

Technology and Political Education

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In a book titled *How to be Alone*, the American writer Jonathan Franzen bemoans the incapacity of the contemporary individual to find either a meaningful public space in which to participate, or the quiet comfort of solitude. Franzen is a writer of fiction, not philosophy, so his thoughts are not woven into any coherent account of modernity. Instead what one gets from his books is a sharp aesthetic feel for living in modern urban space. Technology, or rather the love/hate relationship that Franzen has with it, figures prominently in this aesthetic. Franzen tells funny stories about his resistance to the CD (for years he pirated from his friends' CDs and copied their tunes onto tapes), his scavenging in the streets of New York for cast off, thrown away objects like old chairs which he rescues and rehabilitates, and his senseless hanging-on to a manual typewriter. He also chronicles his own debilitating depression that he suffered for years, until he decided to move from a state of "depressive realism" to one of "tragic realism" (Franzen 2002, 93). Underscoring all of these ruminations are Franzen's efforts to live with technology and as its creature. Resigned, he writes:

For better or for worse, ours is now a technological society, and whatever the benefits to the health and affluence of the upper half of society, it would be difficult to argue that either technology or the free market capitalism that is its Siamese twin has done much to solve the ancient problems of mortality and the world's unfairness (202).

Death and injustice remain the perennial problems of the human condition.

In this paper, I want to pick up where Franzen has left off, and consider what impact technology has had on matters pertaining to mortality and fairness. If these are the primary considerations of education and politics (and they are identified as such as far back as Plato's *Republic*), how has technology changed how we see them? I begin with George Grant and Hannah Arendt, two thinkers who thought deeply about these questions, and I hope to draw out of their work some cautionary tales about how *not* to respond to technology.

George Grant has been dead for some years now, and his voice is fading in the study of Canadian political theory, a regrettable thing. Best known probably for his lamentations on the dwindling of Canadian sovereignty and the absorption of

Canada into the United States' ethos, Grant also had important things to say about technology and its wedding to the "Siamese twin" Franzen identifies as free market capitalism. Grant would also add liberalism, or what he preferred to call "English-speaking justice," to the entanglement. In a book of conversations with David Cayley, Grant lays out what he sees as the fundamental essence of technology. "Knowing has been put at the service of making in the ancient world," Grant explains in these conversations, *techne* was a species of *poesis*, and *poesis* is a kind of production, what Grant calls a "leading forth" that requires human activity. This is really the best depiction I have encountered of the difference between *techne* and technology. To "lead forth" is to be guided by something outside one's own volition. Exactly what it is that is doing the guiding is hard to pin down. Grant thought it could be some intimation of what is good, or some intimation of what is beautiful, and sometimes he conflated the two.¹ The general point that Grant makes, though, is that technological "knowing" is different from earlier forms of knowing. He tells Cayley: "I've been thinking very hard about this, and one thing that has become clear to me is that the paradigm of knowledge given in modern science differs from the origins of the idea that one is given knowledge through love of the beautiful. I see this" (Cayley 1995, 184-85). What makes modern science true, according to Grant, is "that you're able to control the world through it" (135).

Grant elaborates on why this distinction between ways of knowing has profound political implications. The ancients had no practical ambitions for perfecting politics, or building ideal states, precisely because their ways of knowing precluded such ambitions.² If part of how one knows is to be open to being "led forth," then one does not dream of masterful control, so much as one simply hopes for vision, good fortune and grace, coupled of course with as much human effort and ingenuity as is realistically possible. Grant tells Cayley, when the conversation begins to drift: "I won't leave technology out of it for a minute. It is inconceivable that moderns would think in this way [*that is in terms of never actualizing the best state*]" (79). Modern political philosophy and modern scientific technology have walked hand in hand, as Grant says, and one cannot separate them.

The collapse of knowing into making has two principal dimensions in Grant's work: the decline of metaphysics (or what he sometimes speaks about in the context of natural law) and the supplanting of knowing as loving, by knowing as willing. Both are precursors to the success of technology, which is the wedding of *techne* and knowledge into one, instead of *techne* being guided by knowing.

