greater solitude is necessary for us to rebuild our ability to relate meaningfully with one another. One only need observe the modern family dining table to conclude that an absence of digital devices allows greater relational presence. However, solitude from the digital world in our times of being truly alone is also crucial if we are to regain the inner quiet and peace so fundamental to the human condition.

The practices we adopt to cultivate this quiet may well be reminiscent of the past, not due to blind nostalgia, but a recognition that our inner quiet is worth restoring. Choosing to disconnect in our moments of silence, to face the “boredom” and find solace on the other side—or renewed time for thought, prayer, and relationships—will aid us in restoring our given human form. This may look like allowing ourselves to travel without a constant stream of digital content in our ears, wait for an appointment without turning to a device, or actually dedicate uninterrupted time for contemplation or prayer in our routines without digital distractions. However we choose to create such space, our bodies, minds, and souls need silence and solitude to truly flourish.

Fasting

As in the case of ascetic labour, fasting is the antithesis of the self-actualisation preached by the proponents of the digital age. However, establishing periods of self-denial of sustenance was a common rhythm of life for previous generations in our civilisation. For those belonging to the Christian faith, the fasting of food is a reminder of what we truly need as humans to flourish—we need spiritual communion with our Maker even more than we need physical food for our bodies. Fasting from our digital devices can similarly serve as a reminder of what we truly need in our day to day lives as embodied beings—space and capacity for spiritual nourishment, then investment in our physical wellbeing, and only then the connectivity offered by the digital world. Fasting from virtual technology is a guard against dependence and addiction, and one which creates time for the other practices outlined here to help us renew our holistic humanity.

Slowing

Our digital devices are supposedly designed to save us time; however, their emphasis on speed and efficiency leave us instead living in a state of permanent hurry. From streaming speed to food delivery, to navigation apps, we are being rewired into seeking the most expedient ways to achieve all our desired outcomes. Our ability to exercise patience is waning, and our anxiety levels are rising. The tech-induced rush is not a state we are designed to thrive in as human beings. Building lasting relationships, mastering a new trade or skill, responding to an interruption to our schedules—every element of our lives takes time, especially those which are most meaningful. By choosing to resist the ever-accelerating pace of life instigated by the digital age, we can reorder our priorities based on care, meaning, contribution, and compassion. Expedience need not rob us of these higher goods.

Conclusion

A picture of a new renaissance rooted in responsibility begins to emerge. Few today look at the overawing power of technology and consider that the humblest, smallest, and most trusting of human initiatives can dare hold it at bay—much less serve as the fresh foundation of a new regime, where technology takes its proper place as the servant of our given human being. But this is to act as the central story of our civilisation reveals, as God Himself acted coming into the world as a man. It is a profound teaching—hard to trust, but boundlessly rewarding for those who do. Here humility and mercy must be our guide, our guard against forgetfulness that, as icons of God, our responsibility is to love the world as He does—not consume it, as technics are bound to do.²⁵

The theology of the virtual world has presented us with its best offering for the recreation of the human form. Yet, all-consuming as it may seem, we have the freedom to choose the beauty of our given existence, in its distinctly human shape. The choice we face is one between rooting ourselves in the humble practices which nourish us—body and soul—or in our digital tools. By taking the narrow path of stewarding, rather than escaping, our embodied lives, we can once again turn our tools outwards to the world around us. And in doing so, we protect the cultivation of the inner life and feed our souls instead with the spiritual wisdom found deep within the roots of our civilisation. These seemingly simple patterns of resistance will therefore release us from the project of reinventing our humanity—creating new, external avenues for our creative exploits, and sabbath delight for the soul.

¹ See, for example: “Doing Business in a Post-Apocalyptic World”, remarks at *The Austin Institute for the Study of Family and Culture*, The University of Texas at Austin, 30 March 2022, <https://www.austin-institute.org/events/engaging-orthodoxy-doing-business-in-a-post-apocalyptic-world-with-author-james-poulos>.

² The reduction of human uniqueness to the creative “spark” of consciousness is executed at the highest level by David Deutsch, *The Beginning of Infinity* (Penguin, 2012).

³ See: Joshua Mitchell, *The Fragility of Freedom* (Chicago: 1995), pp. 141-47.

⁴ On the subtle logic leading Americans toward soft despotism, see: Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 1835, p. 515; 672.