In an early work, *Philosophy and the Mass Age* ([1959] 1966, 31), Grant focuses mostly on the first aspect, the decline of metaphysics. Metaphysical understanding for Grant encompasses the nature of man, the order of the universe, final causality and the existence of God. None of these objects of knowing is grasped in its entirety, but that does not mean that there is no human knowledge of any of them. In a metaphysically ordered understanding, we assume that there is a natural order of some kind, and that it is important to think about it and try to grasp its meaning. What we do know is that we are rational creatures, and the ends for which we are fitted are not given to us instinctively. “Reason is at first present in us potentially and not actually. It needs to be developed, and developed by education. Education is seen as the process by which a person comes to think clearly about the proper purposes of human life” (32). Part of education then consists in knowing when and how to curtail *techné* and production, insofar as these things can hamper the proper purposes of a human life. To go back to Jonathan Franzen’s concerns, we *can* say with some authority that two purposes of a human life are to die (that is a natural given), and to pursue justice (that is the reasonable way to live). For me, Plato’s *Republic* and *Apology* stand out in the Western tradition as the most persuasive accounts of why one ought to pursue justice, even in the face of death. George Grant would probably add the Christian Gospels. For Grant:

The fundamental difference between our modern society and the old is not only, or even primarily, the external difference shown by our mastery over nature through science and technology, but a profound difference in man’s very view of himself. We no longer see ourselves as part of a natural order and as subordinate to a divine law. We see ourselves rather as the makers of history, the makers of our own laws. We are authentically free since nothing beyond us limits what we should do (42).

Ten years after the publication of *Philosophy in the Mass Age*, Grant delivered his Massey Lecture on “Time as History”. By this time, Grant’s concerns, though the same, have shifted to a different target: the ascendancy of the will. He explains in that lecture that “the accomplishments of masterful doing lead us to think about the language of willing” (Grant [1969] 1995, 21). Since actions require volition, Grant looks closely at what kind of thinking accompanies the modern project of mastery and control, and he decides that a new form of “willing” takes place in metaphysical decline. Willing, he says always does violence to the world, because it is unthinkable without action (22). In fact, Grant

says, it is a strange thing about human beings that the deepest thought (that directed at the good, the true or the beautiful) seems to be in some way hostile to the greatest actions. “If our thinking is not to be Procrustean, we require an uncertain and continuous openness to all that is; certainty in closing down issues by decision is necessary for great deeds” (22).

This disjuncture between thinking and acting has probably always existed, so what is characteristically modern about the will in *Time as History?* Grant argues that the decline of metaphysics, and the unhinging of knowing from loving, means that it is difficult, if not impossible, in the modern world to understand *techne* in its classical sense as a kind of leading forward. There is nothing to lead *into*. Instead, knowing becomes tied to the will, and turns back on the world in a mode of control and domination. The way we know things is actually transformed by this shift, in that knowing becomes willing and its consequences in action. Grant’s encapsulation of this is worth citing in full:

The coming together of willing and reasoning lies existentially in the method that has made possible the success of modern science. The world is a field of objects that can be known in the workings through the creative acts of reasoning and experimenting by the thinking subject who stands over them. This brings together willing and reasoning because the very act of the thinking ego standing over the world and representing it to himself as object, is a stance of the will (26).

The will now stands over all the other things in the world, Grant says, and subordinates them to our own understanding of freedom. The liberating aspects of this shift toward the paramountcy of the will, and its consequences for practical life, are well known to us, and even Grant warms to them sometimes. In his exchange with David Cayley, at one point Grant hesitates in his vitriolic attack on modernity and qualifies:

Now, before we go any further, I want to make one thing perfectly clear about modern technology: my wife and I would have been slaves, with six children, if we hadn’t had a washing machine and stove and electricity. This is something that *must* be admitted and must be seen with clarity, along with what I call the ‘oblivion of eternity’ that went with it (Cayley 1995, 78).

Grant's ambivalence about the will in the modern world is most evident in his *English-Speaking Justice*, an even later book ([1974] 1985) that he delivered initially as a lecture at Dalhousie University. If the will and its capacities for domination and control are the only measures of worth, we can be led to much greater ambitions than were possible for the ancients. To be "led forth" by things not quite comprehensible is to open oneself to vulnerability, chance and disappointment, as well as success. This is what it is to love. To make the world according to one's own will appears initially to be more reassuring. One can aspire to overcome the defects of nature by developing the arts and sciences (technology), and the free power of human reasoning can show us "in its impartial, universalizing power, why the arbitrary and deficient allocations of nature ought not to be allowed to continue" (24). We see no reason necessarily why we ought to accept the vicissitudes of nature.

The victory of the will in the modern world appears to be more humane than the assent to natural or cosmic forces, but if we return to the two principal objects of human concern, death and justice, we may get a different picture. The will cannot conquer death, not matter how hard it may try. Grant's greatest contribution to modern political thought, however, may be in his relentless questioning of why the will should care at all about justice. If we do not believe that there are any final purposes for which we are fitted, how can we think about justice? For Grant, the greatest modern exponent of justice was Kant, because he was the only modern thinker who tried consciously to tie the will in its freedom to morality. Famously, Kant posited his categorical imperative, that the only truly free will is a will that is moral. One ought to order one's actions in such a way that they are consistent with what one would choose for anyone who is autonomous and free. For Grant, "[Kant's] categorical imperative presents to us the good without restriction. That justice which is our good depends upon our willing of it. We are the makers of our own laws; we are the cause of the growth of justice among our species" (26). The best state for Kant is a republic that necessarily is based on the protection of the universal rights of man, so that all individuals can have the maximum amount of autonomy to will their own ends. In the *Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant declares that "the universal law of right is as follows: let your actions be such that the free exercise of your will can co-exist with the freedom of everyone in accordance with a universal law" (Kant 1970, 133). Morality in the Kantian universe is autonomously willed action and self-made law.

There is nothing in Kant, however, nor in any other modern thinker, according to Grant, that can sustain the commitment to morality or universal autonomy against

the force of the will to power. Grant really believed that the commitment to liberal justice—in the extension of universal rights and autonomy—was a legacy of *pre-liberal, pre-modern* conceptions of justice, a kind of laggard epiphenomenal baggage that would wane as technology advanced. Justice cannot be derived from making, only from loving, and insofar as this is a civilization bent on technology, justice is a hindrance. “It must be stated,” Grant says,

that our justice now moves to a lowered content of equal liberty. The chief cause of this is that our justice is being played out within a destiny more comprehensive than itself. A quick name for this is technology...that technological destiny has its own dynamic conveniences, which easily sweep away our tradition of justice, if the latter gets in the way (Grant [1974] 1985, 83).

Grant’s major contribution, then, to the discussion of technology, is really that the problem is not technology itself—the wedding of technique and knowledge in such a way as to perform transformative tasks—but the *kind* of thinking that underscores technology, and that kind of thinking involves a shift from meditative reflection to willing. Hannah Arendt wrote about similar themes in much of her work. In an essay called “The Concept of History,” written about the same time as Grant delivered his Massey Lecture on “Philosophy in the Mass Age,” Arendt weighs the impact that that has accrued from the shift from knowing as “beholding” to knowing as making. Whereas history before the modern period had been thought to be a record of the deeds and sufferings of human beings, it has acquired a different status today. History is no longer thought as distinct from nature, a series of actions and deeds against a backdrop of the merely given, but has become one with nature. “We know today that though we cannot ‘make’ nature in the sense of creation, we are quite capable of starting new natural processes, and that in a sense therefore, we ‘make nature’ to the extent that is that we ‘make history’” (Arendt 1958, 291).

Like Grant, Hannah Arendt attaches the modern concept of history, and its focus on making, to the ascendancy of the will. In her book on willing, part two of Arendt’s last major work *The Life of the Mind*, Arendt explored the idea of the will, tracing its evolution both in practice and in the thoughts of major thinkers in the modern world. Like Grant, Arendt concludes that: “In short, the will always wills to *do* something, and thus implicitly holds in contempt sheer thinking, whose whole activity depends on ‘doing nothing’” (Arendt 1978, 37). Also, like Grant, Arendt distinguishes this modern will to do something from the ancient

notion of *poiesis*. For Aristotle, for example, the craftsman who makes a “brazen sphere” puts together matter and form, both of which existed prior to his activity, and makes a new object that adds to the world of both given things, and man-made things. “The human product, this ‘compound of matter and form’—for instance, a house made of wood according to a form pre-existing in the craftsman’s mind (*nous*)—clearly was not made out of nothing, and so was understood by Aristotle to pre-exist potentially before it was actualized by human hands”(15). According to Arendt, the Greeks did not even have a word for the will, precisely because they had no notion of creating *ex nihilo*. Neither, according to Arendt, did the Greeks have a sense of time that was oriented toward the future:

The view that everything real must be preceded by a potentiality as one of its causes implicitly denies the future as an authentic tense: the future is nothing but a consequence of the past, and the difference between natural and man-made things is merely between those whose potentialities necessarily grow into actualities and those that may or may not be actualized. Under these circumstances, any notion of the Will as an organ for the future, as memory as an organ for the past, was entirely superfluous. Aristotle did not have to be aware of the will’s existence; the Greeks do not even have a word for what we consider to be the mainspring of action (15).

To formulate a notion of the will, one must reconfigure one’s notions of being, time and history.