⁵ “Religious peoples are naturally strong just at the point where democratic peoples are weak. And this shows how important it is for people to keep their religion when they become equal.” Ibid, p. 445.

⁶ See especially: Baudrillard, *The Agony of Power* (Semiotext(e), 2010); Baudrillard, *The Intelligence of Evil: or, The Lucidity Pact*, (Bloomsbury, 2013).

⁷ See: George Young, *The Russian Cosmists: The Esoteric Futurism of Nikolai Fedorov and His Followers* (Oxford University, 2012), p. 3; 9.

⁸ See: Leon Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution*, trans. Rose Strunsky (International Publishers, 1925), pp. 255-56.

⁹ Marc Andreessen’s “Techno-Optimist Manifesto”, *andreessen horowitz*, 16 October 2023, <https://a16z.com/the-techno-optimist-manifesto/>. The manifesto counts Nietzsche among its “patron saints” and declares its “enemy” to be the “last man” denounced by Nietzsche. The manifesto claims that technological growth progress “opens the space” for politics. But it implies that politics cannot arrest the decline unto death caused by technological stagnation. It is silent on what politics can or must do, and indeed never mentions politics again.

¹⁰ The best and most notable recent account that both explains and epitomises this pattern of thought is Umberto Eco, “Ur-Fascism”, *The New York Review of Books*, June 22, 1995.

¹¹ Anna Brown, “5 Key Findings about LGBTQ+ Americans”, *Pew Research Center*, 23 June 2023, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/06/23/5-key-findings-about-lgbtq-americans>.

¹² Jeffrey M. Jones, “LGBTQ+ Identification in U.S. Now at 7.6%”, *Gallup*, 13 March 2024, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/611864/lgbtq-identification.aspx>.

¹³ See: “microsoft/Pride-flag”, *GitHub*, accessed 3 January 2025, <https://github.com/microsoft/Pride-flag>.

¹⁴ “Cyborg politics are the struggle for language and the struggle against perfect communication, against the one code that translates all meaning perfectly, the central dogma of phallogocentrism. That is why cyborg politics insist on noise and advocate pollution, rejoicing in the illegitimate fusions of animal and machine. These are the couplings that make Man and Woman so problematic, subverting the structure of desire, the force imagined to generate language and gender, and so subverting the structure and modes of reproduction of “Western” identity, of nature and culture, of mirror and eye, slave and master, body and mind.” From Haraway, “A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s”, *Manifestly Haraway*, (University of Minnesota Press, 2016), p. 57.

¹⁵ “Religious ‘Nones’ in America: Who They Are and What They Believe”, *Pew Research Center*, 24 January 2024, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2024/01/24/religious-nones-in-america-who-they-are-and-what-they-believe/>.

¹⁶ Chris Reed, “Losing faith: Why fewer New Zealanders are attending church”, *The New Zealand Herald*, 20 June 2018, <https://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/losing-faith-why-fewer-new-zealanders-are-attending-church/MV25KTPVEVW27IFUCXNUC3KE/>.

¹⁷ See: Gregory Smith and Alan Cooperman, “Has the rise of religious ‘nones’ come to an end in the U.S.?”, *Pew Research Center*, 24 January 2024, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2024/01/24/has-the-rise-of-religious-nones-come-to-an-end-in-the-us>. This article states that, “In Pew Research Center’s 2023 polling, 28% of U.S. adults are religiously unaffiliated, describing themselves as atheists, agnostics or simply ‘nothing in particular’ when asked about their religion. That’s marginally lower than our surveys indicated in 2022 and 2021, and identical to what we found in 2020 and 2019, which raises a question: After decades of sharp growth, has the rise of these religious ‘nones’ ended?... The identical results we’ve found in three of the last five years are a sign of stability in the size of this population. At the same time, in two of the last five years, we obtained readings above 28%. In 2022, our estimate of 31% was 3 percentage points higher, while the 29% we recorded in 2021 was just 1 point higher. We haven’t found any readings below 28% in the past five years.”

¹⁸ “Each one of them, withdrawn into himself, is almost unaware of the fate of the rest... He exists in and for himself... Over this kind of men stands an immense, protective power which is alone responsible for securing their enjoyment and watching over their fate... it only tries to keep them in perpetual childhood... it daily makes the exercise of free choice less useful and rarer, restricts the activity of free will within a narrower compass, and little by little robs each citizen of the proper use of his own faculties.” Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, J. P. Mayer ed. (Harper and Row, 1968), p. 692.