Arendt links conceptually the victory of the will in the modern world, the collapse of history into nature, and the conflation of the public and private realms. One of the reasons that she devoted an entire book to an inquisition of the faculty of the will was because she realized that the locus of the will is the radically isolated individual. Unlike *thinking*, which is attached to something outside the self (to hearken back to Grant’s formulation, thinking is always a kind of love insofar as it is attached to the true, the good or the beautiful), *willing* is radically and irrefutably autonomous. As such, it is indistinguishable from power. Drawing on Heidegger, Arendt shows how even the commonplace making of things is transformed by this kind of thinking. Every act of willing on the part of an individual generates opposition, and pits itself against obstacles to be overcome. “For a carpenter for instance, the wood constitutes an obstacle ‘against which’ he works when he forces it to become a table. This again is

generalized: every object by virtue of being an object—and not merely a thing, independent of human evaluation, calculation and making—is there to be overcome by a subject. The will-to-power is the culmination of the modern world's subjectivization; all of man's faculties stand under the Will's command" (177). Seen from this perspective, the will is essentially destructive. "Technology's very nature is the will to will, namely to subject the whole world to its domination and rulership, whose natural end can only be total destruction" (178).

So we have, in the accounts of George Grant and Hannah Arendt, a bleak picture of technology and its impact on the modern world. The root of the problem is deeper than technology; it is in the formulation of the will and the conversion of thought from a meditative consciousness to a productive consciousness. What these two were really saying is that under technology, to think *is* to will. If they are right, then there is no question of tinkering with technology, or trying to subordinate it to rules and regulations, or to dam it under the rubric of a kind of Kantian moral autonomy. None of this will work. You cannot educate people to the appropriate uses of technology, if in fact the participation in technology requires a mode of thinking that precludes management of ends. There is a large intellectual industry these days engaged in just this task, but to what avail?

Margaret Somerville is the founding director of the Centre for Medicine, Ethics and Law at McGill University, and has been an advisor to the World Health Organization, and the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, and UNESCO. In her book *The Ethical Canary* (2000), she proclaims that "scientific progress alone would be a hollow victory without the moral and ethical progress that must accompany it and ensure the humanization and humanity of our development and use of science." Somerville acknowledges that we have a "stunning power" in the modern world, to alter the very basis of human life through genetic and reproductive technologies. "The possibilities presented by these technologies include *in vitro* fertilization; cloning human embryos; cloning our adult selves; using ova from aborted fetuses to produce children whose "mother" was never born; and designing our progeny through genetic manipulation in ways that range from choosing certain physical characteristics—such as height or eye or hair colour—to dramatically augmenting their intelligence through a so-called smart gene and even creating disease-proofed children" (3).

Margaret Somerville recognizes that in the past “we wove the metaphysical facts in which we wrapped the events of birth and death mainly using the resources that we found in religion.” The great religions gave us a “shared story” that we have since abandoned in favor of a collective “faith” in the new science. “In particular, modern medical miracles held out hope, if not of immortality as most religions do, at least of delayed mortality. This new science radically altered our perceptions of the nature of human life, its transmission and its passing” (3). What Somerville advocates is a more conscientious development of ethics, and under that concern she lists three factors: values, trust and risk. “Ethics deals with values. For one thing, doing ethics requires us to identify our values. Moreover, we must justify the choice of values on which we base our ethical decisions” (289). We choose our values, we convert them into systematized ethics, and then we invest trust in others once we have made an intelligent choice.

The problem with this response is that values themselves are products of the will, not capable of containing the will. Rights, values and conscience, as Edward Andrew has explained, are the “holy trinity of liberalism,” and all are subsumed in a polity that is conceived as a “marketplace of moral and consumer choice” (367).³ Ethics construed as “choosing values” does not supply a vantage point from which to assess and judge technology; it allows us only to choose among the alternatives within technology. Values, as Andrew warns, are “relational and exchangeable goods” and they “represent the language of the marketplace, of trade and trade-offs, not of deep loves or strong loyalties” (367). Values can always be traded *up*, as one becomes more sophisticated, or has more options.

Conceived in this way, education in a technological society seems to be a matter of keeping informed, so that one is aware of the broadest range of options. We are urged as citizens to make ourselves aware of technological advances so that we can make wise decisions. If we are ill, we are encouraged to find out as much as possible about the nature of the illness and the treatments available, to shop around for medical care, and to demand from the state that we receive state of the art treatment. Some of the most contentious debates in our political context are those surrounding the issue of when and under what circumstances it might be an ethical decision to choose death, but even in this case, one can see that the value lies in the individual, who is viewed as a manager of alternative choices. In January 2005, a Canadian man held a press conference to advertise his own suicide. Marcel Tremblay had a fatal lung disease and he told reporters that he had decided to pull a helium-filled bag over his head and kill himself because he “had nothing to look forward to but a lousy death.” Mr. Tremblay “chose not to

suffer on from a disease that was slowly choking him to death, and his friends and family backed him up, sending him off with a wake at his suburban Ottawa home” (*Globe and Mail*, 2005). The *Globe and Mail* editorial noted that there was something about this “public leave-taking” that makes the conscience itch: “an earlier time might have called it self-murder. Today, according to Mr. Tremblay, his suicide was simply a matter of choice—perfectly legal and thoroughly disturbing.” Every major religion condemns suicide, but can we even articulate why? The most important consideration within the framing of a rights-based technological society is how much autonomy an individual can have in willing his or her own destiny, and overcoming as far as possible contingencies of nature, disease, suffering and dying.