¹⁹ See especially: Marshall and Eric McLuhan, *Media and Formal Cause* (NeoPoesis, 2011); Marshall McLuhan, *Laws of Media: The New Science* (University of Toronto Press, 1988).

²⁰ On *Videodrome*, see Nick Ripatrazone, “The Video Word Made Flesh: ‘Videodrome’ and Marshall McLuhan”, *The Millions*, 19 April 2017, <https://themillions.com/2017/04/the-video-word-made-flesh-videodrome-and-marshall-mcluhan.html>. This article states, “In his audio commentary for the film, Cronenberg admits that the professor was inspired by the ‘communications guru’ Marshall McLuhan. McLuhan taught at the University of Toronto while Cronenberg attended, but to his ‘everlasting regret,’ he never took a course with the media icon. Cronenberg said that McLuhan’s ‘influence was felt everywhere at the university’ — a mystical-tinged description that McLuhan would have appreciated.”

While Baudrillard's influence on *The Matrix* was even more direct (his *Simulacra and Simulation* was required reading for the cast), he turned down the personal invitation from the film's creators to participate in the production of its sequels. Baudrillard recounted how "a similar misunderstanding occurred in the 1980s when New York-based Simulationist artists contacted me. They took the hypothesis of the virtual for an irrefutable fact and transformed it into a visible phantasm. But it is precisely that we can no longer employ categories of the real in order to discuss the characteristics of the virtual... The actors are in the matrix, that is, in the digitized system of things; or, they are radically outside it, such as in Zion, the city of resistors. But what would be interesting is to show what happens when these two worlds collide. The most embarrassing part of the film is that the new problem posed by simulation is confused with its classical, Platonic treatment. This is a serious flaw. The radical illusion of the world is a problem faced by all great cultures, which they have solved through art and symbolization. What we have invented, in order to support this suffering, is a simulated real, which henceforth supplants the real and is its final solution, a virtual universe from which everything dangerous and negative has been expelled. And *The Matrix* is undeniably part of that. Everything belonging to the order of dream, utopia and phantasm is given expression, 'realized.' We are in the uncut transparency. The Matrix is surely the kind of film about the matrix that the matrix would have been able to produce." See: Aude Lancelin, interview, *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 19-25 June 2003, republished in English as "*The Matrix Decoded: Le Nouvel Observateur Interview With Jean Baudrillard*", *International Journal of Baudrillard Studies*, Dr. Gary Genosko and Adam Bryx, transl., Vol. 1, No. 2 (July 2004).

²¹ McLuhan firmly believed salvation required understanding: "In the past, the effects of media were experienced more gradually, allowing the individual and society to absorb and cushion their impact to some degree. Today, in the electronic age of instantaneous communication, I believe that our survival, and at the very least our comfort and happiness, is predicated on understanding the nature of our new environment, because unlike previous environmental changes, the electric media constitute a total and near-instantaneous transformation of culture, values and attitudes. This upheaval generates great pain and identity loss, which can be ameliorated only through a conscious awareness of its dynamics. If we understand the revolutionary transformations caused by new media, we can anticipate and control them; but if we continue in our self-induced subliminal trance, we will be their slaves." See: Eric Norden, "The Playboy Interview: Marshall McLuhan", *Playboy*, March 1969.

But at the same time, McLuhan avowed that understanding in the sense of mastering knowledge was insufficient, as true understanding transcended rational comprehension. "I never came into the church as a person who was being taught. I came in on my knees. That is the only way in. When people start praying they need truths; that's all. You don't come into the Church by ideas and concepts... Actively relating to the Church's prayer and sacraments is not done through ideas. Any Catholic today who has an intellectual disagreement with the Church has an illusion. You cannot have an intellectual disagreement with the Church: that's meaningless. The Church is not an intellectual institution. It is a superhuman institution." See: Marshall McLuhan, *The Medium and the Light*, Eric McLuhan and Jacek Szklarec eds. (Wipf and Stock, 1999).

²² See: Palamas, *In Defense of the Holy Hesychasts*, now known and published as *The Triads* (Paulist Press, 1982).

²³ The Holy Bible: 1 Corinthians 13:4-8; John 15:13.

²⁴ The Holy Bible: Galatians 5:16, New International Version UK.

²⁵ See: Andreessen, "Why Software Is Eating the World", *The Wall Street Journal*, 20 August 2011, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424053111903480904576512250915629460>.



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