Somerville’s attempts to think through the moral quagmire of modern medical technologies is admirable, but if George Grant and Hannah Arendt are right about the fundamental issue—that the problem is a philosophical one of the will, and not a practical one of technology—then Somerville’s attempts seem an impoverished response. As Grant put it: “We are called to understand technological civilization just when its very realization has radically put in question the possibility that there could be any such understanding” (1996, 34).

There is an alternative way of living in the world, other than that immersed in the modern combination of will, values, and technology, and one can get some sense of this by reading pre-modern accounts of politics. Here, I can only refer to what I have learned from reading and teaching Aristotle, and over the years of doing this repeatedly I believe that I have some sense of the world that is lost to us under technology and the victory of the will. Here are some of the things that Aristotle says about living well. The purpose of a human life is to live a life of happiness, according to reason, and in pursuit of virtue. These things all belong together. Happiness is not a state but an activity, and it requires some understanding of the purposes for which we are fitted, which is why happiness is tied to reason and virtue (some understanding of the good). When Aristotle tries to sort out what the best activity is for human beings, things get opaque. Theoretical activity, he says (that is, thinking), seems to be the supreme kind of happiness, because it dwells on the greatest virtue. It is the most “continuous activity,” that which least depends on the contingencies of the world, that which has “remarkably firm and pure pleasures” (Aristotle 1985, 1177a25), and that which is the most self-sufficient. One can always think, if one has the native capacity for it, no matter what the circumstances of the world; this seems to be what Aristotle is saying.

A secondary kind of happiness can be found in a life of action, a different kind of virtue, but one that is more specifically “human” according to Aristotle (1178a8). The life of action is more human than the life devoted to contemplation, because it is a life tied to the many human goods that one enjoys in family and political community, and because it is a life that requires the development not just of intelligence, but of character. In the life of active engagement in the world, “intelligence is yoked together with virtue of character, and so is this virtue with intelligence.” The development of character cannot happen without deliberative decision about the most ordinary things. How will I earn a living, how will I treat my friends, how will I respond to situations I find myself in: with anger, with patience, with contempt, with generosity, and so on. Human virtues, Aristotle continues, are tied to feelings, not just to thoughts, and the virtues of human beings are a consequence of this “compound.”

In the exercise of practical virtue in a *human life* that reflects the compound of thoughts and emotions, the habituation of the political community is absolutely central. It is in the political community that the nature of human beings is brought to fruition, or else corrupted. There is no such thing for Aristotle as an *innate* nature; nature is a potential that can be realized or thwarted under specific conditions. What is natural for human beings cannot really be separated from what is habitual, or from what we are taught. To understand what is ethical for individuals, in Aristotle’s way of thinking, one has to start by thinking about the whole of which individuals are a part, and this whole includes cosmic things as well as political units and families. One does not begin with the individual, with his or her will, values and rights. The political theorist Stephen Salkever traces this great divide between Aristotle’s way of looking at the world and ours, to the developments in scientific thinking that have so profoundly affected how we view questions of education and ethics. “Scientific reasoning . . . explains natural phenomena by treating them as wholes in need of being reduced to the lawful motion of the smallest parts: real science is in part the search for the smallest element. Scientific sophistication involves unwillingness to treat apparent wholes—such as plants and animals—as if they were real wholes” (Salkever 1991, 326).

Jonathan Jacobs, a philosopher who draws on Aristotle to draft a kind of “virtue ethics” for the modern citizen of liberal democracies, writes in a compelling way about “choosing” one’s character under conditions that are themselves formative for those choices. “[T]here are objective goods for human beings [and]

excellences that are perfections of human nature” but “our grasp of the reasons that certain goods are goods and our ability to appreciate them as such depends on second nature. Habituation is crucial to bringing a person into a condition to make these acknowledgements and to have these abiding concerns” (Jacobs 2001, 95). According to Jacobs, we choose our characters because we act in ways through life that eventually congeal into a settled and identifiable persona, but the fact is that those choices are made within a context that in itself is constitutive. Character is something that is formed by habit and practice in a specific context; it is not the consequence of intellectual judgment, although certainly decisions are part of our habituation. The point is, though, that a good character is not the same as a correct principle. The latter can be arrived at conceptually, through analysis, in the way that Margaret Somerville talks about embracing modern ethics: one thinks about choices, then posits a value, and then follows it, until of course one may reassess in light of newer information, and then “trade-up” in values. Jacobs, on the other hand, drawing on Aristotle, is talking about a settled state of character that is developed through habit, choice, instruction and practice. His point is that one cannot in fact change one’s character once it is formed, unlike “values” which one can always exchange.

The development of “character ethics” makes the issue of education a critical one. This is why Aristotle thought that the *polis* was the natural home for human beings, and it is only under the guidance of law and community that is attenuated to some good, that people can live purposeful lives. This is such a remote way of thinking to those of us in the modern world that it is almost impossible to think through the implications of what Aristotle means. For Aristotle, the cultivation of virtue in the fully human sense, as a combination of the development of intelligence and character, is unthinkable outside politics. As Stephen Salkever put it, “Political activity [for Aristotle] is neither a self-generating end in itself nor an association for the protection of individual rights; its constitutive function is the development of virtuous personalities or ways of life” (1991, 37).

Aristotle was well aware of the difficulties of cultivating virtue, or finding happiness, in a vacuum. Toward the end of the *Politics*, he addresses these concerns. He is not all that optimistic about the benefits of argument. “If arguments were sufficient by themselves to make people decent, the rewards they would command would justifiably have been many and large” (Aristotle 1984, 1179b5), but the fact is that “the soul of the student needs to have been prepared by habits for enjoying and hating finely, like ground that is to nourish seed.” It is hard for anyone, adult or child, to move toward virtue if he has not been brought

up under good laws (1180a), and the sad truth is that a father's instructions lack this power, as do the exhortations of any individual "unless he be a king or someone like that" (1180a20). It seems to be the case for Aristotle that if one has the bad fortune to live in a corrupted state, with little or no proper guidance from the laws, that it is impossible to pursue a happy life in the active sense. One cannot as an isolated individual, pursue a good that is thwarted by the greater whole in which one lives.

Given the fact that the ancients did not conceive of building a perfect state on earth, but only of hoping for such a state by chance (or praying for it), what teaching can we possibly take from Aristotle on political education? All I can say is that under the auspices of technology and the primacy of the will in modern thinking, and how these things have pervaded every aspect of our existence, I find it hard to prescribe anything. There are no kings in democracies. If our understanding of justice is reduced to "values" that are the consequence of our own wills, and our wills are integrally bound up with action in a way that has made technology possible, then there can be no "ethics" that stand outside technology, no political community that can divert the will to power. Our characters are inextricably tied to the habituation of a technological milieu.

There are those contemplative sorts however, who suggest a much less ambitious course than the reform of political institutions under technology, and who advocate a turning away or existential relapse from technology. An example of this can be found in an interesting lead article in the *Atlantic Monthly*, a magazine of wide circulation in North America, in 2004 by Michael Sandel. Sandel is a professor of political theory at Harvard, and best known for his communitarian critique of John Rawls' *Theory of Justice*. Most of Sandel's work has been devoted to trying to bolster atrophying levels of community involvement in a society that increasingly turns toward atomism. Critical of John Rawls' notion that liberal democracies ought to be places that tolerate the widest range of individual choices, both economic and moral, Sandel has tried to make a case for the embeddedness of choices. He has stressed the ways in which people's choices are shaped by the communities into which they are born, and which habituate them in specific ways. While a critic of Rawls, Sandel nevertheless had previously always maintained his commitment to the broad parameters of the liberal society, with its protection of individual autonomy. In this *Atlantic Monthly* piece, however, Sandel takes a different turn. Sandel attacks the unleashing of "human freedom unfettered by the given". Looking particularly at genome research and its possible consequences for the

manipulation of human life, Sandel says that this kind of research “threatens to banish our appreciation of life as a gift, and to leave us with nothing to affirm or behold outside our own will.” As a response to this, Sandel takes the position that we ought “to acknowledge the giftedness of life” and to recognize that “our talents and powers are not wholly our own doing.” It is also to recognize that,

...not everything in the world is open to whatever we may desire...
Appreciating the gifted quality of life constrains the Promethean project and conduces to a certain humility. It is in part a religious sensibility. But its resonance reaches beyond religion (Sandel 2004, 54).

But exactly what does “appreciating the gifted quality of life” accomplish? And what does it mean to appreciate the “gifted quality of life” in a technological society? Does it mean that, if my child is born prematurely, I let nature take its course and do not intervene with massive amounts of medical expertise? Does it mean that if I discover that I have cancer, I think about my impending death instead of embarking on an informed series of the latest treatments in chemotherapy? Is it just for me to absorb the cost of such treatments when there are thousands of children dying every day in the world because they don’t have enough to eat, or because their water is unclean? My point is: can we realistically stand by and admire the “given” in a technological society?

Sandel’s karmic stance in the *Atlantic Monthly* article has resonances of Heidegger. Heidegger, as we know, thought deeply about technology, and his final response to it was standing still and waiting for the appearance of God. This was a position that he came to only after his disastrous foray into politics, something that still is the subject of enormous controversy in academic circles. Hannah Arendt issued an infamous apology for Heidegger on the occasion of his eightieth birthday, in which she tried to explain Heidegger’s initial support of the Third Reich, and his subsequent retreat into silence.⁴ The pivotal moment for Heidegger, according to Arendt, was his recognition of the paramouncy of the will in modernity, and Arendt believed that Heidegger was the first philosopher to see clearly the destructive effect that the will has on thinking. “The outcome of the whole thing,” Arendt (2004, 161) writes—and by the “whole thing” she means Heidegger’s seduction by the Third Reich—“was the discovery of the will as the will to willing and thus as the will to power.” Heidegger’s reaction to this “discovery” was to retreat back into thought, a stance that Arendt appeared to endorse in this apology:

Composure (*Gelassenheit*) is part of thinking and, from the perspective of willing, the thinker has to say, only apparently paradoxically: “I want non-willing.” For only then, only if we ‘wean ourselves from the will’, can ‘we release ourselves to the sought-for essence of the thinking that is not willing’ (61).

I draw on Heidegger and Sandel as examples of what I see as the philosophic response to the problem of will and technology. If the fundamental core of technology, as George Grant and Hannah Arendt (and Heidegger, according to Arendt) have identified, is the primacy of the will and its intrinsic entanglement with action, one possible response is to stand back in the paralysis of thought. The choices appear to be immersion in technology or detached withdrawal. The individual can always retreat. I tracked this response in a book that I wrote on Hannah Arendt some years ago, and noted that for Arendt, the turning away from willing toward “pure” thought, was a reluctant stance taken only under conditions in the world that make any kind of action compromising. A life of withdrawal is never an optimal choice, but one that is pursued in sadness in a world that precludes meaningful citizenship. Arendt quotes Lessing:

Flight from the world in dark times of impotence can always be justified as long as reality is not ignored, but is constantly acknowledged as the thing that must be escaped. When people choose this alternative, private life too can retain a by no means insignificant reality, even though it remains impotent. Only it is essential for them to realize that the realness of this reality consists not so much in its deeply personal note, than it springs from privacy as such, but inheres in the world from which they have escaped (1968, 22).

I like this citation from Arendt because it captures the tension that exists between our existence as thinking beings, in solitude, and as political beings, living among others in meaningful association. Arendt was always uneasy about the solitary life of thinking withdrawal, although she defended it, both in Heidegger and in general, as a reasonable response to desperate political conditions.

Can *thinking*, in the way that Arendt formulates it, lead to a resurrection of political life? Dana Villa wrote a book recently called *Socratic Citizenship*, in which he invokes the model of Socrates for a reinvigorated citizenship in liberal democracies. Rather than lament the Periclean model of ancient democracy, with its robust conception of political engagement, Villa calls for a disengaged

citizenship modeled on the reflective negativity of Socratic questioning. Everyone must “take up the project and the burden of their own moral self-formation” (Villa 2001, 305). Thinking for oneself requires “the realization that *one does not have* a firm grasp of what virtue is” (305). Villa’s prescriptions for citizenship involve “a never-ending practice of critical disillusionment,” coupled with a healthy sense of the intrinsic moral inadequacy of all “local” form. It also outlines a new conception of citizenship, “one which does not demand the *sacrifizio dell’intelletto* and in which moral and intellectual integrity finally take their rightful place as important *civic* virtues” (309).

The problem with Villa’s formulation is that moral and intellectual integrity are not the same things, and they never have been. Even in the best political circumstances, there is always a tension, and this unresolved tension can be found in Aristotle. We recall that for Aristotle, the happiest life in some sense is the life of contemplation because it is the purest, the most self-sufficient and the most “continuous” activity. Thinking “aims at no end beyond itself” (Aristotle 1985, 1177b), and does not cause trouble. Political and moral activity, even at its best, necessarily involves actions that entail relations of power and honor, and usually involves the handling of enemies as well as friends (1177b). We ought, as far as possible, “to go all lengths to live a life that expresses our supreme element,” which is the life of contemplation, but a life of continuous thinking is more divine than human. It does not require the development of character, or of the moral virtues, all of which have to do with the management of “troubles.” One can understand a lot, and still be a lousy human being (which is the most common indictment of Heidegger).

We seem to be living in an age of extremes. For reasons that are complex and historical, the tension that has always existed between *theoria* and *praxis*, between the “most divine element” in human beings, and the most human elements in human beings (their actions and their living together in the world), is broken. To return to George Grant, we can say that the break in this tension has made it possible for the will to ascend to untold heights and to become the existential reference point for people living under technology. We can understand something about this break, but I don’t see any way that we can “fix” it. As I see it, the two realistic alternatives in the modern world are those of Margaret Somerville and like-minded ethicists on the one hand, and people like Heidegger, Arendt and Grant on the other. One lives and develops one’s “ethics” within the parameters of technology, arranging and classifying values, thereby living within the vortex of modern “will”, or one abstains as far as possible through thought.

I think it is important, though, that if one adopts the latter stance that one does so without smugness and *hubris*. A life of withdrawal is not divine, it is unhuman. This is why I prefer fiction writers to philosophers for the most part. They portray better the aesthetic of the modern world, and in their attention to detail, they capture better what is lost. One can live in a “tragic realism,” as Jonathan Franzen says, without living in despair. Emerging from his solipsistic despair and embracing hope, Franzen writes:

How could I have thought that I needed to cure myself in order to fit into the ‘real’ world? I didn’t need curing, and the world didn’t either; the only thing that needed curing was my understanding of my place in it. Without that understanding—without a sense of *belonging* to the real world—it was impossible to thrive in an imagined one (2002, 94).

Franzen wrote a review of Alice Munroe’s *Runaway*, her most recent collection of short stories in the *New York Times Book Review*. Alice Munroe is a Canadian writer from Southern Ontario who has collected many accolades for her stories about ordinary people in small settings whose lives are afflicted by all the things that have always beset human beings. Her characters love, they struggle to understand, they make serious moral transgressions, they are filled with remorse, and sometimes they experience grace. Franzen calls Munroe probably the greatest living writer in North America today. As Franzen says, she does not give her books grand titles like *Canadian Pastoral* or *Canadian Psycho* or *Purple Canada* or *In Canada* or *The Plot Against Canada*, the point being that her aspirations are not huge or pretentious or hubristic. Toward the end of the review, Franzen begs people to read Munroe, and he asks: “Can a better kind of fiction save the world? There’s always some tiny hope (strange things do happen), but the answer is almost certainly no, it can’t. There is some reasonable chance, however, that it could save your soul” (2004).

If education is always about learning to die and learning how to be just, and this is a constant for human beings, and if George Grant and Hannah Arendt are right about the deep, deep conundrums of living in a technological society, then this is the most that I can say. Education begins with saving one’s own soul. One does that by thinking, and by opening oneself to the best accounts one can find that map the terrain of the modern world. What one does after that is a matter of practical judgment. I do think it is safe to say that a person who reads authors like Alice Munroe and Jonathan Franzen is not likely to spend his or her money

buying a kidney from some destitute person in a developing country, in order to forestall their death, just because it is possible to do that. Such a person is less likely to see every human relation as one of opposition, with winners and losers in a struggle of the will. Such a person is less likely to believe in the perfectibility of either himself or of the world. Such a person is less likely to respond to the world with the smug detachment of what Arendt called the “professional thinker,” and more likely to respond with a prayer.

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¹ There is a very good discussion of the problem in George Grant's work with the conflation of the good and the beautiful, or, put differently, between the conflation of the philosophic and the poetic (Cf. Andrew, 1996). For the purposes of this paper, I am most interested in distinguishing between activity that is aimed at something outside itself (whether in philosophy, or art, or production) and activity that is self-referential, so I shall not be considering this difference that Andrew specifies, though I actually think his criticism of Grant on this ground is right.

² On this matter, Grant would agree with Leo Strauss' interpretation of classical political philosophy. Grant shared with Strauss the view that neither Plato nor Aristotle was interested in building an "ideal state", but rather precisely in showing the error of such a project. Strauss argues that the rejection of the perfectibility of man and states is the precise point of departure between the ancients and the moderns. "Because [the ancients] saw how limited man's power is, they held that the actualization of the best regime depends on chance. Modern man, dissatisfied with utopias and scorning them, has tried to find a guarantee for the actualization of the best social order" (Strauss 1991, 210).

³ Edward Andrew has written a trilogy on the interweaving of rights, values and conscience in the modern world: *Shylock's Rights: A Grammar of Lockean Claims* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1988); *The Genealogy of Values: The Aesthetic Economy of Nietzsche and Proust* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1995); *Conscience and Its Critics: Protestant Conscience, Enlightenment Reason and Moral Subjectivity* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 2001).

⁴ Arendt wrote to Heidegger in 1969 and sent him this address, with the prefatory dedication: "For you, for September 26, 1969, after forty-five years, as ever, Hannah". Hannah Arendt had been Heidegger's student and his lover when she was young (Arendt 2004, 148). This apology was published in the *New York Review of Books* 17, no. 6 (October 1971): 50-54.